

TRACES

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10

Torn from nothingness

*What can save us
from losing our
enthusiasm for life?*

TRACES

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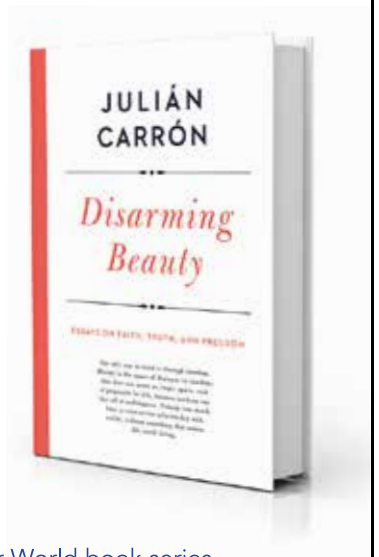
November 2019

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The journey to truth

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

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An irreducible reality

There is a word that pops up more and more often now in the news and discussions on TV. One that, if it does not make it into conversations among friends or into chats over lunch, it is only because people have not realized how concisely it describes something we all live, with no exceptions. The word is “nihilism,” the closest word to “nothingness,” the word that best describes what it is to *live* “nothingness.”

It does not have the same meaning it once did relating to violent rebellion, a desire to destroy a world we do not like (though there is plenty of anger to go around, voiced in social media and from town squares around the world...), or at least that is not its sole meaning. Rather, it refers to something more subtle that, in the end, is also at the root of violence.

It is the fading of our attraction to reality, a loss of *meaning* and therefore of *enthusiasm*, two things that cannot be separated in life. It is the lack of a purpose capable of drawing us in, of setting all our affective energy in motion, of completely winning us over. “There is no ideal for which we can sacrifice ourselves, because all we know are lies, we who do not know what the truth is,” Malraux wrote almost a century ago. His words are a perfect summary of today’s world.

Despite everything, there is a bright side to the widespread malaise: at least now it is crystal clear that no idea, as Malraux said, is capable of rescuing us. No theory can do it—only an experience, something that happens to us (as we saw in the last issue). It is there alone we can find a way out, and if we look at experience, we begin to recognize two things. The first is that even the most tepid heart—even the most ardent nihilist—still holds within it an irreducible reality: the desire for happiness. This is unavoidable and almost against our will; we have a need—or better, we *are* a need—for fulfillment, even when everything seems to say otherwise. This irreducibility manifests itself in many ways—it can emerge through the most unimaginable openings, offering a fresh start.

Our experience, if we are true to it, also offers us a second recognition to start from: the heart does not give up and is ready to be reignited the moment it meets something capable of awakening it—not an idea, but a presence, a fact, a living face that offers a proposal that lives up to our need. One that therefore becomes an *authority* (as the lesson from the CL Beginning Day, published weeks ago on the CL website, observes)—a word that implies someone who helps us grow, who helps our humanity thrive again, and who gives us redemption from emptiness.

In the following pages, you will find experiences that illustrate this dynamic. They are contained in stories of people who have been set back into motion by an authoritative encounter, an unexpected proposal of meaning—and of enthusiasm; in other words, by the fact of an unforeseen *paternity*, another imposing word. Or better, a decisive word, so decisive that we will return to it in our next issue...

Alejandro, Gioia, Ignazio, Marco

edited by
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Course for caregivers

I know a lot of people here in Venezuela who face difficulties with a human resilience that is stronger than the crisis. There is this young man who graduated from a trade school for auto mechanics, a school that was started with “Trabajo y Persona” in collaboration with Ford Motor Company, which provides internships for young students in training who do well. There is a woman who is an entrepreneur in the chocolate sector whose products are sold in various parts of the country; she travels all over the country in search of cocoa suppliers. There are hair stylists who start their own businesses to support themselves. The same is happening in many other sectors. We just finished the first training session in a program that issues official certificates for caregivers. The course is called “Cuidadores 360” because of its holistic approach to the care of the elderly. Those who have graduated are already offering their services. Between one blackout and another, on a day when there was electricity, we managed to provide instruction to these students who devote themselves to the elderly, a particularly helpless sector of the population. In fact, in Latin America, Venezuela is the country with the highest percentage of elderly residents. Younger people often leave, sometimes with their entire families, leaving behind lonely elderly people in need of assistance. The stories of these students are really moving. A young woman who lives in a small city far from Caracas would leave at four in the morning in order to be in the classroom by 9:00. She only missed one day of school, and that was only because of a roadblock caused by flooding. Today she works in a place close to where she lives. Another girl sold coffee at the

bus stops to pay for the round trip ticket for her three-hour trip to get to school. There are so many stories like these of people whose lives have been changed thanks to having received an opportunity.

Alejandro, Caracas (Venezuela)

“I’m sure you can do it”

Dear Fr. Carrón, since September I’ve been helping a child with learning problems in his studies, but it has become much more than that. This child has difficulties with reading and at the beginning having to read was a big drama for him. He would start to cry and stamp his feet; he was frightened in front of something he didn’t feel capable of doing, feeling that he was not good enough. The only thing I could do was to praise him for the few things he was doing well, but over time I noticed a change. His homework often consists of reading the same piece three times. Until recently, he couldn’t do it alone, so usually the first time he read it, the second time I read it, and the third time we read it together. Little by little he started doing it all by himself, improving the intonation of the sentences and following the punctuation. One particular episode touched me. He read very well and turned toward me to ask, “Did I do good?” “Yes” I answered, “Yes, very good, but I’m certain you can do even better.” “That was only a warm-up,” he said. He read the second time instead of me, missing only a double consonant, and after that he looked at me happily, giving me a high-five, and added, “I want to read the third part alone, too.” This had never happened before. He started the first sentence, but he stopped halfway, frightened, “No, no, you read it.” I looked at him. “It’s the same piece you just read. I’m sure you can do it.” He regained confidence and began reading again. I was moved in front of that step of confidence. In my life the exact same thing happens; in front of my fears and lack of ability, the only thing that is able to break through my own measurement of myself is a step based on trust; that is, having someone in front of me who tells me, “I’m

with you! I'm sure you can do everything!" The thing that surprised me even more was his mother. One day she stopped me and said, "I wanted to thank you because since he has started working with you he is a different child." I know myself, and I know that what provoked that change is not just me. The thing that made this evident is what the mother told me about the child, in which I recognized the signs of Christ at work. She said, "He comes home, and he has more desire to stay with me, and asks me to do homework with him." These are signs of someone who is starting to value himself, to take himself seriously, to believe he is worth something! I never told him to want to spend time with his mother or to improve his self-esteem; I just helped him with his homework.

Gioia, Bologna (Italy)

Africa at home

The pope has declared October to be Missionary Month, and this year it caught me by surprise. Since my childhood, mission work has seemed to me to be a truly beautiful thing, but far from me, unreachable. Then, living, a little at a time, you realize that within the Church, within the Movement, mission is a daily event. Two years ago, thanks to an exhibit at the Rimini Meeting about the children of immigrants, I came in contact with some Muslim people. A friendship with them was born, and with it, a new capacity to welcome others, to welcome also their faith while confirming with certainty my own. Then one day a proposal was made to take into my home Harouna, an African Muslim immigrant from Mali. It was not easy to say yes, but Harouna has been living in my home for 15 months. This young man is deeply Muslim and has a beautiful religious sense. With him, it has been possible to become aware of questions about God and questions addressed to God. I have been able to understand what Ramadan is for him and he what Lent is for me, and I've had to explain the "craziness" of the Resurrection. It became clear that the intensity with which he lives Islam is not a call for me to convert him but for me to deepen the reasons that I follow Jesus. If these reasons are alive, he can see them in action in me, and perhaps he will be curious to know more about Jesus. Missionary work is not down there in Africa, far away – Jesus has brought it to me in my home. The most incredible fruit of this "domestic" mission relates to Harouna's mother. She lives in a village in the middle of nowhere and they only get to talk on the phone every three or four months. When he told her that he was living with a Christian family, she couldn't believe it; she didn't think it was possible that any Europeans

could welcome her son in this way. But with the passage of time and the stories he told her, she gave in to this new reality. In their last telephone call, she didn't even ask how he was, but asked him to "bless the family you are with!" It's incredible. I always thought missionary work in Africa was not for me and yet Jesus has made it so that Africa would come to me. And in doing so, Jesus has come to that woman in Mali.

Ignazio, Rimini (Italy)

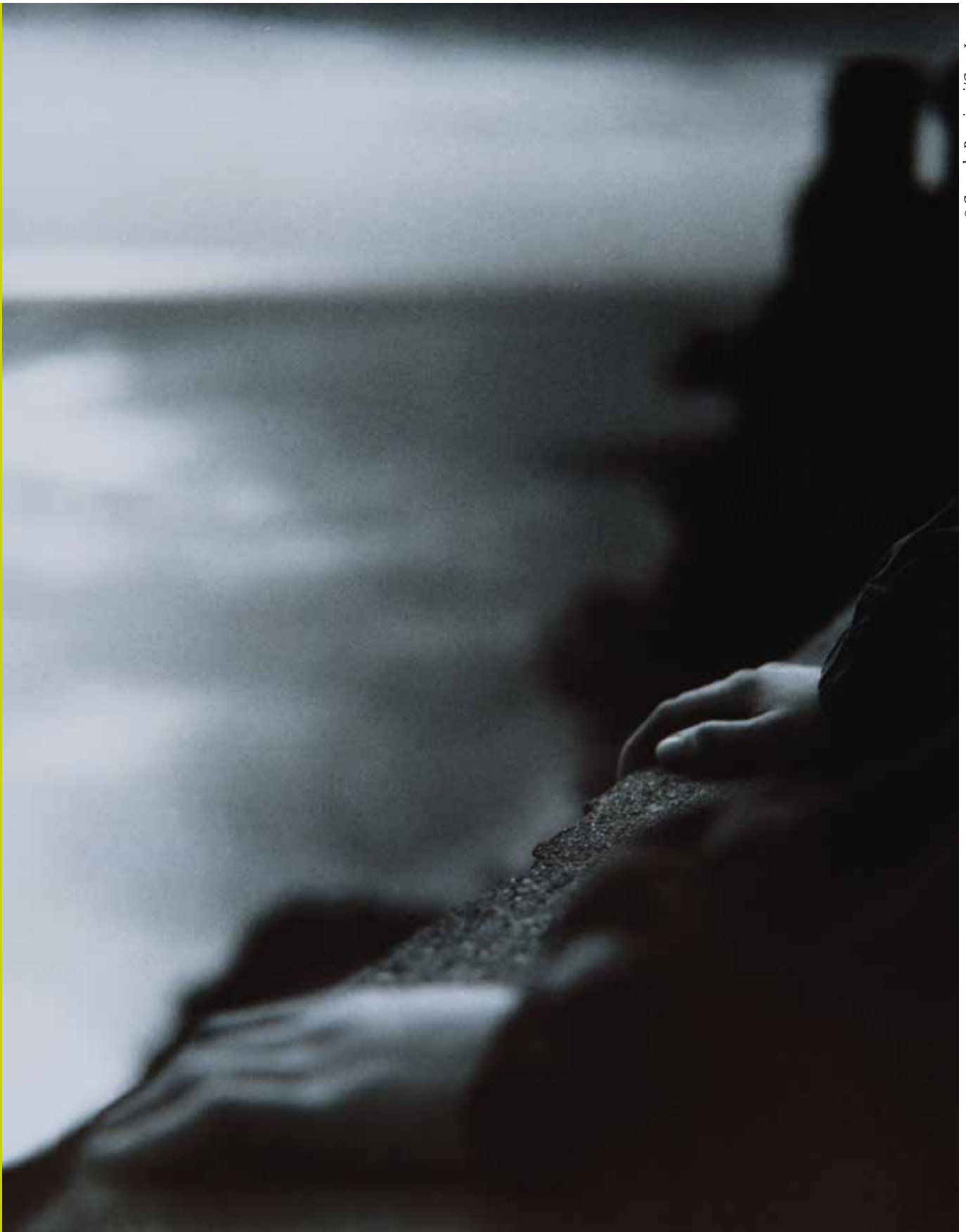
Happy hour with the coaches

With four friends we organized a rather unconventional *Traces* day. The inspiration for this day was the difficulties experienced by some of the parents of kids on the children's soccer team we coach. We thought about giving these parents an issue of *Traces* and in this way inviting them to a dialogue with the magazine's content as the starting point of a relationship with them. We came up with the idea of a happy hour, to which we invited parents from other teams, friends, and people who are not in the Movement, perhaps not even Catholic. The first thing that amazed us was their immediate yes to this proposal. The second amazing thing was that one of the coaches, a Latin teacher, told us about how Fr. Giussani's description of "authority" has freed him from a series of frameworks and fears he had with respect to the image evoked by the term. During the happy hour, amongst a number of questions, people spoke of the experience they have with their kids, and confided that what they want to transmit through sports is the ability to face the drama of life. They talked about a teammate who has been confined to a wheelchair, the players from one team displaced by an earthquake, and the parents who oppress their children with their ideas. Halfway through the happy hour, a woman phoned her friend and suggested that "you really should join us." Another woman confessed that listening to the discussion had freed her from the anxiety she felt in thinking that her daughter's salvation came only through her. "It is a grace to realize that our children can find someone in their lives to follow when they pull away from you and don't listen to you, someone who is interested in them and who they can attach themselves to." The owner of the tavern followed the unfolding of the meeting, and at the end asked us when and where we would be meeting the next time. We hadn't thought that the meeting would be such a success. The pleasure of preparing for it and our discovery of the richness of experience contained in *Traces* would have been enough for us.

Marco, Fermo (Italy)

Saved from nothingness

What do we mean today when we use the word "nihilism"? What does this word have to do with concrete daily life? If we look around us—and within ourselves—it is evident that this strange sense of malaise, this endemic weakness, strong enough so that nothing seems to have the power to truly attract us anymore (this has become a clear fact among young people), is deeply woven into our days, muddying them, muffling them. At first sight, this malaise and weakness even seems capable of lulling the irreducible desire that nonetheless continues to dwell in our hearts. Today, as never before, something needs to happen to rekindle that desire and set us into motion again. In our interview with the philosopher Costantino Esposito, we sought to define the nature of the problem and to understand the features of this "something" we can call "authority," or, using an even more familiar word, "paternity." This is what we need most of all. This is seen clearly as well in the stories about people "saved from nothingness," for whom only an encounter with an unexpected paternity enabled a new start. Something must happen again in the present so that life can be born anew out of nothingness. ("No one generates unless he is generated," Fr. Giussani reminded us.) This generativity is at the heart of the Cometa hospitality house in Como, through which a few conscious, aware fathers and mothers are saving dozens of young people from nothingness, from the void. (dp) ■



The nihilism in the house next door

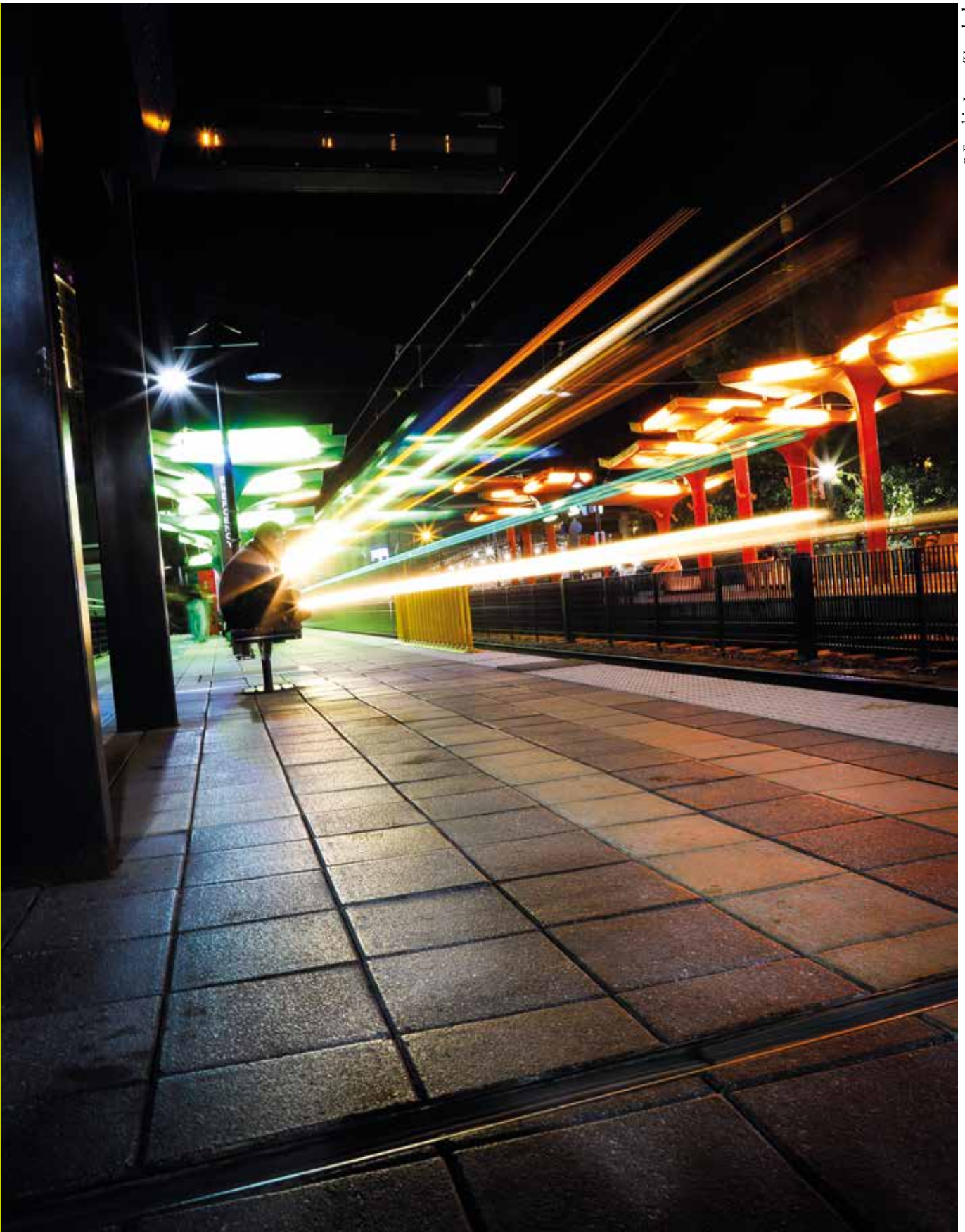
Nihilism is no longer a theoretical ideal, but an existential trend emerging everywhere, involving a loss of gusto and energy, a “yawning abyss where meaning disappears.” It affects all of us and yet also causes something irreducible in us to emerge. A conversation with the philosopher Costantino Esposito.

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Davide Perillo

“Some time ago, we were talking about free will during a lesson when all of a sudden a student burst into tears. Everyone was struck silent. I asked her, ‘What’s the matter?’ and she replied, ‘Professor, I realize that I have this possibility to be free, but my problem is that I don’t know what to do with it.’ This is today’s irony: “We’re free, but to do what?” The student’s tears express the meaning of a word that philosophers like Costantino Esposito, a professor at the University of Bari, have long used, a word that captures like few others the malaise experienced in our time by young people, but not only young people: “nihilism.” It is a subtle enemy, difficult to grasp and decipher because it does not always exhibit clear features (like drug use and desperate partying, anger on social networks, the use of certain words and listening to certain songs...), but much more often presents itself intangibly in the form of a bottomless void. Its effects are that nothing truly attracts us and makes life worth living. “Young people today are not well, but they don’t even understand why,” said psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti, interviewed by *Corriere della Sera* some time ago (and quoted by Julián Carrón at the CL Beginning Day published on CL website). “They lack purpose. For them, the future has changed from promising to threatening.” His words were echoed a few days ago by those of the writer Antonio Scurati in *Corriere*, when he spoke of a widespread situation in which “there is no space for the great scenes of life: love, art, (true) politics, the generation of children,” and no horizons or hope. These ideas have been echoed by the Italian novelist Susanna Tamaro, sociologist Mauro Magatti, and even the goalkeeper Gigi Buf-





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Costantino Esposito (Bari, 1955) is a full professor of the history of philosophy at the Aldo Moro University of Bari. Among his main areas of research are the works of Heidegger, Kant, and Francisco Suárez. Since 2001 (together with Pasquale Porro) he has directed *Quaestio, the International Yearbook of the History of Metaphysics*. Among his latest works is *Introduction to Heidegger* (Mulino, 2017).

fon, whose letter recounted some of the dark moments in his career: “If you live your life in a nihilistic way, your soul will begin to shrivel.”

Thus nihilism is something very concrete that affects all of us, “and yet the most difficult aspect of the problem of nihilism today lies precisely in the fact that the problem is not seen,” observes Esposito. “It is *felt*, and many symptoms are perceived. It is sensed as a yawning abyss where meaning disappears. But there is no understanding of what it is and how it can be faced.”

Let’s start here, then. Today, what do we mean when we say “nihilism”?

First of all, it’s an existential problem. It indicates something unresolved in the experience of each of us. There is a subtle bewilderment that some might call a void,

and others a senselessness, which could be described by saying that there is nothing in life that can truly seize us. And I’m not speaking in a theoretical sense. In order to live, you need to imagine some goal for yourself, no matter how inadequate. The problem is whether there is something that truly attracts us, magnetizing us all the way to the core of our being.

This has nothing to do with the ideal proclaimed by philosophers like Nietzsche and his ilk, or by the anarchists of the last century...

No, in a certain sense it is the opposite. Nietzsche wanted to achieve an “active” nihilism, something heroic and titanic, whose objective was to cast down the idols of a culture he saw as suffocating, beginning with a Christianity that had been reduced to moral doctrines.

Nietzsche said that if he had to choose between an abstract ideal that was universal but distant and life, he preferred life.

Many have considered this the road to affirmation of the “I”...

There was a period, the so-called postmodern period, when European culture saw this position as a chance for emancipation. Every effort was made to be liberated from meanings that had become a prison, and in doing so to free the “I.” This led to the sexual revolution and the liberation of desire. But the reality that this led to the exact opposite: there was not a liberation of the “I” but a liberation *from* the “I.” Without a meaning greater than itself, the “I” dissolved, and its desire was not exalted but extinguished. The irony is that a kind of passive nihilism came to prevail.

What characterizes this passive nihilism?

A progressive weakness, a loss of energy and spirit, that has developed in an almost hidden way and has spread everywhere, even in spheres that are not ideologically nihilistic. It has entered our homes, our religious beliefs, and our political ideals. It's like passive smoke. You don't light the cigarette; maybe you would never do so. But you end up breathing what's in the air around you without realizing it, and you suffer the harm.

What is this harm?

First of all, the loss of gusto for living. This nihilism has created an enmity between life and meaning. Life becomes pure instinct, pure self-affirmation, while the ideal, the goal, if any is accepted, becomes a "have to be," something that maybe you have to achieve but in no way exists already here and now. Consequently, when we look at the world and ourselves, we only see what is *not there* and not *what is there*.

For example?

Well, think of television series. They have taken the place once held by great literature. Some of the most popular ones recount in almost ferocious detail an unheard-of capacity for violence; I'm thinking of *True Detective* and *Money Heist*, but also many others. But the interesting thing is that this violence always originates in the extreme fragility of the protagonist, a fragility that comes from a wound to the "I," the failure of a relationship, a deep disappointment. The violence is the ultimate, tragic solution for cynically covering a heartrending need, an unconfessed need to love and be loved that can find no outlet. It is a statement that "I'll never find anyone who truly loves me." And thus life is not worthwhile.

But isn't this the same position that emerges with respect to more serious problems? I'm thinking about the debate on assisted suicide. Even there, deep down, the crucial point is whether you experience an affection that makes life worth living even when your suffering is enormous...

It's necessary to understand what is truly in play. Certainly, I think it's unreasonable to theorize that life is completely at our disposal. But it's not enough to just repeat that it's "a value in and of itself." Life has value because it hosts something greater than itself, and if we

do not perceive this, we can reduce life to having only a biological value. Today's challenge is for us to realize once again that we are made by the mystery of being moment by moment, and that this mystery is not only a force of nature, but much more: a father. Deep down, on the anthropological level, this is the great difficulty of our time: we find it indecent to look our need in the face.

In what sense is it "indecent"?

When we discover not only that we *have needs* but that we *are a need*, this can become a curse, because we discover we cannot meet this need. We cannot solve the enigma that we are. We need an other. In the end, there is only one way that my "I" can be embraced to the point that meaning is not something we achieve, but rather an encounter. If meaning is not loving, it is ruthless and unbearable. Maybe this is why we find it so difficult to identify the right approach for grasping the problem.

Why?

For a long time we have believed that in order to resolve the drama of the "I," the most useful approach was self-analysis, a process of disassembling and reassembling life following our various projects. Analysis is certainly useful if it helps us look full in the face at something deep and suppressed in us. And projects are necessary, too, but they do not suffice, because in order for me to regain myself I need to be looked at by someone *other* than me and affirmed, prized, because *I* exist, and not first of all because I can prize myself. This is the most painful problem of today's nihilism: a lack of self-esteem.

And yet if you look deeply at nihilism, you find something that is irreducible in the final analysis. Remember the famous letter from Hœllebecq to Lévy? He is a nihilist to the core, yet wrote, "More and more frequently, it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be liked." He was "convinced of the absurdity of this dream," but "thought was powerless and the desire persisted," and he had to admit that it "persists to this day."

Exactly. In sum, you could say that today, nihilism no longer lies in a loss of values and ideas, but rather, in the emergence of an irreducible need. There are fewer ideological protections: the need is much more bare, and thus much more demanding. It no longer has cover, and therefore nihilism can be seen as an opportunity.

In other words, it leads to new opportunities for relationships and makes people more open...

I would say more vulnerable, and this vulnerability, like every true human phenomenon, is something happily ambiguous because freedom is involved. On the one hand, it can lead to a progressive loss of self, to a renunciation, to thinking that the only remedy is the golden mean of the ancients, managing in some way our finite nature. Seneca said, "In order to live, I must learn to die a little at a time." But on the other hand, precisely in front of this vulnerability, an interrogative, an entreaty can emerge "from the depths of the abyss of oneself," as Augustine would say, as one discovers that "in the 'I' there is already an other." Otherwise, it would not even be possible to desire. This second attitude can make encounter possible again, sometimes in an unexpected way, because this desire is common to all of us. The important thing is to avoid an ultimate reduction.

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What is this?

Desire is not only a lack, a void waiting to be filled. What we desire is something that, once encountered, does not eliminate the desire, but intensifies it. It is the food of which Dante spoke, which, the more it fills us, the more it causes us to hunger. This is what the heart wants, and the more it satisfies us, the more it rekindles our restlessness.

But if desire is like this, it is neither generic nor intellectual. It is already directed toward an experience in act, and asks to *encounter* the answer, not just to know of its existence. In Houellebecq's letter, he did not just say, "and yet something doesn't add up." He cannot silence the need to *be loved*.



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Yes. It is not just a spring that pushes us to "go beyond." It is something more precise. In fact, today the point is not so much to affirm desire theoretically, but to understand whether the object of that infinite desire is an illusion, a dream, or a real possibility. Answering this question is possible only if this desire is the object we are seeking, only if we realize not so much that we must go seek a meaning that eludes us, but that the meaning itself is seeking *us*, preferring *us*.

We cannot give ourselves this preference through our own efforts: we can only recognize it if it happens.

Absolutely. But pay attention here, because this is not fatalism. It does not mean, “For those who are lucky, it can happen.” The contribution that Christians today can give is precisely to tell the world, “Look, this happens all the time. It happens now, everywhere. The problem is that we do not realize it.” As Houellebecq wrote in the final part of *Serotonin*: “Today I understand Christ’s point of view and his repeated horror at the hardening of people’s hearts: all of these things are signs, and they don’t realize it.” We don’t realize it. The escape from nihilism is not through moralism, but through something very simple: paying attention to the signs of reality. In Christian terms we would say poverty of spirit. It seems like nothing, but it is everything.

So what enables us to start again? What saves us from nothingness?

First of all, not abandoning your desire and realizing that you do not abandon your desire when you discover that there is something or someone that corresponds to it, when you find someone who says, “Look, what your heart desires actually exists,” and above all, who accompanies you in experiencing it. In the Beginning Day, Fr. Giussani told us that we call this someone an “authority,” a “father.” It involves a real relationship and requires only one thing of us.

Which is...?

Being patient with God—if I can put it this way, giving Him a chance. We have to allow Him to make us understand. Attention is required for this, letting ourselves be struck by things. Here you see the extraordinarily interesting meaning of Christian friendship today.

What do you mean by “Christian friendship”?

It is not only relationships among those who belong to the community of the faithful, but also the friendship that Christians feel they can offer everyone. I think of my students and colleagues, people who no longer struggle with “the problem of Christianity,” and long ago closed the door on it, but with whom unimaginable relationships can arise, precisely because of the foundational, irreducible nature of human desire. I feel a sudden sense of friendship with anyone who lives a fragility, which is also mine, not because I can solve it, but because the experience I have encountered makes something happen in my life that saves me from nothingness, a preference that pulls me out of nihilism. It is something that I do not generate but that I can share with everyone.

For you, what is the face of this preference? Where does it happen? Where does it come from?

Look, your question is already an example, because it forces me to not entrench myself behind theorization using more or less correct categories, but to realize that anything useful we can say about ourselves and the world must be something that we have in some way experienced. This always has the precise faces, with first and last names, of the people who pressure me to understand that the usefulness of my work as a teacher and a university professor lies in being sincere with what happens in my experience. At times, another spectacular thing for me is my children.

Why?

Because I think there is always a strong temptation to want to forge

their life without taking into account their freedom. I expect certain things of them that do not always correspond to who they are. What is nobler for parents than to want the best for their children? But the problem is that often the “good,” even if right, is “what I have in my head,” while it is another thing to discover that their good is that they are themselves.

This is the difference between a sterile relationship that does not generate and a real paternity...

Yes, and the same thing happens with my students. You begin the new academic year wondering if you will be able to “touch” them. There was a time when “touch them” meant “convince them,” bring them to think certain things. Now, though, it involves a heartfelt yearning for them to realize that they are themselves, even should they reject me when they realize it.

Can you tell me about a moment when authority saved you from nothingness?

The husband of a very dear friend discovered only a few years after their wedding that he had a very severe degenerative disease. She helps me great deal and has made a deep impression on me. Because of her attitude toward herself, she is capable of living a loving relationship with her husband simply by aspirating the tube in his trachea; this is not just “nursing” love, but rather complete, fulfilled love. She told me once, “I won’t give up on being happy. I can’t say ‘so it goes, I just have to live with it.’ No. I want to see happiness now.” For me, she is an authority, because she makes me see that God is a possibility for me, too. ■



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Paola Ronconi

Ed is reborn

The story of Edmondo, known as Ed, who was lost in drugs and alcohol, and also the story of the love of his father, of a phone number on a slip of paper in his pocket, fished out as he left prison, and of a family who welcomed him into their home, where he “felt like a bum, but nothing of what happened there eluded me.”

If at the age of 10, you skip school as soon as you can to get away to the mountains, if at 12 you punch the principal and at 13 you jump out of a window to scare the substitute teacher (who does not know about the scaffolding), it is to be expected that at 14 you will be expelled from middle school and have to make up two years of study in one year in order to get your middle-school diploma.

Edmondo was a difficult boy who could not stand “unauthoritative authorities,” as he called them. Today he would have already undergone a thousand psychological and behavioral analyses. Even winning the provincial championship in mountain racing at the age of 15 did not satisfy him. Today, he explains himself candidly, saying, “The people of my town weren’t enough for me. I wasn’t part of them.” And he did not care, not even about worrying his parents deeply when they discovered the bad company he was keeping. In a town of not even 5,000 people in the lower Valtellina area of northern Italy, people quickly know everything about everybody.

This is how Ed, now in his forties, introduces the story of the depths he has plumbed. How deep they were is evident in his intense, good eyes, with a hint of the abyss. Heroin and cocaine arrived even in the Valtellina mountains, and for alcohol he just had to go to the local café in the square. In a short time the costs and the doses rose mon-

strously. “To get money, I began stealing and selling everything.”

When Ed was 19, his father, a man who had never taken a day off work, decided to take a six-month leave in order to be close to his troubled son. “We had to make up time for a relationship that never existed. For six months he never left me alone even for a minute; at night I slept in his bed with him.” When his father’s leave ended, “the day my father returned to work, I had a needle in my vein within a few hours.” Six months wasted? “I perceived his goodness, but I was an empty vessel that nobody could fill.” Once he jumped out of a window 27 feet above the ground from a room in which his father had locked him. “I ran to the station, to Morbegno. I jumped on the first train, and as they were closing the doors, my father caught up with me. I saw his eyes: ‘Why? Come home,’ they were saying.” But this was not enough for Ed.

You have to try them all. He tried a drug rehabilitation center, and managed to stick out three years of work, individual psychotherapy three times a week, and family psychotherapy twice a week. “I learned to know myself and also to understand how lucky I was: it was the time of AIDS.” Things seemed to be getting better, but “one day I discovered that the family psychotherapist was divorced. I thought, ‘And this guy wants to teach me what a family is!’ I needed people who

could show me that it was possible to make it in life, and that the good was possible.”

Ed became a graphic artist, and when he left home, he found work in Lecco. He was good at it, knew how to do business, and began earning well. He met a girl, found a house to share, and had a nice car. But not even all this “normalcy” was enough. “There was nothing worthwhile” that could keep him away from drugs and alcohol. He abandoned everything, or more accurately, destroyed everything once again. His life was an endless flight.

One evening, absolutely desperate, his father told him, “I don’t know how to be a father. If you know how I can help you, tell me.” This time Ed went to a detox center in the Turro section of Milan. But not even that could work the needed miracle. One day Ed stole a car and after a desperate flight ended up in the police station. Given his fat file of previous run-ins with the law, he was sent to jail for three years, one on conditional release.

Behind the bars, he had a strange sensation, “almost a liberation. I fooled myself into thinking that prison would redeem me.”

His cellmate was Dario. When he saw Ed in such bad condition, he ripped his sheet in half and called the guard, “Take him away to the shower, please.” When Ed returned he found two pork chops waiting for him. “In prison they cost a fortune.” One day Dario suggested that Ed interview for work in the prison

printing center. “They teach you to use the computer; you learn a trade, and you do something.” Not terribly convinced, Ed went nonetheless. The director, Patrizia, told him, “I trust Dario, so if he trusts you, you can work here. We begin every morning by praying the Angelus.” Ed thought, “These people are crazier than me!” but he did not leave. Every day he showed up for work on time and even stayed when they did School of Community on Fr. Giussani’s book *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* He thought, “How can this priest know me so well?” Patrizia’s words found an opening in his walls. A month before leaving prison, Ed wrote Patrizia’s cell phone number on a little piece of paper, stuck it in his pocket, and forgot about it.

January 6, 2010: “Edmondo, you are free to go,” a guard told him, throwing two trash bags of his belongings at his feet: dirty clothes and a disassembled cell phone. When the prison gates closed behind him, he had nothing in front of him except a lot of phone numbers of people who in a half an hour could help him take up his previous life again. In a moment that lasted an eternity, he pulled Patrizia’s number from his pants pocket. “I’m Ed. Can you help me?” Patrizia had pneumonia, but within a half an hour her husband Fabio arrived. “You’re Ed, the prisoner? I’ll bring you home to your family.”

They lived in Colico. Ed’s father told Fabio, “You don’t understand. I don’t want this son.” Ed recalls, “In that moment, I saw one man who said to another, ‘I can’t manage anymore. I give him to you.’ And when Fabio answered, ‘Okay,’ I had two true men in front of me. Two fathers. I realized I had sunk really low.”

Within a short time, Ed found work and a home in Oggiono, in a house a priest made available to him. For the weekends Filippo, Fabio and Patrizia’s third son, went to get him and brought him to stay with them. A lot of friends, a lot of people passed through their place. “I wasn’t part of that family. I felt like a bum, but nothing of what happened there eluded me.” Patrizia’s elderly mother, who suffered from Alzheimer’s, always welcomed him, saying, “There’s my boyfriend.” In her

dementia, “she was my point of good,” Ed recalls. When he found another job in Monza, Fabio and Patrizia decided to host him permanently in their home, since one of their sons was abroad. “I became the owner of the sofa, the remote control and the refrigerator,” but not only that. One evening they needed to bring Ed to the emergency room... Nobody had realized that he had begun drinking again. In a short time he had emptied their wine cellar and refilled the bottles with tea and Coke to imitate the color of wines and liquors. He said, “I’m going. I don’t want to ruin your family, too.” But Patrizia responded, “If you walk through that door, you know it’s the end for you. We love you.” Ed stayed, but Fabio imposed conditions that were almost more rigid than those of the prison: he could never go out alone, could never carry any money, and you could not get his driver’s license back. “Looking at him, I asked myself, ‘How can a man be so certain he can trust someone like me?’ I had encountered the mystery through Patrizia, and now I was becoming a son again with Fabio. If I wanted to grow up and understand the spark I saw in them, I had to entrust myself completely and be loyal to what they were asking of me.”

Time goes by. Every day since then has been a step forward toward understanding the reality that entered his life. Today, Ed has stopped escaping. His cup overflows: “I had to go through all those experiences to become what I am today: a happy man.” He is married to Rosanna and has a son, Francesco, a lot of friends, and a certainty: “My strength is the presence of Christ that supports me and is always there.” And his weaknesses? “They were the modality for encountering those eyes again for all time. When I see a beautiful car I think that if I stole it it wouldn’t change anything, and I say, ‘My God, thank goodness I have met You.’” When Francesco was born, Ed called his father, who said, “Give him a kiss from me, then go home and thank your friends.” As they were speaking, Ed thought of Nicodemus: Can a man be born again? Ed is convinced that “yes, he can. And how.” ■

“If I wanted to grow up, I had to entrust myself completely and be loyal to what they were asking of me.”

“Come with me”

Davide, who lives idly; Alessandro, who feels bored; Antonio, who feels hatred... Erasmo Figini, founder of Cometa (Comet) in Como, has met so many boys like them. He tells us about his personal experience of fatherhood, saying that “words are no longer enough.”



Paola Bergamini



Cometa is a community of families on the outskirts of Como, from which a reality ranging from foster care to assistance with studies was born.

“**L**ook at your brothers! They go to school, to university, they study and do sports and what about you? Where did we go wrong with you?!” Davide instead does nothing. He does not even respond to yet another outburst by his mother. At 19 he dropped out of school and began spending his days in his room. His father, exasperated, called Erasmo Figini when Cometa, a family resource center in Como, was starting out. “I do not know what to do. Could you talk to him?” “I have only met him on a couple of occasions. What excuse do I have to call him?” “I have old chairs that you could refurbish. I will persuade Davide to deliver the chairs and bring them to you at Contrada.” [Editor’s Note: where master craftsmen teach young people, mostly dropouts] “Let’s try that.” The boy arrived one morning. Erasmo asked him, “What do you have to do today?” “Nothing!” “Come with me.” They walked around the workshops and Davide paused several times to observe. Right before he was about to leave, Erasmo said to him, “It seems to me that you like this place. Why don’t you refurbish the chair?” He agreed to work on not just his father’s chair, but also other chairs. With the help of his teacher Pilar, he worked on the chairs and transformed them. He only went to his room in the evening to go to sleep. Those months in Contrada sparked

in him the desire to do, to think, to plan for the future, in other words, *to be*. “By becoming more self-aware he discovered his uniqueness, his talent. This happened not because there were abstract lessons, but real experiences,” explained Erasmo.

Alessandro, on the other hand, was attending school, a classical high school, because his parents thought that was the best choice. “It will open many doors,” they kept repeating. But the report card from the first quarter said something else. It was a real disaster. He transferred to the scientific high school and from an academic point of view things improved: by June, he had only one class had to repeat. Alessandro, however, had no intention of studying; he was not interested. This was the problem: his lack of interest. The summer months went by and he was feeling bored and making bad choices. In September, he told his parents he was done with school, any kind of school. “You can’t tell me what to do anymore or what is best for me,” he added. He spent a few months doing nothing, just wandering around Como. His mother figured out a way to get him to Cometa. As soon as he understood that he was going to a school, he wanted to escape, but the proposal was different: to train for a job. He did not mind the idea of earning money, but he did not think he would be good enough. Paolo Binda, a program coordinator at Com-

eta, accompanied him to the place of his internship, a hotel on the lake. At a certain point during the interview, the headwaiter asked, “Can I trust this guy? I need someone who can get the job done.” “Sure! He is very good; he can do anything. I give you my word,” Binda replied. Alessandro was shocked. It seemed impossible to him that an adult who hardly knew him would trust him. During the internship he gave 100 percent and became passionate about the work. At the end of the internship, he told his parents, “I will start studying again, but at Cometa.” Davide’s idleness, Alessandro’s boredom, this widespread nihilism “is a fact,” explained Erasmo. “Young people have reasons for being like this. Nothing works. The great ‘proposals’ have exhausted themselves. Communism has collapsed, consumerism is ending. Words are no longer enough because they are empty. Do you talk to them about their family when most of them are broken, or of beauty that they don’t see? The only possibility is to make them experience something as beneficial for their life. This is possible only within a privileged relationship; that is, within a fatherhood that is not necessarily biological. That is what I experienced at the beginning.” It all started when he met Fr. Giussani almost 40 years ago. Erasmo, a successful designer with a practically “perfect” life, found himself in front of someone “who made my heart

jump when he spoke to me. This had never happened to me before. He told me to open my family to foster children, me, who just a brief time before that had scoffed at the possibility of having biological children. I obeyed because I felt a sense of correspondence, that there was something more for me. At that moment perhaps it was only a premonition, but I felt certain. I discovered my paternal instinct. Today, reading the Beginning Day text and looking back on my life, I can say with more awareness that this was the discovery of authority; that is, of something essential to my life.”

Over the years, the experience of having a father has been renewed and restored in the children who have been welcomed at Cometa, but sometimes in a painful way. Antonio was 10 years old when he entered its doors. By court decree, he was taken away from his biological family, who subsequently moved to southern Italy. At 19, he told Erasmo, “I’m leaving. I am going to be with my parents,” but their relationship remained intact. Erasmo went to visit him without asking or demanding anything of him. One day the boy called him. Screaming in anger, he said, “I hate you because you gave me a conscience and I can’t do what I want anymore!” What he wants, what his biological parents want, does not correspond to the experience of fullness that he lived at Cometa. He put up some resistance but returned to Como. Today he is married and has two foster children. “In Antonio I saw myself, my journey. Fatherhood means letting the other experience freedom. That is, welcoming him, accompanying him so that his ‘I’ may flourish. This is possible through a mutual forgiveness that is renewed every day.”

According to psychologists, Giacomo was in the worst possible situation that a child could be in: he was first abandoned by his birth mother and then by his adoptive family. For him, the word “family” had only negative connotations. He arrived at Cometa during the Christmas holidays. “I would hate to let him spend these days in an institution,” said the social worker. He was supposed to stay only a few days, but he has never left. There have been many difficult situations, “but in this foster home he found a father figure ready to forgive, to always start again without conditions,” said Erasmo. Two years ago, he asked to have a big birthday party and everyone became involved. Giacomo said, “I want to celebrate in this family, because after seven years I feel at home.”

Among his tasks, Erasmo is often responsible for giving infants a bottle. “Who makes me do this at 70 years old? Once again I see that it not only suits me, but it corresponds to me. I understand this when at dawn a child holds my hand and rests his head on my shoulder. There really is nothing sentimental about

it. In living this way, I live better. For me, being a father means lovingly embracing these small, unique, and unrepeatable beings that God has placed in my world and who want to be my traveling companion. This is possible because I am at Cometa. Fatherhood is this place. This is the path God wants for me.”

At 8:00 one morning, a boy approached Erasmo, hugged him and said, “Uncle, you have been gone for some time. I will see you at the coffee break. What do you think of my jacket?” Erasmo replied that it was “interesting.” When he is not away on business, Erasmo stands every day at the Cometa entrance to welcome the boys. “When he first arrived here, that boy had not bathed and his behavior, one could say, was not exactly impeccable. He began to trust, though, and through relationships with others he understood that studying, washing, and behaving in a certain way is much better. He also demonstrates this physically, by hugging you. For me, he is like the baby I give the bottle to.” Mass is celebrated in the chapel at Cometa before classes begin. “It amazes me how many young people participate in it. For some it means waking up at dawn to arrive on time. That is the source of our being, of our fatherhood. We never had to explain it. They simply saw it.” ■

The journey to truth

The fear of questions, the need to acknowledge what happened, the wounded young men, friends buried, and forgiveness...

A conversation with Fr. Francisco De Roux, a key figure in the peace process happening in a country devastated by a seemingly endless conflict.



Doris Soraida Barragan

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“**H**ow can I judge a girl who was, at age nine, recruited by the FARC [The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia], taught to kill at age ten, and at 11 raped and forced to have an abortion? Who am I to judge? If I had been in her shoes, how would I have ended up?” Fr. Francisco De Roux, a Jesuit, since 2017 has been the head of the Truth Commission, the entity at the heart of the Colombian peace process. “It is not really the ‘Truth Commission,’” he immediately insisted, “but the Commission for the Clarification of Truth. We are trying to reconstruct exactly what happened in this country.” He is referring to the more than 50 years of armed conflict involving guerrilla groups (including the FARC), paramilitaries, drug cartels, and the National Liberation Army, a war that has left in its wake 265,000 dead and eight million wounded and featured attacks, kidnappings, murders, forced displacements, mutilation, child recruitment, and expropriation of land.

Peace negotiations began in 2012, and there were years of intense bargaining up until June 23, 2016 when a peace treaty was signed in Havana. On October 2nd of that year, the treaty was submitted to a popular referendum, and the unsettling result was a “no” to peace. The day after the vote, De Roux wrote, “The result of the referendum may be what leads us to overcome the deepest of our problems—namely, ourselves. We are a people who exclude one another and are unable to grapple with deep issues together, even with the knowledge that our animosities and aggressions—expressed in politics, in the media, in academic and faith-based debates, and within families—have lethal consequences. [...] We have to accept with realism and humility that we must reexamine ourselves. [...] We are part of the problem, and precisely because we are part of the problem, part of the crisis, our responsibili-

ty to be part of the solution becomes more salient.”

Today, as the delicate peace process is threatened by a resurgence of violence and attacks in anticipation of regional elections, De Roux refuses to be discouraged. He studied economics in Paris and London and has dedicated all of his energy to economic and social development projects in his country, “but I am convinced,” he says, “that Colombia’s problem is a spiritual one. It is a brokenness in the human person. If we do not work at that level, we will not be able to do anything.”

Fr. De Roux, how is it possible to face a situation as complex and painful as the one our people is experiencing?

I have always thought that the roots of the problems in Colombia—this goes for every country, but for us especially—go very deep. Drug trafficking, armed conflict, land disputes,



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the way we became the world's biggest producer of cocaine... The list is very, very long. And each of these problems is a kilometer deep. We start to address one and, when we have gotten down 100 meters, we get overwhelmed and say, "No, forget about it. It's too complicated." With that attitude, nothing ever changes. In fact, if you do not address problems, things do not stay the same, they get worse. Of course, we may be afraid because interfering in the status quo is dangerous, but doing so is indispensable if we want to avoid repeating our errors. This is why I think one of the most urgent priorities for education is teaching that when there is a problem, you have to get to the bottom of it in order to face it.

What road you are following?

Helping the country to not be afraid of questions, and to name the problems. For example, we hold public meetings to go deeper, to bring all the questions forward. We hope to be able to provide some answers in December 2021, when we plan to present a report, but for now we want to ask questions, trying to help people not be afraid of them.

How can each of us contribute to the reconciliation process?

With that question you rightly underline the fact that peace is not a question of government, but of society. I think we have to start being honest with ourselves and to acknowledge our personal histories, with their successes and mistakes, light and darkness. This involves having the courage to be an open book: "This is what I am, with my virtues and my defects, my disappointments and failures. This is what I am, but I have had the courage to forgive myself." Not having the courage to acknowledge the way we are leads to two signifi-



Bogotá. A peaceful demonstration from earlier this year, after a relapse of violence and the murder of a number of the society's leaders.

cant limitations: if I do not acknowledge the truth about myself, I cannot do so in front of others and if I do not learn to have compassion toward me and to forgive me, it is impossible to do with others.

How does restoring the memory of all that happened help us to rebuild? Does uncovering what happened not, instead, stoke hatred and violence?

Our country has buried the memory of everything that has happened. As these things happened, the majority of the population looked the other way. There is a fear that the truth will end up polarizing us even more, feeding a desire for revenge. Of course, it is easy to find out what really happened and say, "Look how evil they are, they deserve to be hated and ostracized; they should not be part of us." You can use truth to divide people. But if you understand it correctly, it is instead necessary to better understand who we are and to learn to have compassion on ourselves and others.

Is the journey to peace only possible by way of forgiveness? And what does it mean for all of us to forgive today? You, too, lost many friends and collaborators...

I am convinced that forgiveness is a gift from God. Neither asking forgiveness nor forgiving come naturally. They are both acts of grace. Over the years, I have had to bury many friends. I have learned that asking someone to forgive can sometimes evidence a lack of respect. We have to welcome victims in their pain, embrace them, really listen to them, put ourselves in their shoes and accompany them: if you offer them a great love, you might just see a decision to forgive emerg-

ing in their hearts, but always and absolutely in their freedom. When it is true forgiveness, you ask nothing of the one who wronged you, just as God does with us: He offers us forgiveness as a total gift. In the Old Testament, the guilt of sin was something you had to pay for: nothing went unpunished. In the New Testament, however, when mercy appeared, forgiveness did away with punishment: God is absolutely free and forgives everything. The Lord asks just two things of you: that you repent and that you are open to mercy. And since God cannot forgive in the abstract, He forgives through us; He forgives by rebuilding us and the person who hurt us, rebuilding us as human beings.

What has been your experience?

Julián Bolívar, the boss of Bloque Central Bolívar, killed my friend Alma Rosa Jaramillo. He had his men kill her; they cut off her arms, legs, and head with a chainsaw. I publicly said to Bolívar: "I forgive you." Forgiving is working for the transformation of Bolívar into the man God wants him to be, that he be redeemed, because what he has done has destroyed him as a human being. But that is already God's business: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We fight so that those who wronged us may become different human beings. "Do good to those who hurt you and pray for those who persecute you": that means placing yourself on the path of reconciliation. These things are very profound. You enter into Christian forgiveness: "Love your enemies." It means reaching the point of doing what Jesus did: "I know your situation is very difficult, very risky. But I decided to give my life for you." This is what we are

talking about: my life for his. You cannot ask that from a politician, nor can you put it this way in a purely social environment, because it wouldn't be understood. But that is the Christian witness of forgiveness. It reaches that point. This is what transitional justice aims for.

Can you explain to us this method of transitional justice, which is particular to the peace process?

Those in the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) are asked to start from the truth. Truth is not limited to taking responsibility for our actions, but involves a full statement of the truth, such as, "I will tell you what I did. I will say in the case of Alma Rosa why we took her, how we kidnapped her, where we took her, how we stripped her and raped her, how we cut off the first arm and the second... and the reasons we did it. We knew that she was an attorney who was going to put us on trial that day, and she died in our hands in this way, and this is why we threw her in a swamp near Magdalena Medio. She did not sink, and so they found her..." That is the point of departure for the JEP: you must tell the truth and demonstrate in addition that you are prepared to make reparations and never do it again. If you do this, you are accepted by transitional justice; you are granted conditional freedom but must make reparations. But I am not the judge who tells you how to do this; instead, I call upon the family of Alma Rosa to tell you how to make reparations.

Could you give an example?

Let's take the case of the 11 representatives from the Assembly of Valle di Cauca who were taken hostage for five years and killed the week before they were supposed to be released. There has already been a gesture in



Francisco De Roux (pictured, center) was born in Cali in 1943. He became a Jesuit priest after studies in literature, philosophy, economics, and theology and served as the provincial of Colombia for the Jesuits and as the director of CINEP, the Center for Research and Popular Education. He founded the Program for Development and Peace in Magdalena Medio, which promotes projects that build the social economy in conflict zones, and dedicated himself to people pushed off of their land and to sharing life peacefully. In November 2017 he became the director of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth.

which the FARC asked forgiveness and the families forgave them, but transitional justice is needed to bring about true reconciliation. The families have already decided what to ask: they want those responsible to be assigned a residence on a piece of land in the Valle of Cauca where, for eight years and under house arrest, they will with their own hands, buying the materials with their own resources, build a school for 2,500 students. They will be the builders and painters. This is one of the most beautiful things about JEP. I can also think of the relatives of the victims of “Operation Genesis” led by General Rito Alejo del Río, which involved a series of massacres and forced displacements. The families sent a letter to him with a proposal: “General, we invite you to come with us, to live with us and work with us.”

For a person to receive the embrace of mercy within his or her history is something unknown in this world.

The most important work we need to do is help people encounter the faith once again. I believe that you as Communion and Liberation can offer a significant contribution because of your commitment to education. This task requires faith, a very profound understanding of faith. Faith is not a question of religion; it is a question of “who I am,” ultimately of what gives consistency to my person. Julián Carrón says we are losing the certainties each of us used to have. If a man has lost his certainties, how can he build? We need to think about this. We need to start all over again, to return to the work of recognizing the humanity of each person.

For about four years now, I have gone with a few friends from the Movement to do charitable work in a military rehabilitation center. We visit young soldiers who are seriously wounded and alone because their families are far away. Coming in contact with their stories is to be in contact with the country, and doing so helps us understand how it is our responsibility to accompany them so that they may recognize that, even in the condition facing them, they are loved and their life will go on. But we are the ones who are helped: we are rendered speechless in seeing the drama they have lived and are living and in seeing their strength.

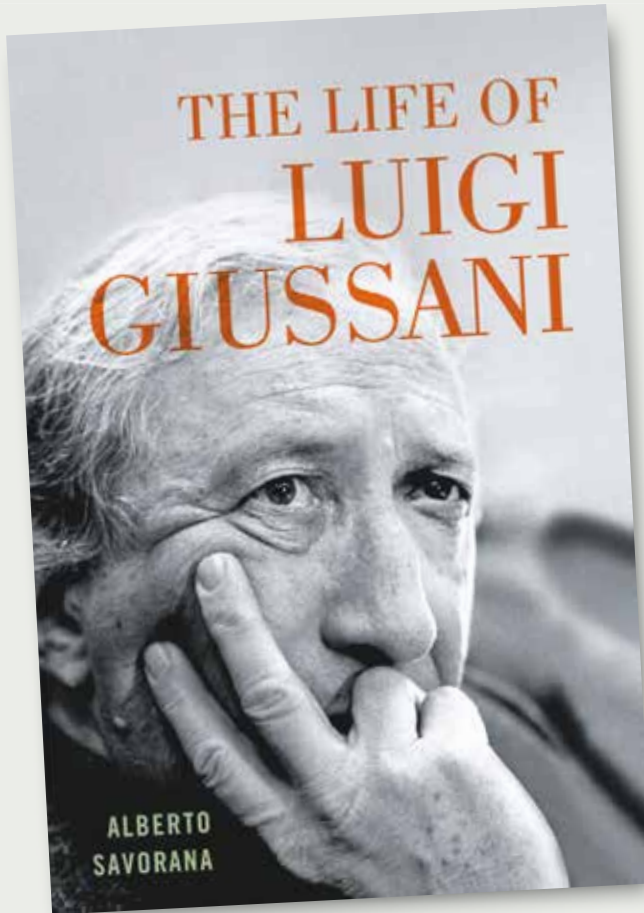
That brings to mind what the pope did with us when he came here in 2017. There has been serious cultural trauma among us, which leads to polarization. The number of victims from every social class is so immense, and the pain is everywhere. This generates indignation, rage, and a desire for revenge that has spread through WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook, on TV, in the newspapers, in speeches from political leaders, and even in the words of priests at Mass. We have all been conditioned; we are immersed in a real trauma. The pope realized this and tried to free us from it, to help us go beyond it.

How?

Some bishops, in their addresses to Francis, never used the word peace because they were incapable of doing so. He used it 60 times. Of the four days he was here, he used three to speak to us and dedicated one day to the victims, just to them, sending a message like the one you send when you do charitable work. He said, “My brother bishops, stop making nice speeches and handing down rules, thinking that offering rules will make the people better and deliver the country from this situation. Lay your hands on the bloodied body of your people: the victims. Go there, otherwise you will not understand.” This is what you do when you visit those soldiers. ■

THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan



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

1,416 Pages, December 2017

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

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

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

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