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***Like you
and me***

TRACES

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Christ and the Apostles. Detail from the Frescoes with Episodes from the Life of Christ. Church of Santa Margherita (c. 13th century), Laggio di Cadore (Belluno, Italy).
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for the texts by Luigi Ciussani and Julián Carrón

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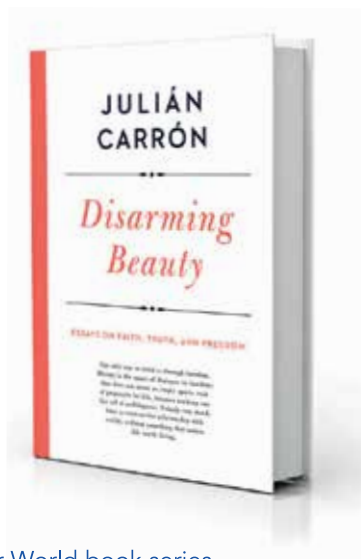
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Under the palms of His hands

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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Roots and the present

In the beginning it was an ideal. Then, a kind of miracle. Now it just seems to be a problem. In the eyes of many, the European Union, that unthinkable puzzle of languages and cultures assembled piece by piece, a gift of expectation and hope for 500 million people, has become something increasingly far-off, even hostile, especially on the eve of the May 23rd–26th elections, which are marked by so much confusion.

There are many reasons for this. Many good ones are related to the limitations of a reality that along the way has lost a good part of its original inspiration, beginning with reciprocal solidarity. But others arise out of us, out of our myopia. Look at Europe and you *no longer see* that it is a space of freedom and peace, the likes of which has never been seen in history, not just in the West. Its values of hospitality, cultural exchange, the Erasmus program, open borders, a common market... they are all taken for granted. But they shouldn't be.

The vicissitudes of the Union show too well the loss of concrete things that we wrongly believed to be destined to exist forever. They show clearly a lesson for all of us: if you stray from the source that gave life to certain foundational values such as the person, work, freedom, and democracy itself, if you stray from the source that generated them and made them *lived*, a part of history, sooner or later they fade away. Separated from the origin, they cannot resist the wear and tear of time. And thus the question: What is at the origin of the essential features of Europe? Where do they come from? What is the source of their life? How can they *regain* this life? Does faith have anything to do with this? Be careful: this is not a matter of returning to the sterile debate about the “Christian roots” of Europe. The rejection of these roots by the European institutions was undoubtedly a sin of arrogance. But it is also a mistake to stop there. The problem is not our relationship with the past. The problem is the present. Are those roots still alive today? If so, where?

This is not a question to be answered in a debate. You can only go see and look for stories and facts that evidence this life. This is the path we have taken in this issue: the “Close-up” offers not only reflections but testimonies, living signs of a Christian presence that contributed to the creation of Europe, bringing it to birth centuries ago from the ruins of the Empire devastated by the barbarians, and then causing it to be born again in a new form from the horrors of the Second World War. This Christian presence offers its contribution today to help Europe emerge from its crisis and regain the identity it has had over the last 60 years as a place “where each person can be immune from coercion, make his or her own human journey, and share it with those he or she meets along the way,” as Julián Carrón, the leader of CL, said in an interview that later became part of his book *Disarming Beauty*. Those words were spoken in 2014, on the eve of the last European elections. They are even more urgently important today.

**Matteo,
Chiara**

edited by
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The new Jerusalem in the slum

In reading the School of Community, I was struck by Fr. Giussani's judgment of the word "equilibrium" when he says that, "the source of the equilibrium of Christian holiness is the overflowing richness of being that takes hold of humanity." [*Why the Church?*, p. 224] My tendency to reduce equilibrium to a personal effort to balance my temperament, feelings, energies, and everything else was swept away by some recent events. The day before leaving for Eldoret for the Spiritual Exercises for CLU [university students of the Movement], Rose, Nacho, Juan, and I were invited to lunch by one of my students from the slum of Kireka. After a series of alleyways, we got to the house—two meters by three, made of mud, corrugated tin, and straw. It was one of the most rundown dwellings I've ever seen. We were welcomed by my student and her mother, sister, and brother. The walls had been covered by sheets for the occasion. The mother confessed that when her daughter had told her she wanted to invite us, she thought of a thousand excuses, among them: "How can we welcome such important guests into a house like this one?" She told us that she was stunned and convinced by her daughter's judgment: "But, Mom, we are not our house. We are not defined by the four crumbling walls; our heart is a home that can welcome anyone who comes." Here is a humanity possessed by the overflowing richness of Christ. The mother, in front of her daughter's certainty, said she no longer had even the smallest hesitation and began cooking. Hearing this story, I thought of Fr. Carrón's words to me at the beginning

of my journey of the novitiate in the *Memoires Domini*: "The home is above all a gaze, the gaze of Christ on your life." A judgment this true can be lived even in the most rundown of places. My student's father was not there because he works for one of our enterprises. He has struggled with alcoholism and we have fired and rehired him several times, so he thought it best not to ask for a day off. But when he returned home, as my student related me, he stopped in the doorway, which is a curtain, shocked by the eyes of his wife and daughter who were waiting for him. "I have never seen eyes like this. What happened to you today? What happened here?" Hearing the description of their day, he said through his tears, "From today, everything has changed. Christ paid a visit to our family. Our dilapidated house that embarrassed us so much should be called the New Jerusalem." I am moved to think that in the midst of one of the poorest and most dangerous slums in the world there is a family who, recognizing Christ happening, lives the awareness of a New Jerusalem. I am moved to think that in that place, where everything is confusion, there could be a point of equilibrium, lived in the awareness of this family who allowed space so that the richness of Being could overflow in their humanity, making it present. This same student told me that one of our teachers asked a class who they wanted to imitate and the students named her. She told me how this provoked her to ask herself what evident difference attracted her classmates through her. She could only answer this question by looking at her own story and becoming aware of the faithfulness with which the Lord had preferred her, and how much she felt preferred now, so much so that she could again say yes. After this conversation, I couldn't help but take up again the words I read in the School of Community: "Intensity is suffering for Christ's glory. The glory of Christ is Christ who reveals himself to each eye, to each gaze and to each ear as the consistency of everything." This not only doesn't level all things as if they were

the same, but it exalts in everything an irreducible individuality, an irreducible personality. It was exactly this irreducible personality that reached me through my student, embodying what we say to each other, and strongly highlighting again the nature of my vocation. **Matteo**, Kampala (Uganda)

“Who knows how much more I have to discover”

Last week, I had lunch with a colleague, a supercreative 50-year-old woman whom I have always greatly admired. I have known her for years and I've always been struck by the tenderness with which she speaks of her son and of her sudden decision to get married. These topics are usually off limits where I work. As we were going to get coffee, we started talking about babies, our children, family, etc., and she told me about a difficult moment in her life about 10 years ago. For years, she and her partner had tried to have children and after four miscarriages and other problems, the long-awaited pregnancy arrived. At the beginning of the fifth month, a friend advised her to have an amniocentesis. That's how she learned that the baby girl she was carrying had Down's Syndrome. After returning home and discussing it with her partner, she decided to ask for an immediate abortion. The days before and after the procedure were very difficult and full of pain. She said to me, “Chiara, it's so hard when someone takes something away from you, rips out something that is in you.” After a short while, she asked, “You're Catholic, right? What do you say in front of something like this?” There I stood, stunned and confused by what she had just said to me. I answered, “I don't have too many certainties in my life. One, however, I keep very close to me: that there is a positive, good design for my life. I have been promised that I will be truly happy, in whatever form, beautiful or ugly, that happiness might take. Things happen daily that I don't understand, circumstances come up that are not in line with my projects. But what do I know? Perhaps through these very circumstances the Lord is asking me to grow, become more of a woman, and if I'm not asking too much, also holy? My mom (an anesthesiologist who often deals with women asking for an abortion) always told me that what happens in an act of love is unique, unrepeatable, and that it is a sin to decide to do without it.” She remained silent, not knowing how to respond. Returning to the office, I thought to myself, “how difficult it must be to live life without the hypothesis that you have been

promised true happiness. What stress it must be to feel the weight of responsibility of deciding what can fulfill you and what not!” I need to feel a uniqueness that is sometimes difficult to accept, but which makes us intuit that we are preferred and on a road that is tailor-made for us. This episode was an opportunity to remember that I depend—I depend on Another who makes all things new and who, thank heavens, doesn't first ask me what I think. What a joy to remember that we need only recognize and obey! The other can truly be an opportunity and instrument for remembering that tie which fascinated you and that you wouldn't let go of for all the world. Now I am no longer afraid of going into the office, of being with my colleagues. From that day, Rosa hasn't let go of me. It's really true that Catholicism is universal, it's within the reach of everyone, and it's made for man's heart.

Chiara

The pension and gratitude

Dear Fr. Carrón and Friends of the Fraternity, my wife and I have been married for 39 years and we have three children, and so far, three grandchildren. We retired a few months ago. In our life, we've never been capable of engaging in great discourses, but we have remained faithful, as the good Lord has allowed us, to the charism of Fr. Giussani. What seems most certain to us is that the presence of Jesus through the companionship of the Movement is what has allowed us to give meaning to our life together. Our gratitude for this fact has given rise to our desire to contribute economically to the needs of the Fraternity. So, we have decided to donate part of our severance package for the work that continues to make the love of Christ evident to us.

Signed letter

Something new

Without a doubt, the European Union is in crisis, not only because of the attacks of new sovereignists and Euroskeptics, or outside pressures, including the blasts from Trump and Putin and the enormous influx of immigrants, but because it is losing sight of the reason for its existence, the spirit that generated it. It was to be a place of solidarity and cooperation among nations that have throughout history been continually at war with one another. It is something unprecedented, with its roots in history (it is no accident that St. Benedict is its patron) and needs to be cultivated by sufficient commitment to make it fully bear fruit, by political leaders with two things in common: a broad, long-term vision and the Christian faith, the latter of which having inspired within it certain fundamental values.

Europe, with all its limits, “still makes sense,” and there is an urgent need to recover its foundation by “weaving the stories together,” as the conversation below with a leading European intellectual, Victor Pérez Díaz, makes clear.

If it is true that Europe still makes sense, what is the proper starting point? And what is the new contribution we Christians can offer toward rebuilding it? In this issue, we propose witnesses from different corners of Europe. They provide examples of grassroots initiatives originating from the life of faith, a life that is capable of generating a different gaze on the human person, and therefore a new way of facing problems—whether it be welcoming migrants, education, or political difficulties. Such initiatives are open to everyone, and Europe is still a good for everyone. (dp) ■

Cracow.





Listening to Europe

Spanish sociologist Victor Pérez Díaz describes the true but often oversimplified complexity of the European continent. What has been censored (in the past, but also now), the resources available, the need for open dialogue. “We need to begin again, knowing that we do not know.”



Fernando de Haro

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Víctor Pérez Díaz made a significant impact on Spanish sociology at the beginning of the 1990s with his writings dedicated to civil society. A few of his most important titles are *The Return of Civil Society* and *La primacía de la sociedad civil* (The primacy of civil society). Educated at Harvard, where he is now a visiting professor, he recently published *Europa en busca de sí misma* (Europe in search of itself), in which he argues that we Europeans are facing profound and widespread confusion in the midst of continuous transformations. He posits that the problems of identity and legitimacy go hand in hand and are getting worse and worse. Pérez insists on the necessity for dialogue among Europeans and for European policies that account for the social customs and resources of different cultures. This means that everyone has to learn from other people and nations, and he adds, “You can neither teach nor learn with a starting point of self-satisfaction or contempt for others, at least among people who consider themselves or aspire to be free persons.”

We are coming up on a seemingly unprecedented round of European elections. A significant drop is expected in votes for parties founded in the wake of the

Second World War, and it seems like there will be more room for parties that, in some way, bring the Union itself into question. What is Europe’s current situation?

I am fairly skeptical with regards to the pro-Europe/nationalist dichotomy. The panorama seems more complex to me. We lived for 70 years in what seemed like a process of “building Europe,” with behind it the very clear idea that we were marching toward a united Europe. But the concrete, historical experience of the people—to which many observers do not give the importance it deserves—has always been complicated. The political class spoke of Europe but practiced local politics; it spoke of Europe, but went to Brussels for the most part to bolster the internal politics of its own nations; rarely did it build bridges to a shared European experience. We went on like that for 70 years. What we have in front of us now is a complex, constantly changing situation, which in and of itself is thought provoking. It reminds us that we have to think about problems more carefully. We have to advance a dialogue, for example, about the differences between how Scandinavians and the inhabitants of central Europe—Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, etc.—think. There are geopolitical problems we have to face: the challenges in the Mediterranean, in Africa, on the new Silk Road of China and in Russia.



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And we have to discuss them and debate about them exhaustively, with a 360-degree viewpoint. We have to find a way for two levels of governance to coexist: the level of the nation-state and the European level. People know all this is complicated, but the point is that we are missing opportunities to create spaces in which Europe can engage in collective reflection and dialogue.

This is what you propose in your latest publication, *Europa en busca de sí misma* (Europe in search of itself): greater participation from citizens in the debates about how to face social problems.

Yes, intending the word “citizen” in its broadest sense. Those who could play a role in this dialogue are workers, associations, churches, political parties, members of

the media, and regular people with their own experiences of family life, personal life, commerce, work, travel, social interactions, and their affective and spiritual or religious relationships. And then you have to weave these stories together. Europe was not something they started to build after World War II—it has been under construction since the sixth century B.C.

But often, this dialogue is missing. People struggle to talk about themselves and listen to each other.

It is true. To talk about themselves, to listen to each other, to reflect with a certain detachment, balancing distance and compromise. Compromise does not mean a loss of clarity. Compromise means well-reasoned loyalty. This is why we have to seek insistently to listen

Madrid.



Victor Pérez Díaz (born in Madrid in 1938) is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a founding member of the Academia Europaea, based in London, and founder and current President of the ASP Research Center (Analistas Socio-Político). He taught Sociology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, and has been visiting professor at many universities, including Harvard and MIT. Author of over fifty books, in 2014 he was awarded the National Prize of Sociology and Political Sciences.

What helps us to speak about ourselves is learning to listen and to read—which is a form of listening—learning to observe, to travel, to put oneself in the other's shoes; it is having fathers and mothers who help their children understand. We need to begin like Socrates: knowing that we do not know, recognizing that we ignore the meaning of some things. There are things that you do not know, your pastor does not know, your professor does not know. This is not easy, but we have to face it, stay alert, be aware. We have to develop the capacity to handle complex situations. There was a time when it was easier to understand what was happening, but not anymore. You have to be careful because often what reaches us are dangerous, oversimplified proposals. You cannot reduce things to good people and bad, black and white, left and right. No, think about it. How can I believe in the "Europeanism" of Frenchmen like Macron if deep down I know they are Gaullists—it is normal that they should be so—and that what they want is hegemony in Europe? All this, if you have not studied history, is like empty words. But many other things at the level of elementary experience are missing. We lack parents who carry out their role, who have time for their children. And we need schools that think of more than just demanding more from children. The transmission of humanity, of a common sentiment, is crucial. If there is something positive set into motion, nurture it and praise it; do not be jealous, do not always try to point out its faults but push people to give the best of themselves. Say to them: go ahead, I

understand, I am listening, I see you. I am not mute like a dead man because I never want to say something positive about other people. This is a moral it is essential we teach.

One major surprise from your latest work on Europe is that, in contrast to the dominant opinion, you affirm that there is a convergence in identity politics that works against the tendency toward polarization. Are we not living in a time of polarization?

There is a stubborn, systematic tendency of media sources at every end of the spectrum and of the academic world and politicians to overdramatize the contrasts. Polarization by itself, however, is not enough to explain what is happening, because if you look, for example, at economic policy, the last 60 years have been characterized by an overwhelming convergence of the right and the left.

Is polarization just a fabrication?

It is not a fabrication, but it tends to be exaggerated in political life, and is not so serious in real life.

Does that mean Europe is experiencing a divide between real life and a group of elite in the media and politics?

There is a divide, and an aspect of complexity to this. Ordinary people, the common man, look at things with a healthy good sense that adapts to things; aside from that, we are faced with explosive cases of threatened identity.

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to reality and to the people who are telling their stories. The formation of nation-states, for example, had a long and dramatic gestation of decades, or centuries, and not without excessive brutality. There were internal wars, there were European civil wars. We have to take ownership of and incorporate this mistaken aspect in thinking about our own history.

And this is what we are doing.

The current culture tells you, "Live one day at a time," "The future is the future," "Learn how to learn." But if you do not remember, you do not exist. And if you do not remember what the other is, you have no relationships. You cannot live like that.

We are to some degree incapable of speaking about ourselves, of explaining our elementary experiences in life, of critical reflection. What can help us?

Lisbon.

In your article, you also affirm that European policies must take the social customs and resources of various cultures into account. One social resource that has been shared up until now is a particular Enlightenment culture, with a number of universal values that had not been questioned and had been the object of a certain amount of consensus. According to some, this no longer exists.

The Enlightenment is the obsession of the classes in power. Where does it originate? In the 17th century or the 18th? Where does it come from? Don Quixote is not irrelevant. Dante is not irrelevant. How can I understand Christianity in relation to the Enlightenment? How can I understand Christianity without pagan polytheism? There are connections between these things, and they have all been censored.

There is a fear of losing one's own identity, a fear of "mixing blood." Foreigners are perceived as threats. Is this due to the fact that Europe, which has always been a product of a very complex history of mixed blood, is insecure about what defines it?

You have to consider this country by country, because they are not all the same. It depends on the historical memory each bears and on recent experience. You can only understand the history of a Poland seeking to free itself from Stalinist power in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to what happened two or three centuries before, when it was divided among the Germans, Austrians, and Russians. Should we consider a threatened identity to be a fragile one? Not always and entirely. But it can have fragile components, like Spain does because of its having been made up of various kingdoms that the Austrian Empire and the Bourbons were not able to bring into harmony. There is some fragility, but not all is fragile. History is complex and needs to be embraced the way we embrace our family history. Look at Hungary today. You have to remember that Hungarians were conquered by the Turks, and at the end of World War I, they lost a huge percentage of their territory in the Treaty of Trianon.



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That fact is in the flesh and blood of the people. After that, they survived the events of 1956 (the Soviet invasion) as best as they could. You have to know the history. Would you like to be together with someone who does not know who you are? Instead of blasting people as anti-European or nationalist, leave the labels aside and try to understand them. With that, I do not mean to justify what certain governments are doing. But first I want to understand, and then see which parts of everything that is happening can be embraced or not, without sticking a label on things from the very beginning. ■

Czech Republic

Everything begins with an encounter

After the fall of the Berlin Wall he was moved by a desire to be engaged in politics as a Christian. Today David Macek has left politics behind for a new way of building society, with efforts ranging from the Brno Meeting to the Drfg Foundation, where the European dream is still alive.



Paolo Perego

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“I see myself at school again, 13 years old, with a new world opening before my eyes.” It was 1989. David Macek was living in Brno, the capital of the Czech region of Moravia. At the time, it was Czechoslovakia, not yet the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the country had been under Communist rule since 1946. The wind that was blowing through an Eastern Europe controlled by the Soviets which would lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall had reached Prague with the “Velvet Revolution,” marking the end of the regime and bringing on the presidency of Václav Havel, the first free elections in June, 1990, and, in 1992, independence for the two countries. Today Macek, married and the father of five, works for the Czech philanthropic foundation Drfg, after years spent in politics. In order to see what remains today of the European dream, one can start here, with his story, with the discovery of a new world of citizenship and freedom that invaded this part of Europe in the early 1990s, a world that gave David the opportunity for many encounters and the opportunity to form friendships that led to a variety of initiatives.

One such initiative was the Brno Meeting that occurred in 2016, a two-week event chock full of cultural events in the Czech city. Another was the “March of Reconciliation” to heal the open wound between Czech- and German-speaking Czechs that was created at the end of the Second World War when the latter were forced to leave the country notwithstanding a long history of coexistence.

“My love for politics and engagement in society began when I was 17 years old through diocesan youth groups that introduced me to the social doctrine of the Church,” recounts Macek. The question he had at the time was whether faith could contribute to a new adventure of freedom. David and his friends went around to

parishes to make the social encyclicals known. Then he began his first political activity in Brno and started studying social sciences at the university. Upon his graduation, a senator offered him a job as his assistant, but Macek also received an invitation from the Pontifical Lateran University to study in Rome. “The senator told me he would wait for my return. That was 2003. The next year, the Czech Republic became part of the European Union.” David ran as a candidate for the European parliament but was not elected. He became a member of the Moravian Regional Council, and in 2006 began serving as the vice president of the Christian Democratic Party.

“I was a 30-year-old politician with little experience. I needed help.” In Rome, he met people engaged in Italian politics and also CL. “I found the group again in Prague with the Mis-



sionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo. Once I asked them if a special spirituality was needed to do politics as a Christian. They smiled and said ‘We’re friends. We meet, talk, and pray together.’ It took me years to understand that Christianity isn’t something abstract” and that there is no special way. “You live your encounter with Jesus where you encountered Him. For this reason, I left the party in 2015,” which seemed paradoxical. “In those years I began encountering realities that

played a much more constructive role in society than politics reduced to the intrigues of party politics, including the Meeting of Rimini, the Cometa Association, which offers a home and formation for kids, and the Company of Works.” In this period, the issues of the day throughout Europe were migrants, terrorism, and its relationship with Islam. Macek said, “I wasn’t satisfied with just discussing these things: I wanted to meet people.” After the terrorist

■
Prague.



David Macek.

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attacks in Paris in January of 2015, “The muslim community of Brno took the risk of denouncing these acts. I went to meet and pray with them at the mosque. But people in the party criticized me, and did so again when I went with some friends to the station to welcome the first Syrian refugees. None of my political colleagues came. Instead, they were all wrapped up in the idea of ‘we Christians defending the country against these Muslims.’” Was what he was doing political engagement? Macek put it this way: “It was pre-politics: going to see, so as not to reason in a populist or ideological way.”

Then, at the CL vacation in 2015, he heard the line, “Everything begins with an encounter.” Soon after “with some friends of my city I began working on what would be the first Brno Meeting. But it was my encounter with Zygmunt Bauman in Como, during a visit to the Cometa center, that made me decide to leave my career in politics.” It was a simple conversation, but Macek could not get it out of his head. “I chose to change roads in order to be able to explore such encounters more deeply.”

He spoke with some friends and renewed some previous relationships. “One of the results of this led to the creation of the foundation where I work, which not only supports charitable works but tries to create spaces of encounter and dialogue in Europe. I am certain that this is a response to the problems of my country.” He says that he is happy when he arranges for friends and acquaintances to visit Italy with him so he can show them what he has seen. “These are politicians, managers, and intellectuals. This year there will be a Czech presence at the Meeting of Rimini with Pavel Fischer, a senator who ran for the Czech pres-

idency, and other figures.” There will be an exhibit on Havel, which will later be shown in the Italian parliament, the Czech parliament, the European parliament, and in Geneva, before coming to the Brno Meeting in 2020.

“Havel’s words from forty years ago about ‘living in the truth,’ answer the question of how one can be a politically active citizen even when it seems that he alone can do nothing,” adds Macek. This does not mean that one cannot act constructively in a party or regional council or in parliament. “On the contrary. This is my story. As long as I found space for action, I was there. But when I encountered something greater, which politics in the strict sense was unable to produce in that moment, I chose to make my contribution to the common good in another way. As the Church’s doctrine says, politics can be renewed starting from civil society, where the person is educated and can truly know. The politics of political parties is good when it valorizes these spaces. This is why it is important, independently of my own journey.”

Macek showed Pavel Fischer what he had seen. “After the presidential elections, I went to him and told him about the interesting way of doing politics I had seen in Italy, about subsidiarity and how it is applied in many of the works I had seen. We organized a trip to Milan and its environs, meeting people and visiting the site of various works. Upon our return, Fischer, a great scholar of social doctrine, told me he had never seen anything of the kind. “They truly live and move because of an encounter they have had,’ he said. For me, this can change politics.” ■

Holland

Catholic, that is, for everyone



Luca Fiore

In this ultrasecularized nation, where the Church makes the news only because of its deserted cathedrals, an elementary school in Vught became the subject of a political controversy. Laurens Peeters recounts the adventure that began with some other parents who put their faith into action.

“**I**n Holland today, you would have to be crazy to want to start a school. You could be just the right person.” This is what Laurens Peeters was told in 2015, when he asked someone’s opinion about an idea that had been buzzing around in his head for some time. Now, four years later, the Misha De Vries Elementary School is a reality recognized by the government, and in 2020 it will be financed with public funding, as is the entire Dutch school system. Next year the school will move into a building made available and renovated by the Municipality of Vught, a town of 25,000 about 40 miles from Utrecht. But the Misha De Vries School is special, and its establishment became the subject of a political and media controversy in Holland. In a country in which the Church only makes news when it is forced to sell

its practically deserted cathedrals, the events in Vught tell the story of a new modality of Christian presence in ultrasecularized Holland.

“After working in Amsterdam for several years, I returned to ‘s-Hertogenbosch, where I was born, and started to frequent a parish where young people would go,” recounts Peeters. They would meet at Mass and then go get a coffee with other young parishioners. “It was a joyful moment, the expression of an awareness that Christ was present among us. We began to desire to have that fullness all week long.” In the meantime, Laurens married Gaudete, and they began having children of their own. “The arrival of children in the community, ours and those of others, created a deeper sense of unity. But at a certain point there arose the problem of where to send them to school.”

Gaudete is a teacher, and knowing the schools in the city, saw that none corresponded to what she desired for her children: a group of teachers who work together to provide coherent formation. “Over time, the need for our friendship to engage our everyday life emerged in the idea of a school that would be ours.” It seemed like a utopian dream. The country no longer has Catholic schools that actually attempt to provide a Catholic education. In order to be recognized and financed as “Catholic,” applicants just have to define themselves as such, nothing more. So the friends began going around Europe and talking about their idea with friends of the Movement. They went to see the Colegio J.H. Newman in Madrid and the Fondazione Sacro Cuore in Milan. At the Rhein-Meeting in Koln, Ángel Mel, the director of the Co-



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Amsterdam.

legio Kolbe in Madrid, told Laurens, “If you truly want to set up a school you have to be directly involved yourself. You should be the director. But you have to have a lot of grit.”

In 2016, Laurens, Gaudete, and a community of parents created a foundation. “We said that in beginning this adventure we wanted to verify our faith.” This adventure meant writing a proposal, finding the right teachers, and securing the funds to begin. The first academic year began in October 2017 with about ten children of various ages. There was

Laurens Peeters.

no lack of difficulties, including with the other parents. One of the most significant episodes was an encounter with Chahrazad, a woman from the Islamic tradition but a non-believer, who came for an interview. Her daughter had a grave skin condition and needed treatment and particular attention. She toured the Misha De Vries School and confided in Laurens, “I have understood that my daughter will be loved here.” The director sensed that the presence of that girl in a small reality like theirs could be destabilizing, and some parents were against accepting her. But he was convinced that Chahrazad’s words had a great deal to do with the identity of the school he wanted to create.

In order to ensure a future for the school, the council of the foundation had to request government recognition. The Dutch system provides for four categories of schools in addition to the public schools: Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and “private neutral,” or nongovernmental and non-denominational. The Hague bases its recognition and funding decisions on the social circumstances of a particular local area. North Brabant is a traditionally Catholic region and, in the zone of ‘s-Hertogenbosch, there is no shortage of nominally Catholic schools. Though their charter provides that the Misha De Vries School will have “a Catholic identity,” they presented it as “neutral,” because it was the only hope that the school would be recognized. This was the first time such an attempt was done in the Netherlands. At the beginning, Laurens and his friends saw this as a kind of ploy, but over time, they came to realize that it was the way they could clarify, for the authorities and for themselves as well, the true nature of the enterprise.

In March of 2018, when Laurens went before the Vught City Council as part of the recognition process, “they asked me why, as Catholics, we did not establish a Catholic school. I explained that our goal was not to educate children in Catholicism, but to introduce them to reality. But in the interest of offering a high level of education, we needed to start from a Catholic hypothesis.” The city council unanimously rejected the application. “We ended up in the newspapers. They accused us of wanting to circumvent the system. But unexpectedly, the national administration took our side.” The city government was



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obliged to provide land and a building for the Misha De Vries School, to the tune of eight million euros. In December, the city council met to decide whether to appeal the decision of The Hague. “If it had passed we would have lost our financing and would have been forced to close,” recalls Peeters. “I decided not to speak, but many of the parents spontaneously gathered at the meeting at which the decision would be made. The council members had rarely seen such a mobilization. It had been many years since their decisions had attracted so much interest.” There were many parents, each with their own arguments, among them Chahrazad, the Muslim mother, who did not want to lose the opportunity to send her daughter to the school. The council decided not to appeal The Hague’s decision.

“For me, it was a journey that began with an intellectual idea, that of a ‘neutral’ school generated by a Christian experience, and changed into a day by day commitment that it reach concrete realization,” says Peeters. “Now, seeing as the school survives on taxpayer money, we have the duty to be faithful to our vocation. This is our greatest challenge, truly to become ourselves, in order to serve the common good.” ■

A monk living in the world



Luca Fiore

The Pope chose Abbot Bernardo Gianni to preach at the Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia. Who is he? The abbot of the monastery at San Miniato in Florence tells us about his life and his relationship with the city and with Fr. Giussani.

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At first glance, one may not take him too seriously, at least by looking at the pictures on his Facebook profile. The pictures show him dancing or speaking with a megaphone... And who is the strange woman he took the selfie with? When you hear him talk, then you understand. You discover that the eccentric woman in the picture is “Aunt Caterina,” a sort of Mary Poppins or Patch Adams, who for years has been driving children with cancer to the Meyer Hospital in her taxi at no charge. And you find out more and more. It becomes clear why Pope Francis would want him to preach at the most recent Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia at Ariccia.

Dom Bernardo Francesco Maria Gianni, abbot of the monastery of Olivetan Benedictine Monks at San Miniato al Monte (St. Minias of the Mountain) in Florence, is a cultured man with extraordinary humanity. Since 2015 when he was elected as the superior of the community, the

historic monastery that overlooks the city has once again become a point of reference, and not just for Catholics. It is no coincidence that the modern city, the symbol of our distracted and restless modern society, was the theme at the center of the reflections presented to the Curia.

In order to understand the inspiration of these reflections, which may begin with a quote from Mario Luzi, or reference to the “mayor-saint” Giorgio La Pira, or speak about the architect and urban planner Giovanni Michelucci, we went to meet the man hidden behind thick glasses and a white woolen zucchetto who somehow creates a connection, even in terms of style, between past and present.

Who is Abbot Bernardo?

A baptized man who, day after day, tries to be a monk, living to serve my brothers that God has entrusted to me as their father and abbot. In order to be both monk and abbot,

I must be a disciple of Christ who attempts to humbly welcome the grace of being a child of God.

What do you need in order to be a true monk?

A monk is a man who is always obedient, completely rooted in Christ, and completely transfigured by a heart converted by the Gospel in everything and for everything. Who would be able to say, “Yes, I am already like this?” The vocation of each person is a work in progress. Just think that in some monasteries on Mount Athos, the monks receive the choir habit, used during prayer, only on their deathbed. It is in the face of absolute obedience, death, that you see the true face of the monk and that the novitiate of a lifetime ends.

Why is it necessary to be a child in order to be a father? This would seem to be a paradox.

As St. John Paul II said, “A man knows how to be a father when he



knows what it is to be a son.” It means having an awareness of my origin, which precedes my fatherhood: to be cared for by another Father.

You have said that you experienced a conversion on the night of Christmas Eve, 1992 in the church at the Benedictine convent in Rossano. Who were you prior to that day? What won you over?

I was about to graduate with a degree in classics, and I was writing a thesis on Coluccio Salutati, a Florentine humanist of the late 14th century. For some years I had distanced myself from the Church, but I was impacted by an experience volunteering to help people with special needs that somehow made me more conscious of the problem of suffering. My studies, volunteer work, and misadventures in love at the ages of 20 to 22 contributed to and led to my encounter with Christ. That night, He reawakened in me the awareness that I am, in spite of everything, lovable by a love that comes to you, knowing that it will find you in your contradictions, arrogance, and weakness. But it comes to you in order to heal you inside, without judging you, giving you the grace and awe of the gratuitousness offered. Jesus does not wait for us to make a move: He looks for you, He finds you, and He leads you back to the Father.

You have a special relationship with the city of Florence. Why would a monk, who we would imagine as being removed from the world, be interested in having a relationship with his own city?

The joy of being been found again by Christ was and still is so great that it has become my life’s passion, which is expressed in my desire for others to also experience this joy. The monastery, and San Miniato al Monte in particular, are like peaks, places extending into the sky and places

Dom Bernardo Francesco Maria Gianni (Florence, 1968) entered the Benedictine Congregation of Our Lady of Mount Olivet in 1992, at the Abbey of St. Miniato al Monte in Florence. In 2009, he became the prior of the community and in December 2015, he was chosen as its abbot. From March 10–15, 2019, at the request of Pope Francis, he preached at the Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia.

of the fulfillment of God's promise at the end of Revelation: the great city of heaven descending to meet the earth. For someone living in San Miniato Monastery, it is impossible not to notice this double vocation: on the one hand, there is the dedication to the liturgy and the intimacy with Christ found in cloistered life with an apparent detachment from missionary work. But on the other, this aspect of being separated from the world calls us to guard the city in our hearts, both as we look down over it and also when we gaze up at the Byzantine Christ that looms over the apse.

Is it true that you visit patients in the hospital at night? Why do you go?

If the Holy Spirit opens your heart to the cry of suffering and entrusts it to you... I would challenge anyone not to go. Sometimes people have romanticized ideas about monasticism, when really to be a monk means to try to live the Gospel vertically and with principles as absolute as God Himself. This happens without taking away from the observation made by St. Benedict bearing witness in the city should never weaken monastic intensity. At the same time, the search for authenticity cannot be a barrier that makes us deaf to the cries knocking on the door of the monastery. According to St. Basil, the monastery is also a big hospital. Our founder, St. Bernardo Tolomei, built a monastery in the heart of Siena during the outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1348, toward the end of his life.

Can you tell us about an experience that sparked your vocation to "go out"?

A monk leaves his monastery reluctantly. I do not have any particular

vocation to "go out," but I sense the grace of a calling to listen. When you think about it, it fits with monasticism, because it means sharing the space of listening, i.e., the monastery. This is a source of incredible spiritual attraction to the Basilica of San Miniato. It makes me very happy, for example, that Aunt Caterina brings patients here, looking for hope in the sounds and in the silence, so that that hope may be reignited in them and their loved ones. Then, in other cases it is up to me to bring this treasure to the heart of the hospital or to the house of someone on his or her deathbed.

You also have friendships with many young people...

Many stories come to mind that describe a potential need for the "thirst of Christ for us," a phrase used by Saint Benedict in the *Rule*. Young people want to be sought out. I see that they have a special attraction to places like San Miniato. These places do not have a direct pastoral purpose, but they are created as spaces where mystery dwells. Young people are purposely looking for a glimmer of the mystery because they are experiencing the night more and more radically. This is a pastoral adventure that the monks ought not seek out. Monks do not have this responsibility from an institutional point of view, but Christ can bestow it on them simply because they are present. Therefore, you may happen to light a candle with a young man who knocked on the monastery's door, because a few hours earlier he came to the Basilica for the funeral of a friend of his... A gesture that was simple yet mysterious, that may be a moment for God to appear again in his life.

During the Exercises in Ariccia, you quoted Fr. Giussani. How did you become familiar with his thought?

In my life I have been given many friendships with people involved in Communion and Liberation. Priests, adults, young adults, plus someone who was important in my life and still is—Fr. Paolo Bargiggia, who died of Lou Gehrig's disease in 2017. He was an oblate of San Miniato. There are many thinkers in the Church that you come across in books, and I first found Giussani in a book, but I became more familiar with him through the faith experience of friends for whom his words were a lived reality that can be used as a criterion. The monastery has always been my natural habitat, where I live the adventure that St. Benedict described as the "search for God." I have never felt something missing from my life, but everything that enters my heart is a gift, a grace.

What is it about the way that Giussani communicates the faith that strikes you?

That Christ is at the center. He is the God of our history, of our lives, in a way that appeals to man in every sense: reason, senses, passions, the need for mystery and human relationships. Also, there is the value given to education: the dimension, that it also monastic, of preserving our inheritance and instilling it into the younger generations. Giussani acted as a bridge between generations. Additionally, he has a great ability to describe the objectivity of Christ in his writings. He is on par with (using the term broadly) the Fathers of the Church, where everything has substance, has a value.



The Pope with Abbot Bernardo Gianni at the Spiritual Exercises of the Roman Curia.

It has been 27 years since that Christmas Eve in Rosarno. There are many things that happen in life. What can withstand the test of time?

God's grace. The impact of time is destructive. From a mechanical perspective, it very dramatic how it is able to carve away, to wear out, to reduce life to habit, which can swallow and devour the mystery. My efforts are not enough to contain this destructive energy, but aided by grace, I am opened to a time that is not a quantity, but a quality, one that is best measured by liturgy, and it is in this way that I feel the awe, newness, and hope that God gives me to continue on the journey. Now, perhaps I shouldn't talk about my own life experience...

Please, go ahead.

The Pope's request that I preach at the Exercises of the Roman Curia took place around the time my father's health declined. He died on December 27. These two events, for different reasons, spoke to my heart. The death of a parent can disorient you; it removes from your life a piece of the roof that sheltered you your whole life and it cannot be replaced. At the same time, there was the request from Rome, which I held to be, if not impossible, at least well above my capacity. And yet in both cases, and not without some struggle, I was soon filled with a great sense of peace.

Where did it come from?

I think it comes from a humble and obedient openness to the will of God; if He beckons, it is surely not meant to contradict the intrinsic logic of gratuitous love.

What helps you remain open to the workings of grace?

The focal point of the life of a monk is the Eucharist and the Word of God. But I believe it is necessary to interpret all of life by looking at the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the architect of time and space; it is in the monastic life, laborious and revitalizing at the same time: we pray together, eat together, rest together, forgive together. This is how Christ transforms your life into a piece of the Church in which the Gospel becomes a lived reality.

What was your takeaway from the days spent with the Pope?

On the anniversary of his nomination as Pope, I had a one-on-one meeting with him. I congratulated him with verses by Margherita Guidacci, "Do not listen to the one who tells you to give up on what is impossible! Only the impossible makes human life possible./ You are right to chase the wind with a bucket./ It is by you, and only you, that it will let itself be caught." The words we spoke right after this greeting had the same intensity and freedom of those verses. It was an encounter between a monk and the Pope, of two experiences of the Church that are different but also celebrated and recognized for their living humanity. It was a moment that changed my life forever. ■



EASTER 2019

The people who followed Him, the disciples who followed Him, were poor wretches like you and me. All the newness of hope, the absolutely new certainty and new reality that they were, was that Presence. The contemporaneity of that Presence with me, with my children, with those who will come after us in a hundred million years: this is the victory that conquers the world. This is the absolute newness. This is the divine in history! I remain the same poor beggar, but with Christ I am certain, I am rich. The attractiveness of my person, that is, what makes it possible to love my person, is the existence of this Presence. Indeed, it is only in a companionship with Him that a person loves himself. Only a person who carries this message can claim an affection for himself, can love himself and therefore love others.

Luigi Giussani

COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

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Under the palms of His hands



Giuseppe Frangi

The Apostles, the eyes and hands reaching for Jesus, and the words of Fr. Giussani. In a little church in Salagona in Cadore, Italy, we find the fresco chosen for the Easter poster.

The tiny church amidst the green meadows of the Trentino region (Italy) can be seen from miles away, thanks to the brilliant white of its four walls. It is a simple, rectangular structure, but it towers toward the heavens with an impulse reminiscent of Gothic architecture. It is the Church of Santa Margherita in Salagona, a little hamlet in Laggio di Cadore. If it seems isolated, it is because a vicious fire destroyed Salagona in 1750. Santa Margherita was spared despite all the wood inside. Little is known about the origins of the little church, which go back to the mid-13th century when the territory was ruled by the lords of Treviso from the da Camino family. Dante remembered those same Caminos in his *Divine Comedy* for hosting him during his exile (“the good Gherardo” in Canto XVI of *Purgatory* refers to Gherardo da Camino).

Its ties with Treviso are obvious the second you step inside the little church: the lower part of the frescoed walls is covered with a decorative pattern, almost like a painted carpet, styled like stairs or snake scales, which is common in the décor of the walls of thirteenth century houses in the main city of the Marche region.

The cycle of frescoes is the real surprise awaiting visitors, with a progression of colors covering all the walls, culminating at the highest level with a series of scenes that

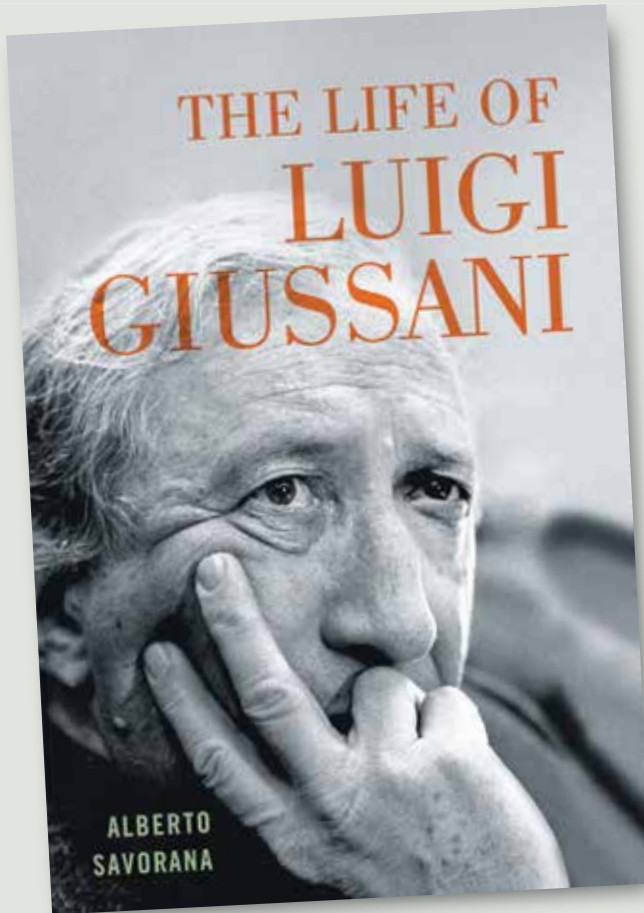
include a Nativity, a *Deesis* (a traditional icon of Christ) flanked by two images of St. Margherita’s martyrdom, a Madonna and Child, and, on the right as you enter, the scene of the *Missio Apostolorum*, Jesus’s sending out the apostles. The walls were the work of many hands, probably executed in the first decades of the 14th century, hands that show signs of the Byzantine influence that was so prevalent in Venetian painting at that time.

Of all the artists, the one called upon to paint the *Missio Apostolorum* is certainly the most accomplished—this can be seen in the artful way he placed the figures in the space, not settling for stereotypical arrangements copied from tradition. The scene depicts what Matthew recounts at the end of his Gospel when Jesus says, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” At the center is Christ, reaching out His arms toward the apostles, who, wide-eyed, are fixed upon the figure of the Lord—especially the one in the foreground, who, being lower than the others, has to curve his body and lift his head, creating an image that stays with you: his face points toward the heavens and hands open like a basin, ready to receive. It seems like he wants to “drink in” the real presence of Jesus.

The artist plays on two elements: gazes and hands. The apostles’ eyes, as we said, are all fixed on the figure of Jesus, but the way they look at Him reminds us a bit of the simple gaze of children. You get the sense of a kind of attraction that wins over the entire person, an attraction that implies a good destiny for each of them. The artist clearly depicts the apostles’ hands in dialogue with a complementarity of gestures. The hands are cupped palms up, but Jesus’s hands are stretched out palms down in a protective gesture, reaching out to find hands that will embrace them, hands that are pushing the men to “go out.” To get to the heart of what this image documents, you need to read the words of Fr. Giussani: “The people who followed Him, the disciples who followed Him, were poor wretches like you and me. All the newness of hope, the absolutely new certainty and new reality that they were, was in that Presence” (from *Qui e ora* [Here and now] 1984-1985, BUR, pp. 67-68). This *Missio Apostolorum* is the genesis, the spark of this new reality that moves out into the world, with faces that carry within them the reflection of the One who first looked at them. That going out into the world is not a distancing, but always remains under the palms of His hands. With a simple, masterful touch, the anonymous artist from Santa Margherita communicates all of this: “The new reality that they were was that Presence.” ■

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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