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What is Christianity?

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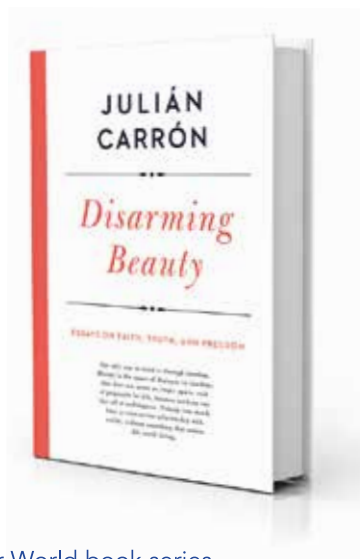
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The students, the fire, and Mrs. Smith

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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Poor in spirit

Those who read *Traces* regularly will be familiar with the extraordinary lesson that Fr. Giussani gave in Varigotti in 1968 to a group of young people of the Péguy Center, not only because the text was published as Page One on the CL website, but also because his words, so far away in time—exactly half a century—are so topical that in recent times they have marked the journey of the Movement of CL very clearly, tracing out a road for facing today's confusion.

That lesson, which in the meantime has been listened to and read by half the world and in many languages wherever Communion and Liberation is present, contains a passage that has struck everyone, because it condenses into two words a subtle but crucial distinction: “It is no longer history, or doctrine, or tradition, or a discourse that will move men and women today. Christian tradition and philosophy, Christian tradition and discourse have created and continue to create ‘Christianness,’ but not Christianity.” Christianity, insists Fr. Giussani, is “quite another thing”: it is “an announcement,” something “living” and “present.” It is difficult to find a more concisely effective formulation to indicate that the faith cannot be reduced to a cultural factor, ethical value, or naturally human impetus, no matter how good and true. Faith is *another thing*. But how can one discover the difference offered by faith today? How is it born? How does it come to the surface in our experience?

This edition of *Traces* speaks specifically about this, not only speaks, but tries to *show* it, revealing the places this strange difference, this presence, emerges, be it in the life of Western society or the “peripheries” of Africa.

We do so during a period that is different from others because we are moving toward Christmas, the source of everything, the moment when this difference appeared in history for the first time, in the simplest of ways, as a baby. It is not a cultural tradition or a system of thought or values. The “social and historical furrow” of Christianity, a phrase used by Fr. Giussani, was still entirely, literally, to be invented, in the 2,000 odd years that have brought us to this moment. And yet there, Christianity was already entirely present.

With that baby, something unheard of entered the world: “A presence charged with proposal, [...] a presence charged with meaning” never before seen or heard. The heart of everything, deep down, is there. You see this well in the image CL chose for its Christmas poster, in that Wise Man so struck by the announcement that he prostrates himself in front of the child, bowing himself, his history, and his humanly regal nature down in front of the most helpless presence that could be imagined.

That man must truly have been “poor in spirit.” The most sincere Christmas wish we can extend is that all of us, too, may be poor in spirit, now, so that we may recognize that Presence.

Letters

Luca, Mariella, Ángela

edited by
Paola Bergamini
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A dinner in Plymouth

Dear Fr. Carrón, I am a CLU student [the university students of CL] from Bologna and since September, I have been in Plymouth, England on an Erasmus scholarship. A few weeks after my arrival, it was my birthday and in the days leading up to it, my roommates (whom I barely knew) asked me what I wanted to do to celebrate, which for them meant, “How do you want to get drunk for your birthday?” I told them that I would like to cook for everybody. Here everyone cooks for themselves and then eats either standing up or in his room. And so I prepared an Italian dinner with the stipulation that we would all have to eat together around the table. The food was clearly a success (it doesn’t take much with the English) but the thing that amazed them the most and which made me think, was that I should decide to spend the afternoon of my birthday cooking for them. Indeed, that afternoon I asked myself why was I doing this for people I barely knew, and I realized, a realization that was further confirmed by their amazement, that the Christian attitude of service for others is what makes me happiest. For me there couldn’t be anything more beautiful than using my time to try to “reproduce” the features of what makes me happy in Italy and give them to those around me. Fr. Giussani in the Beginning Day [see Page One, at clonline.org] says, “Christianity is something that is given to us as an announcement, an unforeseen and unforeseeable reality [...] It is a proposal, a sort of proposal; it’s a kind of proposal; it’s a sort of meaning, a kind of meaning that is passed on to me, is proposed to me, that comes before me.” I

discovered that above all, this novelty is a novelty in me and that my encounter with Christianity pushes me to do things I would not do on my own. It becomes a novelty for everyone. From that Wednesday of my birthday until now, every Wednesday one person cooks for everyone else; it is the only moment of the week in which we are all together. In the meantime, we have also started a School of Community. The first time it was me, Andrea (the other guy from CL) and Andrea’s English girlfriend who is Catholic and since being with him has become interested in the Movement. After the first time, I invited Giovanni, another guy I had met, because he too is an Erasmus scholar and from Bologna. At the end of the School of Community, he said, “In the past few years, I’ve never had a place where I could talk about these things with friends. I was looking for a place just like this.” In Bologna, he hadn’t found anything. He had to come to Plymouth to find the three of us who meet in a living room to try to accompany each other in this life even if we are speaking in a language we don’t know very well.
Luca, Plymouth (Great Britain)

The authority of the newcomer

The journey of GS [Student Youth] did not start well this year. So many of us feel that this is a difficult moment after the unexpected flowering of the community over the last two years. This might be because some of us finished high school and now feel they are authorities over everyone. It might be because the younger ones are having a hard time or it might be personal crises a number of us are going through. And so, the climate seems perhaps marked by disappointment or by the sensation that the best is behind us. But Matilde and Caterina would not let go and proposed a study retreat for All Saints’ Day. It ruined some of my plans, but I accepted the invitation. They also invited Martina, a GS student from Pisa with

whom a friendship was born at the summer vacation. She came with three friends. One of them, Marta, does not know the Movement but she accepted the invitation of her classmate, Elisa. They were three very simple days of studying, of watching a movie together, and of listening to a witness by Pietro, a friend of ours from CLU, and we played and sang together. On Sunday at lunch, I asked Marta what her experience had been. She told me about how she had come with an attitude of waiting and expectation and about her surprise at finding herself at home and feeling curiosity about a journey that is beginning now. Marta asked the others about their experience; she pressed them with questions and didn't let go until the answers were true. In front of her, everyone talked about their difficulties and discoveries, and even those who are usually silent felt the need to tell their story. I let Marta, the newcomer, be the one to guide the moment and I, like all the others, was amazed in front of the clarity of her experience and the purity of her questions. The authority among us is not the one who knows the most; it is the unmistakable happening again of the beginning in the face of a sixteen-year-old girl.

Mariella, Prato (Italy)

A welcoming embrace

I met him fortuitously through a friend online. I don't know what he was looking for but I was looking for him without knowing it. He was at the Rimini Meeting and communicated to me what was happening there. I didn't understand anything—I had never heard anything about CL. I began looking on the internet about Fr. Giussani, the Movement, etc. One day he sent me a message that shocked me. He had gone to Loreto and upon returning told me that he had asked that I might embrace the reality that God wanted for me. I didn't understand anything. He quoted people from CL: Fr. Giussani, Prades, Fernando de Haro, Julián, Nacho... I looked for answers on the internet, which responded more quickly than he did. I felt shaken. I began to read Fr. Giussani, but I did not read him, I *devoured* him. Where had I been all these years? My friend returned to Madrid, and we met and spoke. A month of dialogue, questions and more questions, and things were becoming clearer. But they became even clearer not because of what he explained to me, but because of what I saw in him that I haven't seen in many others who call themselves Christians: coherence. I never personally met Giussani nor yet Carrón or the others,

but now I know them. A few years ago, I came out of a traumatic and painful experience, and my great fortune is that Jesus did not let go of my hand. Certain phrases struck me, and I stopped to reflect and to find their deeper meaning. One day I decided I wanted this experience of Christ. Without saying anything to my friend, I went to the headquarters of the Movement in Madrid. Everyone was very cordial—they gave me the *Book of Hours*, copies of *Traces*, the booklet of the Exercises, and a lot of information. I had been at the headquarters for an hour when someone said, "Let's pray," and we recited the *Angelus*. I was very amazed. Once home, I called my friend and told him about it. I told him that the next Monday I would go to one of their meetings: my first contact with the School of Community. It began with a Galician song, "Negra Sombra," and it was a gift because I am from Galicia. It was like a wink, an embrace of welcome. During the School of Community, I was moved to see how beautiful it is to have a second chance and that God was giving me that second chance. When a stranger like me arrives, you do not know what is happening. After each School of Community, I am better, which is a grace that comes from God. This grace vibrates in every School of Community. Maybe because I am like an infant that is at the beginning, everything amazes and surprises me... But you do not realize that the Spirit breathes in every School of Community. This is the charism of Fr. Giussani.

Ángela, Madrid (Spain)

At the height of life

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What happens when Christianity happens? This is the question underlying the article about Mikel Azurmendi, the Basque anthropologist. A few months ago, he told us about his encounter with a Christian community and his surprise at finding in them, “the smiles of people come back to life,” in other words, at seeing a different way of living. Now his book has come out in Spanish—it is a chronicle of the months he spent working immersed in that strange “tribe” to find the answer to the most decisive questions he faced: What makes them this way? What makes their life so beautiful, so desirable?

It is striking to see how this encounter between a “proposal charged with meaning” and a person whose freedom is still wide open at age 75 can lead to a change in mentality and overturn deeply rooted intellectual categories, giving new life to the forms, gestures, and cultural expressions that no longer seem to have anything to say to humanity. We see the same thing in the witnesses that follow from Burundi, Boston, and Rome, where the Synod of Youth took place and where those present walked away with a richer experience of what the Church—and Christianity—is. (dp) ■





The face of a Christian presence

Mikel Azurmendi's book about the "tribe" of CL has just come out in Spain. It is a chronicle of the almost two-year journey during which the Basque anthropologist identified the key traits of the reality he had come across. The community turned his previous cultural categories inside out, leading him to discover "a hope for all."

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Ignacio Carbajosa

“Can a cultured man, a European of our day, believe, really believe in the divinity of Christ?” This question asked by Dostoevsky over a century ago takes on new meaning in the cultural context in which we find ourselves today. Among the many implications of the question, one is particularly relevant: What kind of Christian presence today is capable of attracting man's reason and affection enough to inspire his profession of faith?

Mikel Azurmendi's recently published book, *El abrazo: Hacia una cultura del encuentro* (An embrace: toward a culture of encounter) (Almuzara Press), offers a response to this question, though without at all presuming to do so. We can confidently call Azurmendi a “cultured man, a European of our day.” He is a man forged in the battle against the Franco dictatorship, an activist in the first wave of Basque nationalism, a participant in the events of May 1968 in Paris, an untiring warrior against the violence of the ETA (a Basque separatist group), an insightful observer of social developments... All this seasoned with an agnosticism originating from a rejection of the Catholic tradition in which he had previously been an active participant. (He was expelled from the seminary during his theological studies.) What led such a man to rediscover the faith? His book is a study “from the field,” the kind of chronicle of notes made by a sociologist during his studies of a tribe; in this case, the Catholic “tribe” that is Communion and Liberation in Spain, a sociologically distinguishable communal phenomenon. Going against all the rules of cultural anthropology, Azurmendi lets himself be-



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come involved in the object of his study to the point of embracing the faith. This is no “private” or “sentimental” experience; rather, throughout the pages of the book the sociologist revisits many of the cultural categories he had adopted and comes to affirm that “there is a hope for our country in this people.”

What are the traits that define the Christian presence he ran into? How is it different from that form of Christianity that is omnipresent in Spain and that he himself abandoned for lack of interest? Here is a summary drawn from the pages of his book.

The “cognitive” value of the encounter... with a presence that carries within it a proposal charged with meaning.

Azurmendi’s adventure began with three encounters: the different way a radio announcer spoke, the gaze of a good and very reasonable man, and the embrace of a volunteer. These were the three “lucky” encounters that drew his interest toward this strange people and paved the way for his path to knowledge. It is a recognizable *presence*, something you can encounter, but not just any presence. “There is something going on here!” he said after the few hours he spent at EncuentroMadrid in 2016. That was the moment he decided to write a book about those people. Azurmendi, at the opening of his book, takes it upon himself to explain what this *presence* with a *proposal* charged with *meaning* is (for him and for his wife), a pres-

Madrid, November 15th.
The presentation of Azurmendi’s book.
From right: the author, Julián Carrón,
and Basque politician Joseba Arregi.

ence that is radically new, “something that wasn’t and then is; unforeseen and unforeseeable,” as Fr. Giussani said in his famous lesson from 1968:

“In the following pages, I have sought to outline the existence of an environment that, to me, was totally unknown three years ago. To describe its vital substance. Though these people close to us speak the same language and live in our midst, the web of meaning which surrounds their experiences and interpersonal interactions has very little in common with our greater cultural web [...]. Entering into their reality, beginning to understand them more and more and finding them enviable: that is the journey that my book has adopted as its storyline” (p.15) [Translation ours].

It becomes evident in reading the pages of this book that this presence with a proposal involves in the meaning it expresses the person who carries that proposal. This is how the meaning reached Azurmendi: through people who were transformed, renewed. The book is full of proper names, people described in all their newness, just as you see in the Gospels or the Acts of the

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Facts and words joined.

Azurmendi unifies his narration of “facts” with that based on “words,” not primarily his own, but the words the members of this “tribe” use to explain the origin of those facts. If Azurmendi began to listen to those Christian words, it was because of the facts his eyes beheld and his reason wanted to explain. The words used by the Christians that he was learning about were what gave him the key to understanding the origin of the facts. Without the words, he never would have reached the point of converting, as he makes clear in the chapter entitled, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Here is how it opens:

“My brief stay in Madrid for the presentation of Julián Carrón’s book was rich with encounters. One was fundamental for me. We went to dinner with ten people consecrated to Christ” (p. 165).

“They speak about Jesus. For me, it is clear that, if He is God, it is worth it to follow His way as they do. But is He God? Was that exceptional man God?”

He began a dialogue with those consecrated men and women, prophets because of their very form of life. Azurmendi writes:

“They speak about Jesus. For me, it is clear that, if He is God, it is worth it to follow His way as they do. But is He God? Was that exceptional man God? As we got ready to leave, Enrique gave me a copy of Jesus of Nazareth by Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI). [...] Reading that book helped me to get to the bottom of what this community of Christians is saying when they speak in this way about the ‘beauty of the face of Christ’” (p. 166).

And when does it come to us? After having read Carrón’s book, *Disarming Beauty*, he writes:

“How can we know if we have truly understood the book? We can tell by whether we live the way he indicated. Riding a bike. I want to see how some of those I have already met ride a bike. I want to find out how they began to learn to pedal” (p. 156).

The limits of a certain kind of Catholic tradition

In various parts of the book, Azurmendi presents the contrast between what he knew of the Christian proposal before, the Christianity he had abandoned, and what he had now encountered. When he was young, it was more interesting to go to the forbidden May 1 protests than to follow the disciplines of the seminary.

Speaking again of *Disarming Beauty*, he says:

“Within the context of today’s Christianity, relegated to doctrine, rules, norms

“Therein lies one of the reasons so many of us left, abandoning the Christian faith in the ‘60s.”

and prohibitions, the book introduces the most basic element of its reasonableness: wonder. Innocence taken to the extreme. As if you were passing from the absence of the meaning of the law to the law of meaning itself” (p. 148). Describing the kind of communion he sees in a number of families he goes to visit at House Masía in the country where they often meet, he looks back on the experiences he had when he still considered himself Catholic and concludes that “we never could have ‘built the Church’ living out a faith of beliefs and rituals that always emphasized our sinfulness. Therein lies one of the reasons so many of us left, abandoning the Christian faith in the ‘60s” (p. 194).

The origin of a new judgment—a cultural revision.

You sometimes hear it affirmed that being open to everyone has been proven to dilute your own identity. Others insist on how necessary it is to explicitly present the Christian truths about man, morality, society, and life. The encounter with Azurmendi is a display of how the factors that make up a new person are born. In that light, it is worth remembering the “cultural revisions” Azurmendi offers in three different areas: education, charity, and the phenomenology of religion. A visit to two schools only quickened Azurmendi’s formation of a clear perception; he was won over by the fact that a cultural revolution was being set into motion by the educational initiatives linked to the life of CL. “I would have really liked to be like these teachers,” declared the sociologist, who dedicated many years of his life to teaching. The words, “You are a gift,” on the wall in the hallway of the preschool at the Newman Institute brought him to see the root of the relationship entered into with the other person and with reality, through education:

“If you define the meaning of reality that way, this meaning protects the student from the inevitable encounter they must have with the deceptive axioms of Rousseau, for example that false statement: ‘I hate slavery as it is the font of all the evils of human kind.’ This statement has been grasped onto by the

Marxes, Engelses, Bakunins of the world, and by that entire army of repairers of evil whose teachings are passed on to students in high schools. In this conception, evil always comes from outside oneself in the form of a poorly structured or governed society; it is always someone else’s fault, whether it be the capitalist, the gypsy, the Jew, the immigrant or someone else!” (p. 86).

After the horrifying impact with the misery of the neighborhood of nomads in Cañada Real, the biggest drug market in Madrid, Azurmendi comes to an extremely insightful judgment as to how sociology has sought to eliminate the Christian event as being something irrelevant without looking at works of charity:

“I think I know why sociologists of religion, and I myself, did not want to look at the collective practice of charity. I realize that I would have first had to look here before affirming that in the current age of secularization, ‘there are no longer forms of Christian religion that can offer an identity,’ but only ‘ritual services.’ And I think I also know why we did not pay attention to the manifold Christian works of charity at that moment when we defined Christianity as ‘a faith without belonging’ or, conversely, ‘a belonging without faith’ (according to recent sociological hypotheses)” (p. 134).

In the end, after having shared that people’s experience of God, Azurmendi was prepared to refute the postsecular idea of a “personal God” as conceived by present-day sociology: postmodern man adapting his own private god tailored for himself. “The personal God is as capable of being divided up and reassembled as the individual him or herself; He is the guarantor of the independence of both the individual and of God [...]. The personal God may well be the religious version of one’s personal life, of the private sphere” (Ulrich Beck). With this conception, sociology discounts the seeds of contemporary religiosity. Azurmendi witnessed something different...

Christ is in our midst.

Mikel offers two examples that lead him to recognize Christ present. The first is related to the unity of life implicit in the way a person speaks about life to others (“witness”).



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Looking out on Barcelona from
Parco Güell, designed by Gaudí.

this “Christian tribe” represents for Spain. In the Introduction, he points out to anyone who picks up the book the role CL plays in our democracy:

“Consequently, at a societal level, Communion and Liberation offers a help in resolving conflicts, in particular the problems of education and the abandonment of children and the marginalized; all this can be found in its invitation to its members to constant personal transformation” (p. 17).

In the last section of the book, in a long excursus criticizing the kind of sociology that does not want to get involved with its object of study, he cites a great living agnostic thinker, George Steiner. Steiner affirms that our Western society is living a “long Saturday,” referring to the dark night of waiting in the tomb, and asks, “Will humankind experience a Sunday? One wonders.”

This is how Azurmendi responds: *“The latest wave of Enlightenment thinkers, like Durkheim and Weber, are also living a perpetual Saturday, despite the fact that they thought they were living in purely rational societies. Contrary to these thinkers, this flock rooted in Christ maintains not only that there will be a Sunday, but that it is already present every day of the week. [...] I would like to tell Steiner that he still has time to see people whose souls are infused with Sunday and the face of people resurrected. People whose lives point to the truth of humanity”* (pp. 304-06). ■

“Why does everyone at Masía listen, immersed in silent assent, to the story about a colleague’s life? What does it mean that, on my very first visit to Masía, they invited me to talk about myself? Might it make sense to aspire that your personal life be united in a continuum spanning from infancy to old age? Can life for some people be a living continuum in which Monday is the same thing as Thursday or Sunday?” (p. 186).

The second example relates to the existence of a people whose development, unity, and behavior seem impossible. This is how he describes a community vacation in the mountains (in Masella):

“The simple act of being in Masella, the simple way they stayed together those six days demonstrated without a doubt that there is a gift in that people I cannot help but call ‘spiritual’ [...]. Put seven hundred people together, most of whom do not know one another, to spend six days in absolute freedom. Put together families and single people [...], newborns, children, teens and adolescents, adults [...]. Would you believe it would be possible in such an episodic gathering to not have a single fight, not one child complaining about another in the pool and running to his dad to go and protest to his ‘adversary’s’ dad, and not a single child or adult pushing in line at the restaurant or trying to cut in line to get to the buffet first? Would you not, perhaps, expect to see the field where the community gathered to be left covered with trash and bottles, so that there would have to be a cleaning service working every day to keep things in order? [...] Instead, none of that happened within that entire people made up by all seven hundred of us” (pp. 277-78).

In this people lies a hope for our country.

At the beginning and at the end of the book, Azurmendi explains what

On the banks of Lake Tanganyika

He came across a phrase by chance and the newness of life will not let go of him, even when he is overcome by a sense of emptiness. This is the journey of Jean-Marie, a young doctor, and of his friends in the Movement in Burundi. To live "without the fear of what will happen tomorrow."



Paolo Perego

“He came looking for me in the middle of the forest, here, in Burundi.” Jean-Marie laughed, as he does each time he says it. He is 26 years old, specializing in medicine in the capital, Bujumbura, on the banks of Lake Tanganyika, in the heart of Africa. His story begun four years ago at the university as he sat next to a friend flipping through a book. After joking around a bit, he asked: “What are you reading?” He saw a phrase that he would never forget: “I don’t want to live uselessly: it is my obsession.” These words by Fr. Giussani were in a book that had made its way to Burundi (who knows how?). “Where did you find this? I also want to live this way.” That friend was part of one of the first CL communities in Burundi. “He invited me on a hike. I did not know the others, but I decided to go. There was something that attracted me.”

And so, here he is today, his life spent between the hospital ward of Bujumbura and his small group of friends in the School of Community: “There is always the risk of experiencing emptiness,” for instance, when he moved to Ngozi last year. “I became immersed in my studies, in the things I had to get done. I didn’t have time for my-

self anymore. I felt as if I had been emptied.” One Sunday, during Mass, he met the gaze of one of his patients who had been recently cured. There was a smile, a brief conversation outside the church, and an invitation to have lunch. “He was grateful for the way that I had treated him. But what had he seen in me if I was ‘empty’? I remembered that beauty that I had known. I missed it. I had lost it, but now it was embracing me.”

“To live by engaging with beauty: there is no other method!” Fr. Carrón told Jean-Marie after he had described that episode to Carrón at the Assembly of African Leaders (ARA) in Kenya at the end of October: “Emptiness is the problem of life. Only when beauty begins to illuminate our lives do we begin to see again.” It is a love for oneself that one perceives: “There is nothing more important than this.”

The group of Burundian CL friends is made up of about 20 people: “There are those who come and go, but there is a handful of faithful ones,” said Andrea, who, every week, meets with Jean-Marie for School of Community: “I need them.” Why? “Because they make me angry...”

He is from Rome, 31 years old, living in Burundi for a little over a year now, working on a project for AVSI.

Jean-Marie and Andrea.



He came with Selina soon after they were married and they are expecting their first child in February. “Yes, they make me angry. Maybe you spent the day trying to fix problems on your own. And at just the right moment, something happens that forces you to start over. Then you look at these three or four faces... and you see the possibility of looking at everything in a different way, and you realize you are powerless.”

It is a kind of anger, however, that dismantles “the armor that you wear in order to face reality according to your ideas.” The companionship of these friends, but also of my wife, serves this purpose. To make me return to the origin of myself.” Otherwise, why would someone leave his wife who is seven months pregnant to go to the assembly of the leaders of Kenya? “I said yes because of the newness that Jean-Marie talked about... I need it too. This is not to say that I want to experience more challenging circumstances, but Christ happened to me again in them, in spite of me.”

“The question is yours, you need it, but you become aware that the world also needs it,” said Jean-Marie, who was still in convalescence from a bout of malaria. He did not go to the hospital for a few days. Then he felt better and returned to the ward. “Everyone was happy, my colleagues and the patients: ‘We missed you!’ Meanwhile I, who could hardly believe it, said “yes,

yes, ok... I missed you too.” But that evening he felt sick again. It was a relapse. He needed to resume treatment and stay home: “Three days, but yesterday the department head called me: ‘Jean, you must come back.’ And I went. I told myself, ‘I will take it easy.’” Again, there was a celebration, he recounted: “The department head, who is Muslim, grabs my arm and tells me that I cannot be absent for three days anymore: ‘I miss you when you are not here.’ Again, I replied: ‘Yes, sure. I miss you too...’ ‘No,’ she said: ‘You give me courage, the strength I need to work. Of all the people here, I want to work like you do. To be like you are with the patients and everyone else.’”

It is a constant surprise, Andrea and Jean-Marie repeat. “Sometimes you construct mechanisms, almost auto-

matically, to resolve the emptiness,” but, Jean adds: “Now I do School of Community, I read *Traces*... but it is not enough. You have to realize that you are loved, and want to be loved again.” It is this preference that the world seeks: “I dated a girl who studied with me in Ngozi during the third year of medical school. We were in love and we wanted to take our relationship seriously. I used to take her to School of Community. At a certain point, we realized that our relationship had a weak foundation. We broke up. Then one day, I received a text from her. She thanked me for the time we had spent together, for the friendships... ‘But the thing about you that I will never forget is the School of Community.’ Do you understand? Of all the experiences we had, the presents... she held onto the School of Community. Isn’t it incredible what happened to me?” ■

“Italian” Tuesdays at MIT



Paola Bergamini

An invitation found on a bulletin board at a prestigious university in Boston. In the midst of a highly competitive environment where it is best not to make contacts or “waste time,” Elisa proposed a dinner to the other graduate students.

End of September: on the bulletin boards of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) campus in Boston, among announcements and other informational flyers, students of one of the most prestigious universities in the world could find a flyer with the image of the *Blossoming Almond Tree* by Van Gogh and the question, “What do I live for?” And below, a few words inviting all to meet in private dining room #3 “to take a moment to talk about what matters in our lives. An Italian dinner will be served.” At the very bottom, there was an email address. It belongs to Elisa Piscitelli, who graduated from the Polytechnic University of Milan and arrived in Boston on August 25th to study Business Analytics, sponsored by the firm she works for. A few weeks prior, during School of

Community and Liberation in the U.S., while speaking about the tensions and problems in the Catholic Church in America, made a proposal: “Let us try to recognize Christ in our daily lives.” Those words became a new provocation for Elisa. “Some questions have echoed in my mind: What is it worth living life for? What use is it to gain the whole world while losing myself? MIT is an extremely competitive environment, where many hours are dedicated to studying and the risk is, in fact, to ‘lose oneself.’ This is relevant for my life and that of other students.” Elisa said: “One could try to pause to try to answer those questions. But how? I still had no idea.”

The first people Elisa makes the proposal to are the 44 students in her degree program. On Tuesday, five people come: Lorenzo, a friend of the community who wanted to participate, and then three of her classmates. One came because, “If you are alone at the first meeting, I would feel bad. Maybe you would feel disappointed.” Another came because “it’s incredible for you to start something like this, but we needed it.” After the group ate lasagna, Elisa began: “I wanted to talk to you about a priest and to read a few pages of his book, which is very important to me, and which can help answer the question...” “Wait a second,” Lorenzo interrupted: “Instead, what if each of us thinks of something beautiful—that we have read, seen, or listened to—to present to the rest of the group?” Elisa took a moment to think, then she put away *The Religious Sense* and said: “You’re right. If everyone agrees, next Tuesday I will bring you the video of a friend of mine. Unless someone has another idea.” Everyone agreed. As people were leaving, Elisa approached them: “Thank you,



Elisa Piscitelli.

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my idea was kind of imposed from on high. In this context, it did not fit.” The following Tuesday, the screening of the video witness of Enzo Piccinini, a surgeon from Modena, a leader of the Movement who passed away in 1999, was attended by ten people. Once the monitor was turned off, the first one to react was one of Elisa’s classmates, the only Catholic in the group: “I was struck that Enzo speaks of Christianity as a presence. Meaning Christ *right now*, someone I can have a relationship with. For me, Christianity has always been about following laws that were just, moral, and true; in other words, a good doctrine.” Then, before leaving, he asked Elisa, “Could you let me borrow one of Giussani’s books?”

The “Italian” Tuesdays continued. The numbers grew by word of mouth. Even the chaplain of the university came to a meeting. One evening, one woman proposed a lecture on a piece she would play on the violin. After the performance she explained: “I often fill my days with things to do to hide the sadness that I feel. Music, though, helps me understand myself to the core. I think that happiness is not external, but it is within me.” “Give us an example.” “Knowing that I am alive.” “That happens to me too: I come home in silence and I say to myself: ‘Wow, I am alive! And this fills me with gratitude.’” Elisa listened with amazement. One night, as she was putting away the food containers, one woman approached her: “I wanted to tell you that I am really happy, which is something new for me. If you want, I can cook next time. It won’t be Italian, but I really want to make something.”

They only began meeting two months ago, and some are non-believers, but something has changed since October 8th. When they run into each other in the hallway, they stop to say hello. They study together. “This is not normal at MIT. They say it is best not to have contact with others from the academic point of view because of the competition, but more generally because it is a waste of time. Instead, in those meetings, a friendship has been born that stays with you, it remains in the back of your mind and transforms your everyday life,” explained Elisa.

In mid-November, the meeting fell during a very intense study week. One by one people replied that they could not come. Then she received a message on her phone: “I’ll be there.” That was enough for Elisa to plan for the evening. At 7:00 p.m., in private dining room #3, four were gathered to watch a video of a talk by Steve Jobs titled, *Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish*. At the end, someone who had come for the first time exclaimed: “I want to invite all my friends!”

When the video of the Beginning Day ended, Elisa thought of the Tuesday night group. “Here was the announcement that ‘cannot be reduced to the past,’ as Giussani says. It changed me and now it is touching the lives of these new friends.” Some days ago, Elisa received this email from someone in the university’s administrative offices: “Even though I am not a student, can I still come to your meetings?” ■



Matteo Severgnini with Pope Francis.



Matteo Severgnini

“Within ten years’ time, Christianity will flower again”

The principal of the Luigi Giussani High School of Kampala participated as an auditor in the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment called by Pope Francis. We offer his reflections on a month spent at the heart of the Church, where the words of a university student can surprise bishops and archbishops.

I was invited to participate as an auditor in the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment. For some years now, I have been working as the principal of the Luigi Giussani High School in Kampala, Uganda, and the month at the Synod was like being parachuted into the heart of the life of the Church. During that time, I participated with bishops and cardinals from all over the world in a gesture that was born from Pope Francis's concern for the future not only of young people, but of everyone.

Those days in Rome offered me a unique opportunity for conversion. I met a great number of important people from all over the world, listened to scores of talks, and participated in smaller Circles to develop proposals for the final document. I even had the opportunity to read my contribution in the Synod Hall. Also, I had the privilege of meeting the Pope, and we spoke with an ease that surprised me. I brought him letters from some of my students in Kampala, and was able to ask him the questions that were closest to my heart. I even visited Benedict XVI for an unforgettable 15 minutes. So when a friend asked me point blank, "What does it mean for you to love the Church, *today*?" I could not help but think of all those faces I had encountered. In the past I would have answered mechanical-

ly or formally, but now I can no longer do so. Today, the answer must necessarily involve this reality made of flesh, which through Baptism is flesh of my flesh, in the full sense of the word. It is a bit like having to answer Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" Saying who Christ is for me necessarily encompasses the physical body through which He makes Himself known to me. The reality of the Church, just as she is, made up of these people, is something I had never before recognized so clearly and dramatically.

The other thing I saw, even in a context that was so particular and apparently distant from the daily dramas of the common people, is the impossibility of suffocating the desire for the infinite that burns in every heart. Christ is the only One who can truly respond to this cry. Every time someone in the Synod Hall spoke about the real presence of Christ in his or her life, it generated a silence that was not there before. For example, this happened during the testimony of Cardinal Louis Sako, the Patriarch of Baghdad, and in that of Safa Al Abbi-aun, a young Iraqi man. In both of them, we saw the radical nature of martyrdom. It was a silence full of His presence. In those moments, He was showing us that there are people who live up to the measure of their desire.

In these days I have been reflecting on the image the Pope used in his homily at the closing Mass of the Synod, that of the blind man of Jericho, Bartimaeus. He cried out, but nobody paid any attention to him. Only Jesus heard the cry of his heart, and asked him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" This is like the question that was asked at the beginning of the Synod: "What are you looking for?" Christ asks us first of all what we desire, because, as the Pope explained, "Faith flowers in life," within each person's situation. He continued, "The faith that saved Bartimaeus did not have to do with his having clear ideas about God, but in his seeking Him and longing to encounter Him." Faith is an encounter. For me, the Synod on Young People was this: a way of seeing a new nuance in the unmistakable face of Christ.

At the end of all the proceedings, Francis offered an insight that truly struck me. After such a month, full of discussions, encounters, and testimonies, the Pope set before everyone the holiness of the Church, of our Mother, not the capabilities of her children, and thus not of those sitting in that hall, for "we are all soiled." Having a holy Mother guarantees that each of us, notwithstanding our own dirtiness, can return and be embraced for who we are. Nobody is excluded. For this reason, "our Mother is Holy, but we

“I do not deny that all these young people have many desires, questions, and dramatic situations. But why the Church?”

children are sinners. [...] The Church must not be soiled; her children yes, we are all soiled, but the Mother is not. And this is why it is time to defend the Mother.”

One encounter in particular struck me. In one of the small Circles in which I participated, the bishop of Bridgeport, Connecticut, Frank Caggiano, said, “I do not deny that all these young people have many desires, questions, and dramatic situations. But why the Church?” That is, why should they come to us to find an answer? He asked this in all seriousness, without taking for granted the answer. I was also struck that the way he phrased it echoed the title of Fr. Giussani’s book, *Why the Church?* Afterwards, I went to the bishop and thanked him for his words, because they were not at all born of pessimism. I told him what a university student in the Movement said to Archbishop Mario Delpini of Milan at a dinner at which I was present in those days: “Your Excellency, in ten years’ time, Christianity will flower again.” Surprised—as I was too, for that matter—the archbishop asked what motivated such a peremptory statement. The young man told him he had organized a vacation for first-year students they had encountered at the university. Most of them did not even know how to make the sign of the cross. At the end of those days, some asked, “Who are you? How can you look at us in this way, be with us in this way?” He concluded, “We said that this is Christianity, this is the Church.” Archbishop Caggiano opened his eyes wide and answered me, “Well, yes, this is like in the early Church, when people were struck because Christians lived differently and encountered people one by one.” And he added, “But what must they have seen to make scores of them willing to die for their faith?”

On the Saturday of the last votes to approve the final document, I went to dinner with Archbishop Paolo Pezzi and Fr. Mauro Lepori. It was a simple and marvelous moment. All three of us were glad and grateful for what had happened to us. It was quite a varied trio: the Catho-

lic Archbishop of Moscow, the General Abbot of the Cistercian order, and the poor principal of a small school in Uganda. And yet, as Pezzi pointed out, especially in the last week, without having planned it, we ended up *together*. They had become familiar faces during the Synod that helped me understand, learn, and ask, so much so that some noted this preferential relationship and sought us out during the breaks or joined us for coffee. By the end, in our own small way, we had become an “identifiable reality.”

In reference to this reality, Fr. Lepori said, “During the Synod, our belonging to the life of CL was not acknowledged in a formal way, but rather through our persons, through our life. The Movement’s contribution to the Church lies in the experience of individuals generated by following the Movement, and in the possibility of encountering everyone.” I understand that these things come entirely from the real experience that Christ is in my life, something that happens to me and by which I convert. The day I returned to school, I received a visit from an American benefactor who works to finance projects promoting the education of children. I did not have much time, but I showed her our school, explained who we are, and how we try to educate. In the end, she was visibly moved. It occurred to me that her emotion had the same origin as the emotion I felt as I listened to Pope Francis’s words, which in turn was the same origin of the great “machine” of the Synod. This woman said, “I’ve never seen anything like it.” What she saw is what the university students in today’s Rome saw, and the martyrs in the Rome of the early Christians saw: Christianity. ■

The students, the fire, and Mrs. Smith

Every morning, there are students waiting outside classroom D104. Before going to class, they meet with their theology teacher to tackle homework and the big questions of life. This is the journey of the experience of GS in Miami, which has become a presence for both kids and parents. And it all began with a ride to school...

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Anna Leonardi

At 7:00 a.m., the light of the sun is already spilling into the classrooms of St. Brendan High School. Outside, though it is mid-November, the first students arrive in their cotton uniforms with short sleeves, a sign of Miami's eternal summer, with temperatures that rarely dip below 70°F. The school opens at 7:00, ready to welcome students onto the 33-acre campus made up of classrooms; football, baseball, and soccer fields; tennis courts; a pool; science labs; and a theater. On the first floor of the main building, you find room D104. It belongs to Miriam Smith, a theology teacher. Lining the floors of the hallway each morning are rows of students

with earbuds in, waiting for her. Her classroom has become a place to stop in before the first bell rings. At first, it was just a few of them, but word spread that the door was open to everyone. A few started to ask Mrs. Smith for a little help with homework or to talk about their struggles and share their big questions.

Thus began the GS group in Miami, which has grown over the last year. Today it is made up of about 40 students who return to room D104 every Monday afternoon for School of Community. The meeting is a solid half hour of dialogue in which participants pose their most pressing questions. "Even though afternoons here are packed with school activities between clubs, sports, and fine arts," says Smith, who has spent 20 of her 49 years of life teaching at St. Brendan, "this is something new that the students don't want to miss."

A small incident helped her understand this. "During one of these Monday meetings, I realized there was a girl studying for the next day. I thought, 'How rude! There is no point in her staying here, if she doesn't really want it.'" Undecided about how to respond, she told a friend about the episode. His answer blew her away, "That girl is really something! She must have so many things to get done, but still wants to spend time with all of you. Something is keeping her there, something that is greater than everything else."



This was more or less the same thing that happened to Miriam when she met the Movement in 2008. She had replied to an email from a colleague, the head of the program for international students, asking if any of the teachers would be available to drive two Italian girls to school and back. “I volunteered because my husband was planning a trip for us to Italy and I thought it would be interesting to meet them. I never could have imagined that such a simple act could change our lives,” she said. One ride at a time, the relationship intensified and began to involve Miriam’s children as well. One day, one of the Italians invited Miriam’s family to her 18th birthday party. Miriam was perplexed. She knew how teenage parties were. She decided to stop in just to say happy birthday and drop off a present. Instead, she stayed all evening. “I had never seen a party like that. Singing, games, and dinner together. Then, a prayer before everyone went home. There, for the first time, I understood that we were in front of something completely new.”

The next year, two more Italian students from the Movement came to the school. She volunteered to drive them, too. They asked even more of her: “Could we use your classroom for an afternoon meet-

Miriam Smith and a group of GS students at St. Brendan High School in Miami.

The GS vacation last winter
in northern Florida.

ing?” Miriam discovered School of Community. “The students started meeting along with classmates they invited and one of my colleagues they asked to lead them. I stayed in the classroom, getting things done,” Miriam remembers, “but I listened to everything they were saying and it seemed impossible to me that 16-year-old boys could speak so profoundly. I remember how each time, driving home, I would say to myself, ‘Faith is something that changes every day for them. What is it for me?’”

Miriam started to participate in the meetings. She became friends with Desa, the Italian teacher who helped the students. She started reading Giussani and going to events with the adult CL community in Miami. “Suddenly, Christ was no longer something present but that’s it; He became a person I could live with,” she said.

In 2012, Miriam found herself alone again. Desa had moved to another city. “I asked myself, ‘And now who will help this little GS group?’” Enrico, a friend from the local community, said to her, “You take over. Be yourself, take a risk.” Miriam threw herself into the new adventure but was laden with anxiety. She wanted to make sure to do things right. “I repeated all the same gestures in a formal way. I had asked a friend from New York to tell me about all their GS initiatives so that I could do the



same.” Her biggest fear was related to the presence of the Italian students. “I realized that those who came to School of Community were attracted by their somewhat ‘exotic’ presence. I was sure that once the Italians went home, there would not be anyone left here.” Miriam spoke of this to Fr. José Medina, the national leader for CL in the U.S., who told her, “Follow the life of your students. Start there, with what is happening to them and with them.” “For me, GS started in that moment,” Miriam remembers. It did not matter that it was small and that different people came each week. “One Monday to the next we could have five or fifteen, and there were even a few times no one showed up. But our time together turned more and more into a friendship in which I followed them with a desire to get to know them, and they started to follow me.” Last winter, Miriam decided to organize a short vacation without joining up with another GS community. “It was a problem of cost and distance, so I decided to take a risk, proposing that we go camping at my sister’s ranch

“It seems like Jesus has been here the whole time with us. He’s like this fire—something that draws us in no matter how different we are.”

in northern Florida.” They made flyers to hang around the school. Twenty people signed up. “I asked for help from many of the adults in the community. They helped me with the food, hikes, and singing. Everything was going well until a thunderstorm hit, blowing over all the tents and turning the field where we were supposed to sleep into a giant swamp.” They decided to divide the students between buses and cars for sleeping on the last night. “I was panicking; I kept thinking maybe it would be better to go home,” Miriam said. One student noticed and asked, “Mrs. Smith, why are you so stressed? Look, we’re all fine. We’re happy. And tonight we will have our bonfire.” And that’s what they did. After singing and dancing, Miriam invited them to speak about their experience on the vacation. Julian, who had come for the first time, jumped up. “I thought it was going to be a really ‘Jesus-y’ thing,” he said. “I thought we would pray the whole time. Instead, I had a ton of fun. And I even made some friends. Still, even though it wasn’t a ‘Jesus-y’ thing, it seems like Jesus has been here the whole time with us. He’s like this fire—something that draws us in and holds us together no matter how different we are.”

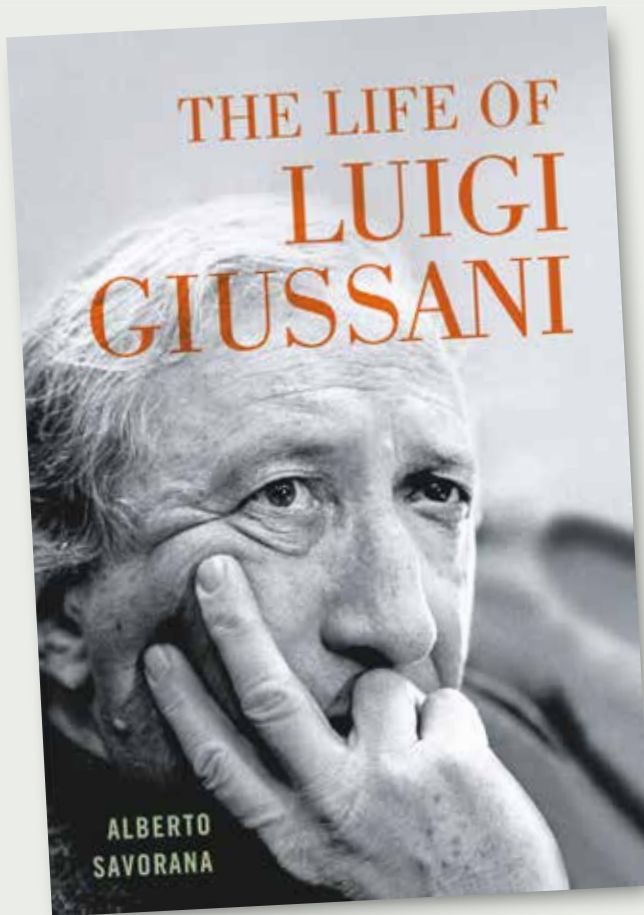
After that vacation, things went viral at school. Many of their classmates wanted to come and see what this “GS” was. The students worked to organize the School of Community as much as possible. They used the school’s app to send out announcements and an agenda. Each week, they began with a part of Fr. Giussani’s life taken from an exhibit put together by American college students. They started wanting to sing, too. They sent around the words to the song “Be Still My Heart,” by Jacqui Treco. One freshman girl overcame her shyness and brought her guitar. Miriam watched and let them proceed. She did not want to burden them with issues of technique—“It’s beautiful that they have realized the importance of singing together.” At the end of August, the beginning of the new

school year, they ran out of chairs in Mrs. Smith’s classroom. “I have 30,” she explained, “but at the first School of Community, there were students on the floor and standing, leaning against the walls. I kept asking myself, ‘What is happening here?’” It’s the same question the parents of many GS students are asking. A few months ago, Sofia’s mother asked to meet with Miriam. She was having serious issues with the family she left behind in Venezuela and wanted to talk to her about it. “Mrs. Smith, my daughter is so happy when she talks about you, and I want to be that happy, too,” the mother admitted before starting to describe her struggles. “As she was speaking to me,” Miriam said, “I realized that I could not help her; I had no solutions to offer her. But the words of Fr. José from a few years back came to mind and I thought, ‘Stay with her, just stay with her.’”

Other parents also wanted to get involved. “They asked me, ‘Who is Giussani? Who is Carrón?’ So last October, when Fr. Medina came to Miami to meet the students, I invited the parents to join us for Mass and dinner together.” It all took place at scenic Crandon Park, a nature reserve on the shore of the Atlantic. Elise, who is a senior, talked about how, when she went to visit colleges, she asked the various schools if they had a CLU, the group for college students in CL. She was upset that not one of them had any idea what she was talking about. Sofia is also about to graduate. She too is anxious about choosing a college. Her grades are high and she could choose the best, “but could I lose what I have met?” she asked Fr. José, full of urgency. “Sofia, did you generate that encounter, or is it something that happened to you? Could you have just imagined it for yourself?” he replied. At dinner, Sofia sat with the other seniors. They promised each other that, no matter where they are, they will meet up next June for the CLU vacation in Colorado. She is no longer afraid of losing anything. All she can think of are the words of “Be Still My Heart”: “But if you stand still / you’ll never know / why you burn at all.” ■

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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