



TRACES

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06

***What can  
withstand  
the test  
of time?***

## TRACES

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Vol. 21

**Editor (Direttore responsabile)**  
Davide Perillo

**Editorial Assistant**  
Anna Leonardi

**Art director**  
Dario Curatolo

**Layout**  
Maria Cristina Mazzù

**Editorial office**  
Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano  
Tel. 02.92945400 - Fax 02.92945401

**E-mail:** traces@traces-cl.com  
**Web:** english.clonline.org

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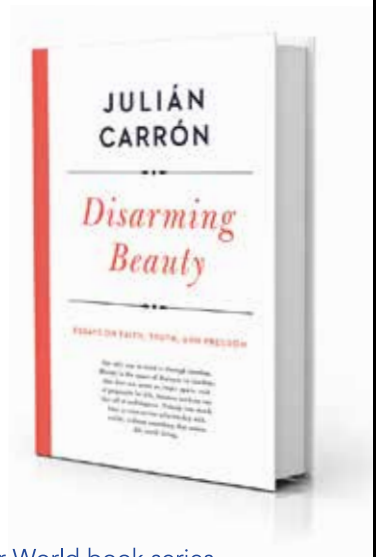
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## JULIÁN CARRÓN

# *Disarming Beauty*

### ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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## A new way of knowing

**I**t would be hard to pose questions that are more urgent, more intricately interwoven with the fabric of our days and our relationships, with what happens to us and what we do hour by hour, and which *call out to* our need to leave a mark so that we can avoid ending up in the nothingness that often seems to envelop our present environment: What will withstand the test of time? What makes it possible that life, *our* life, not slip by in vain, but become a path capable of building us up and building up the world around us? Deep down, these are questions we all share, no matter what conception of, position on, or vision of the world we have decided to embrace—assuming we have chosen one. Reality itself will raise these questions, at a time and in a way we least expect.

This is the reason you will find the question "What will withstand the test of time?" both on the cover of this magazine and in the booklet that will soon be available on the CL website containing the text of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL: this text contains meditations and an assembly focused on the necessity to put faith—the event of Christ as it happens in our lives—to the test in reality, of verifying whether it holds up, if it helps us become true men and women.

**What you will find in the booklet** is a true path that is possible for everyone to follow. It is a path not founded on theories: no idea is able to adequately respond to the question posed. Rather, it points to a new life, a way of being in the world that generates a new way of seeing and knowing reality, and allows us to delve deeply into the underlying factors of this new life and way of being to the point of recognizing their origin, the wellspring of it all: Christ. If faith were not capable of reaching this point, of responding to that question, it would be useless. And if it could not demonstrate that capacity *within our experience*, if it were merely the repetition of doctrines, albeit true ones, it would still be useless and too abstract. It could not move anyone.

**What we offer to our readers is demanding:** a proposal of work to be done, work that demands of us that we take the time to go deeper, to consider, and to verify. It is for this reason that the booklet will be the basis of CL's educational proposal for the next few months.

To accompany the beginning of this work, we have chosen to dedicate the "Close Up" section this month to the Exercises. You will find stories and witnesses that document what happens when you begin to take the question asked by the title seriously, verifying the answer for yourself. In simple terms, this verification changes our life. It is a verification that never stops, always putting us back in front of the same urgent need for the existence of something that will last forever.

# Letters

## Guido, Giovanni, Enrico, Giorgio

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
*pberga@tracce.it*

### “*Gracias amigo!*”

We spent a day in Tijuana, the small town you find just across the Mexican border from San Diego, California, to prepare dinner for about 200 men and some of their young sons, who have either been deported from California to Mexico or were unsuccessful crossing into the United States and do not have family in Tijuana. We were at Casa del Migrante, which is run by the The Scalabrinian Congregation. I expected to find these men with no hope, dejected, and feeling very down. Instead, I was very surprised to see them witnessing to a courage and desire to live their lives fully by embracing their dramatic reality. How is this possible? What sustains these men from whom everything and everyone has been taken? After meeting a few of them and hearing their stories, it was clear that the difference is that they are loved. Before the men began eating dinner, Daniella, a social worker at Casa del Migrante, asked who wanted to say the blessing and two hands went up. Daniella called out one of them and the prayer began. Everybody was silent, including us volunteers who had arrived hours before the prepare dinner, but it was not a formal silence. A gratitude that finds its roots in the Easter words of Pope Francis: “Every morning, he comes to find us where we are. He summons us ‘to rise at his word, to look up and realize that we were made for heaven, not for earth, for the heights of life and not for the depths of death,’ and to stop seeking ‘the living among the dead’” (homily at the Easter Vigil, April 20, 2019). As soon as the prayer finished, as I was crossing the room toward the kitchen, Xavier, a young

man in his twenties, grabbed my arm and with tears in his eyes looked at me and said: “Gracias, amigo.” *Gracias, amigo...* all of life was contained in these two words: *gracias amigo!* Another man came into the kitchen after eating dinner and said, “Today I’ve been treated like the Roman emperor. Thank you.” And another man, who was deported last week while going to work in West LA, having been brought to the United States when he was two-and-a-half by his grandparents about 40 years ago, was excited to start the “next chapter” of his life in Mexico even though he would have to “brush up” on his Spanish. He already had a job, which is one of the services provided by Casa del Migrante, and was looking forward to what life would be like in Mexico. We were totally blown away by his openness of heart and had to ask ourselves what makes this possible. It is a friendship with Christ present now, with us, that can every day sustain the call to life as it presents itself. I thought I would go to Tijuana to help the poor by cooking dinner. Instead, I was invited to become poor through an attractive openness of heart and poverty of spirit, and understood, as Pope Francis said, “stretching out our hands reciprocally one to another, a salvific encounter can be created which strengthens our faith, renders our charity active, and enables our hope to continue securely on the journey towards the Lord who is returning.”

**Guido**, Los Angeles (USA)

### Mario, who came from China

Dear Fr. Carrón, a husband and wife came to visit my family with their little, newly adopted son. Mario, who came from China, is five years old but seems like he’s only one. The parents talked about how he was afraid to be outdoors because he was used to always being indoors in the orphanage and how he had never seen himself in a mirror. His parents are helping him to

take his first steps to gain a confidence appropriate for his age. In so many little ways, his simplicity and amazement have moved me deeply. When he approached me and I asked, "What is your name?" he said nothing, no answer. His mom suggested that I "do it this way" and mimicked the gesture of opening her arms. I followed her advice. As soon as I opened my arms, Mario threw himself at me, hugging me tightly and smiling joyfully. After the guests had left, I asked my dad, "Where did they find this Mario?" and he said, "They were called by someone in China and they went to get him." This answer made my heart explode because Mario's experience is the same one I have every day. There is Someone who comes just for me. And why? To love me, to embrace me with all my limits, my wretchedness, my smallness, my cynicism. There is Someone who every day comes to find me in "my China," who embraces me, who loves me. And this allows me to look at myself without becoming scandalized by my evil and to love myself in spite of my unfaithfulness and blindness. "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have had pity on your nothingness." So, just as Mario's parents had gone to the ends of the earth for him, without any plans except to love him, each day Christ comes into my day to save me with His love, having pity on my nothingness.

**Giovanni**, Milan (Italy)

### At dinner with the next-door neighbor

One evening, we were invited for dinner at my in-laws' house along with a dear friend of ours who wanted us to meet her fiancé, Filippo. We were surprised to see that a neighbor from next door, a widower for about a year, was also invited. We made small talk and then the conversation turned more and more serious. The neighbor began to tell us that since becoming a widower he has started making charitable donations and has become involved in charitable works. At the same time, he's become discouraged that this world is always getting worse, that it's hopeless, and so on. All of a sudden, my father-in-law came out of the kitchen and said, "Well, I have to tell you one thing, and it's not to ingratiate myself with my son-in-law, but you need to know that he is part of Communion and Liberation. Now, I have completely opposite viewpoints from CL, but you have to say that the way Enrico and Barbara are together with their friends is truly beautiful. Just think, at their wedding, there were 260 guests, most of them young people, and it was something beautiful."

At a certain point, the neighbor asked us, "Tell me, what can we do to change this world?" Filippo and I were taken aback by this question and so we said nothing. Our neighbor began speaking again and at a certain point he got up and said, "Well, I've talked too much. I'm going out to have a smoke, but I will tell you one thing: the only way this world can change is through some exceptional, superhuman event." After dinner, we began watching the video of our wedding and the neighbor said, "You can really see that you have beautiful faces; they're so different." At the end of the evening, I was truly full of gratitude. Once again, in an unexpected and unpredictable way, I became aware that the exceptional, superhuman event that our neighbor was talking about has really happened in my life, has changed my life, and that others notice.

**Enrico**, Italy

### Martina's ski lift

My third child, Martina, is ten years old and very special (she has Down syndrome). During our ski vacation, she learned to take the ski lift. When she would get close to the point where she had to get off, she would shout, "Sir, sir, please help me!" to the attendant, who really didn't do anything. He would leave the cabin and smile at her and she would calmly get off the ski lift, and ever so happy, would get back to skiing. I repeated to her a number of times that it was useless to call the gentleman, seeing as she was able to do it on her own. Then this fact caused me to reflect. Often, if I am in difficulty, I try to figure it out myself. It's hard for me to ask others for help, but above all to ask the Lord for help. Martina doesn't have any problem with this and asks for help even when she knows she can do it herself. This is to trust in the Lord, to call Him by name, to ask that His will be done, to ask Him to stay close by and to keep us safe whether we are being tested or whether we are happy. In those same days, I learned that my mother had had a recurrence of a very bad illness, so I ran to the top of the mountain of the Santuario della Santa Croce and just like Martina shouted, "Lord, help me." Like Martina, I felt a kind gaze upon me. During the last days of our vacation, the gentleman of the ski lift would come out of his little house as soon as he could see Martina in the distance, even before she could call to him. I said to myself, "If a man would behave in such a way, how much more does the Lord have attention for us."

**Giorgio**, Italy

# Close-up



■  
The black and white photos accompanying the “Close Up” were taken by Alberto Ricci.

# A work that begins

**T**his month’s “Close Up” begins with three stories from different parts of the world. They are a way of catching the first impact, the beginning, of the work on the Exercises of the CL Fraternity—the text of which you will find posted on the CL website in the coming weeks—work that will take some time to delve into and develop. For now, it is interesting to discover how the question, “What can withstand the test of time?” provokes a response in anyone concerned with what is human, in himself and in others. Just reading the long, beautiful interview with the well-known psychiatrist Giovanni Stanghellini, is enough to help you see.

The witness from Spain that appears right after the interview also clearly demonstrates the importance of the work on the Exercises. It shows that a personalization of the faith and a deepening of one’s relationship with Christ makes such a difference that, not only can it withstand the test of a dramatic situation like that of Rober and Mamen, but it can even transfigure it so that it sheds light on everything around it, even inside a hospital. Their faith is the contribution they make to the world. It has a social impact, even a political one. Following in this line of thought, we offer two other contributions to bring the “Close Up” to completion. The first is published on the CL website—it is the record of a conversation between Fr. Julián Carrón and a group of university students delving into this dynamic, showing the “political value of an experience” that is fully Christian. It reveals the value of the students’ experience as they become aware of what they are already living.

The last article is a collection of stories from some who, in recent weeks, accepted the invitation contained in a CL flyer to verify the value of their experience even in the context of the European elections. The result? A chain of surprising discoveries. (dp) ■



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# ***Put to the test of daily life***



D. Perillo,  
P. Perego e P. Ronconi

From the question proposed at the Exercises of the Fraternity to today: three witnesses at the beginning of a journey.



## Spain: The “living” and *los burlaos*

“We bet everything on faith. That it can become an experience for me, that I can live it: this is the decisive fact. This is the only thing I can contribute to the world.” “The world” for Cesar Senta, a 42-year-old *Memor Domini* from Madrid, is the “front line” he returns to every morning when he enters the school of Sant Hipòlit de Voltregà, close to Vic, where he is a teacher and principal to 235 students between the ages of three and 16. His path also intersects with many other people every day as the national leader for GS in Spain.

When you ask him about the recent Exercises and the work they have set in motion, he talks about the powerful reaction he had from the first reminder about having “tenderness for yourself.” “I cannot disregard my heart, that radical need I carry within. Being able to look at myself with affection is crucial. When I reduce my ‘I,’ faith becomes one thing among many.”

It has been this way since he was 16. “I was a mess. I had failed out of and been expelled twice from school, and carried a huge wound in my heart: my mom had died and I did not have a good relationship with my dad. I lived at the local bar.” That is where one of his teachers found him one morning. “He stuck his head in before going to school and waved to me. I responded by raising my bottle of beer... eventually, however, I started going to his classes. I saw a man who was happier than I was.” When that teacher invited him to a weekend with GS, challenging him, Cesar took the simplest step: “I got up and went to see.” It was the “point of no return.”

“The evening after that trip, I went to bed and thanked God for existing. ‘Please do not ever let me distance myself from this history.’” And if you ask him how he managed to recognize Him, to say “God” after three days of singing, games, and conversations, he quickly answers, “The correspondence. It was full and total. It was impossible. I was not an idiot; I had tried many things... I said to myself, ‘If I don’t want to lose this fullness, then I have to follow it. The hundredfold does not depend on me, and I need it. Therefore, it makes sense to stay attached to that place where it can happen again.’”

**The discovery of the origin.** There is need for a continual verification. In the end, this need summarizes his life with the students. “On Good Friday, we went to the church,” he said. “There were about 40 people: 32 old men and women, we three *Memores* and five GS students. I thought that if we were not here, there would be a 60-year age gap in the



people present, two generations, and that between them there was nothing. So I asked myself: ‘Why are these students here?’” His answer was, “Not because of tradition, but because of something that fascinated them. They are postmodern, fragile, and already jaded. Still, their judgment is clear: they want to identify this difference, to see where it comes from.” More than, at times, those who think they already know Christ. “When we talk about ‘something more,’ what comes to mind is often not what is happening; we identify it with our images. For them, instead, it is something present. As one of them told me, ‘In the world I have seen so far, people eat, drink, have sex, and die. Period. You are alive.’ It made me think of the beginning, when the pagans called the Christians ‘the living.’”

He read an e-mail he received from a student. The boy had switched schools because he was being bullied. “From the very first day, I saw a difference here,” he wrote. “I was struck by the teachers, by how they interact with each other and with my classmates. Then, they invited me to the School of Community, and I couldn’t believe it: a place where you can speak without fear about your own pain....” Cesar’s comment: “When something like that happens, you have to follow it. In a certain sense, I live off of what happens in them.”

For example with *los burlaos*, “the crazies,” a companionship that meets every Monday evening at his house. “It’s a group of young people from the town. Some are former students. Almost all of them live an unstructured life: they are not working or in school. But at a certain point, they come back to us because having a place where you can focus on life is indispensable.” Over beer, they do School of Community. “There you can see what we are saying in action: your ‘I’ may be fragmented, but the heart is not.” When the encounter comes, it cannot be missed. “And from there you can begin a journey. Just as I did.” ■

## Czech Republic: When everything changes

“One Tuesday in May, there was an article on the CL website about the Assembly of European CL leaders in Krakow. It began by mentioning, ‘Those everyday struggles, the aridity that always returns.’ I was blown away! How could that be? We had the Fraternity Exercises, we had Easter, but life always come back to that!” It was exactly as Fr. Carrón described in Rimini: you are (A) in the midst of a difficult time, you (B) encounter something that shakes you out of it and you take a step forward, but (C) it does not last and you find yourself back at (A).

Claudia Piccinno was not present in Rimini; she attended the Exercises in Esztergom, Budapest. She has been living in Prague with her husband and two sons for five years. She has been in CL most of her life, ever since she met Fr. Paolo Bargigia at school in Florence in 1985. With her new life abroad she, “had to change everything,” as she told us in a Florentine accent that remains untouched by learning Czech. “I left my job as a lawyer, started taking care of my kids full time, and had to learn a difficult language...” The most ordinary, daily things get complicated when just buying bread is like an exam. But “I want to be happy *there*, in the mundane parts of life,” she said.

Her letter was among those Carrón read during his Saturday morning meditation. “How can you, O Christ, hold up in my marriage, with my friends, in my relationship with my kids who are growing up, in the challenges of daily life, in the fears that grip me, in the things that I used to like to do, but now leave me almost indifferent?” she wrote. She talked about a friend suffering from a tumor who confided in her, “In my marriage, I still expect God to do great things.” Claudia, instead, said, “I realized that in my

wonderful marriage with everything in place, I no longer expect much at all in terms of the great things God could do.” Still, she says, “returning to the tenacity of a path” (Fr. Giussani’s words from a Beginning Day) convinced her and her husband to participate in a charitable work in Prague, working with the sick in a hospital.

**Those two hours a month** placed “Jesus between us” again. “My husband and I are very different, and the more the years pass, the more I discover that, in reality, I do not know who he is. We are together, we are married, but we each have our personal relationship with the Lord. Spreading ointment on the frail skin of the sick has made us aware that we share a desire to follow Christ through the companionship He led us to encounter many years ago.” The Exercises, and then the article on the meeting in Krakow (“Look at the hope that lies in you,” Carrón said), set them back to work. “Both illuminated what happened to me next.” The afternoon of the Tuesday that the article was posted, she had parent meetings for her children at school. “The sixth grade teacher asked me and the parents of the two worst boys in the class to stay a minute. I went there thinking there were no problems... They told us, ‘These three have really been teasing a girl in the class for a while now; it is bordering on bullying. We have sent them to the principal, we got the counselor involved, but the situation is bad, with a risk of suspension.’” Claudia’s heart sank. “You think you know your kids well, and you discover that they are totally ‘other’ from you. What had I taught that boy with all my efforts to show him what is good?” She thought of what she had heard from Rimini, the section she was working on in the School of Community from the introduction: “The more I seek control, the more I keep for myself, the less is saved, the less is resurrected. I know I have to learn to offer precisely the thing that hurts most, that I can’t fix but at best can only manage to hide, like dirt under a carpet.” Back at the school, together with the mothers of the “worst” kids, a light bulb came on: everything you live is “an opportunity to become more familiar with You, O Christ, and *there* in that instant, He rose again for me. I listened to the teachers, I said what I needed to say, and at home I gave my son a real talking to; but then was able look at him in his entirety, and not just at the mistakes he had made, because there was an Other looking at him through me. I was at peace. That evening I thought that here is the ‘hope that lies in me.’ It’s there, and it consists of being able to be in relationship with Him, waiting to see Him rise again,” in every moment. ■

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## Uganda: When time is a friend

“Looking back at my own history and discovering that I am ‘preferred.’ That’s the first truth I carried home with me after the Exercises. After 49 years....” After 19 years living in Uganda with his wife Manolita and their five children, businessman Stefano Antonetti tells his story: “We left Varese right after we got married in 2000.” Not because of a “missionary impulse,” he underlines. “My wife had been in Africa with her family and felt a desire to relive the beautiful experience she had there, and working for AVSI in Africa was an opportunity that was in front of us.” They never thought it would be for the rest of their lives. “When we received that question from Carrón before the Exercises, ‘What can withstand the test of time?’ we asked how it would be possible not to look at what has happened to us since then,” Manolita said, with all she had heard in the video from Rimini still very much in her heart. “Carrón sent us back to work to rediscover that newness that caught hold of us: Christ happening again right now.”

“It was 2013. The weariness that had started to spread into every aspect of life as time passed had become unupportable.” Over the years, their friendships within the Movement in Uganda had become arid, and the children started to have more needs as they grew up. “Maybe as time went by a certain kind of presumptuousness emerged, almost as if that choice to live in Uganda was itself the finish line,” Stefano said, “as if leaving Italy was our own initiative, and not an adherence to a road Jesus had chosen for us. When you think that way, if reality is hard, you tell yourself ‘it is given,’ but as a slogan you tack on. You try to incorporate the slogan into life, but you feel constricted.”

**After 13 years,** “we started making preparations to move back to Italy,” Manolita explained. They bought a house in Varese and enrolled their kids in the local public school. “But we weren’t able to find jobs.” Something was not adding up. They discussed it with many friends. “One asked us what it is we truly desire.” Deep down, this is the same problem of recognition that was discussed in Rimini, and looking back today, after the Exercises, they understand even better. “It was not a problem of putting everything in place, but of deepening our relationship with the Mystery that was knocking at our door once again.” After that, a road reopened: “A few months later, I received a job offer from Uganda,” Stefano said. “We were surprised to find ourselves grateful to be able to look with new eyes at the thing we had wanted to leave.”

Nothing had changed at an external level in Kampala:



“There were the same people and the same difficulties as before. But we had changed: the crucial point was the real need we had within us.” Relationships that had grown arid blossomed again, and new ones were formed. Manolita went back to working for AVSI in their Distance Support Program, but with new responsibilities. “I felt inadequate. Because of my personality, I stress out about not being good enough. But what defined me? My job was to communicate the beauty of AVSI’s work with children in the slums. I realized I had that beauty before my eyes—I had experienced it firsthand; I did not have to make it up. It was for me.”

Their new perspective, involving a continuous comparison with their need, still required them to confront issues concerning the education of their growing children and things happening at work, like dealing with a person you helped and taught how to work, and then who then steals your clients. “But you face these things in a different way; you get creative and change things. You get angry, but you love the other. You start to see a good for yourself in everything,” even in the death of one of Stefano’s dear friends last year. “The thing is to understand what it is you are asking,” Stefano continued. “One evening, after the hundredth difficult day, before walking into my house I thought, ‘At least for tonight, let’s pretend to laugh, that everything is great.’ But was it pretending or was there really a point from which we could begin again? The faces in my life were not fake. Reality is your enemy when it is just your idea, like the time I was angry with the Movement years ago... You say to yourself, ‘I am following, but why do I bother? Why put forth the effort?’ If reality is not for you, time eats away at you.”

Looking again at life in this way is to regain it, “To feel how you are preferred, loved by a Presence that happens again and regenerates your ‘I,’” Manolita added. “It is a work you begin anew each day, one that makes you a protagonist.” ■

# A kiss that is not the end

*Psychiatrist Giovanni Stanghellini reflects on the question, “Is there something that lasts forever? A dialogue about experience, relationships, waiting, evil, and repetition. And the unexpected that “touches me concretely.”*



Paola Bergamini

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“If you want, you can stay. I think there will be something interesting for you, too, in our conversation.” These are the words of Giovanni Stanghellini to his graduate students at the end of his lecture on Dynamic Phenomenological Psychotherapy. A psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and professor at the University of Chieti in Italy, Stanghellini did not indicate the topic of the conversation about to take place: the CL Fraternity Exercises. But almost all the students stayed. “My first encounter with the thought of Fr. Giussani was about 10 years ago, in an exchange with Maila Quaglia, whom I met in a course at the University of Urbino.” This is a relationship that continues today: Stanghellini oversees professional development for the staff at the Nazarene Cooperative [Editor’s Note: A nonprofit serving people with psychiatric disorders], where Quaglia is one

of the directors. “Since then, I have found many points of overlap with phenomenology, my field of work and study. One that is particularly important to me, which I spoke about recently at a conference at the University of Milan-Bicocca with Fr. Carrón himself, involves the word ‘experience.’ Experience is something that happens to me now, that touches my heart—the most sensitive aspect of our flesh—and by involving me, leads me to say: ‘I am here.’ It reveals my own presence to myself.” And “experience,” a very concrete word, comes up often in our conversation.

## **What is it that struck you about these Exercises?**

First of all, the fact that they are “exercises,” in other words, a practice designed to turn a principle, an idea, into muscle, nerves, and flesh. You perform exercises in a way that can make what you practice into a *habi-*

*tus*, a habit. And they are not “spiritual” in the abstract sense, but in that they relate to what animates all our actions. The first thing I understood is that there is a pragmatic aspect. You do exercises so that something, a principle, can become flesh.

## **Carrón speaks of work to be done, a journey.**

I recently met him for the first time, and in the course of our conversation, I told him how struck I am by his pragmatism. He answered, “I am the son of a farmer!” I thought: well, there you go. I liked reading the texts. Let’s say I exercised my spirit; in other words, I completed the exercise of translating what I read into my own “language,” but at the same time encountered something that surpasses my “language.” Time will tell whether and how much I appropriated it as my own. Still, this is a kind of work that interests me.



**Let's begin with the title. Is there something that can withstand the test of time?**

It's paradoxical, but what withstands the test of time is history, which seems like the domain of contingency. Let me be clear about the terms. *History* means, first of all, the world and humanity. Being in history means perceiving oneself as part of a community. Today, considering how society feeds into conflict and prejudices regarding the other's histories, this is more challenging. But my existence takes on meaning when it is part of the human story, and this becomes an urgent question when something bad happens: how can this inhuman thing be part of my humanity? Second, *history* means stitching an episode that has happened into my personal history, endowing it, along with other events, with meaning, so that they are all united by a common thread. The prob-

lem is when we recognize a repetition of events in our history, usually a repetition of events connected to evil. I find myself in the same situation of being limited, which involves a kind of trauma, or of experiencing the same failed relationship. This shakes me up.

**Why do you say especially events connected to evil?**

They are what most awaken our awareness.

**And if the events involve a pleasant surprise?**

That means there is no repetition; therefore, the events involve an experience. It is the unexpected to which Carrón refers and that touches me concretely.

**Does it require the person, the subject, to make a "move"?**

Of course. That move is a kind of "conversion"—this term, too, needs to be properly understood.

**Does it involve the movement of a person's freedom to decide?**

It involves the possibility for you to look at the repetition in your history from a different perspective. To see this repetition not as the result of a malicious kind of fate, but rather the effect of a personal disposition that I have not yet been able to recognize, to bring into focus. It is a movement from thinking I am the victim of a malicious fate to thinking that there is something within me, in my *habitus*, my otherness. Something has to give.

**And something external is needed to trigger this?**

Two conditions are necessary: you have to feel really bad and have



**Giovanni Stanghellini**, born in 1960, graduated from medical school and in philosophy *honoris causa*. He is a professor at the University of Chieti in Italy, where he teaches dynamic psychology and is director of the School of Dynamic Phenomenological Psychotherapy, in Florence.

### Could you give an example?

I would like to watch a movie, but my wife wants to clear the table. This experience of being “out of sync” causes pain at an everyday level. But it can really become disturbing, in the positive sense of the term, when I recognize that the other has a right to live her own sense of time. This is another kind of encounter. Let us be clear: it is not that my wife wants to clear the table so I can become aware that my sense of time is different than hers. She wants to clear the table, period. But this kind of “semitraumatic” encounter is what reveals to me, on the one hand, the other’s sense of time and right to have this sense, and on the other hand my own. This is a way of defining our human condition. Realizing this is exhilarating.

### It seems like a good “exercise” we are doing. What else struck you in the text of the Exercises?

I could make a long list. Here is another: taking one’s own discomforts, vulnerability, and “symptoms” seriously. The terminology Carrón uses is very familiar to those in my line of work. It is thinking—and this is the first definition of what we called “conversion”—of your symptom as your greatest ally when you want to understand yourself, acknowledging that your symptoms carry the power to reveal you to yourself. An example: if I have a phobia about trains and I have to take one to get to work, I have to come to terms with it. Instead, in our culture, symptoms are seen as impediments to fulfilling our plans, so we want to

eliminate them. But if I eliminate this symptom, another will appear. I have to acknowledge my symptoms in order to understand the meaning of my existence. First this acknowledgment and then the rest follows. And there is another term that strikes me.

### Which is?

“Restlessness,” which has two faces. In its negative form it means not being able to be constant in committing to a project. It is living the instant satisfaction of my needs under the banner of spontaneity. But restlessness is not just this; in a positive sense, it is aspiring to something greater, being oriented to transcendence and not being satisfied with what is already known. When our consciousness is driven by an insatiable desire for repetition, to find the similarity in everything we encounter, we lose sight of reality and the individuality of others; we settle. Restlessness is that state of the soul that keeps you from settling.

### Positive, therefore, because it opens you up. You may be surprised.

Exactly. Restlessness is a precarious balance, but existence itself is a precarious balance. If you are not hanging in this balance, you cannot move forward. Restlessness is the emotional hinge of existence: on one side it points to the negativity of never being satisfied and it makes you live life as fragmented moments involving a continual change of direction and plans; on the other, it offers you the possibility of looking at the essence

someone beside you who, with courtesy, tact, and good grace, makes you look at your condition from a different perspective. Plato says we see ourselves reflected in the pupil of a friend: that friend who makes himself available and is capable of reflecting you to yourself without what you see seeming so painful that you want to run away.

### This is what Carrón calls the “encounter with the other.”

There are two kinds of encounters. The first is what we just described: a friend is like a “gracious mirror.” The second is when the other does not help me recognize myself, but rather overturns all my habits with no intention of helping me see myself. This happens with people who have a desire that differs from mine, a sense of time that differs from mine. This is the experience that causes us the most suffering: my sense of time does not line up with that of the other.

of another person, his otherness. The fundamental ethical question, then, is how to *remain* in this precarious balance.

**And how do you do this?**

Those with faith do it through faith, which is naturally related to restlessness. For the rest, some may think they can manage to remain in this restlessness without faith.

**Is that possible?**

I will not be the one to give an answer. In religious terms, you could say it would be living in an eternal advent.

**Of waiting, in that sense?**

Yes. Always awaiting fulfillment.

**And if fulfillment comes? Like that “beautiful day” Camus speaks of...?**

If the beautiful day comes, it is all the more beautiful if it is renewed every day. I would happily give away a fulfillment that is not constantly renewed and instead keep my restlessness.

**Which is like an open window.**

Yes, and the drafts can come in, so you can catch cold or get a stiff neck.

**Let’s go back to that “forever,” at the beginning of the conversation.**

You could say that the “forever” we all long for—think of the phrase “I will love you forever”—is threatened from one side by spontaneity and from the other by the timelessness of eternity. Dante describes hell as “that dark air untinted by a dawn.” In the midst of it all is the event: something that is always on the verge of being fulfilled. Once fulfilled, it withdraws and is fulfilled again. This constitutes the “forever.”

**People often talk about the restlessness of young people, but put this way it makes me want to say that I hope to be restless up to my last breath.**

I talk about this in two of my books: *Lost in Dialogue* and *L’amore che cura* (The love that heals). Restlessness is also that state that goes along with a shapeless view of things, before they take a definite form. And I would add that this is another reason restlessness is intolerable.

**Because it does not allow us to see?**

The opposite: because it shows us what comes before the form. Think of the dynamics of a relationship: the

other person takes on a form the moment I think I know him or her. This allows me to settle in. Before getting to know her or putting her in a particular category, I am in a restless state, especially if I want to meet her, if I am interested, but I am still not able to categorize her.

**Is that what allows you to discover the other?**

It is the necessary condition to discovering the other. Lévinas used to say, “The face of the other is infinite.” It does not mean that it is shapeless, that it is not beautiful. A relationship is not something that fixes the features of a face, but in giving itself over time, it reveals different forms of that face. And this can be disconcerting, but in a good sense.

**Let’s go back to that “advent,” to that waiting for the event to happen, for it to come again.**

I would like to always live this advent. That is one of the reasons for this dialogue. Why are you interviewing me? It is an encounter. That it come, an advent...we are always at that level.

**Is that related to faith?**

Faith is this advent; I would define “faith” as this experience of advent. That is how it is for me.

**And this is Christianity?**

I do not know, but I would very much like Christianity to be this. I find myself at home with Christians for whom faith is the experience of advent, and so I got along well with Carrón. And before that, I was struck reading Giussani, whom I met through the witnesses of those who knew him either directly or indirectly. Today, I met you. In those Christians with whom I get along well, the event becomes flesh. Or better, the advent of that event becomes flesh. I have an affinity for what is there one moment before. As John Keats, an English poet who died before “kissing” life, before kissing his beloved, wrote in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, which describes two young people on the verge of kissing: “Never, never canst thou kiss.” That involves the same theme of advent.

**Yes, but when it does come, it fills your life and your heart.**

It makes me very happy to hear you say so. Very happy. It makes me happy when someone tells me that.

**It comes to meet you as Giussani and Carrón describe. I would describe it as time bursting open. You can kiss your beloved and it is not the end.**

And the kiss is not the end. It is an experience, one that touches your heart... ■

# Close-up





# Rober (or, “the joy of being a son”)

How can the life of a man who is frail and sick be so useful? “Those who go to visit him know: they come out changed.” A way of living pain and sickness that is a good for his family, his friends, the doctors, and other patients... A witness from Madrid.



**Guadalupe Arbona Abascal**

The date is March 18, 2019. Rober feels extremely tired, and tells his wife, Mamen. At first, it does not seem like much, but the next day he has a fever and starts to lose control over his movements. Mamen takes him to the hospital where he had gone six years before. There, they know his entire clinical history and give him a warm welcome. When they walk in the door, one of the doctors says, “This is a patient who is very dear to us. The way in which he and all of you faced his illness six years ago is something you cannot forget. I see a lot of things in my work, but I have never seen anything like it.” As he speaks, he wipes away a tear. All the life this patient generated in those around him is still burned into the doctor’s memory. He is not an ordinary patient. After his first operation, with his body worn out and full of tubes and wounds, he smiled and said he would not change an instant of his life; he was serene. He said it with disarming simplicity. The doctors could not believe their eyes, and kept going back to visit him to see if it was really possible to live pain and sickness that way. In fact, they visited him even after their shifts ended, when they had no obligation to do so. It was a strange procession: the cardiologist, the anesthesiologist, and the internist slipping in to get a peek at a new way of facing illness. “In bed, stripped of everything,” Mamen says, “without speaking, because he is not even strong enough to open his mouth, he is a man deeply involved in life. He looks off into the distance and I whisper, ‘Rober, what are you thinking about?’ He answers, ‘I am praying.’ It is amazing to see how, in the weakness of his condition, he lets himself be touched by Jesus’s presence.” How can the life of a man who is frail and sick be so useful? Those who go to visit

Rober and Mamen.



him know: they come out changed. This time he was delirious when he entered the hospital. The infection had spread to his entire body and he spent many days in intensive treatment. His wife could not go to visit him more than an hour a day. The second day, when Mamen got home, Candela asked her, in tears: “Mom, tell me the truth, is dad dead?” “No, my daughter, but he is very sick. Why do you ask?” “Because the last time he was sick you were always at the hospital with him, and this time, no. Mom, tell the doctors we will give them all the money in the world if they can just cure Daddy.” At that point, their older son interrupts: “Stop crying. Can you do anything? No. So pray. Dad is alive right now, at this moment. What is extraordinary is that we are alive and not dead. You were chosen to be here; be grateful. Why are you worried? Today, Dad is alive.” The day ends, they go off calmly to brush their teeth, and the young girl hugs her mom and says to her, “I see that you are serene, and I know you love him. I want to be like you, too.”

They may be the words of an 11-year-old and a 13-year-old, but they have already seen a lot in life. When their father was close to dying, Mamen had said, “Today he has surprised me because he is alive; tomorrow, I don’t know how he will surprise me.” The way she trusts and lets herself be loved by the Mystery is evident.

As his children were having that conversation, Rober was fighting the infection. They could not operate until his fever lowered, and the valve they had replaced six years before had been eaten away by bacteria. In addition, he suffers from a neurodegenerative disease (he has 28 cerebral lesions), chronic insomnia, and continual hemorrhages. From his bed, he looked at us with a weak smile and said, “If I die, I will rest with Jesus. All I desire is to witness my faith to the world. My entire life has been remaining at the foot of the cross; this has been my life, and I would not exchange it for anything in the world.” As he said at a gathering with college students, “I have had a lot of problems in my family growing up and because of my health, but everything has been illuminated by an encounter with Jesus and by following Julián Carrón. I have been able to discover that life is dependence. This is something I read in *The Religious Sense* and that has stayed with me throughout life. Perhaps a person without health problems cannot understand this in such a direct way, as has happened for me. I really appreciate the clarity. Thank you, Lord, because I depend on You. I have spent half of my life this way, and it is a blessing.”

**There is not a hint of exaggeration in his words.** I met him while I was studying journalism. His father abandoned him, and his mother, in order to support her children, was a hairdresser by day and sold newspapers at the train station by night. I asked him about his father, but he did not want to hear it. Months, then years, went by, and every so often I asked him, “Don’t you think, Rober, that it would be better to forgive than to carry

*“Being with him clears my eyes of my fear and fatigue. I do not have to conjure up anything, just looking at him is enough.”*

all this bitterness inside?” One day, he went looking for him, and after a few weeks was able to meet him for coffee. A little while later, he invited him to eat at his home. Time went by, and Rober started going with him to the doctor for blood transfusions, and in the end the father died in the arms of his son, knowing that he was forgiven. I remember the day Rober discovered and fell in love with *Les Misérables*. The bishop’s gesture of forgiveness toward Jean Valjean deeply moved him. Is it possible that in reading Victor Hugo his desire to forgive his own father came back to him? Now he sees the relationship with his father as a gift from God, and talks about how it is as if God had said to him, “Look, what you believed to be impossible—a relationship with your father—I give it to you that you may see how great life is.”

Rober’s life has been and is fixed on the cross, just as was that of Etty Hillesum, a writer he has read and reread. From her, he learned how, even in a concentration camp, you can live in dialogue with a You. Etty wrote that “You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, O God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, O God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer.” This is how Rober lives: he is grateful and prays with the simplicity of a child, a rosary of colored beads always clutched in his hands.

On March 26<sup>th</sup>—it took eight days to eradicate the infection—the doctors decided to operate once again, as it was a question of life or death. Rober suffered hallucinations and told one friend that what he wanted was not to be separated from reality. He wanted to learn not to stop short at appearances; in such horrible moments, he wants to discover the One who allows him to breathe. Mamen looked at him just before

he went into the operating room, and a few minutes later wrote, “Thank heavens being with him clears my eyes of my fear and fatigue. I do not have to conjure up anything, just looking at him is enough!” The presence of a You in his flesh is so evident that it betrays an Other. Therefore, for Mamen, that victory over fear and fatigue has a name: “Only Jesus’s resurrection gives solidity to my life. Otherwise, all that I do just slips through my fingers.”

**Rober came out of the surgery** very weak, and the doctors declared, “We thought we could operate, but we were not certain. It is the third miracle we have seen in him. It is incredible the way he and his family live.” Mamen is always there beside him; she who has personally overcome the trials of his illness says she is able to live this way thanks to the work of the School of Community and to following Carrón: “It seems unbelievable that, in the most difficult moments, the person closest to us is over 1,000 miles away. Through Julián, I understand the experience I am called to have within the conditions of this illness: it is the experience of Jesus’s tenderness.” The first few hours after the operation are very critical, but even the doctors have faith. They have seen many things that seemed impossible happen in him. As one of them was making a visit, he said, “Rober, there is a patient in despair upstairs: I would like you to speak with him.” The fact is that Rober’s peace is desired by everyone who sees him; he is so aware of his dependence, of being a son, that alongside him you experience something new, a kind of need to change. When they are with him, both friends and strangers perceive the historical and cultural weight of the faith. It is hard not to be pulled along by the desire to participate in what he lives. An anthropological desire to change; in other words, the desire to live as a son who depends on a Father who is good and the desire for His joy to reach everyone. All of this has the result that Rober’s doctors, who are used to dealing with sickness, realize how people like him are needed, how his life does the hospital good. Rober contributes to the common good with his sick body and his gaze of a grateful son. ■



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## Europe

# *The things that matter*



Daide Perillo

*"It may seem insignificant, yet it is the answer to the darkness in the world around us." A snapshot of the richness in action that emerged during the dialogue involving the flyer about the elections published by CL. We have seen that the common good is the newness of life we are all seeking.*



**M**arco works as a mailman in Mestre. He went to the meeting almost by chance, because a friend invited him. Its theme: the elections. The title: “Politics Starts with You.” His father had warned him, “Be careful, don’t let anyone put strange ideas into your head.” On the stage, instead of slogans and declarations there were three witnesses. “They were short accounts, details of a shared life that drew my attention,” he said. “I asked myself: Do I care about the common good? Do I, right where I am, with those around me, take it to heart? Then it hit me. I realized how much these questions revealed my separation from the things that matter.”

Yet, “the things that matter” are important for daily life.

The next morning, “as I headed to work, I had a greater sense of wonder; I became aware of how much my heart and the hearts of others seek, even for a moment, someone’s gaze, someone’s attention.” As a result, “while I delivered the mail, I was able to not let the work overwhelm me. It was a miracle, because normally I am in a hurry to achieve results and efficiency...” This time, he stopped to talk “with a woman from Eastern Europe who lives in a poor neighborhood nearby,” just for a few minutes. “But it was good for me! I can’t speak for her, but it made me see that someone is waiting for me. Why miss out on something as beautiful as this? Where was I rushing off to? It brought me back to the essentials.” This was a thought that was echoed in the stories of people who, in the face of the European elections, agreed to consider an unusual proposal. More than a month ago, even before the start of the most unpredictable and most divisive campaign season ever, Communion and Liberation released a flyer titled “Present To the Need of the World.” It is not a declaration (“We should do this” or “This must be done”) or suggest who to vote for. It is an occasion for a simple verification: it stated that in the midst of the sea of doubts that we try to navigate, “our first need is not for the nth political theory or for a new organizational strategy, but to encounter a

life that has the power to open us up again to hope.” The flyer described events that had taken place in various places around Europe that demonstrated this way of life in action, a life possible for everyone. It proposed an undertaking with five very practical questions (“How does the experience I am living awaken in me a passion for the common good? What action does the upcoming election inspire in me?” and so on) that can be summed up in a single question: “And you? What does this event mean for you?”

**Many people** made a connection between this proposal and the question that was the theme of the Spiritual Exercises of CL, not only because it becomes ever clearer that finding something that “withstands the test of time” is the only solution to the fragmentation plaguing our society. Why were there so many people in Rimini and why are so many working on the Exercises? Were they provoked by what happened there? Do they increasingly realize that from that point, from the opportunity to partake in that “life that has the power to open us up again to hope,” comes the birth—or rebirth—of an interest in oneself and in reality? In all of reality, including politics?

This realization can be seen in the witnesses sent to *Traces*. There were more than one hundred letters that document forms in which the “I” came alive, using the elections as an opportunity to take initiative, or



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just to be surprised “for the first time by a political event and that I could live it freely as a protagonist,” as stated by Dodi from Rimini, who works in a refugee welcome center. Laura, a researcher in a lab in Milan, was amazed by the fact that “stories of simple people (like me)” quoted in the flyer could generate “hope, first, in my own humanity: perhaps even I can make a difference in the world, in my daily life?” Laura told her story on Instagram with a profile encouraging “friends, students, and colleagues” to look past any complaints they had that politics was not relevant for researchers.

Many of these accounts talk about recent events and initiatives. There were dozens of public gatherings organized in order to reach a judgment about the text and about situations of daily life. There were letters from Italy and other places in Europe: the volunteer in a tutoring center from Porto Franco who began an unexpected conversation with a family of foreigners; the mother involved in a refugee welcome center who reached out so that “relationships with other families could grow”; the teacher who described the “change in the way she faced” the mother who complained about her son’s grades; the university student whose interest in the student

elections (which were taking place at the same time) “spread” to his friends; the Portuguese entrepreneur who explained how he was able to have a deeper experience with people at his company. Hundreds of people found an unexpected connection between “big politics” and their own lives as a result of the proposal.

**For many others, the work** was an unfolding of what is here now, what is already happening, even in initiatives that have been underway for some time, but concerning which people may have lost sight of the civic and political value they carry as a method, a path possible for everyone. The “school for parents” established in Fidenza, the career center in Messina, the foster families of Verona and Trent, the pregnancy center in Cremona... all of these realities originated from people’s response to a need and grew, supporting and changing a part of the world around them. “The mayor summoned me before the city council and asked me to give a speech to politicians and journalists,” said Nicola from Ancona, who helps in an after-school program with 35 volunteers and 90 children (many of them foreigners). “He wanted to show that our experience is one of true certainty and integration.” There was also an account of someone reaching a better understanding of the value of charitable work, a gesture that has always been a pillar of the education in faith proposed by CL.

Simone from Bergamo had this experience with the Food Bank—he delivers packages of food to a poor family. In his story about being surprised by receiving a gift from them for his wedding (“They don’t have much: Why did they do it? Am I not the ‘good’ one? Who is truly giving?”), he described what he had come to understand: “I was not moved theoretically by the questions on the flyer; instead, I understood that some of my experiences help me judge what was written in it and show that it is true. It is a reversal of a method: starting from charitable work, I can say that I also live what is experienced by others in Lithuania, Holland, and Spain, as described in the text.” As the text stated, this is a way of life “that can change our gaze.”

These initiatives may be small in scope (even though

there are 250 Solidarity Food Banks in Italy alone that support 80,000 people), but they have a great and universal value; they reveal a hope that is *present*. They point out an existing hope instead of ideas; they demonstrate the common good as something more than a theory or the solution to the ever-greater challenge of mediating between different societal ideas and interests. They are part of the discovery of a good awaited together and shared together what *it happens*. They are examples of the “societal friendships” called for by Pope Francis. These facts happen “only by living according to the scope of the charism, that is faith” as Massimo from Pisa wrote, “and this has political value, because it is human.”

The transition to this understanding is not simple—the objection, more or clearly less stated, that is interwoven with political issues from the start was based on certain questions: Is everything truly *politics*? The invitation to a way of life, the examples, the hope... do they matter for the elections? Are they just a nice idea, even an understandable one, but which then needs something else to show its worth, to impact the major problems we see around us?

Maybe in the end the most important thing is this: those who took initiative were able to look faithfully at these questions and were able to make a judgment based on their own experience, one that led to an answer, very often with the help of others gained in discussions along the way.

In Perugia, at a gathering on the flyer, the subject of skepticism was raised. “It was expressed as a sense of political weakness, of the text’s lack of impact, of feeling that the examples proposed were naïve and modest in their significance compared to the situation,” said Marta and Peppe. Then someone with a different background—in the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and then mayor for ten years of a town in Umbria—stood up and said, more or less, “Don’t you see? The examples in the flyer contain everything that should be looked at in politics. They show what politics is.” He highlighted the Muslim mother who sent her sick daughter to a Catholic school, and offered a detailed defense of the school because it “is a good for all.” He concluded, “Do you really believe that those who wrote the flyer meant to say something else? The content of that flyer is intentional: we are asked to change our gaze.”

In Pisa, a well-known journalist said, “I have seen the world and have written about its atrocities, and now that I am 60 years old, it becomes more evident that to move forward I need a place where I can find a breath of fresh air that en-

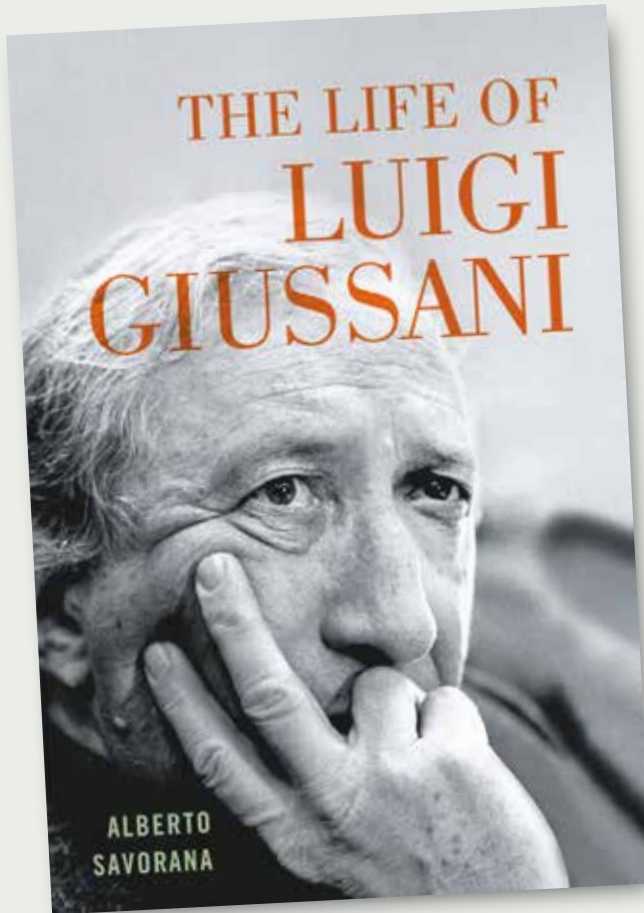
ables me to go back and plunge into the things that don’t work as they should.” There was also the example of a local bishop’s response after hearing a story about assisting refugees: “What you experience may seem small and insignificant, yet it is the answer to the darkness in the world around us.”

**Something also happened** in Chivari at a public event 10 days before the election. Among the many people who spoke was a lawyer from Genova, who sits on a committee formed by those who lost their homes in the collapse of the Morandi Bridge. He described what one of his clients told him in a recent meeting: “OK, you must give the speech: otherwise the proposal risks becoming an accusation about money and nothing else...” This is the same lawyer who, until recently, did not accept the ideas of CL. He explained the changed attitude of his client with these words: “I am only a smuggler of ideas. When I go to work, I bring with me what I discover spending time with you.” A new life. ■

*“Perhaps even I can make a difference in the world, in my daily life?”*

# 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.

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