

TRACES

litterae communionis

Communion and Liberation
International Magazine

Vol. 20
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10

A person is shown from behind, in silhouette, looking out from a balcony or window. The view outside is a vast, flat landscape under a bright blue sky with light, wispy clouds. In the distance, a low horizon line shows some faint structures or buildings. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

***Made
to know***

TRACES

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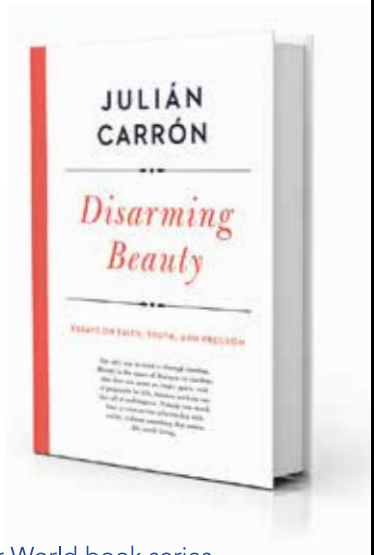
November 2018

- 01** **Editorial**
- 02** **Letters**
- 04** **Close-up**
Encountering the world
- 06** *What do we want to know?*
- 10** *A small switch leads to Mars*
- 14** *Like John and Andrew*
- 18** **Kenya**
Paradise in the slum

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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The human factor

In this issue of *Traces* we are trying to take another step on a journey. In the last month, we asked what makes it possible to generate people able to bear today's confusion caused by the impact with a frighteningly chaotic reality that at times prompts the desire to simply withdraw into our shells. We said that in order to respond to the great emergency in education, *places capable of generation* are needed, not *refuges* for hiding from the waves, and we gave a few examples.

Now we move on further, with other questions. What instruments for not getting lost are available for an "I" who throws herself into the game, who goes out upon the open sea of reality to face without qualms the tangle of problems of which life is made—from the great political stage, harbinger of impending storms, to daily relationships with children and colleagues? How can this "I" be certain of something, and *know*?

Today's chaos provides us with one ironclad certainty: in order to know, data, analyses, and theories do not suffice. The history of recent decades shows this clearly, and our current times confirm it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Today we have oceans of information, literally, and the capacity to analyze it, and both are growing at a dizzying pace. We have increasingly invasive ways to collect data and to create algorithms that process it in real time, that tell us with certainty which flight to take, which diagnosis our physician should make, and how many months of prison a judge should give a convicted criminal (in certain countries this is the norm). We have enormously powerful information and instruments to manipulate it, which are seen as *objective* because they are increasingly able to eliminate the impact of the "human factor."

And yet, we are more confused than ever. This "metamorphosis of the world," to use the words of sociologist Ulrich Beck, has left us stunned and disoriented, with the question of what it means today to "know." What does it mean to know as *human beings*, with a modality that is appropriate to our needs, including our need for certainties and relationships? What contribution can Christianity make? Fr. Giussani said that "John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, precisely in following that exceptional person, learned to *know differently*." What is this difference?

In this issue we try to offer some kind of answer, proposing some reflections and two testimonies about the possibility of truly knowing in the important work of technological research, and in the story of a girl who encounters Christianity for the first time. The issue closes with the story of a production of the *Divine Comedy* in a Nairobi slum, which shows the emergence of the human factor in knowledge in all its power, and helps us to understand and *know*.

Nicoló, Ingrid, Ale, Lourdes

edited by
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Those thirty seconds

Dearest Fr. Carrón, not a day has gone by since the Beginning Day that I haven't been filled with an insistent, almost obstinately deep emotion that, regardless of my emotions or mood, has permeated everything. I relistened to the audio of Fr. Giussani for the third time, but Saturday it was as if it was new, unedited. Everything was in play in those initial seconds, in that instant when Fr. Giussani asks everyone who is listening to remain silent, to ask themselves before God what they have come there to do. In those thirty seconds, my position was put into play, my loyalty of judgment and willingness to adhere, in front of that announcement that conquers my 24-year-old life. Everything in that instant? Yes. Those seconds were for me the most powerful test because in my way of being in front of them, the tremendous alternative between a past and a "now" was put into play. In those seconds, one can remain quiet as a form of aesthetic veneration—after all, it's Fr. Giussani speaking, an esteemed man of proven humanity. This happened to me the first times I listened to it. But Saturday, it was different! Saturday afternoon, in that instant, I was also silent because I asked myself, "Why did I come here?" Like those who listened to Fr. Giussani in 1968, I also had to surrender myself to the contemporaneousness of that gesture. Responding to that provocation forced me to decide: either it's past, even if prophetic and illuminating, or it's now! I said to myself, "It's now." Answering Fr. Giussani's provocation wasn't pretending to talk with a video. It was acknowledging a present. It was acknowledging the fact that I was seated in that chair in the Assago Forum that Saturday

afternoon in late September. It was acknowledging my nine years of life of faith after an encounter with Christ. It was acknowledging my baptism 23 years ago. But in a certain sense, it was acknowledging the very fact that I was alive, that I was there in that moment. Who can "move" all of this if not Someone who is in front of you, if not now? It's not a video, not an audio, a recording from 50 years ago. No! It's Someone, now! Dear Fr. Carrón, it's alive and truly present. It is the time of Christ. It is something present that slams into the Church, the Movement.

Nicoló, Milan (Italy)

"I was forgiven by a gaze"

Dear Fr. Carrón, I had the opportunity to meet the Movement through Laura, a *Memor Domini* who came to Esquipulas as a volunteer in an institute for orphaned children where I worked in the past. We became friends and when she had finished her work there, she asked for my address. Two months later, she sent me a copy of the Italian magazine *Tracce*. I began to translate the whole magazine to see what it said. She found a way to put me in contact with Charlie, the responsible for the CL community in El Salvador. He, his wife, his son, and another friend came to visit me in my city. They gave me *Huellas* (the Spanish edition) and they invited me to the Spiritual Exercises. When I arrived, it seemed as if they all knew me and were waiting for me. That same year, I participated in the CL community vacation, I met Honduran friends, and I tried to follow all the events the Movement proposed to us here in Esquipulas. That year, Charlie wrote me saying there was a possibility of participating in the CLU exercises in Colombia. I said yes. I had never imagined getting on a plane, going somewhere so far from my country, and meeting university students from the Movement. When I got to Bogotá, a family was waiting to take me to dinner.

I knew that from that moment, something great was going to happen to me. After the exercises started, I ran into the phrase, “He was looked upon and then he could see.” I completely saw myself in that phrase, because I, too, was looked upon in this way: Jesus looked at me and chose me for something great. Fr. Julián de la Morena told us that we fall in love with Christ the same way we fall in love with a person. Always thinking about Him, wanting to see Him, and being amazed when He is near, are signs of being in love. To my surprise, I was asked to give a witness. As I was speaking, I realized that the negative things that happen to me are insignificant compared to the greatness I have found. I had always thought that I couldn’t help anyone with my life because I had never considered myself a good person. But I was looked upon and forgiven by a gaze that no one can take away from me.
Ingrid, Guatemala

The invitation from students repeating the year

Dear Fr. Carrón, I started teaching in a public school with two campuses, both a distance of 40 kilometers from my home. They gave me the position of teaching Latin to the fourth-year students at the high school. I was immediately informed that the position was passed to me because my colleague from the previous year had asked to be reassigned away from what is a terrible class. In fact, they put all of the students from the whole school who need to repeat the year in this section. My colleagues informed me that they don’t study and often they don’t allow the teacher to teach the lesson. In the few times we’ve had class, I’ve had to maintain a climate of great severity; I haven’t allowed myself to relax. I’ve seen, however, that they are curious about this “alien” who wants to teach them. Today I gave a lesson on Cicero: I asked lots of questions from their homework (to my surprise, some of them had done it), and they paid attention. I had left the building at the end of the day thinking, “Phew, I made it through another day,” when a student stopped me. He’s kind of the leader of the class. He said, “Prof, I have to ask you something. Would you go on a class trip with us?” I asked him why, of all people, he would ask me. He said, “You see, no one has ever liked us,” and he smiled. As the pope says, they have a good sense of smell. The good Lord put Himself where I thought I had already taken care of everything. I was reducing them and me to a sort of civil coexistence. As Fr. Giussani said, “A miracle,

therefore. It is a reality that I see, hear and touch, but that I cannot reduce to what I see, hear and touch, that necessarily points to something other. I would have to deny that reality in denying that pointing to. If I reduced it, I would annihilate it.”

Ale

Charitable work with Belén

Yesterday, Belén opened the door to us, dressed in her best dress. She had invited my husband and me to dinner. For seven long years, month after month, we have been going to her home to bring her a food package. I have followed her during all this time and today our relationship was transformed into a friendship that is a good for both of us. Belén understands that something has entered her life that she cannot define but she recognizes that it is the greatest good. Her life had been chaotic—drugs and partners who come and go. All of this has had grave repercussions on her son because in each of those men who appeared in his mother’s life, he had seen the possibility of finding the father he so wanted. Óscar began exhibiting signs of violence and aggression toward everyone, including kids and adults, and teachers and director at the school he went to. The situation got so bad that at one point, they were considering taking custody of her son away from her. Charitable work is teaching me to love and not to judge, to see Belén, to consider her destiny, and to embrace her heart with an infinite tenderness. The same gaze that I need and that has been bestowed on me is what I desire for her. When we arrived that evening, her house was clean and orderly, the table was set perfectly and with great attention to detail. But the evening was made happy above all by Belén’s immense joy, the beauty of her face, her gratitude because we were sharing a meal and our free time with her. Returning home, I realized I wasn’t completely aware of all I had just experienced, of the good that should be a sign of having participated in the dinner. I sent her a message to thank her and she answered, “You make me feel more myself, more a person.” Balthasar’s phrase cited during the Exercises came to mind, “Love transforms the subject or the individual into a person.”

Lourdes, Tenerife (Spain)

Encountering the world

Is it still possible for us to know something with certainty? How? It is not a theoretical question: to avoid being at the mercy of reality—to live—we need certainties. We need them even more when our reality gets so mixed up that it seems impossible to tell which way is up. And the context we live in, as Costantino Esposito's article outlines, appears to be just that: a world that is difficult to decipher, where the disconnect between perception and truth is widening and the impression that we are dominated by instinctive reactions and moods—and make decisions accordingly—is rampant. We see it in every area of life, from politics to personal relationships and in daily life.

This makes knowledge the problem of today. To address it, we first of all need to clarify a misunderstanding: our affections are not the enemy of knowledge. Knowledge is not something abstract that proceeds in sterilized conditions: it is connected to our humanity, and takes place when reason and affection work together. This is the heart of the witnesses contained in the "Close-up" below, stories that show how it is still possible to "broaden our reason" in everyday life and to face the challenge of exciting frontiers. We hear from Mauro Prina, an aerospace engineer, and from Gaia, a young Indian woman who encountered something she knew nothing about: Christianity. Reading her story is like reading a present-day Gospel. The same facts, the same dynamic, and the same discovery of what happens to reason when it encounters something that corresponds to us totally and grabs on to it. It is then that reason truly begins to know. (dp) ■





Close-up

6

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What do we want to know?

Algorithms, the domination of perceptions, illusory truths on the web... Today, we have the tools to find “answers” for everything. But when do we experience a kind of knowledge that transforms and sets our person in motion? We explore the main issues raised by the most radical crisis of our time.



Costantino Esposito

If we were asked to identify the defining factors of the crisis that seems to threaten our lives at the individual and social level and from every angle, we would probably think of the many political, financial, technological, and ideological issues that dominate every kind of media and most of our discussions. Upon closer examination, however, we find that there is a deeper problem at the root of all these issues, which is recognized by many as the “secret weapon” (even though it is often jammed) for understanding our contemporary condition: the problem of knowledge.

To understand what we mean in practice all we need to do is remember a simple fact, a fact that is implicit in our daily experiences: in each of our actions, in all of our relationships with objects and with people, we are only moved to act when

we understand what the world offers us. Is it not the case that our experience as conscious and free persons is augmented when we discover that reality comes to meet us, that it provokes us and is waiting for us to respond?

Becoming aware of reality—the way we position ourselves in the world hinges on this. Everything depends on the way we perceive *what we are, what the things around us are*, and, at a deeper level, whether or not we take for granted *the very fact* that reality exists. It may sound like an abstract reflection, but these perceptions actually implicate the most concrete aspects of our existence. However, as is often the case, it is only in a time of crisis that, paradoxically, we begin to notice the needs behind everything that is going wrong. In the time in which we live, it is precisely seeing this knowledge of reality reduced more and more that pushes us to grasp how essential it is for the fulfillment of our person. When I speak of a reduction of knowledge, I certainly do not mean to refer to the quantity of virtual information we are able to gather. From that perspective, the development of our knowledge is now potentially unlimited, so much so that all the information we think we would like to know is available to us. But what is it that we want to know? This is the really critical question in our contemporary society and culture, in which we are presented with a huge amount of “information” that often risks falling short of helping us to truly “know” anything. The acting subject, in fact, tends to be supplanted by what determined cultural, commercial, and political interests have led him or her to want. This is the problem being furiously debated today with respect to “Big Data,” the overweening diffusion

of both universal knowledge and the particular preferences of individual users within the great web of knowledge: preferences that those who manage information networks can accumulate, direct, and monitor thanks to the revelation (much of it procured illegally) of individual choices, drawn from the most popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

In such a context, how *do* we perceive the world? Upon what basis can we tell that what we have learned is “true?” As Danah Boyd, an American researcher who studies media literacy, wrote, citing Cory Doctorow, “We’re not living through a crisis about what is true, we’re living through a crisis about how we know whether something is true. We’re not disagreeing about facts, we’re disagreeing about epistemology”; in other words, about the way our “knowledge” is formed. If we do not have reasonable certainty—or at least sufficient trust—that what we perceive is true, we will be condemned to never really come into contact with reality.

Complicating the issue is the way we are increasingly conditioned by the digital environment in which we are continually immersed (just look at dependent we are on smartphones and the internet), which affects not only the “construction” and selection of inputs, but also the very for-

mation of our mental and perceptive processes—so much so that the truth of a piece of information, and, consequently, its trustworthiness, might be real or simply made up, constructed as an “illusory truth,” in some cases merely through the use of graphics or visual strategies that fix our attention on headlines that may be ambiguous or misleading.

Katy Steinmetz wrote about this recently in an article about fake news that appeared in the August 20 issue of *Time* magazine. She stated that “the problem is not just malicious bots or [...] teenagers pushing phony stories for profit. The problem is also us,” our brains. “Illusory truths” depend on the fact that we “make snap judgments [...] about what we can trust online” based on habit and how often the messages that come to us through the web are repeated. “The higher something appears in Google search results, the more reliable it is. But Google’s algorithms are surfacing content based on keywords, not truth. If you ask about using apricot seeds to cure cancer, the tool will dutifully find pages asserting that they work.”

The problem is so slippery and widespread, partially because of the way economic and political forces take advantage of it, that it can be deemed “the equivalent of a public health crisis.” Some say that you can respond to the falsifications of truth and reality caused (indirectly) by

algorithms by putting in place other algorithms that can identify the Facebook pages or social media accounts where fake news begins and is spread in order to block them. But this counterreaction can never be enough, because what is at stake are the very mental and moral processes we use to convey or grant trust when we communicate.

Only a “human factor” can get us back on track; only a process of education can make us “stop to think” about what we might be instinctively or mechanically led to accept and share as “true,” but in fact may not be. As the *Time* magazine article concludes, “Teachers must [...] train students to be skeptical without making them cynical,” and teach a critical method of verifying their faith in the reality they are presented with.

Every crisis places us before a fork in the road. We could give in to fear and sink into pessimism, conceding that by now it is inevitable that we are all being “played” by the great digital media machine, and that precisely at the time when it seems like we have the most tools to know and manipulate reality, we are actually being deprived of the very freedom to be ourselves, and not what the algorithms have decided to make us. This cognitive crisis, therefore, may be an opportunity we are being given to recover a certain process of

“The problem is so slippery and widespread, that it can be deemed ‘the equivalent of a public health crisis.’”

“Who knows a person better: the one who distances himself and tries to possess the other according to his prejudices, or the one who tries to understand how the other is speaking to him, the way the other is inviting him to understand?”

gaining critically verified, not just automatically accumulated, knowledge. This method of knowing and the stakes of our recovering it are things each of us can and must discover for ourselves, starting from those moments or examples in our lives when we have consciously experienced a kind of knowledge that has transformed and set our “I” into motion.

This means, however, that we must broaden our very concept of reason, typically understood as the capacity to analyze and calculate the effects of our actions, in order to make it something “lived.” Reason is not a sterile procedure, but rather the way that we—in all the dimensions of our person—live in reality.

This task, now made urgent by crisis, intersects with two additional issues currently being debated in cognitive science and contemporary philosophy. The first is related to the inextricable connection between our rational awareness and our emotions. What we think, and how we think of it, is never the result of an abstract faculty of our mind, but is rather always influenced by our affectivity.

According to some (including the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari in his recent book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, published by Spiegel & Grau), the main risk today is that an entirely artificial model for gaining knowledge will take over—one that is then exported into the realm of artificial intelligence (AI)—so that all our decisions will be replaced by computerized processes. Consciousness, however, according to Harari, goes beyond intelligence, because it does not stop at “solving problems,” but is rather “the ability to feel things such as pain, joy, love, and anger.”

Reality will only truly become an object of knowledge for us if it touches us, awakens our interest, and fills us with expectation. Often, we hear that in order for our knowledge to be objective, we need to distance ourselves from our own subjective perceptions, even though these perceptions draw us close to an object so we can know it (another excellent book, recently translated into Italian,

speaks about this: *The Delusions of Certainty* by Siri Hustvedt, Simon & Schuster Press).

We have all had the experience of realizing that the more we put ourselves into play in our relationship with reality, the more we want to know reality for what it truly is. Who knows an object or a person better: a person who distances himself and tries to possess the other according to his or her prejudices, or the one who tries to understand how the other is speaking to him, the way the other is inviting him to understand?

The connection between rational knowledge and affectivity opens up another critical question in our experience—that of freedom. We desire to know not just so we can be informed about particular topics, but, at a deeper level, because we want to be more free; more free to understand, to choose, and, definitively, to be ourselves. That freedom is not just our capacity to choose one thing over another, but rather a willingness to respond to and be engaged in what is happening to us.

Even understood in this way, freedom is not at all an effect of the knowledge of what is true: freedom comes before, as the condition for gaining that knowledge. You cannot know something without being free. Just as St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: “Those who have been made subject cannot judge.” To judge—to know what is really there—you have to be free, not stuck at the level of a reduced logic of cause and effect, or action and reaction (though these are valid and necessary), but ready to ask about the meaning of things. And how does that meaning emerge? It appears to our consciousness in the form of beauty.

The beauty of things—a quality that Augustine saw as not merely an aesthetic value, but refers to order, harmony, and the profound reason through which and in which things exist—speaks to everyone, but not everyone understands. Only those who know how to ask with careful judgment can understand; in other words, those who “compare that voice received from without with the truth within.” ■

Close-up



A small switch leads to Mars

From Italy to Silicon Valley, in the company that is revolutionizing space exploration. This is the story of Mauro Prina and the adventure he lives every day at work: attention to reality, the questions opened up by looking at one detail, and sharing with his colleagues. "When you remain stuck on what you already think you know, you find yourself back on the margins."



Paola Bergamini



Falcon Heavy's first launch, on February 6, 2018.

In the eighth grade, Mauro Prina had a passion for typewriters. He was fascinated by their mechanical workings, and he used this kind of fascination to direct his work in school into something clear, precise, and ordered. He decided to enroll in a high school with an emphasis on technology because an acquaintance told him that “computers are like really powerful typewriters.” Back then, in 1984, he never imagined that this passion would lead him from Baceno, the little Italian town north of Lago Maggiore where he lived, to Los Angeles, where he became the Thermal Dynamics Director for SpaceX, the company founded in 2002 by Elon Musk, the chief executive of Tesla Motors and one of the most famous people (and sharpest minds) in Silicon Valley, where he could build spacecraft to carry people and objects into orbit. His objective was simple: to make travel to Mars possible. In 1996, after Mauro graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering, the astrophysics professor Marco Bersanelli proposed that he go to Pasadena to NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory to study the cooling systems for the Planck satellite, a project he was overseeing. “Over the years, a vocational choice was maturing in me, one of total dedication, and Guido, a *Memor Domini* who had recently moved to Los Angeles, had asked for someone to join him there,” Mauro said. “Bersanelli was a dear friend, a person I could trust. Plus, I was very impressed by the American method of investigation I had encountered a few years before at the University of Chicago. Basically, these were all signs it seemed the Lord was putting in front of me. I accepted, and most importantly, the professor I was working with supported my desire to follow these signs.”



Mauro Prina (left) with a colleague.

12

His work in Pasadena was focused for two years on designing a switch. “I chose that detail because, within the team of people working on it, I found one who knows the material really well. I knew I could learn from him.” At a certain point, they ran into a problem with a soldered joint between pieces. “The technician who worked alongside me and I began to ask other people about it. Each of them added a new element toward understanding the issue. For me, at the heart of it all is a curiosity toward reality. When I encountered Christianity, I found myself opened up even more to reality. I wanted to discover the places the Mystery makes himself present and comes to meet me. Knowledge, then, becomes an adventure even when it’s about a detail as small as a switch. Therefore, in the face of a problem, the first questions are: ‘Do I know everything? What is missing? What does what I learned today tell me?’ In dialogue with everyone, you gather all the inputs and start to follow a path, one that is not predetermined and often is not linear. In fact, they sometimes seem to lead you astray. It is like when you are driving and think you have taken a wrong turn but find yourself in a really beautiful place that you otherwise would not have seen. That is how we found the solution for the joint, and discovered something new in the process.”

After his work on the switch NASA offered him a contract, and Mauro began dedicating his time to designing a compressor. His areas of competence widened so much that he was the one to sign off, as project director, on the technical documentation for the entire cooling system installed on the rocket.

Once that project was finished, it was time to work on the cooling system for the space rover designed for Mars, later named “Curiosity.” In particular, he worked on the valves that would maintain the temperature. How should they work? “The solution was in the shower.” Which means? “I thought of the valves that maintain the temperature in the shower even when you turn on hot water in another faucet. We did not do anything more than adapt these valves for the rover. If you stay glued to the technical data, as has happened to some of my colleagues who have a materialistic view of life, you cannot pick up on that *extra* aspect reality is trying to tell you about. You cannot really know, cannot see all the connections.”

In 2007, Mauro decided to change jobs, because the rhythm of the project development at NASA was too slow for him. In the course of a single day, he in-

interviewed with and was hired by SpaceX. For many, it was a visionary startup, for others a fool's dream. "I was fascinated by this idea underlying the whole project, that our human consciousness surpasses the geographic limits of earth. I had this desire to make a contribution toward advancing the history of the world." The first successful launch of a rocket was in 2007, but Musk then posed a new challenge for his 300 employees: to make it a sustainable project, the rocket had to more than just launch, it had to return, just as a ship or a plane does. They had been considering the mechanics at NASA for 40 years, but at SpaceX, the steps progress much more quickly. They try, make changes, and learn from their mistakes.

In 2015, the first stage of the Falcon 9 rocket, after going into orbit, landed on the launch site. It was the first

time that a rocket carried a satellite into orbit and returned to its base. But there is still a long way to go. "It was clear that we were setting out to do something that had never been done before. Not knowing what to expect, you need to share your knowledge of the data with your colleagues on the team. This is because they look at the same thing and see aspects that, though they are right in front of your eyes, you do not recognize. When you desire to know, you are not afraid of making mistakes, asking for help, or taking risks. Those lacking this curiosity for knowledge gradually find themselves out on the margins, as I have seen happen to me when I remain stuck on what I think I already know. And in those cases, it is just a matter of time before you find yourself out of the game."

This summer, SpaceX sold its first

ticket to outer space. Yusaku Maezawa, a Japanese businessman, bought a trip around the moon for a group of artists, with the aim of seeing what this might inspire them to create. Mauro was blown away by the news, but his colleagues did not understand why he was so happy. He explained, "Don't you see that it's someone spending a lot of money so that other people can be inspired to create something beautiful? The fact a person like that exists says something about the greatness of humanity, what it aspires to."

To work on a project like this requires total commitment, yet that is not enough by itself. Difficulties come up, and sometimes your initial motivation of being able to collaborate on a great achievement, grows weak. Two of the colleagues Mauro had hired quit, telling him, "We want to move on so we can recover that motivation. We would like to live with the zeal you still have." Mauro said, "I still have that zeal because, insofar as I can be aware, I want to discover what is new in every day. For that, I need the Lord to make Himself present, that He come to meet me: in Morning Prayer, at work, in my relationships." One day, one of his bosses asked him, "Where do you get this zeal for knowledge? Many other people have lost it." Mauro told him about his life. At the end of this description he said, "In a few days, I am going back to Italy to see my friends. Back where it all began." His boss replied, "Okay, I'll come with you." ■

"In the face of a problem, the first questions are: 'Do I know everything? What is missing? What does what I learned today tell me?' In dialogue with everyone, you gather all the inputs and start to follow a path, one that is not predetermined."



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14

Like John and Andrew

Gaia is the young Indian woman quoted by Fr. Julián Carrón at the CL Fraternity Exercises. This is her story, a reminder of “the first two who ran up against Jesus”: the encounter, the faith, opening up a new way of knowing... “I can never forget what happened to me”



Daide Perillo

She still remembers the date. March 12th, five years ago. It was during her Art History class at the university. “It was then my life was totally changed.” Gaia had just lost her father. “I cried a lot. I cried and suffered at the thought of how I had treated him sometimes, at the last things we said to each other and the last thing we did together.” Even in class that day, she could not suppress the lump in her throat. She sat there crying as the professor spoke and her friends beside her whispered, “It’s all right...” A girl whom she had never met in the row in front of her turned around and asked, “What happened? Are you all right?” Gaia told her about her father. And in the eyes of that girl, the same tears welled up. She was moved to tears. Moved! And the way she asked me, ‘How are you?’... Not at the funeral, as they buried my father... But I would even say that in *my whole life* no one had ever asked me how I was. It was the first time someone asked me that.”

This is how Gaia, Indian on her mother’s side and Spanish on her father’s, now a 25-year-old living in a situation where a certain discretion is required, ran into something she could never have imagined: Christ. We heard her story mentioned at the CL Fraternity Exercises months ago. Fr. Julián Carrón read an excerpt from a letter she sent to Fr. Nacho Carbajosa, the responsible of the Movement in Spain. She described her encounter with Christianity in Madrid, her discovery of a new and more *human* way to live, and her attempts to distance herself when a relationship with a young man took an unexpected turn because he wanted “to consecrate his life to God.”

Yet, even in London, where she later moved, or in India, where she returned to look for other roads to happiness, what she encountered never abandoned her. “It is inside me,” she writes in her letter. “Every day I get up asking that He not leave me all alone. I can’t say I’m alone. I can’t. Christ must have been like you, a person who helped others to understand themselves, to look deep into their hearts. This is exactly what happened to me when I met you: I understand myself.” She goes on, “At times I see how I confuse everything. It’s a forgetting of steps I’ve taken, which has made me more unhappy or even more stupid. But I can’t forget what I’ve already lived, what is

already inside me. I’m waiting for Him to happen again to me. I seek Him. I look at people, hoping for that gaze, those eyes, to return and appear. I hope to see him in every person I meet,” building up to the last lines, “Since I met Him, my life is often more restless, even painful, but it’s also something more: it’s alive. It’s as if He were the source of my life: I was dead and now I’m alive.”

If there is any story that can demonstrate what Fr. Giussani means when he underlines how “John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, by following that exceptional person, learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality,” it is Gaia’s story. Looking at what happened to her is like flipping through the pages of the Gospel, one after another. Bit by bit, you see the introduction of a new way of using reason and affection, and it began on that day in March, in a college lecture hall.

The girl who was moved is named Anita. Argentine by birth, she now lives in Madrid. That evening, she received an e-mail: “I want to thank you for today. You helped me a lot when you said that no one can take away this pain. But, then, why do I feel such a need to talk about it? And *why with you*, when you asked me how I was? And why, instead of asking me about my father, about his last days and so forth, did you ask how I was? It seems like you are different from the others. There is something about you I can’t put my finger on.” Just a few days later, Anita was at Gaia’s house for dinner. Gaia’s mother spoke about herself and about her husband, how she met him while he was stationed with the army in India, and asked Anita many questions, about everything. “I spoke about what had happened to me,” Anita said, “and she responded, ‘No go back even further’...” Anita told her whole story, about how she had encountered people who looked at her in a way that was different, who lived in a way that was different. And how she discovered that this difference had an unexpected origin: they were Catholic. “I remember all the names she listed, because she must have repeated them a thousand times,” Gaia said: “Lucia, Maria, Natalia, Pablo... she spoke, and I thought, ‘what she is saying about how they looked at her is the same way that she looked at me!’”

Anita also wrote about that dinner in a letter to a friend. Reading it, you find the same deeply felt wonder. “At a certain point, her mother asked me, ‘So, you believe in God?’

and I said, 'Yes, but not a distant God. One who accompanies me every day.'" She described facts, gestures, and friendships. "As they listened, their eyes grew wider. And then Gaia's mom said to me, 'A God like that? How is that possible?' I couldn't believe it. I was overtaken by deep emotion."

At the end of the dinner, Gaia turned to her mother and said, "You see? This is the gaze on reality I was telling you about. Have you ever seen it in anyone else?" Before saying goodbye, she said to Anita, "You could disappear tomorrow, or I could, we could never see each other again, but I will remember this dinner as long as I live."

After that evening, Gaia's life was filled with new faces and a flurry of questions. About her friends, because the usual way of keeping each other company, of "putting up with nonsense," was no longer enough, and about her relationship with her boyfriend, which had started to break down.

A few months later, she left for Italy to study abroad in Pisa. At first, it was really difficult: the country, the language, the classes... everything was different, foreign to her. Gaia describes it with great clarity, "I needed that newness, to hear that 'how are you?' once again." She looked for it in a church, but they asked her to leave because they were about to close. She grew sad. Her roommates did not understand it. She felt like going home, until one day in class when a girl tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me, are you from Spain?" She had seen Gaia writing on WhatsApp. Her name was Martina; she was Italian, and they struck up a conversation about what classes to take, lecture notes... "If you want, I can share mine." "That struck me, that

a stranger offered to help me."

The real shock came later, after class. "Are you busy? If not, come with me and I'll introduce you to some friends." She found herself in a room with about 20 people studying or discussing what they were reading or had just heard in class. She was impressed. "You could see something different in them: they were happy." She asked Martina who they were, and why they seemed so unified. "We are part of a Catholic movement, CL. Have you heard of it?"

She started to spend time with those students; they became her guardian angels. She invited her to the Beginning Day in Milan. She went, partially because a certain Fr. Carrón was holding it ("what strange joy when I found out that he was Spanish"), and partially because, "I wanted to understand what he meant when he said 'a presence.'"

She described what happened in Milan in a letter: "I left *overcome* by how he spoke about *me*, my problems, the things I was interested in. I was especially struck by Mary Magdalene." But there was one thing she did not understand. "Why does Carrón say all this is Christ? I have seen all he was talking about in my friends; why Christ and not just *them*?"

Back in Pisa, the first thing she did was buy a Bible, "A used one, because that is all I found in Spanish." And she started to read, one section at a time, beginning with Mary Magdalene and those pages she heard for the first time at the Beginning Day. "'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' And how He calls her by name, 'Maria!' The same thing that happened to me! 'Why are you weeping? How are you, Gaia?' Exactly the same!" And, going backward, she went to the Old Testament, the Psalms... "I read, and it spoke about

me. For example, every morning before leaving the apartment, I read Chapter 1 of Genesis. I walked out on the streets and everything was different: the buildings of Pisa, the sky, everything around me... All wonderful. And then the Gospels. I needed to read them. It was like I could not separate myself from that man's life." It is quite moving to skim many of the e-mails from her time in Pisa. They continually move back and forth from the text to her life and vice versa. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep...' I heard it this morning at Mass, and I could not stop crying. It is what He did for me! He left the other sheep and came looking for me when I was lost after my father's death. Now I am beginning to understand. I am beginning to realize why Carrón says that you are Christ. But I need to know more."

And life responded to that need, in the same form described in those stories: an encounter, a fact, an attraction spreading from one person to another, broadening reason and making relationships closer. Gaia invited her friends to her apartment to study. Her roommates were surprised: "Why do you study together? You are not even in the same department." Still, after awhile they joined in: first Diletta, then Lisa, from Germany, who after a few times said, "Gaia, spending time with all of you makes me take my studies and study abroad seriously. I like it much better now than in the beginning, when I went from one night out to another..." She read School of Community every day. She went to Mass and left "crying, because the readings always spoke to me. I sit in silence and listen. I wait for Him to speak to me again, to explain something new to me."



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Her experience was a constant provocation for her Italian friends. Advent began, and Gaia knew nothing about it. She had never heard of Christmas, “had never seen a Nativity scene.” They explained what it is all about. And she recited a page from the Gospel: “There is a point where it says, ‘And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means *God is with us.*’ God with us! How can I prepare myself for that?” A relationship with one boy grew more intense. She met him at a dinner. He, too, had lost his father. They fell in love. Over Christmas, Gaia traveled to India. She spent the break there. Her mother had warned her to watch out with her relatives because they did not think well of Christians there, especially her grandmother. Gaia felt distraught. “Each time I saw a relative, they would say the same thing, ‘Gaia, you’re so different!’ And I could not tell them why, I could not speak of Christ...” There was the same problem for Mass: she wanted to go on Christmas Day, and had found a church and Mass times online. But how?

The evening of December 24th came and the questions her relatives were asking convinced her to talk. “I realized how much had changed for me. And I took a risk.” She spoke about Jesus. About how she encountered Anita, CL, the Bible, Mass... Gaia kept her eyes on her grandmother, who seemed sad. When there was a break, she followed her into

the kitchen and they talked. “Gaia, I am not upset that you hid it from me. Or that you are so changed. You are happy. And I would really like to understand what changed you this much. This is what I am sorry about—that I cannot have the same experience.” When Gaia left to return to Europe, her grandmother bid farewell saying, “Keep praying.” She thought of those words, “Christ answers.” It’s a presence that she still cannot strip from her heart now that life has taken her elsewhere. In the time between was all she said in the letter read at Rimini. That boy, little by little, discovered that his vocation was to virginity. He is now in the seminary. For Gaia, it was a real blow. One that left her “a whole year not wanting to talk to anyone,” one that opened up a hundred questions inside like “How could a man leave the woman he loves for something like that?” They were all questions capable of *opening* her, though, because they went hand in hand with that certainty she could not strip away. “He says that he loves me even by doing what he is doing. And that did not sound abstract to me. I know, because the only people I saw love that profoundly had just one thing that made them different: they had encountered Christ. That’s the only difference.” It is a solid judgment, planted in her heart. Reason and affection together, without a millimeter of separation. “I cannot forget what happened to me. There is nothing else in life with the same value.” ■



Paradise in the slum



text and photos by
Giuseppe Frangi

Abigael is Beatrice, Brian is Dante, Hillary is Virgil. The circles of Hell are their lived reality, inhabited by crooks and drug dealers...Directed by Marco Martinelli, 140 kids from Africa's largest slum brought the *Divine Comedy* to life. And they made us look to the stars again.

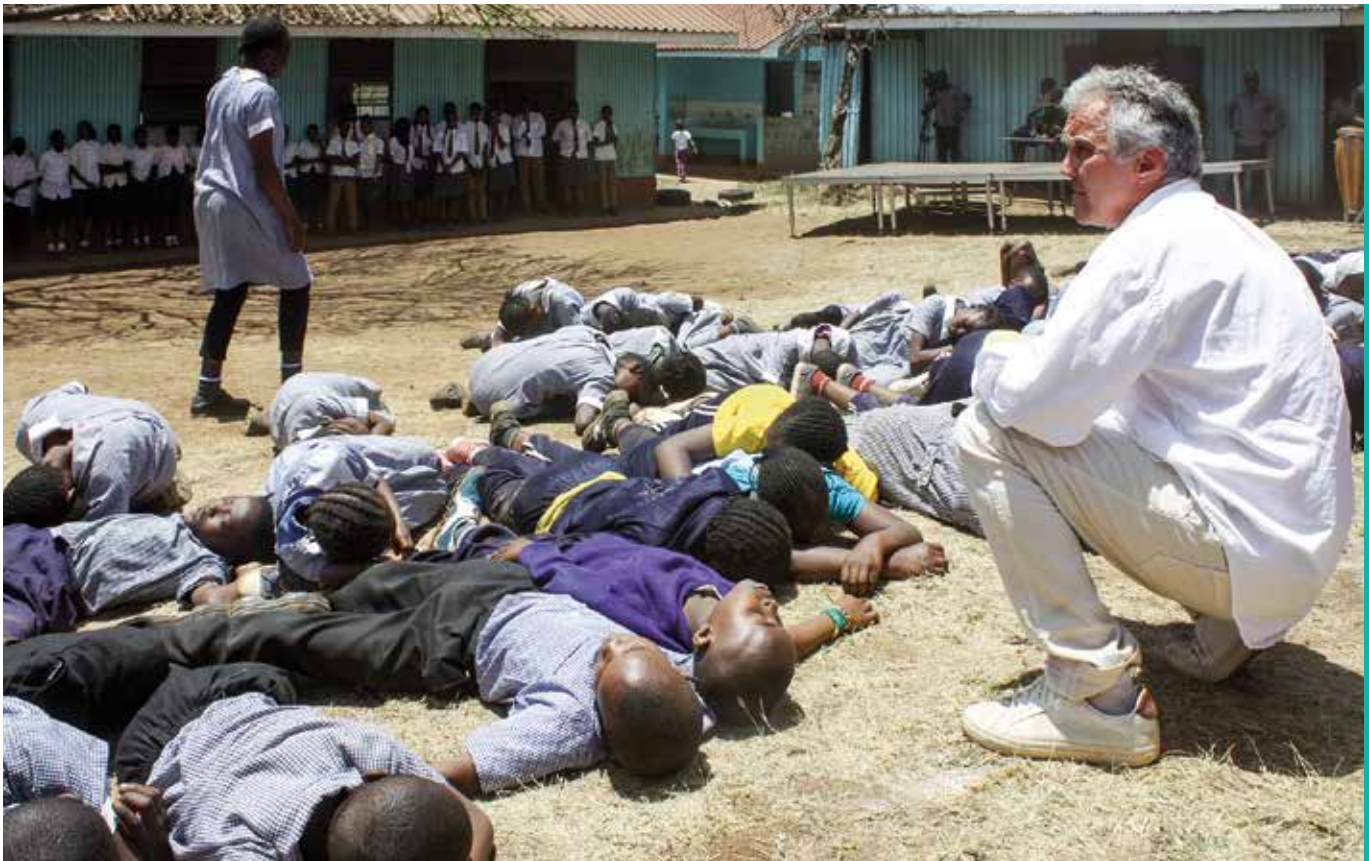


A moment from the play *The Sky over Kibera*, a theater experience born at Little Prince Primary School and supported by AVSI.

The stage was the basketball court of the Little Prince Primary School in Nairobi, Kenya. On the bright white wall were painted the words of the last verse of the *Divine Comedy*: “The love who moves the sun and the other stars.” Beyond the wall lay the infinite sea of mud and metal sheets of Kibera, the largest slum in Africa. It was impossible not to sense its force standing on the other side: many of the children lined up on the stage live in those houses that can hardly be considered houses. Kibera, in ancient Nubian, means forest, even though there is not a tree in sight, because in the slum there is not even one centimeter of bare land. Its name fits surprisingly well with the play: the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri begins in a dark forest. It was Brian Kabugi, a dark-skinned Dante, a student at the Cardinal Otunga High School, who found himself lost in it. He moved with ease, as if he had always been an actor; instead, this was his first time

acting. He was very skilled at convincing everyone that Kibera and Florence were the same place. Here too there were wild beasts that surrounded him, in the form of groups of youth that moved menacingly in unison. They were “Africanized” wild animals: the wolf, the hyena, the snake, the lion. At that moment, there was the providential arrival of Hillary Nindo, an athletic Virgil. He took Dante by the arm and together they let themselves be pushed through the entrance into Hell. This was the start of a production thought to be inconceivable. It was made possible by the audacity of one individual who dared to envision it and make it a reality. That man is Marco Martinelli, one of today’s most important Italian directors. He is a man with a “heretical” view of theater—he thinks that theater has to do with real life and with people’s happiness. He has put this into practice in Ravenna, his city, as he did in Kibera.

“Many of the children lined up on the stage live in those houses that can hardly be considered houses.”



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Marco Martinelli with some of the children who took part in the play.

Martinelli has a fascinating and peculiar background: he loves to stay outside the bounds of convention and to work on the fringes. For example, in a number of schools in the suburbs of central Italy, he built a program that generated a major collaborative performance, *Eresia della felicità* (*Heresy of happiness*). He admits that in order to make a dream like bringing the *Divine Comedy* to Kibera a reality, there had to be an extraordinary convergence of factors. And this is what happened. The first factor was the Little Prince Primary School, where a group of teachers had discovered the developmental and educational potential of theater. Children and teens found a suitable channel to express their vitality; they gained self-confidence and learned in the process. The second factor was an organization, AVSI, that supported Little Prince and had decided to invest in the idea that culture could be a key instrument for promoting social development. This is how a school in the slums came to have a real theater, named after Emanuele Banterle, the long-time president

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of the Compagnia degli Incamminati (Company of the Pilgrims), who lived the theater with the same convictions as Martinelli. The third factor was a ripple effect: other schools in Nairobi discovered that they also wanted to enact initiatives like the one at Little Prince. The time came to make the leap and dare the unimaginable.

When he heard the proposal, Marco Martinelli immediately understood that it would be impossible for him to pass up work on such a dream. He opened up his planner, entered the dates of his trips to Kibera, and set the goal: to create an adaptation of the *Divine Comedy*, because, as he puts it, “one must be able to experience Paradise, even in a slum.”

The title given to the play, *The Sky over Kibera*, evidences its scope. To reach the sky, though, they would have to pass through Hell, through the envi-

ronment suggested by the students based on their lived experience: the assassins, the corrupt police and politicians, the drug dealers, the false lovers, the child molesters. Each of these “circles” is traversed following the text of the script, of course, but also giving space to an extraordinary capacity for improvisation.

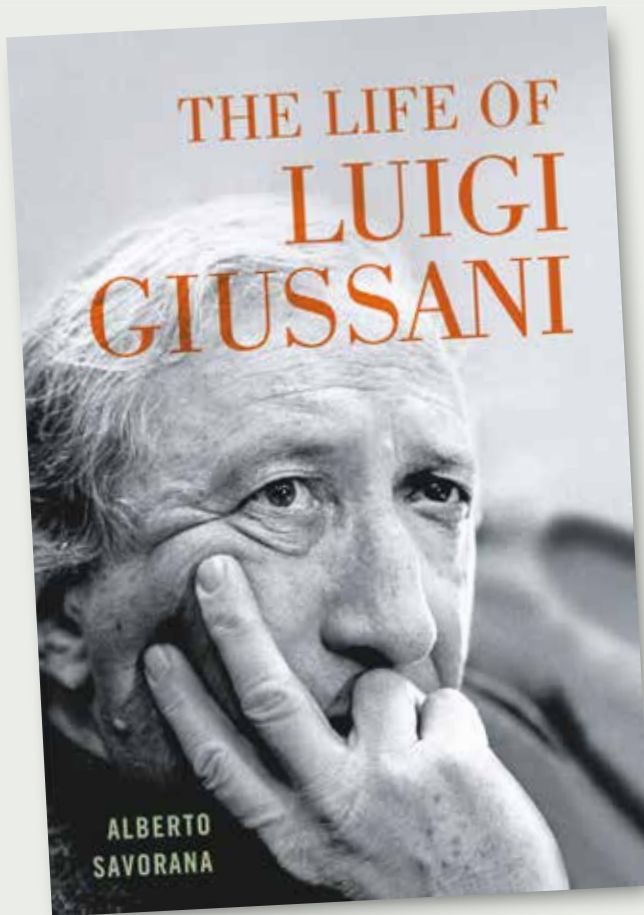
The passage through Purgatory was accompanied by the music of Mahler played on the flute, as well as poetical verses shouted to the heavens by the voices of the youth. (“It was there in Purgatory that Dante put many of his colleagues,” emphasized Martinelli.) The verses were written by poets from every era and land: there was Dante, Mayakovsky, Raymond Mgeni (who wrote in Swahili), and Emily Dickinson. Calling out in response to the voices of the poets was Abigael Waniu, a Beatrice with tight

black curls, who exuded a commanding, endearing tranquility and persuasiveness. She soothed little Faith, explaining to her that she was already in Paradise, because Paradise is present in those verses that lead up to the end: “Virgin Mother, daughter of your Son...”

The day after the second performance, the *Divine Comedy* was brought outside and into the slum. The big blue gate of the Little Prince Primary School was opened and the youth, all wearing yellow shirts, filled the streets and called out to the stars in the sky of Kibera, the same stars that were praised in song by Dante and acclaimed again by Mayakovsky: “After all, if the stars light up, does that mean anyone cares? Does that mean someone wants them to be there? Does that mean someone calls these little gobs of spit pearls?” ■

THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan



A detailed account of the life and legacy of the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement.

1,416 Pages, December 2017

Monsignor Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy, which has hundreds of thousands of adherents around the globe.

In *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, Alberto Savorana, who spent an important part of his life working and studying with Giussani, draws on many unpublished documents to recount who the priest was and how he lived. Giussani's life story is particularly significant because it shares many of the same challenges, risks, and paths toward enlightenment that are described in his numerous and influential publications.

In addition to providing the first chronological reconstruction of the life of the founder of Communion and Liberation, *The Life of Luigi Giussani* provides a detailed account of his legacy and what his life's work meant to individual people and the Church.

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