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09



**Come and see**  
*Christianity is an experience*

## TRACES

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for the texts by Luigi Ciussani and Julián Carrón

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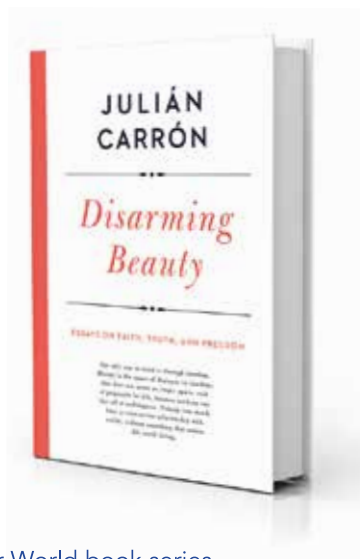
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## JULIÁN CARRÓN

# *Disarming Beauty*

### ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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## The journey to truth

**W**hy is this issue of *Traces* titled “Come and See”? It refers to an invitation to those who may have found this magazine in their hands for the first time, having received it from a colleague, a friend, or a person they met on the street. It is also the heart of Christianity, which, despite what we may sometimes think, is not a set of ideas, rules, or values. It is first and foremost a life involving events and people. It is about something that happens that, when we notice it, surprises us with its beauty. It awakens a curiosity and calls us to take steps to discover the origin of a newness that is so unforeseen yet so correspondent to our humanity. In that “come and see” spoken by Philip to the skeptical Nathanael—similar to the words “follow me” contained in the Gospel—lies the full power of the only road that can overcome skepticism, both today and 2,000 years ago: experience. This road says to us, “See for yourself, you be the judge. Verify whether this newness that aroused your curiosity is interesting for your life, whether it makes it more intense and more true. See whether it can wholly embrace your longing for meaning and for happiness.”

**It moves us to think of the road God has chosen for us** to know and love Him. It moves us because the road of our experience is the only way possible *for us*, the only truly human road. This road defies even our attempts to reduce its significance based on the fact that the word “experience,” while so immediate, is also so often misunderstood. We are all ready to agree that, as Fr. Giussani said, “the journey to truth is an experience.” We can only grow and learn through encounters, events, and things we are told about or happen to us. Anything else seems abstract. Yet—and here is the root of the misunderstanding—“gaining experience” is much more than accumulating things you have done. It requires that you realize *the nature* of the things that happen to you. And the more unexpectedly extraordinary they are, the more a step of awareness is needed so that they do not slip away, buried by a simplistic sentimental reaction (“how beautiful!”). A fascinating event does not by itself cause us to grow. (The Gospel is full of miracles that do not change anyone.) Recognizing what one is really seeing and the One who is offering it as an opportunity for us: that can change us.

**Christ bets everything on this.** He does not appeal to rules; he imposes nothing. He submits to the test of our experience, to that simple faithfulness with which we, when struck by a people who lives in a fascinating way, follow through with the questions that emerge: “What is it about them? Who are they?” You will find a related question—“Who is this man?”—presented on the website [clonline.org](http://clonline.org). It is the title of the text from the CL Beginning Day, a proposal of a journey to walk together based on experience. Our hope is that curiosity may be opened wider and wider in those who will read the many stories on the following pages, so that they will never stop growing.

## Helen, Eleonora, Marina

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

### “I want them to be happy for the way they are”

I recently started attending School of Community. At first, I was reading the text trying to understand “the lesson.” At home, I care for two family members with mental disabilities—, and I’ve always tried to get them to do what I wanted and this has made me always tired and stressed. But spending time with friends from the the community, and going to the School of Community, gave me a new perspective on my life. When I would return home, my brother and my cousin always found me radiant, and they felt looked upon by a different gaze. I have understood that I want to be happy, and I want them to be happy *the way they are*. This has completely changed my way of looking at them, of being with them, and it has even changed our home. I bring them to see my friends, to the assembly or to the community day, because there they are accepted. In our country, a “culture of shame” is still very strong, and a disabled relative is seen as a punishment, never to appear in public. What a relief to discover that I am happy while I’m with them.

**Helen**, Kajang (Malaysia)

### The vise that gripped my heart

First let me say, even though it pains me to say it, that I am not even a believer. Or rather, I once was, when I was small and still took things as they were presented to me. But over time I became dissatisfied with how things were explained to me: how could I be satisfied with those truths if I couldn’t understand their meaning? For a long time I continued to think

that faith had no place in my life, until the beginning of this summer, when I went to the GS vacation. Why did I go? The answer is simple: I hoped to find some answers there. In June in fact, I started to feel a strange sensation, an inner discomfort that gave me no peace. It was like a vise that gripped my heart, my head, my brain, and didn’t let me live fully the things I was doing. After all, that’s what summer is for: to have fun, to have fun, and to have some more fun. And yet, for as much as I tried to constantly fill my days with activities and with going out with my friends, the vise still had me in its grip. I was no longer able to enjoy myself. Not knowing who to blame for this feeling, I took it out on a guy I was in love with. After some time, way too much time, I discovered that he had just been toying with me. My friends and my parents agreed with me: he had been the cause of my discomfort. All I needed to do was to let a little time pass and I would forget him. But this solution disappointed me: the more I tried to convince myself that the reason for my discomfort was that guy, the more I realized that wasn’t it. If he had been the reason, then why, even when I was with him, being held tight, as he held my hand, was my heart still gripped by that invincible vise? I needed answers. That’s why I went on the GS vacation. Did I find them? I think so, above all, thanks to a person who saw something in me that I had never seen, who from the deepest part of their heart told me they understood me and that I wasn’t wrong. What was happening to me was something beautiful, because God, in that way, was giving me a sign of His existence; that same existence that I had always doubted. I finally understood the cause of that emptiness.

**Eleonora**, Italy

### First day of school outside of jail

September 11<sup>th</sup> was the first day of school for C., a young friend of ours. Thus far, nothing strange. However, the fact that this youth is incarcerated, and for the first time after several years of imprisonment,

was getting out to go to school, and to reach the school he had to use public transportation to cross a city he doesn't know, made it complicated. Going to school is a great opportunity for him to pursue a course of study that is aligned with his interests, and he has a scholarship that allows him to attend. When C. asked us volunteers to accompany him, we immediately understood that this new beginning could not be ignored. It had to happen in the best way possible. I offered to pick him up at the prison and to accompany him with public transportation to the school in time for the 9:00 a.m. start. I would then return to pick up my car and go home. I was amazed to discover that other people had also responded to his request. So on the 11<sup>th</sup>, three of us met at 6:30 a.m. – I would drive two other volunteers to the prison, and they would accompany C. to school via public transportation, and then go to work. We arrived fifteen minutes early and we waited for C. at the entrance. Time went by and he didn't show up. We learned from his roommate, who was on his way to work, that since it was his first time out, the inspections were more stringent. In the end, he arrived late and they had to run to catch the bus; they couldn't afford to miss it. C. appeared rather tense, and there wasn't even time for a handshake. It went differently than I had imagined, but when I got back in the car, I was happy to have contributed to the journey of a man who was starting a new phase in his life. I was also amazed at the thought that in a few hours, two others of our friends would be part of this event: one of them would accompany C. back to the prison using public transportation, and the other would then bring the first back to work. Five people for this first day of school. Where does it come from, this "exaggerated" availability? The awareness that we are in the right place? And happiness in being there? These things can only be explained by a presence. That September 11<sup>th</sup>, we saw what "I am precious in Your eyes" means. This goes for him and for us.

**Marina, Italy**

### **The common fund, a gesture of gratitude**

Dear Father Carrón: I decided to write to you because I wish to share with you my thoughts about the small and simple, but at the same time, great gesture of contributing to the Common Fund. My husband passed away this past spring. He cared very much about being faithful to the Common Fund,

much more than I did. He was the one who always remembered to pay, because every time, through that gesture, he could express his gratitude for belonging to the community and the Movement. The kids and I are having some economic difficulties now, but when last week the first payment of the survivor's pension arrived, the first thing that came to my mind was the fact that I could now pay the Common Fund. In March, swept away by the drama of the illness, we didn't pay, but now I have paid my contribution as well as my husband's. This is because if in the morning I open my eyes, and I don't curse life, but instead recite the My God, I Adore You prayer, it is only because I have received the grace of meeting the Lord through Fr. Giussani. I need to belong more and more so to be able to recognize Who gives meaning to my life and to the death of my husband.

**Signed letter**

# Close-up





# Learn from what happens

**T**his issue's *Close-up* is a "journey in experience". It is ideally linked to the CL Beginning Day text that you can download at [clonline.org](http://clonline.org), in which the importance of the word "experience" is explored more deeply, especially in its aspects that are most urgent for us today. Here we offer a few stories that show what it means to learn from what happens and the kind of work that is needed for us to grow, because if experience is real, it involves a realization that we are growing. The fact that growth involves work emerges clearly in the first story, the diary of three days spent with 500 high school students and teachers, which allows us to verify the depth of our human growth. It offers a method to everyone as seen in the events and intense conversations of those days, in which the protagonists urged each other not to separate themselves from experience, because experience is where reality reveals itself.

The same trajectory of awareness emerges in two other testimonies. There is the story of Fiorenza, a young architect working in Oman, which shows that learning from reality is the road for building a solid and glad humanity that can be a presence even in a faraway land. Then there is a story involving an exhibit from the recent Meeting of Rimini, already mentioned in the September issue of Traces, on American pioneers and safe spaces, unusual in that it invited viewers to follow an experience instead of listening to explanations. What happened with the proposal of the exhibit? What fruit does an experience generate? (dp) ■

# The verification is in living

At the meeting of the leaders of Student Youth, young people and adults freely compared ideas and experiences about what it means to say that “the journey to truth is an experience” and about how to love the freedom of the other.



Paola Bergamini

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“**S**amba landó, samba landó / *Qué tienes tú que no tenga yo?*” (“What do you have that I don’t have?”) The cry of the black slaves of Latin America resounded in the hall of the a hotel in Trentino (Italy), sung by over 500 high schoolers and the many adults who follow the experience of Student Youth (GS) as their leaders. They came from all over Italy and also from abroad, among them Polish participants who traveled 19 hours by bus to get there. Some arrived alone and did not know anyone their age there. Why did they come to participate in these three days at the end of August? The theme for the event was “The Journey To Truth Is An Experience.” Everything depends on the word “experience,” not in the sense of things done or events undergone in the past, but as an opportunity to grow, to discover what you have encountered. Experience is something that happens and that you cannot reduce to a lovely memory.

Well, what about me, attending those days as part of my work? I had the same opportunity—you also live by watching. There is no choice: in order to know, you must run up against life and discover its meaning, as Francesco Barberis, a GS leader, said in his introduction: “Living the ideal in the moment, not as a reflection, but as a question, an entreaty that makes us fall in love with Christ, who gave us this gift: this is the companionship of Student Youth, where this happens regardless of your merits or abilities, a companionship where you are important just the way you are. I am here to serve you, like a waiter at table, to have the honor of asking you, ‘Shall we walk together?’”

Tommaso, in his final year of high school, followed the thread of those words after the hike, sitting in the meadow with his hiking boots loosened and eating his sandwich. “My neighborhood friends don’t even know who this Je-

sus guy is! I tried to tell them about this great thing I’ve encountered but they don’t understand. But I can’t give up on them!” Lorenzo added, “Yeah, that’s how it is. We’ve known each other forever; we’ve grown up together. What can you do?” Talking with these friends can seem like a tunnel with no way out, a fruitless search for something right “to do.” But it opens up a question: is GS just about this, or is it a help for living?

**Giulia, for a number of reasons,** left the companionship of the Movement to dedicate herself more to school. She organized encounters, joined all the clubs, and had an active school career until she realized that many of the people she encountered were full of their own culture. They knew all the rules for living life, but not for enjoying it, for being happy. “I spent the summer believing that nothing could amaze me anymore, but actu-





ally hoping that something could,” she wrote in the contribution Fr. Pigi read during the lesson. “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart,” was how Max Weber defined them. But now Giulia was there, “because what attracts me about GS is not the beautiful speeches or well-organized activities, but the gusto for living that I’d not seen before.” Pigi said, “It’s enough to just be present, saying yes. Everyone would like to encounter an experience like this.”

Anna, however, doubted this. She thought that her friends, even those she most respected, would not be interested in a friendship like this. “But I couldn’t believe in a God who was not for everyone, in a companionship that could not reach everyone.” So she invited her friends to a gathering organized by GS, and at the end of the evening, one of them said, “You can really see that your friendship is true.” That evening became a watershed moment for her. “I realized that I could bring what I had encountered without doing anything special, but simply by living. I always need to verify that what I’ve encountered is real,” she wrote in her contribution. The only verification is living, seeking that presence that has become an encounter for you. Agnese wrote, “GS has created a dialogue with God, and now I feel He is a friend” to the point that

you find yourself face to face with Him, alone, in a good solitude that prompted Maria to say, “What are you calling me to? Who are you? I need to be truly loved, always.” This is the dizziness of a relationship with the mystery.

In the square in front of the hotel, Tommaso rolled himself a cigarette. “I keep thinking of my neighborhood friends. He hasn’t given me the answer for them.” Luciano offered a light. “Here. Listen, in my school in Milan a lot of my friends follow GS. Me, I have highs and lows. I have a friend who wanted nothing to do with GS and I always thought he wasn’t interested. This year, when I returned from the Easter Triduum, don’t ask me why, I told him about how those three days went. You know what he said? ‘Why didn’t you invite me?’” Tommaso shook his head and said, “You don’t know my friends!” Luciano observed that “I didn’t know you before, either.” Lorenzo, silent up to then, looked at both of them. “In this companionship there is truth, this I know. But in any case, I still have Tommaso’s question, and it makes me think that right now I’m in Never-Never Land, and everything is beautiful, but what happens when I return?”

The conversation continued at table, where we were joined by Bianca, Andrea, Marina, some other students, and a couple of teachers. Up until a few minutes before, they had been strangers to each other. It would have been so easy to

give them a set of instructions, a nice pat speech, and end the discussion, but I looked at them and thought, no, that's impossible, given the experience of these days.

How best to look at the kids was the point of departure in a meeting between the teachers and Fr. Julián Carrón, the head of the Movement, who was eager to meet with the GS friends. In our attempt to seek what the Lord is doing in the kids, there is often the risk of treading on their freedom: motivated by good intentions, maybe asking the help of others, you do not propose, but impose. At this point the question flips: the problem is not the kids, but you, the adult. So the true question is, what constitutes you in your relationship with the students? A need? A lack? These things are not sufficient for respecting their freedom. The only possibility is to live a superabundance.

"Only a person who *experiences* the overflowing richness of being can not only respect the other's freedom, but love it, love that person's destiny," Carrón said. Only a person who stays in reality in this way is "a presence charged with meaning," to use Fr. Giussani's words. The students perceive this immediately. They seek and "stick to" women and men full of this superabundance. This is the acknowledgment of authority: I recognize that you are important for my life. Treading on the freedom of the other means you rely on rules and "instructions" that are the sign of a failure to educate. In a relationship with young people, instead, you must offer help that enables them to discover from within their experience of the truth they are seeking. This means taking risks, including the risk of making mistakes. Above all, it means not holding them in the grips of your

power, but rather, letting them go, as the father did with the prodigal son, so that they can travel *their own* road.

**After the meeting, Anna** re-read a WhatsApp message from a student of hers who had failed three subjects the previous academic year, one of which was hers, and had to study all summer to prepare for the late summer make-up exams. "I am very grateful for the help you gave me during the exam, but I don't think we'll see each other next year. I wanted to write to thank you from the heart for your words. They were very useful for me and I will cherish them." After the oral exam, Anna had complimented the student for a job well done, saying that it showed his abilities, even if he had studied little. She added, "You can be great, not only in English, but in life. Look at the greatness of your heart and your desire, rather than your failings. If you have to repeat the year, you can decide to have a new beginning." The young man was moved to tears.

The rhythm of *Samba landò* marked the beginning of the assembly with Carrón and the young people. "This song expresses a man's gusto and passion for life," Fr. Pigi explained. This same passion animated the students who offered their contributions. They brought everything to the discussion without reticence, speaking about themselves with a passion that reawakens and surprises, as if to say, "and now what will happen?"

Davide spoke about his holiday in Tuscany with friends: "I felt a sharp difference between this vacation and the one with GS, where there was something different: I was happy." The first point: the clear judgment that not everything is the same. Carrón said, "You saw something stupendous that you would like for yourself, but you

can't replicate it." The right attitude is that of expectant waiting, of reaching out. "In other words, being simple of heart in order to be able to discover, to catch, what Jesus tells us. It doesn't depend on us, but when it happens again it surprises us and fills our hearts; it's something we experience."

Kristina had a question that meant a lot to her. She spoke of a friend who made her feel special. "But I didn't want to share him with anyone else. How can you love without possessing?" Listening to her, it was not clear what her question had to do with what was being discussed. But this is the point. You follow what is there, accompanying it, without shortcuts. In this way you become great. Carrón opened the question to everyone. "Can you love without possessing? Tell us about this happening in your life." Chiara recounted how after an argument with her best friend, he didn't want to talk to her any more. She could have gotten angry and gone to find him, to impose herself, but instead chose not to. She understood that respecting his decision meant loving his freedom. "In doing so, I understood that I loved him more." It seems like a paradox. You love truly by loving the freedom of the other, without suffocating him.

**The conversation continued** step by step, coming closer to the answer. Carrón asked, "What road do we have to travel to learn to love this way?" Emanuele said that he wanted to love his girlfriend totally. At the GS vacation, he had an experience of fullness and being preferred he had never experienced before. Carrón pressed him. "What does this have to do with your girlfriend?" Emanuele responded, "My idea of love has changed. I realize now that I love

*“What truly wins you over? This attraction that surprises and frees us. From what? From the fear of making mistakes.”*

her more.” Another step. Carrón continued, “This happened through the totalizing experience that you had. Give space, not with words, but as experience, to that presence, Jesus, that fills your heart and enables you to love the other. You start from a fullness, not a lack. Each of us must take the risk of verifying whether this is true, whether Jesus fills you so much that you can love without possessing. It is called virginity, and it is not just for priests.” Without this verification, sooner or later only anger remains, because the other will never satisfy our need to be loved.

For Elena, shyness has always been a limit. “In this solitude, I began to pray, and some important encounters happened. Even so, I’m still afraid, and I’m sad to always have to fight this part of myself.” Carrón asked, “Where was your shyness overcome?” She replied that “in GS, I met some kids who liked singing, something I like very much too. A true friendship began with them.” “So then, you didn’t take a course on overcoming shyness. What was needed were people with whom you felt free. This is the method the mystery uses to enable us to be ourselves: a preference. He places us in front of people in whom this victory is visible. All you have to do is go along with it.” Once again, experience. This is the road: going deep down into what happens, all the way to the origin. Carrón continued, “Solitude and fear are opportunities for a relationship, for glimpsing the mystery.” If you think about it, it is simpler to live this way, and also more exciting, because there is nothing mechanical or taken for granted about it. Luigi asked the last question. “How do I continue on this journey?” Carrón responded, “The same way you began: by following an attraction.” It means never being at rest, never settling, thinking you have understood everything. But this is the challenge of life, grounded in a love of self. You love yourself because of the desire for happiness that constitutes you. “The extreme edge of audacity is humbly loving yourself,” Giussani said during a gathering of university students. Carrón concluded, “The most important thing in my life was that I never gave up on this urgent need I have inside, the desire for fullness that the mystery put in my innermost being, but instead, I took my humanity seriously.”

In the back of the meeting room, Daniele Mencarelli

listened to the entire assembly. In the cafe’, before the meeting in which he was to talk about his book, *La casa degli sguardi* [*The House of Gazes*], he said, “I’ve never seen a place where kids feel so free to ask such deep and personal questions. I don’t know if you realize this.”

**Sunday morning, the last day, Leonor sang** a Portuguese song. “You wait for a different day, you wait for a day when you will succeed, you wait with your own strength. But the memory of a place where being is more than obtaining has not disappeared inside you, a place where you learned to wait, where you can still be sincere.” Then the longing for something lost that echoed in those words seemed to be fulfilled as they sang the refrain of “Liberazione 2”: “Only You can fill the void of my mind.” The “You” that attracted us, making our life glad, is a gift freely given. It fills the heart so much that we desire to start school again. Fr. Pigi challenged the students, “Are you attracted more by the student body, by success in your studies? Go! But if you are sincere, what truly wins you over? This attraction that surprises and frees us. From what? From the fear of making mistakes.” Jesus said, “I will be with you always.” There is nothing to defend. It is an experience of liberation that asks for your yes, as it was for Mary. God wagers everything on your freedom. Freed from the fear of error, you can even love yourself. “The soul wounded in the depths of her heart by the arrow of an immortal desire boasts of her wound,” Saint Gregory of Nyssa wrote. When you have seen a love like this, you desire only to be touched by it again. “Your eyes are wide open, seeking it. You can recognize those who have encountered Christianity not by the many things they may know, but by their poverty of spirit. This is my wish for you as you begin this new academic year,” Pigi concluded.

After these days together, that wish held for me, too. A line from Romano Guardini, dear to Fr. Giussani’s heart, came to mind: “In the experience of a great love, everything becomes an event within its sphere.” Tommaso set his bag on the ground, looked at Lorenzo and said, “Love myself! Do you realize that this is where I need to start from with my neighborhood friends? Now that’s an entirely different life. This is anything but Never-Never Land! I really want to return.” Me, too. ■

# Close-up

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# Oman

# The best thing

“You grasp the meaning of the things that happen to you as they happen.”  
The witness of Fiorenza, who has been working as an architect in Muscat for three years. Life in the sultanate and the many questions and signs of answers she discovers each day.



Luca Fiore

**F**iorenza Matteoni is a 36-year-old architect from Riccione, Italy. How she ended up working in Muscat, the capital of Oman, the peaceful sultanate at the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, is an incredible story. Even more incredible is the struggles, encounters, and discoveries she recounts from her life over the last three years. Above all, she describes the surprise, in what seems from afar to be a desert, of seeing her faith grow through the stuff of life, in her experience.

After spending a year working in Bahrain, Fiorenza met and had the opportunity to have dinner with Bishop Camillo Ballin, the apostolic vicar of northern Arabia (which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). She was fascinated. “I saw a man in love with the church in a situation that was difficult and somewhat claustrophobic at times in terms of the repression of freedom, but even that was not an obstacle to saying ‘You’ to Christ.” At the end of the dinner, she was left with a strange desire to go back to the region, to relive that experience of fullness.

In the days following the dinner, the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux were brought to Rimini. On September 4<sup>th</sup>, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was canonized in Rome. She entrusted her desire to these two saints. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, she received a text from a friend who knew of an engineering firm looking for someone like her. The location: Oman. “I felt looked at and preferred in a special way concerning a desire I had not confided to anyone, that I had merely placed in God’s hands.”

**Muscat is a patchwork** of white houses overlooking the deep blue of the Indian Ocean. Behind it curves a crescent of barren mountains that blaze red and orange in the warm light of sunset. The sultanate, which is considered a peaceful haven in the turbulent Persian Gulf, was founded in 1970 by Qaboos bin Said al Said, who over the years has won the title of an enlightened monarch capable of tempering the absolute power typical of Arab dynasties with social and political reform. The majority of Omanis belong to a school of Islam called Ibadism, which distances itself from violence and is open to



The *souq*, or marketplace, in the Muttrah district of Muscat, Oman.



Fiorenza Matteoni.

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dialogue. The country, in contrast to nearby Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, has cautiously started down the road to modernization; its traditional culture coexists in close quarters with a capitalism imported from the West. There has been a great influx of immigrants from India and the Philippines, though in lower numbers than in nearby countries, and there are around 55,000 Catholics, approximately 2 percent of the population.

Fiorenza came to the country not knowing anyone. A member of *Memores Domini*, she has referred to the house in Doha, Qatar, a two-hour flight from her, since January. “The question that accompanied me as I came to Oman was, ‘Who will keep me company in a place like this?’” She relates how, as she was leaving, she had a presentiment of an answer that came from all her previous experience in the Movement. “In these three years, I have thought a lot about a comment by a 92-year-old Indian friend I met in Bahrain. I asked her if she was happier in India or in the Arab world. She said, ‘I do well wherever God puts me.’ I began to understand that the first companionship is really God’s companionship; He causes me to exist in this instant and He wants me where I am.” What does that mean? Fiorenza puts it this way: “The first companionship is realizing that the reality in which I live is made up of unique persons, all marked by a great desire in their hearts. Recognizing that has allowed me to find friendships with them.”

**In her office in Muscat**, where Westerners work alongside Omani-born employees, men and women usually eat lunch in separate places. “We call it the ladies’ club, even though recently we have opened it up to men as well. Lunch

has been a time of interesting conversations,” like that with a young Omani colleague who, her face framed by the headscarf of a Muslim woman, told us about a fight she had with her father, who did not want her to learn to play guitar: “It is not feminine. And remember, you depend on me and on our tribe.” His daughter looked him in the eye and replied, “No, I depend on myself and on God.”

Fiorenza related another example of an exchange with a female colleague: “Fiorenza, I bought a bicycle and I would like to use it to get around, but my friends tell me it’s something that a girl should not do.” Fiorenza’s reply? “I think you should use it: God is the one who gives you desires; they are not just random.” After a few days her colleague came to her, excited: “I took a bike ride along the road overlooking the sea. It was amazing.” Fiorenza explains, “I feel a friendship with these people who choose to follow their desires, even when it challenges the assumptions imposed by their society.” These encounters with the hearts of people can also come within moments of conflict, like the time Fiorenza argued with an official at the Muscat airport, which ended with him saying he would do all he could to have her thrown out of the country. Her colleagues, at first, tried to make her see reason, “You can’t act that way; you have to say you are sorry.” “Me? He should say he is sorry.”

That evening she left the office feeling sad and went to her parish for Mass. It was the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity. The priest said, “Now you expect me to explain the mystery of the Trinity, but I will not, be-

*“The best thing for me is this primordial relationship with Him in the things of daily life and through friends who are far away.”*

cause I do not understand anything either... Certain things have to be accepted because they come from God. It is not worth arguing about who is right. You can only accept and embrace, as a husband and wife do.” Fiorenza thought of the official and was filled with a strange peace: “Who knows what the mystery is doing with this man, if He has changed me so much through him.”

**The next day she went back** to the airport to see the official. She saw him from a distance and he gestured *mafi mushkila*, which means “no problem.” She walked over to him with a package of Baci Perugina chocolates. His cheeks reddened. “We Omanis cannot live with a stain on our hearts.” Fiorenza noted to herself that “this is the same thing I thought, but in another way.” On her documents, her name is listed “Maria Fiorenza,” and the official started to call her by name. “Maria, do this,” “Maria, sign here.” “I thought of when the risen Jesus called Mary Magdalen: it was incredible, because even in that strange predicament, I was able to recognize in him the face of the mystery calling me.” That evening she told a friend about that thought, and he replied, “You see? You grasp the meaning of the things that happen to you as they happen. That is how you gain experience.” Fiorenza thought, “Of course, that is the grace I learn from the Movement.”

In her years in Muscat, Fiorenza has had her highs and lows. There was one time, in particular, after a few friends had gone back to their home countries and other difficulties had emerged, that she began to feel the

wound of solitude once again. The question, “Who will keep me company?” welled up again inside her with all its drama. But the question became a dialogue: one day, as she drove home, she thought, “If Jesus could give me an entire legion of friends and right now is not doing so, it means that the best thing for me right now is this primordial relationship with Him in the things of daily life and through friends who are far away.”

Fiorenza uses an image to explain what happened next: “The companionship is like a man who leaves a glove or a hat lying around the house. You recognize he is present because of those signs.” She explains that recognizing Him is even easier when she sees her friends from the *Memores* house in Doha. “When I am with them, the thing that strikes me the most is praying together. In Muscat, in the morning, I read Morning Prayer by myself. In Doha, we *sing* it. That is the leap you make with the companionship. Friendship is precisely this saying ‘You,’ together, which elevates your personal response.” Every time she has to say goodbye to them at the airport, she says she feels like crying. And she cries. “Why is it so hard for me to leave those friends? What have I seen that makes me say I do not want to go away from them? And I answer: it is a certain openness, a certain discrete way of loving the other, an availability toward people they have just met. These signs that are so evident that they make me say, ‘It’s really Jesus here.’”

Fiorenza tells the story of a friend who, when he entered the Cascinaz-

za Monastery just outside Milan, wrote to his friends, “We have all that we are lacking.” She explains, “This is the challenge through which the mystery makes himself present: to recognize that He is what we are lacking. A true companionship is one that makes you look at what you have, wherever you are.”

**One day at the ladies’ club**, a colleague said to her in front of everyone, “I will come to Italy to see you when you get married.” Fiorenza replied, “No, look, I am not getting married.” The colleague said, “No, come on, the odds are good for you.” At first she did not want to get into it, but she changed her mind. Fiorenza told her, “I am not getting married because I am consecrated to the Lord; I do everything I do for Him, including my work.” She tried to explain the story of her vocation. A deep silence followed. The first to break the ice was her boss, who said, “Oh, it was obvious.” Fiorenza asked, “How?” “You could tell from who you are.”

Fiorenza was awestruck. It was not the first time she had had such a conversation. She had already told another colleague about her vocation, and the woman responded in the same way. “You did not have to tell me. I could tell.” Fiorenza asked the same question: “How could you tell?” and the colleague said that “those who belong to God have this light in their eyes. And in Islam, Allah forgives the sins even of the parents of these people.” On that occasion, Fiorenza was the one to stop in silence, as if she were looking at a hat left lying around the house, reminding her of the one who left it there. ■

# Face to face

*The “strange case” of the exhibit on American identity at the Rimini Meeting this year. Instead of offering opinions and explanations, a simple proposal was made: to face an experience head-on. The result? It made some people uncomfortable and caused others to look with greater affection at their neediness, while still others began to understand their lives more clearly...*



**Martina Saltamacchia**

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“**H**ere you find something surprising, something unexpected,” wrote Marco, an astrophysicist from Rome, as he reflected on the exhibit he had just seen at the 40<sup>th</sup> Rimini Meeting entitled *Bubbles, Pioneers and the Girl from Hong Kong*. The bizarre combination of the three elements in the title draws our attention to the heart of the proposal of this unusual exhibit. The exhibit was not supposed to be explained, but rather experienced. The exhibit invited people to set aside for a moment that instinct to “figure out the meaning” that sometimes can prevent us from seeing clearly.

The exhibit, set up as a journey to discover the American identity through the stories of the protagonists, was developed in four sections: pioneers and astronauts, slavery and 9/11, the bubble, and the girl from Hong Kong. In each room of the exhibit, the sequence of music, voices, and images brought the visitors into the realities of various people, as they listened to the actors’ narration through headphones. The visitors to this exhibit were first asked to *look*. How? “The unraveling of each chronological sequence,” continued Marco, “woke me up from the state of apathy that I did not realize I had fallen into. I thought that ‘I knew everything,’ more or less, and therefore I looked at things with minimal interest and subdued curiosity.”

The guides for the exhibit did not offer any explanations; they only provided some brief guidelines at the beginning and invited visitors to be present, to ponder their questions, and to engage in personal encounters with the



protagonists, not with the intent of understanding and retaining everything, but of letting themselves become vulnerable and experiencing the exhibit through their freedom.

“At first,” said Alessia, “I felt disoriented because I could not figure out the connections, the order, some of the choices... I expected everything to be analyzed and explained, and it was very interesting to realize how much I struggle to achieve a different outlook, to face head-on, with my problems and my past, the echo of the exhibit’s words, images, and





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sounds in my human experience. When I stayed present, with all of my humanity, the exhibit began to speak to me, to make me feel less alone. It was necessary for me to experience the jolt of discomfort of not understanding everything at the beginning in order for something else to happen. So that, like Richard Cabral, an ex-gangbanger from Los Angeles whose story is described in the last section of the exhibit, I could “ask you, God, to break the stone that remains in my heart.”

The exhibit ranged from the pioneers who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century ventured West to the first astronauts who landed on the moon, from the slaves who were inhumanely tortured to the people of New York City who, on September 11, 2001, stood helplessly before the chilling spectacle of the 200 who jumped from the Twin Towers. The events and protagonists introduced in the exhibit were not placed in a chronological order or exhaustively depicted. Instead, there were unusually arranged snapshots that beckoned to be seen for the clues they offered from another dimension that transcended time and space.

  
The exhibit *Bubbles, Pioneers and the Girl from Hong Kong*, at the Rimini Meeting.

Everything in the exhibit, from the blown-up images of faces and close-ups donated by the famous photographer Lee Jeffries to the time-lapse videos of Randy Halverson, a farmer by day and a photographer of the stars by night, to the music composed for the exhibit, and the voices, the layout, and the lights and shadows, were all intentionally brought together to create an encounter and connection with the people depicted. The awe inspired by the incredible Milky Way that rotated on a 23-meter (75-foot) screen in the pioneer section made it easier to hear the “voice of silence” identified by William Butler in his description of the stars over the prairies that “look from above, in infinite silence, down on a silence nearly as intense.” The spiritual soulfully sung by a slave in an archival recording played at the entrance of the section on slavery, helped visitors feel the pain of young Jim, who was separated from his mother to be sold to his master John. In order to tell the story of this country, America, that was created not as an idea, but as a result of the personal growth of men and women who by their choices shaped the story, the exhibit offered visitors the opportunity to listen directly to their voices through letters, documents, and personal accounts of presidents, astronauts, slaves, mothers, and farmers. Imagine being invited to a dinner where 10 or so people are talking amongst themselves—rather than having someone narrate their conversation and attempting to explain the message and reasoning of each guest, visitors are simply invited to listen to the conversation.

*“Finally, something comes alive inside and says, ‘Pay attention, look at what is happening, stop thinking and keep watching.’ My heart is less guarded, and something becomes present there.”*

Because we are accustomed to commentary and analysis, this kind of approach may seem unfamiliar. “It leads me down another path that is different from what I am used to,” observed the visitor from Rome. “Finally, something comes alive inside and says, ‘Marco, pay attention, look at what is happening, stop thinking and keep watching.’ Then, the scales fall away and I regain a genuine curiosity. My heart is less guarded, and something becomes present there. I enter into an awe that cannot be erased.”

**It is possible to be amazed**, and therefore not exhausted, by something new that happens. Manu, one of the guides, asked herself why she was not bored by listening to the recordings over and over, and why instead, she experienced a constant discovery. “By guiding others through the exhibit, I was forced to follow it myself and at every turn I found something different. Each time, I felt as if I were facing myself without holding anything back, and that it was stripping everything away from me and leaving me alone and suffering, showing me, ‘You are this need, you are this

desire, you are this longing.” Elena, another guide, in order to capture those words that “made me restless even on the 20<sup>th</sup> tour,” spent the last one memorizing phrases “so that they will remain in my heart in the days to follow.” “During the tours,” she continued, “what helped me to enter into the texts was observing the visitors who listened in silence to the audio clips and music of the exhibit through their headsets. More than once I was moved by seeing them being moved. They also helped me through their many questions and objections” that emerged in conversations at the end of the exhibit.

Each person had a different experience of being compelled by the words of the exhibit. One of its defining points was the completely American distinction between *loneliness*, the pain felt when someone is alone, and *solitude*, a detachment, either physical or metaphorical, so that one can hear more clearly his or her interior voice. This was painful for Jonathan, who because of work and circumstances often finds himself alone, which generates “an un-



easy, unexpected provocation. I have a hypothesis that has grown inside me that, at the bottom of this loneliness that always frightens me, there is a possibility of hope, there is the divine.”

Federica was struck by the way that the gangster Cabral described his gang as his “new family.” They are brothers whom he asks for protection in the hope that they will build “a wall of rocks around my tormented heart, until it becomes impenetrable, secure, *safe*. Finally something that lasts.” She talked about her surprise at the fact that his desire to construct a wall around his heart—a desire that often, to her surprise, emerges in her as well—does not just come from betrayal and disappointment. Everyone needs a rock that gives them something solid under his or her feet. “This has changed how I look at myself in those times when I want to escape and hide myself in my safe place. It has enabled me to view all of this less harshly and with more tenderness toward myself.”

**Cristiano saw himself** in Bert the turtle, who hid in his shell when faced with danger. Bert was the protagonist of a cartoon projected in the room of the exhibit dedicated to the 1950s, and he evokes the experience of living in a bubble, a safe place. Looking at the encounters described in the stories of this last section of the exhibit, Cristiano understood that it is not possible for him to leave his “American living room” just because he understands that it is the right thing to do. “There has to be a real and physical moment that makes me emerge. I must always beg to meet the girl from Hong Kong.” That woman is the subject of the quote in the last room from author James Baldwin. The moment you meet her, or what she represents, she becomes the center of your life. So much so that if you lived in Chicago and there was no other way to reach her, you would swim to her: our hope is to meet someone who is not knocked down by darkness, someone who, like Baldwin, lives with the certainty that “there is light in the darkness.”

A woman from Torino tearfully described this at the end of the exhibit. A year earlier, her son had died in the hospital. The months that followed were filled with suffering, but also with graces and consolation. “The story told by the exhibit is exactly the experience I had this year, but now I look at everything again and understand it completely. ‘Light is discovered in the darkness, and this is the purpose of darkness.’” ■

# Newman's living idea

*He is the first English saint of the modern age. Ian Ker, the leading expert on his life and work, presents a portrait of the man, intellectual, and pastor who was a prophet of the contemporary church. "When I have doubts about my faith, his holiness is the best evidence of their inconsistency."*

18



**Giuseppe Pezzini**

Illustrations by  
**Roberto Abbiati**

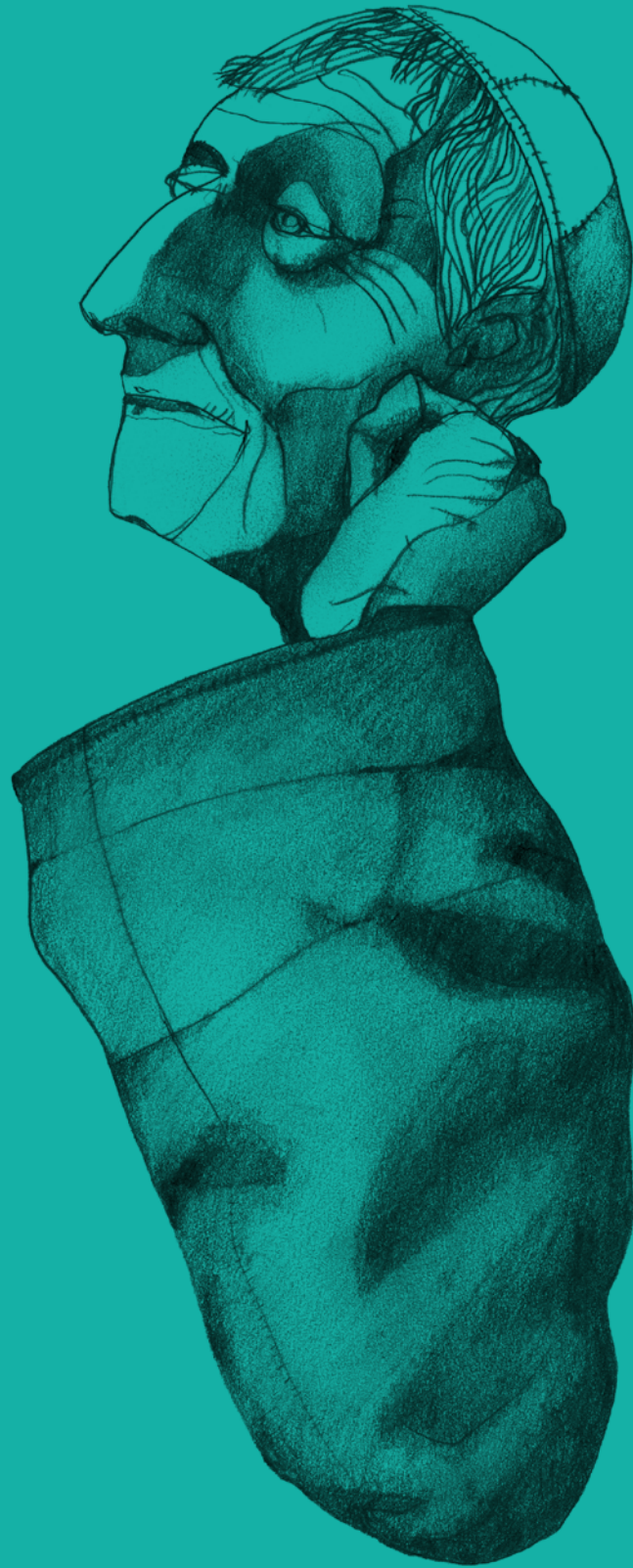
**J**ust nine years after his beatification, on October 13<sup>th</sup>, in Rome, Pope Francis will complete the canonization process of John Henry Newman, the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century English convert. In view of the recognition of his second proven miracle, Newman becomes the first English saint of the modern era, the first in more than 300 years. Before him was John Kemble, martyred in Hereford in 1679, the last of the many victims of the schism began by the actions of Henry VIII and of a century and a half of civil war. It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of Newman's life and thought and the breadth of his influence on many figures, from J.R.R. Tolkien to Graham Greene, from Christopher Dawson to Joseph Ratzinger. Priest, teacher, theologian, polemicist, preacher, and, finally, cardinal, he was also a novelist, poet, journalist, committed intellectual, and, above all, a charismatic reference point for thousands of people, both in the formative years of his youth at Oxford, during which he gave birth to a movement that changed the Anglican church, and, after the earthquake of his conversion in 1845, in a Catholic Church that was not immediately ready to welcome such a free and original mind. We spoke about him with Ian Ker, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Oxford, and the world's undisputed authority on Newman. He is the author of about 100 publications, including a rich and fascinating biography of Newman.

**Professor Ker, why should the average Catholic be interested in the canonization of an academic and theologian from Oxford?**

Newman was anything but an ivory tower academic. Throughout his life, his intellectual and apologetic activity went hand in hand with his pastoral activity—this is an aspect of the man that has always personally fascinated me. For example, in Littlemore, during the years of crisis before his conversion, Newman enjoyed teaching children from the poor families of the area. In the years after his conversion he was engaged in intense pastoral work in the oratory of Birmingham. One of the reasons why his written output was not as extensive as it could have been was that he spent hours every day tending to the stream of correspondence that he received from hundreds of people coming from all social and cultural backgrounds.

**The two people that he miraculously healed were also not impressed, first and foremost, by his intellectual stature.**

Not at all. Catholic intellectuals often don't pray, and I've always said that the faith and prayer of the simple-hearted was necessary for Newman to become a saint. Deacon O'Sullivan, the recipient of the first healing, got to know Newman by watching a documentary on television in which I spoke. O'Sullivan was struck by the great and serious suffering that afflicted Newman during his life, and by the faith with which he lived it. Melissa Villalobos, who received the second, decisive healing, is a mother of seven; she watched the





**Ian Ker** (born in 1942) is a priest and professor emeritus in theology at the Oxford University. Author and editor of more than 20 books on Newman, including *John Henry Newman - A Biography* (1990), he also wrote *The Catholic Revival in English Literature 1845-1961*, *Mere Catholicism*, and a literary and intellectual biography of G.K. Chesterton.

same documentary, which prompted her to pray to Newman when she was seriously ill. She was fascinated by the fact that he was not an ivory tower academic and by the relevance of the challenges Newman faced.

**Indeed, in an interview, she declared that she had been saved by Newman so that she could continue to lead a normal life, but one that was entirely dedicated to God and to the church. At the same time, however, the legacy of Newman's thought is immense, especially on 20<sup>th</sup>-century theology.**

Of course, and your movement is one of many examples. When I met Giussani a few years ago at one of the meetings of CL leaders, he told me he had studied Newman's writ-

ings during his years at secondary school, long before me! Newman is truly a prophet of the world and of the contemporary church. He identified more than anyone the onset and effects of secularization, and he understood that the church should face it first and foremost by placing at its center the individual encounter with the person of Jesus Christ as the only answer to every human being's desire for fullness. One can see this emphasis, for example, in the conversion of Callista, the eponymous heroine of a beautiful novel by Newman, which is often forgotten. For this and other reasons, I am sure that sooner or later Newman will be declared Doctor of the Church.

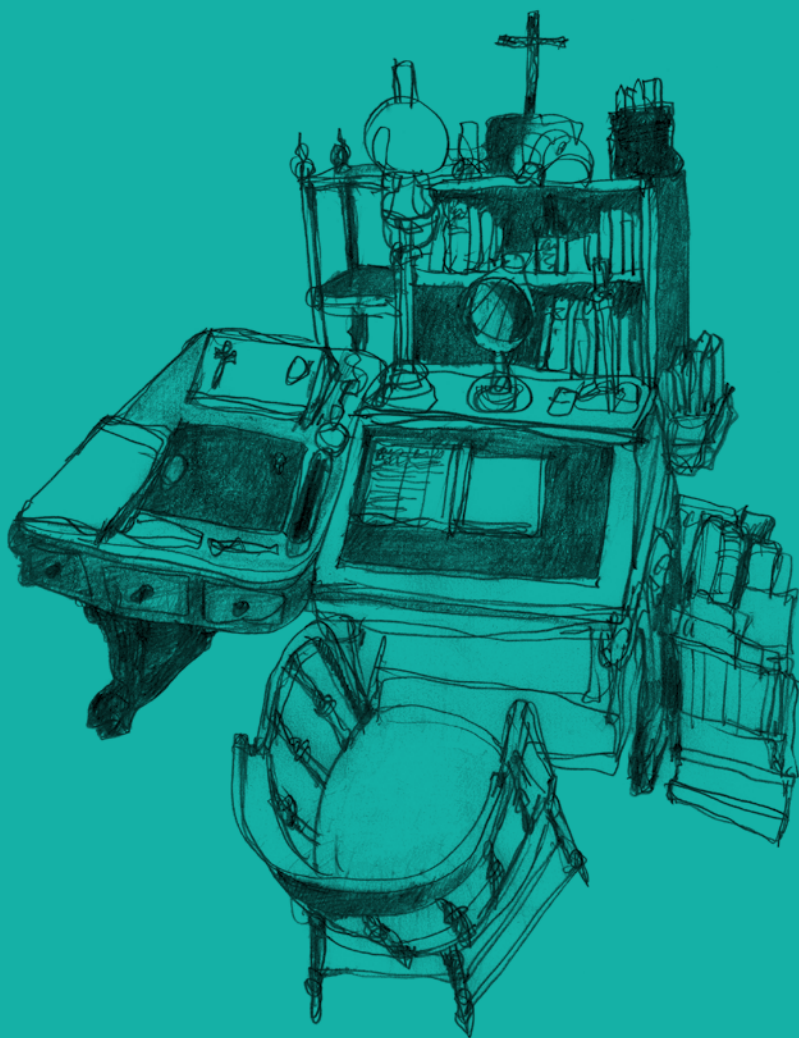
**In your books, you often associate Newman with the Second Vatican Council: What is the connection?**

Newman is to the Second Vatican Council what Cardinal Bellarmine was to the Council of Trent. Prophetically, Newman is the great apologist of the true hermeneutic of the council: the development of doctrine in full continuity over time.

**But how does Newman prefigure the council and the postconciliar church?**

An important element (one of many) for him is the idea of organic communion: for Newman, the church is not a dualism of clergy and laity, but is the living body of all those who have received baptism, as it was described in the

*“Newman defended the importance of ‘personal influence’ as the true method to propagate the truth.”*



first two crucial chapters of *Lumen Gentium*. Also, Newman anticipated the importance of returning to the study of the early church and the church fathers, which was central in thinkers like De Lubac, who had a great influence on the council. Newman's writings prefigure many of the key documents of the council, including *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Nostra Aetate*. Newman's writings often also provide the basis for a rethinking of the various hermeneutical distortions that, unfortunately, were put forward in the postconciliar years.

**Does Newman's prophetic role as respects the council only concern theology?**

Another aspect in which he anticipates the postconciliar church is in the idea of movement, which is the concrete embodiment of the idea of organic communion that I mentioned. This idea is central to both Newman's life and his thought. In the 1830s, together with some friends and colleagues at Oxford, Newman gave birth to the Oxford Movement. The purpose of the movement was to demonstrate or recover Catholic theology within the Anglican Church. It took a form that was similar, in many aspects, to that of the new movements born in conjunction with the Second Vatican

Council. In its early days, many of his companions spoke of the need to organize commissions and strategies. Newman strongly opposed this, defending instead the importance of "personal influence" as the true method to propagate the truth.

**What does this mean exactly?**

Quite simply, it is the idea that Christianity, and every living idea in general, spreads from person to person through the dynamic of fascination within an individual relationship.

**What does Newman have to say to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Church?**

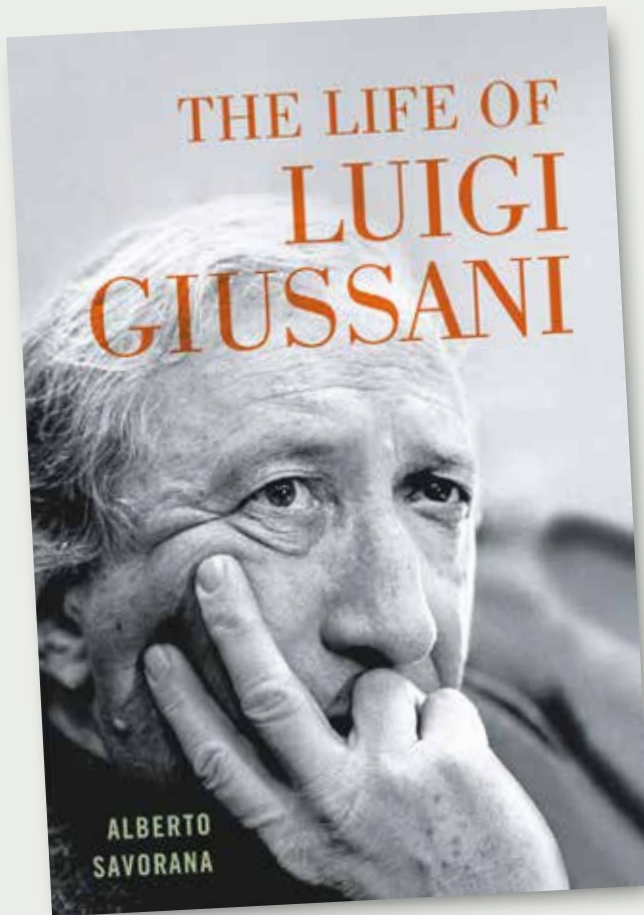
For Newman, the traditionalist vs. liberal dichotomy does not work. Rather, through his life and thought, Newman showed that it is possible to be simultaneously conservative and reform-minded—and that it is necessary to do so. Newman often said that in order to always remain ourselves, we need to constantly change. This is the task of the church, and that of every single Christian.

**Professor Ker, you have dedicated most of your academic career to Newman, but what was Newman's particular "personal influence" on you?**

When I have doubts about my faith and everything I have dedicated my life to, I think of Newman, both because he was not afraid to face those doubts, and because he devoted so much of his intellectual energy to the questions of how to have reasonable certainty and the relationship between reason and faith in general. But, above all, I think of him when I have doubts because his holiness is the best evidence of their inconsistency. ■

# 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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