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01

# ***On a journey with Francis***

## TRACES

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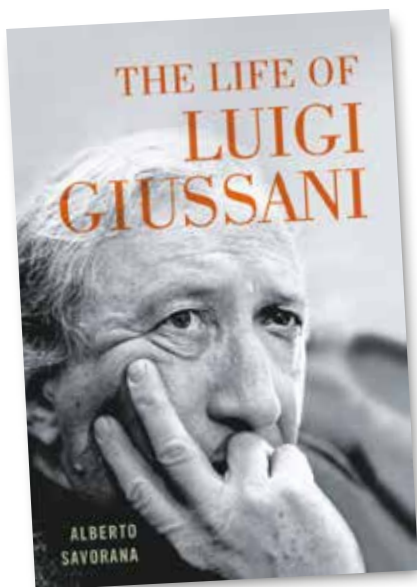
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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## January 2020

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# 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.*

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## *A window wide open*

**W**ords and gestures, together. Each gives flesh to the other, showing the full depth of both and making them the object of experience. This is how Pope Francis is broadening hearts and reason, even in those who are far from Christ, in those who have never known Him or recognized Him. This is how he has become a witness for all people. We saw it right away, in the first moments of his pontificate. And the more familiar you become with him, the more this capacity to touch deep into our heartstrings, which had become unreachable even by more coherent or better-reasoned arguments, becomes apparent. What was it like to see him up close and in action? What can we learn in staying by his side and in following his footsteps as he encounters, speaks, looks at, and embraces all the people?

**A journey with the pope is an experience that opens a window** onto his person and onto the world, and in this issue of *Traces* we invite you to share the view from that window. Our inspiration was the presence of a *Traces* journalist on the flight that brought Francis to Thailand and Japan some weeks ago. It is a far-away universe for the “Christian West,” but one that is immersed in the same questions and problems, which he summarized in a powerful expression: “The loss of the meaning of life.”

The detailed account of the pope’s week is more than just a chronicle of an apostolic journey, as important as that is: it is an opportunity to step into his shoes, into his thought, into the way he acts as he seeks to respond to the drama that suffuses every aspect of the lives of contemporary men and women. It is a chance to look at his way of looking, to see what he follows and how he does it. It is also a way to better understand the origin of his fatherhood, the authoritativeness that allows him to reawaken the humanity and sense of expectation in everyone—in continuity with our theme in the last two issues of *Traces*.

**It is for this that the world is thirsting.** You can also see it in the other pages of this magazine, from the story of the Fraternity of Saint Joseph, a profound and singular example because of the way the order makes Christ present in the world, to the witnesses in the letters and the points of emphasis found in the other articles, where you will see windows being thrown open and the adventure of living the meaning of life beginning again.



# Letters

**Sara, Cecilia,  
Elena**

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

## A “yes” in the storm

Dear Fr. Carrón, our third daughter was born with a serious health problem and was hospitalized for almost three months. Many friends and relatives were praying for her to be healed and sought to be near us in every way they could. My husband and I were facing this circumstance without being able to change it, worried as any parents would be, but with a certainty that surely didn't come from us that everything was going as it should and was for Costanza's and our good. This point was made very clear when one evening my husband and I were able to carve out a moment for ourselves to attend a cultural event. The presenter introduced Beethoven's *The Tempest* by reading this comment by Fr. Giussani: "In every trial, one must reflect on this: if life is something serious, then the trials that inevitably happen in life are storms. This makes clear the substantial position that man assumes in front of a truth that strikes him and about which he is aware of being struck. On the one hand, there is a heartfelt cry consistent with the desire that is reignited each morning, and on the other, there is something that sweeps away all the cloudiness of the objections by which falsehood darkens the sun that should flood the totality of our life." I felt the tears soak my face as I heard these words. Spending time in the hospital put me shoulder-to-shoulder with so many mothers. One couple in particular came unexpectedly and so profoundly into my life in those days because they seemed so different. I learned of their faith and that they had a spiritual father who followed them. One day she asked me point blank, "Don't you ever break down?" I responded, "Of course I break down, but I've seen that you and your husband also have a strong foundation that you

lean on." When the time came for Costanza's discharge, I left a letter for this mother in which I told her about the beauty I had seen in them and related everything I had learned and verified while in that hospital ward. I left our home address so that she could write back to me. A month later, we had our first follow-up visit. After it was finished, I approached one of the doctors and asked if she could share anything about that couple's child. She told me that the child had passed away, and my first thought was about the pain that those parents must be living. I asked myself how they received my words after what had happened to them.... Two months later, a small envelope arrived at our home; it was her response to what I had said. Here is an excerpt: "We are dealing with the loss of our son. We are not afraid: we know that something very, very great was asked of us, but we want to trust in Him. We try to say our 'yes' every day. At times it comes out good and loud, at other times it's a little forced, and at other times it's a 'yes' through clenched teeth and with a little (maybe a lot of) anger. We welcome those who want to be close to us, we welcome our families who are doing everything they can for us, and we welcome those who in this moment don't know how to be at our side. We try to have enormous arms to embrace everything that life gives us, which, as we are coming to understand, is truly a lot. I wanted to thank you for being a light for this, our journey. I am convinced that you, your presence close to us, and your letter are all part of this marvelous life."

**Sara, Conegliano (Italy)**

## A question of gratitude

When I started working ten years ago, my salary was decent but not too high, but this was alright because I had few expenses. Over the years, my position has improved, but also the duties of life have increased: marriage, a wife, a mortgage, children. In recent times, the test of time has made itself felt more and more, and without the companionship of the movement and the Fraternity,

everything would be different for me. The evidence provided by this companionship asks me to respond responsibly. A moral and intellectual honesty and a seriousness with those people who take my destiny to heart compel me now to double my monthly contribution to the Common Fund. I don't know for how long I'll be able to continue contributing at this level, but even if it's only for this month, it would be unjust and ungrateful not to do it.

**Signed letter**

### An unmistakable face

Dearest Fr. Carrón: in September I began a teacher training program in England. It soon became clear how tough it would be—in addition to the difficulty of returning to work after maternity leave in a new culture that was very different from what I expected, it also turned out that the person who was supposed to be my mentor had various issues. My initial temptation was to suck it up, hold my nose, and plug my ears until the end of January. But this would not have been enough for me, especially given the sacrifices required. Then something happened. I was at Mass, and during his homily our parish priest said, “At times, the only thing we are able to say is, ‘Lord, remember me’ like the good thief, and this is enough, this changes things.” I asked myself if this were really true and when was the last time I had been aware that Christ had remembered me. Beyond all the problems I face, I cannot deny one fact: a mysterious and inexplicable correspondence between me and this new, challenging journey that I never could have imagined. And so, a dialogue began within these circumstances, starting with that small piece of reality that allowed me to again recognize that there is Someone in everything that happens and that allowing myself to be embraced again allows me to start again. This position has allowed me to notice small things that I could not see before. Last week at school, a student teacher from China told me, “I’m happy that you are here, because since you arrived, there is a person who treats me in a human way and who I can talk with.” I, who so often only see how I am struggling, had to ask myself, “What does it mean that I treat her in a human way? How does this reveal itself?” Our au pair, who just arrived at our home, bought us Christmas gifts to thank us for making her feel welcome and loved. Never would I have imagined that I treated her in some special way; often I only observe my husband and me arriving home tired and weighed down. It’s incredible to become aware again that the only thing that is asked of us is the simplicity of heart to recognize the correspondence between what we

are searching for and desiring in every circumstance and Christ, whose face is so clear and unmistakable that it illuminates those very circumstances that until a moment before had seemed to involve only a coincidence.

**Cecilia, Berkhansted (Great Britain)**

### Three years after the first encounter

Dear Fr. Carrón: I met the Movement almost three years ago. I was going through a period of crisis in my relationship with God, and in response I made myself go to the Orthodox liturgy once a month, and to go to confession and receive communion. I had never looked for a Christian community. I had some friends who were believers and this seemed sufficient to me. At some point, I ran into a friend who invited me to the CL Christmas party. I didn't really expect anything from this encounter; I went more out of curiosity than anything else, but never could I have imagined how it would change my life. I met some people there and I felt like coming back, so I started going to School of Community. At the beginning, I couldn't understand many things, but I kept going and asked my questions to a friend who's in the Movement. It was an open and sincere dialogue about the presence of Christ in my life, about my desire to trust in Him and why I had such a hard time doing that. His answers amazed me because he shared the experience of his relationship with God. After some time, I realized that I no longer needed to force myself to go to church; I went because I really wanted to go. I remembered that I had prayed to God to send people into my life whose faith was not extraneous to their existence, but I never expected such a response to my prayer! It was as if God had opened the door and I had entered, responding to His invitation. I met people who help me encounter Christ in the most diverse situations. In these three years, many joyful and sorrowful things have happened: my mother's illness, the death of a friend, losing my job and finding another one. This period has not been easy, but I know with certainty that He is always close to me. My friends have supported me and I've learned from them to look at the world around me, to not close myself off, to be attentive to whoever is close to me, to not turn my back on those who can be difficult, and to respect the freedom of the other. The Movement for me has truly become the place that helps me discover God and reality; the place where I desire to stay and to continue the journey together. And because of this, I ask to be admitted into the Fraternity.

**Elena, Moscow (Russia)**

# Francis's way

Eight full days, from Rome to Bangkok then Tokyo and back again, passing through places marked by old wounds and current dramas. Traveling with the pope to see the way he thinks and acts up close and to see his long-term work to build up human persons. Today when the most serious threat is the loss of meaning.



Alessandra Stoppa  
photos by Anja Goder

**K**osuke Koyama, a Japanese theologian who spent many years as a missionary in Thailand, coined an expression to describe God's way, saying that He moves "three miles an hour." That, he explained, is the speed a person walks, and is therefore God's speed, since He works deep within our lives, "whether we notice or not." He wrote that God "educates man slowly."

Pope Francis, even in the most noticeable elements of his pontificate, which seem to quickly move the church's history forward, embodies this presence that walks slowly. The way he thinks and acts leads to slow progress, following the pace of the person and his or her history without conditions. It's a distinctive speed in the midst of what he calls today's "ra-

pidification," in which "everything loses its solidity." For him, the human person comes first.

Building up the human person is the long-term work on which he bets everything. This comes out even in an extremely intense journey in a few days packed full of events, like his recent apostolic visit to Thailand and Japan. Throughout the course of 27,000 km of travel, seven flights, 18 official speeches, many Masses, moments to greet the crowds, and private meetings, following the pope in Asia offered a close-up view of the method used by a man in love with Christ to face the present, a man who "goes out," since that is the only way the church "goes out," growing "by attraction," to use the expression of Benedict XVI that Francis has con-

tinually repeated, considering it to be "prophetic" for our times.

**His vision does not focus on** distances that divide, but most clearly on an encounter with worlds profoundly different from the West. ("It is good for the people to know cultures far from the West," he said, highlighting a first note on his method that was directed to the journalists on the flight.) He did not say "peripheries," but he lives them and brings them to life, assuming the perspective of those corners of the church where most people have never known—or no longer know—what a priest is, and where technological progress is relentless. He especially draws attention to places where history has left us the crater of an atomic bomb, or



where humanity is disfigured by modern slavery, including sex trafficking, or where the solitude and alienation felt by young people are extreme, and speaks to our experience of these places.

Francis breaks the inertia of a way of thinking that is completely turned in on ourselves by making use of what he encounters. “The starting point for every apostolate is the concrete place,” he admonished Japanese bishops soon after he landed, and later on the return flight he said, “One cannot evaluate everything within the same category. Realities must be evaluated

■  
Pope Francis in the Catholic village of Wat Roman in Thailand, during the November apostolic journey that also took him to Japan.





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At Hypocenter Park in Nagasaki,  
where the atomic bomb exploded in 1945.

according to the category they share with the same reality.” He himself draws everything from reality, just as he draws his physical strength from his contact with people, to whom he gives himself without reserve and by whom he is rejuvenated when he is exhausted.

**His words and gestures are imbued** with what he attributes to Jesus’s relationship with the disciples: he “knocks them off their pedestal,” makes them keep their feet on the ground. When he deals with those in power, he shreds the hypocrisy of those who “talk about peace while building and selling weaponry.” To leaders from other religions, he has pointed out the “small steps” which attest, in our world “so prone to creating and spreading conflict and exclusion,” that “the culture of encounter is possible.” He always reminds priests and the faithful of their “beginning,” so that they might not forget that it was not “words or abstract ideas or cold syllogisms” that changed their lives, but a “look that captivated you.” Christianity is not a “model of thought” to be imported, but rather the Lord who encounters man right where he is, just as he is, “with his face, his flesh, his dialect.” The particular reality of Thailand is expressed in the explosion of flowers, dances, bowing, and hands put together amidst the faces and dress of the tribal people. It is not Francis’s intent to confuse evangelization with folklore, but to shake the faithful out of “fruitless discussions and ways of thinking,” and bring them back to the patrimony of the first missionaries: “They did not expect a foreign culture to receive the gospel easily;



rather, they plunged into these new realities, convinced of the beauty of which they were bearers.” It was the same unconditional impulse that sparked his youthful interest in going to Japan as a missionary, a desire that was unfulfilled due to his health. Today, he is over 80 and limps, but the weight of the Petrine throne has not slowed down the wonder that breaks out on his face each time he meets another person.

The words he spoke on the last day of his journey, in a private Mass with a group of Jesuits at Sophia University in Tokyo, are a synthesis of his modus operandi: “The encounter with Jesus and the desire to serve him are realistic and concrete, engaging with what happens in life: poverty, failure, humiliation, our sins, everything. Jesus never, ever takes us out of reality.”

This is the source of the war he wages through his actions on abstractions. To challenge the modern ill of focusing on abstractions, he always gives a privileged place to need because no formula can hold up in the face of a real need. On his journeys, including this most recent one, he chooses to touch the most tender wounds, from prostitution to the 2011 tragedy in Fukushima, from those sick in hospitals to victims of bullying. He militantly insists upon relationships, upon the “necessity” of the other, to whom we belong and who belongs to us. He gives himself to the people waiting for him, stopping when he was already running late, in the face of rigid protocols and schedules, for

a long and silent embrace with a little girl in Thailand. She broke into tears and he dried them with his hands.

The Gospel-like scenes amidst the crowd could either be mere touching snapshots, or they might be able to reawaken a nostalgia for the church in those who do not believe, or who no longer believe, and in those who report on her for a living and see mostly misery and power. In Thailand, the admiration of the Buddhists awaiting him was expressed by his cousin and interpreter, Sr. Ana Rosa Sivori, and is a good representation of what makes his presence different: “What he says, he lives.”

**He often repeats** one phrase: “Only what is loved can be saved. Only that which is embraced can be transformed.” He first said it during his trip to Panama, and then had the hundreds of thousands of young people present repeat it, with the educational power he uses to challenge them, always going back to a few simple, clear principles: “You cannot save a person, you cannot save a situation, if you do not love it. For this reason, we’re saved by Jesus, because he loves us and cannot go against His nature.”

Abstractions are also the source of “the throwaway culture” that wears so many faces and shapes in Francis’s speeches, in which he consistently exhorts us not to fuel it. “No one can turn a deaf ear to the plea of our brothers and sisters in need,” he reminded the crowd in Japan, up-

ending a mentality that crushes the person and that values the society over the person. “We hope you can wake us up,” a journalist from Sol Levante in Brazil timidly said on a papal flight, “because what is inhuman has become habitual for us.”

Greater than any evil or sin, any weapon, tsunami, or social injustice, Francis identifies today’s most “serious threat” as “the loss of the meaning of life.” In him resonate the words of John Paul II (the first and last pope to travel to these lands, over 30 years ago) who entrusted to Japanese bishops in their last *ad limina* visit the task of addressing the “threat of despair at the lack of meaning in the lives of many people,” and directed them to the same font Bergoglio mentioned: “Prayer and contemplation, listening and ardent devotion” until the heart “falls in love” with Christ.

According to the pope, “the first victims” of the void of meaning are young people. He has a preferential relationship with them. Through the synod, he asked the universal church to listen to them, and he never tires of telling them that “the world needs you.” Everywhere he meets them, he goes right to the ultimate meaning of their lives, its “call,” and encourages them not to fear because they are wanted, because “Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive!” These 10 words, in the postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, contain the full power of his message for “every young Christian.”



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The meeting with Somdej Phra Maga Muneewong, the Buddhist supreme patriarch in Bangkok.

There is no geography and no problem that can dilute his focus: “Christ alive is our hope and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world. He is in you, He is with you, and he never abandons you.” He revealed to the young people in Bangkok that “the secret to a happy heart is the security we find when we are rooted in Jesus” and the joy of “knowing that the Lord has sought us out, found us and loved us infinitely.” He invited the young people of Tokyo to ask themselves, “For *whom* do I live?” He called them by name, commended their questions, and sent them off with new questions because that is what makes the difference: “Not having the right answers, but asking the right questions. Do I have a restless heart that prompts me continually to ask myself about life, about myself, about others, about God? With the right answers you pass an exam, but without the right questions you do not pass the exam of life!” We learn this from the gospel, which is “full of questions that attempt to unsettle and stir hearts. The questions of the master are always meant to renew our lives.”

The affirmation that “compassion is the authentic way to shape history,” is not a humanitarian theory, but rather the radical conception of truth as relationship that can respond to the global challenges of our world: “The gravest error is addressing problems separately,” when everything is “connected, interdependent.”

This helps us understand even more why he insists upon “putting problems into perspective,” not absolutizing them, for example the crises in Hong Kong and Latin America. “The church calls for dialogue,” he says frankly.

This is the paradigm—that time *is greater than space*—of a pontificate alternately applauded then instrumentalized, but that calls us to “generate new processes in society, patiently enduring adverse situations” without “being obsessed with immediate results” and building what is ultimately a “house of cards” (*Evangelii Gaudium*). He says to both politicians and parents that an “obsession with results is not educational,” and neither is “control,” but rather touts the deeply rooted processes that lead to “the growth of freedom,” as he indicated in the rich text *Amoris Laetitia*, which is incomprehensible without the perspective of the Second Vatican Council that you cannot approach truth without passing through freedom. Francis’s thought is characterized by demanding aspirations, but he is convinced that they are possible. One who works side by side with him, Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue says, “He is unmovable on the ‘drop by drop’ approach because he is not conditioned by resistance or prejudice.” Ayuso goes on to say that his urgency regarding the need for “inclusion” and “brotherhood,” which he will share with anyone, even giving the gift of the Abu Dhabi Declaration to the leaders of the Middle East, “is not a horizon limited to Muslim–Christian dialogue; it applies to everything and everyone.” He better understood what Bergoglio means by his “exclude no one” imperative when he was moved to see the deacon who read the Gospel out loud, using sign language while reading, at the Mass in Nagasaki.

**The more complex a situation** is the more the pope is clear and open. That is why he loves the unexpected, vulnerability, and little failures so much. He is a thoroughgoing anti-perfectionist. His insistence that we should “not to be afraid of making mistakes” is addressed decisively and paternally to everyone, whether they are cardinals or children. “Always keep walking; maybe you will trip, but then you will learn how to get up and keep going,” he replied off the cuff to a young man waiting for him with his peers at the Tokyo airport, despite the wind and rain, so that they could learn “what message he had for us.” Whatever the issue, whether it be migration, the imprisoned, abortion, end of life issues, poverty... he defends

humanity in every condition, and asks that the first action we take be to contemplate the mystery of existence: “Human life, beautiful beyond words yet frightfully fragile, points us beyond ourselves. We are infinitely more than what we can do by ourselves,” he said over a year ago to the Pontifical Academy for Life, because only our “ultimate destination” can restore the meaning of existence. This is a subversive outlook in a secular world, especially for an atheistic people like the Japanese, where you can be Shinto, Buddhist, and even Christian all at the same time, but where the world is always the ultimate reality, not allowing belief in transcendence.

**The reality of the muted heavens was palpable** in the quiet of evening in Hiroshima at the end of a very intense day that left a mark on the pope, who delivered “a human catechesis on cruelty.” Thinking of the skeletons left by the mushroom cloud, survivor Yoshiko Kajimoto, 88, spoke about her life haunted by visions of people walking like ghosts, burnt skin hanging off, and the unending horror after that moment that “will forever mark the face of humanity.” The pope listened intently, then gave a hard-hitting speech on the responsibilities upon which we will be judged, saying that peace is no more than “an empty word” without a full acknowledgment of the “other” in truth and freedom, in charity and recognition of diversity. At the end of a secular prayer service, he summed up all the world’s cries in the most human form of asking, which is not directed to man: “Come Lord, for it is late.” One of those listening was Sako, who is 70. “The pope’s presence takes me back to my origins.” She means the way everything began in her country, back to the martyrs and “hidden” hearts of *kakure kirishitan*, those Christians who lived the faith and passed it down clandestinely for seven generations without priests or any communication with the church. When after two-and-a-half centuries the first missionaries returned, the farmers remembered the criteria for knowing whether the “church had returned,” which included “priests who were obedient to the pope in Rome even though they had never seen him.” Who must Francis have been for them? ■



# “He speaks like no one else”

The invitation to an unconditional openness that has shaken primarily Catholics. The authority of a man who does not play a role. And the need to walk a path so that everything will not disappear... Reports from missionaries in Asia after Francis’s visit.

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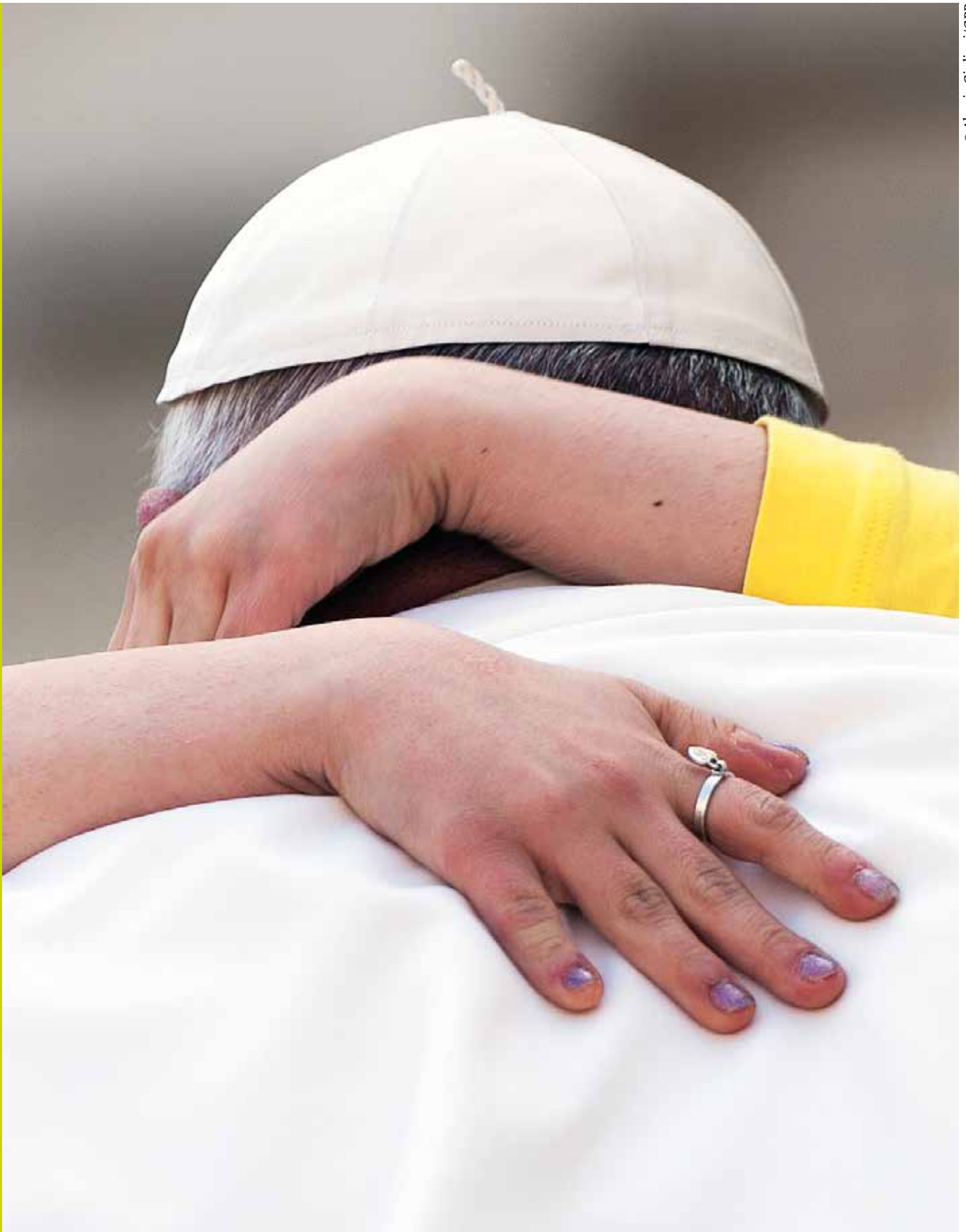


Alessandra Stoppa

**A**t Saint Mark Church in Pathumthani just outside Bangkok, Fr. Adriano Pelosin sees, as if through a magnifying glass, what is happening in the church. “The pope’s witness poses a dilemma: whether to give in to God’s goodness or not.” He sometimes can’t read Francis’s words because they push him too much. “He invites us to an amazing horizon, but we do not want to change because he disturbs our peace and our power.” He also sends some of the Catholics in his parish into crisis: “There is resistance to the beauty of this mother church that wants to embrace everyone.” It is not, however, a matter of having courage, but of following. “I am afraid of saying and doing certain things even though I want to, but the pope says them and does them, and it’s conta-

gious. I want to learn to follow him.” Because of Fr. Pelosin’s openness, his “family” is now composed of two struggling priests entrusted to him by the bishop, a 34-year-old man with a developmental disability, three women dedicated to apostolate, a homeless man who has to undergo dialysis four times a day, and the man’s female companion. “I asked them to take care of three orphans. They do a good job.” Finally, there are three young people from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), the missionary order asked by the Italian bishops’ conference to proclaim the faith to non-Christians. Fr. Pelosin has been the superior general of PIME for about 10 years.

**For those on mission** in the lands of the Orient, Francis’s visit was “a



*“Here the collective comes before the individual. There is some intuition of meaning, but without a flesh and blood announcement, there is no answer. The horizon of life closes in, drawing the people toward death... The pope, who carried a concrete message, broke through because this is a pragmatic people with an immense need for a more comprehensive idea of existence. And he found the key!”*

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beneficent typhoon, bringing rain when the soil needed it the most,” said Fr. Mario Bianchin, 78, who has been in Japan for 47 years with PIME. “I think that the most important thing is that the pope spoke with authority. I use the word in its truest sense. As some young people put it, ‘He speaks like no one else.’ He is not playing a role. He is an authority because his person is entirely engaged in what he believes, in what he does.” There is only one thing he can compare it to: when Mother Teresa came. “There was a brief meeting with Mother Teresa, but it has stuck with us our whole life. Francis and Mother Teresa are people who have the power to make us grow” in a world where “relationships with authority occur only by necessity so that we can stay within the mechanism of society or of some group.”

**After the pope’s return to Rome,** “the issue is continuing to walk,” Bianchin went on to say. “A sustained and deep generation of the faith is needed. The faithful in my church came back so enthusiastic, and even the media followed the visit, but once the news had moved on... Missionary life in Japan, like every life, requires loving attention over time.” This is equally true in Thai society, which “loves choreography, impressions, and appearances,” Pelosin explained. “You have to work so that everything doesn’t disappear. This is the biggest risk for

Catholics.” That is why he doesn’t ask if it’s worth opening himself totally, turning 360 degrees, because doing so “brings me to life, enriches me. It’s enough to see the smile of Buddhist boys and girls who feel welcomed for the first time by a church they thought was severe, detached, and foreign. They come to play here, to spend time with us, to eat with us. Many have started coming to catechism classes. Or to see the lonely elderly ladies who go to great pains to come, sometimes on crutches... Half of those who participate in our parish life are Buddhist.” The many years of life as a missionary is “still transforming me today, at age 74. I continue to discover new things and to look again at what I thought the day before.” In Thailand, the pope often reaffirmed that we need the “other,” no matter how different or distant from us, so that we can “come to understand the Father’s loving plan, which is greater than all our human calculations and predictions.” It is necessary to have the experience of “what the pope is always repeating: ‘The Holy Spirit precedes us,’” Pelosin said. An educated Buddhist engineer came to him because he wanted to marry a Vietnamese Catholic woman—he had been moved when he heard her speak about creation. Her words were what he had always thought about the universe, but dared not say, because it contradicted what he had been taught. “That man was ready to embrace the truths of faith



because God had been working in him.” He does so with each person in a unique way. He remembered a young woman who discovered God in “the wonder at being loved. She lived in misery, in a shack in a rough area. We accompanied her father in everything, and she, at a certain point, asked us, ‘Who are you?’” She started catechism classes, and in the end this illiterate woman became friends with the engineer. There is surely “something impossible happening here. It is because of love that they believe,” Pelosin summarizes, voicing what those living the life of the church in these lands, where Christianity is for the most part reduced to a political or cultural history, would say. The church’s works of charity and many educational initiatives run against this predominant view, as do one-on-one relationships with Christians.

**Fr. Andrea Lembo**, the provincial superior for PIME, who has been in Tokyo for 10 years, spoke about “his kids.” “They can only encounter Christ by encountering someone whose life has been changed by Him.” He says evangelization there is a bit of a “scramble,” like the massive intersections where crowds of pedestrians cross from every direction (while tourists take pictures). “People meet if their paths cross in everyday life,” in the anonymous flow of humanity of a “society in transit,” with its 28 subway lines and high-speed trains. He talked about the children he welcomes in the An-

gel Café (in the megalopolis, one out of six children lives in poverty), the adolescents who come to the free after-school program, and the drama of coming to terms with those who want to end their lives, or who do so: it is estimated there is a suicide every 15 minutes, around 30,000 per year. “There is not a family left untouched.” He founded the Galilea Cultural Center in Funabashi to address the problems of society together with some collaborators (a third of whom are not Christian), getting to know the people and shattering their isolation. The phenomenon of *hikikomori*, those who cut themselves off from society and close themselves up in their rooms or in internet cafes, is widespread. Those who do not reject life in society must operate within rigid boundaries, chasing predetermined, obligatory goals, effectively imprisoned. He invites young people to eat together and to talk. “Living a companionship in the sparse free time left by the rhythm of work and study opens a space of freedom, a space for the heart.” Bianchin, who lives in the hills north of Kawasaki, in Yokohama province, has learned that life in Japan—“this mountainous country, so often tested” by earthquakes and flooding—is as beautiful and as hard as nature itself. This is one of the reasons the mentality of the people is rooted in “the need to survive. The collective comes before the individual, because alone you cannot make it.” The organization of society keeps everyone alive, and meaning is replaced with

a functional explanation for everything. “There is some intuition of meaning, but without a flesh and blood announcement, there is no answer. The horizon of life closes in, drawing the people toward death.” The pope, who carried “a concrete, not a theoretical, message, broke through because this is a pragmatic people with an immense need for a more comprehensive idea of existence. And he found the key!” the missionary excitedly exclaimed, referring to these words from Francis: “Without people, we grow dehumanized, we lose our faces, we lose our names, and we become just another object, perhaps better than everyone, but still nothing more than an object. But we are not objects; we are people.”

**A relationship that brings** you into being and gives you a name reminds us of Caterina, a young woman from the Lisu tribe in the mountains of northern Thailand, who named her daughter “Pime” after the missionary order because she was so grateful that she had met certain faces, like that of Fr. Claudio Corti, who said, “Her father had been killed by drugs, her mom just wanted money. She was 15 and decided to start down a path. Today, her life of faith is inexplicable considering her background. You can only explain it as the work of the Holy Spirit using the witness of the lay faithful.” Fr. Corti traveled to Bangkok for the first time in 1998 and never ceases to be amazed at how conversions come about “through a friendship, as if faith were contagious.” ■

# Fraternity of Saint Joseph



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## *Let me live happily*



**Paola Bergamini**

“Any type of humanity, in any moment of life, can be seized by Christ.” The testimony of the Fraternity of Saint Joseph, which is comprised of women and men called to virginity in the experience of the charism of Fr. Giussani, in the conditions in which they find themselves.





In these pages, some moments in the life of the Fraternity of Saint Joseph.

God, who wanted it so.” Where does this awareness come from? Giovanni, who has lived a life full of troubles and defeats, explained it this way at the Advent Retreat of the Fraternity of Saint Joseph. “The vocation to virginity is the relationship with Him! It enables you to be more attracted by things. It pushes you to see beyond the things themselves.” It is fullness of life even in the midst of trash. “The Saint Joseph” is *only* this, a fraternity that welcomes and supports women and men whom the Lord has called to virginity at a certain point in their lives, to a radical relationship with Him as a vocation within the circumstances of life.

**This was the original** intuition of Fr. Giussani. In fact, in the mid-1980s some people told him about their desire to dedicate themselves totally to Christ, but because of family or work situations, or other reasons, did not enter the *Memores Domini*. Fr. Giussani indicated as fundamental for the identity of the Saint Joseph “a certain choice of prayer and pleasure in it; a commitment to mutual assistance; faithfulness to the recognition of the presence of the Lord. This choice makes one perceive life in its toil and pain as a witness to Christ in the world, or in other words, as the missionary exaltation of the meaning of life. It is the content of baptism pushed to its extreme conclusion.” In the last 30 years, a small group has slowly grown and today there are about 600 members who, remaining in their own personal and work situations, consecrate their life to Christ

according to the evangelical councils of poverty, chastity, and obedience. “The living wellspring for it is the movement of CL,” explains Fr. Michele Berchi, who has been the leader of the Saint Joseph since 2009. “For this reason, the ultimate authority recognized as essential for one’s vocation is today Fr. Julián Carrón, as previously it was Fr. Giussani. In its content... there is no ‘form.’”

**Each story is a testimony** about how every type of humanity in any moment of life “can be seized by Christ, seized all the way to one’s innermost depths. This is why it is very beautiful to see it in the Gospel and to see it in you,” as Fr. Carrón said at the most recent retreat (you can read the full text on [clonline.org](http://clonline.org)). Many times, precisely when one hits bottom, when there is only failure, desperation, or resignation, the Lord calls us in a simple, clear, and unequivocal way. This is exactly what happened to the Samaritan woman at the well and to Zacchaeus, and it reminds us of St. Joseph, who silently protected and cherished Our Lady. Each member remains within his or her condition of widow or widower, separated or divorced, or simply living alone. At the age of 19, after the death of her father, Laura left the church and began a series of relationships, including some with married men. She lived dissolutely in search for something that could fill her emotionally. When she was 26 she got married at the courthouse and worked as a nurse in a hospital. Her nephew, a member of *Memores Domini*, said to her one day,

**G**iovanni pulls on his gloves, grabs his broom, and as on every morning, feels a surge of rebellion. A college graduate, he certainly had not expected to work as a street sweeper. But, as he does every morning, he begins with a Hail Mary and says, “Everything is for You; I offer you everything.” Only after this does his day truly begin. His prayers continue as he sweeps up litter and empties trash cans. At the end of his shift he is happy and thinks to himself, “I’ve cleaned a piece of Your kingdom, and so I’ve done something important. Looking at the clean city makes me think of You, O





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“I’ve seen how you relate with the sick. It’s not just a job for you. Why don’t you try spending time with the CL community in your city?” In the end, she yielded; she started to attend meetings and resumed going to Mass. She asked the Lord, “Let me be happy. I want to return to the church and get back on my feet again.” When Benedict XVI stepped aside from the papacy, she sensed that “I want to be free like him.”

**Shortly after that, her life took a different direction.** Laura separated from her husband and thought that the most appropriate road was that of a cloistered monastery, because “with walls around me, I won’t wreak any more havoc.” Before departing, she met with Fr. Carrón, who asked her, “What makes you happy?” “Being with the sick.” “Good. Verify whether you feel the same happiness in the monastery that you feel when you are in the hospital.” Two months later, she understood that life behind convent walls was not for her. She went back to Carrón and began a journey of verification in the Saint Joseph. During those months, an atheist colleague who had always judged Laura’s faith cynically became gravely ill. For three months, Laura assisted her day and night. Shortly before dying, the woman whispered to her, “You are my hope. Call a priest. I want to confess.” During that period, Laura “forgot” the Saint Joseph. “I guess I don’t need it,” she thought. She spoke about it to Fr. Michele, who told her, “Stay until the Lent retreat.” That period was an unexpected turning point, where she understood that the Saint Joseph was her road. “It was like for Nicodemus: I was reborn as an old woman. The Lord took me back, overcoming the perception I had of my own sins, which still kept me tied down. I wagered on myself and respected my desire to live alone.” Today Laura helps in a hospice and where possible prepares patients for their encounter with Jesus. “I have a virginal relationship with them: they belong

to me, but I don’t possess them.” Exactly the opposite of what her previous life had been.

Roberta was abandoned by her husband when their fifth daughter was born. She asked Fr. Michele, “Even if I’m separated, my vocation remains marriage. But I live as if the Lord offered me something more in this condition. Does this have something to do with the Saint Joseph?” He responded, “Yes, because the Fraternity does not fill a void. It is more. The Lord calls you to consecrate your life to Him as a way of living matrimony as a separated spouse.”

The Lord surprises people also when their lives, including their relationships, seem to be going well. Walter was widowed when he was 40. He had a son, directed a community for recovering drug addicts, and was a leader of the movement in his city. “I thought I didn’t need anything else.”

Through his work, he met some people with whom he felt in sync and at home. Later, he discovered they belonged to the Saint Joseph. All his thoughts that everything was okay dissolved in front of the possibility to which the Lord was calling him. “The day I went to Fr. Michele to ask to begin the verification, I had the same experience as when I told Maria, my wife, that I loved her.” His worries about work, which used to keep him awake at night, no longer do so. “Being magnetized by Him creates a peace that is not the fruit of my own capacity. It is a grace that fills you.”

**Daily Mass**, an hour of silence, prayer, meetings with one’s group, and annual gatherings are the simple gestures that help members recognize the presence of Jesus and live the memory of Him. Nothing else. “The flesh of Christ to which you consign yourself is the circumstance,” explains Fr. Michele. “First comes the vocation to virginity, then the Saint Joseph. The verification is first of all in this. We understood it better with Solange.” Solange, a Brazilian actress who was continually on tour worldwide, could never participate in gatherings or in her group. “In front of this situation, we went to Carrón to ask him what the ‘minimum’ requirements were for membership in the Saint Joseph.” He turned the question around, asking, “Can the San Giuseppe support the vocation of a woman whose work involves those conditions?”

“Precisely this humanity of ours, which often displeases us because of our many limitations, because the sums do not add up, is actually the one thing able to be seized by Christ,” Carrón said at the Saint Joseph Advent Retreat. Chiara, a physician specializing in nutrition, had come to the point of detesting herself because she still had not succeeded in having a definitive love relationship. However, she shared very strongly the sentiment of Peter’s question, “If I leave You, where can I go?” And yet neither the movement, nor her friends, nor the School of Community provided a complete answer. “It was a battle. I understood that I could not do without my relationship with Christ. He wanted me. Let’s say that He courted me assiduously.” One morning in 2013, she called the secretariat of the Saint Joseph. “When I heard Fr. Michele speak, I thought that he was telling my story. The Saint Joseph corresponded to me because it saves all my personal characteristics. I am myself.” Now the patients at the nutrition center she directs are always telling her, “You are different.” The psychiatrist she crosses paths with in the hallway said to her, “Your ward is another universe.”

In the beginning, Fr. Giussani had imagined that “if these groups multiplied (...) they could invade Italy even without the purpose of invading Italy.” He was wrong.

It is not just Italy, but the whole world that has been “invaded.” In Africa, priests, sisters, and also *Memores* are accepted because they are easily identifiable, while the experience of Saint Joseph is inconceivable.

In 2002, Marta went for the first time to the vacation of the community of Yaounde, Cameroon. She was particularly struck by a woman, Alice, and asked the friend who had invited her, “Why is she the way she is? Attentive, calm, maternal, kind...” Her friend responded, “She made a choice of life: she isn’t married and has no children. She is a member of the Saint Joseph Fraternity.” “Well, I would like to be like her!” Marta exclaimed. Two years later, when Marta was in Italy for the International Assembly of Leaders, she was introduced to some members of the Saint Joseph, among them Adele, who said, “I’ve been told about you, about your desire. So then, do you want to be with us?” Marta did not hesitate. “Right away!” She began her verification period the next day. When she returned home, she told her family about her decision, but they responded coldly—her choice was incomprehensible. “With the studies you’ve done... to reduce yourself this way!” From that moment on, she no longer existed for her parents. Now Marta is an educator in a social center for young people having difficulties. “In my relationship with these young people I ask, ‘What do You want from me in this moment?’”

**Being present “in the context of daily life”** means subverting a mind-set. In Kenya, after the retreat, Fr. Michele was asked to throw a big party for a woman who had entered the Saint Joseph. “We have always said no to this kind of request out of discretion,” he explains. But the person who wanted the party insisted. Shortly before Mass, in the sacristy, he spoke about it with Pietro Tiboni, who knows the African mind-set well. The Combonian missionary had no hesitation in saying that “in Africa, virginity lived like this, as a layperson, is a challenge. For this reason, I say don’t do the party. Not because of the party in and of itself, but because there is no need to formalize this gesture. It is about the person, with his faith and vocation to virginity.”

“I am always surprised at how Christ fills the life of these people with affectionate relationships,” says Fr. Michele. “He reaches them in the accent of their particular situation. In the Saint Joseph, they discover an unexpected familiarity, an unthinkable friendship. What did Our Lady do after the annunciation of the angel? She went to Elisabeth, to share what had happened to her.” The words of Romano Guardini are appropriate here: “In the experience of a great love, everything that happens becomes an event in its sphere.” ■

## Marco Martinelli

# “I am telling your story”



Anna Leonardi

He brought to the stage the youth of the Kibera slum for an unforgettable performance of the *Divine Comedy*, which has now been made into movie. How did his theater come to be? One of the most interesting Italian directors today talks about his life, Dante, a love that kept him from losing himself, and about his need “for great humanity, because my ‘I’ is not enough for me.”

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“**W**hen you walk the streets of Kibera, you have to watch your step. Along the red dirt road, littered with kilometers of corrugated steel and trash, there are chickens, stray dogs, and street vendors. It is hard to look up and see the sky.” This is how Marco Martinelli, director, playwright, and artistic director of the Ravenna Teatro (Ravenna Theater) described his first impression of the massive slum of Nairobi, Kenya. Still, he was able to look at the sky and draw it closer to the earth. His play, *The Sky Over Kibera*, which brought together 150 youths to perform the *Divine Comedy* in the dusty streets of the slum in November 2018, is a journey that takes you from the underbelly of the world to the light of the heavens. Today, this play, which began as a project of AVSI in some of the city’s schools, has become a 50-minute short film in which Martinelli gives us a taste of “an experience that has changed me, above all.” It came after his 40 years in the Teatro delle Albe (Albe Theater), the theater company that he directs with his wife Ermanna Montanari, and 30 years in the “non-school” program, a theatrical program that exposes youth to the classics and has brought him into contact with many educational institutions. “Kibera is an immense human trench where I was able to regain sight of the reason why I chose this profession, that is, so that I

could have an opportunity to understand the heart, the mystery that we are. Fundamentally, neither of us wanted to work in a ‘dinner’ theater. There is always a risk, but in time I have learned that where there is danger, you can also find what saves us.”

**Speaking of risks, you arrived in Kibera with neither a script nor a project. You only told the teachers and school principals expecting your arrival, “Do not prepare anything, I am coming to take a look”...**

This is our method: we need to become like children in order to be able to see. Only after a year of conversations and investigation did I perceive that the *Divine Comedy* was the appropriate text for these kids. One day, I met with teachers and students and I began to tell the story of a man who got lost in the woods. He was confused and fearful, and when he saw three wild animals drawing near he became frightened. I asked, “What do you think will happen to this man?” In chorus they replied, “The animals will eat him!” So I asked, “Are you sure? Don’t you think that something else could happen to him?” A small child, 10 years old, raised his hand and said, “Yes, that man could call his mom.” That is when I knew I had made the right choice. I said, “Do you know that in this story that is exactly what happens? His mom sends him a friend that guides him out of the forest.”





**This is the moment that you call “bringing to life,” meaning that the theater does not “bring to the stage” classics, but rather it “resurrects” them; it makes them alive and tangible.**

Ezra Pound used to say that Dante was an “everyman,” that he represented all of humanity. Even though these youths in Nairobi had never read a verse of the *Divine Comedy* before, they understood immediately that Dante’s experience had something to say about their own. They are more familiar with hell than we are. In fact, they suggested their own rings of hell: thieves, assassins, corrupt politicians, false lovers... in the ninth ring, where Dante places Lucifer, the greatest evil, they placed those who committed evils against children.

**The final scene of *The Sky Over Kibera* shows the moment in which a huge human river emerges from the slum and reaches the entrance of purgatory. How did you introduce the students to the corresponding passage in Dante?**

*Purgatorio* is the canto of a new beginning. The night is over and children go back to school, where they begin to learn a new language. In that scene, we used

Marco Martinelli at a rehearsal for *The Sky Over Kibera*, performed by students from Nairobi, Kenya.



some verses by Mayakovsky. “What sense would it make if only you save yourself? I want salvation for all the earth, for the entire race lacking in love.” Then, “If stars are lit it means / there is someone who needs it. It means / someone wants them to be.” The person yelling these words through the megaphone was Kingsley, 11, who was facing the procession and leading them along the way. By watching his expression and hearing the words resound from his mouth, it was clear to me that he was not just performing. He was living those things and announcing them to the world.

**The task of reinventing the *Divine Comedy* inside and outside theaters has become your trademark. In *Matera* and *Ravenna* in Italy and in *Timisoara* in Romania, you filled town squares and streets with people who became actors. Would you say that your theater is a theater of the people?**

I like the idea of a theater of the people very much. It reminds me of the sacred representations of the Middle Ages and of the mass spectacles of the Russian Revolution, in which the artists went into crowds and together gave life to their creations. In each city we go to, we hold “public auditions” and many people flock to us, each with his or her own desire to be Virgil, Beatrice, Paolo, or Francesca. During the Ravenna Festival, for Canto XVIII of the *Inferno*, we presented the choir of harpies as figures who do not submit to men. Hundreds of women came and all of them performed – it is a role that touches the hearts of many women. The greatest surprise was that the woman who gave out the most piercing cry was 82 years old. I have a need for great humanity. My ‘I’ is not enough for me.

### **How do you come up with these ideas?**

My ideas come when they want to. They are like grace; they are graces. You can wait for days, even weeks, and nothing happens. During this time that seems empty, you continue to work. You work with vigilant discipline and make miniscule attempts. The ideas have always come because Ermanna and I, in some form, have prayed for or invoked them. Then during the process of creating the production that follows, there are moments that can be dramatic, in which you ask yourself why you decided to follow that intuition...that is the moment of crisis, of the dark forest.

### **How do you find a way out?**

In the darkness, after days of making bad decisions, you must become silent and hope for an epiphany. When Ermanna and I were faced with creating *Fedeli d’Amore* (faithful of Love), a project in which we wanted to tell the story of Dante as he is reaching the end of his life, we spent months in limbo. We were struggling to create the story, so we finally shut ourselves in our house. I read Eliot and she watched Netflix. It was thanks to verses by Cristina Campo that we were able to break out of our writer’s block. Ermanna sprang up and said, “What if the fog spoke?” I discarded everything that I had written and gave a voice to the fog, making it the protagonist of the first scene in *Fedeli d’Amore*, in which Dante dies during the night of September 13–14, 1321.

### **Does this also happen in real life in moments of existential darkness?**

In order to escape the forest, Dante needs to be pulled out by a human chain. The human hands that helped me were first of all of my father, and then those of Ermanna. I lost my faith when I was 24 years old. It was the most tragic moment of my life. I could no longer feel the affection for me of the “You” who I had been used to talking to since I was little. I spent two years thinking that it had all been an illusion in my mind. I was wounded and in mourning, and I felt tormented to the point

of being open to suicide. I was saved by Ermanna and by the theater.

### How?

Ermanna and I got married when we were 20 years old with the great dream of having our own theater. We were still at university and everyone thought we were crazy. A year later, we created our first theater company, “Maranatha.” Then later when I was going through dark times, Ermanna’s love saved me from drowning myself in illogical thoughts. I define it as a “Dionysian love,” because Dionysius, the god of theater for the ancient Greeks, kept me bound to the sacred. Through Dionysius, I gradually rediscovered Christ, who moves my heart. The great illusion was the lunacy that I had sunk into. “It was from there that we emerged, to see—once more—the stars.” With this verse, Dante concludes the *Inferno*. In reality, there, in that first step that frees you from blindness, you already see the light of paradise.

**In your most recent book, *Nel nome di Dante (In the name of Dante)*, you talk about your father, Vincenzo, who would wake you up every morning by reciting Dante, Esopo, Toto, and Guareschi...**

My father, even though he came from a family of farmers, was able, through a series of coincidences, to attend a classical high school. He became an official for the Christian Democratic Party in Ravenna. He infused in me, from the time I was a small child, his passion not only for Dante, but also for politics in its highest form. I absorbed all of these things like a kind of music. He never taught me from behind a desk; he was just a happy man who mixed serious things with silly things. As St. Augustine said, “The soul is nourished by what gives you joy.”

### How have you put into practice what has been passed down to you?

Vincenzo was my teacher without trying to be, from the time he would sit at my bedside in the mornings, always telling me new stories, until the day he died in 2009. He lives in my heart, which I see in the way I try to interact with teens who participate in our “non-school” programs. We named it this, even though it is an educational program, to underline its two essential conditions: desire and freedom. No one is forced to come. You come because inside your heart you want to be there. It is a call that I, first and foremost, must answer.

**The non-school program has produced great fruit, taking root in vastly different lands, from Nairobi to Scampia in Naples, and in many classical high schools in big cities...**

In every part of the world youth long to find adults who have the courage to do what they talk about. In me they do not look for a director, but someone who can respond to what is good and bad about their lives, someone who takes responsibility for them. In Scampia, the social workers asked me if Simone could join in. He was 12 years old and did not go to school anymore—his entire family was in jail. Any excuse was enough for him to pick arguments or fights. This went on for months—he would kick the stage as we worked with the others preparing to perform *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry.

### And then what happened?

One day Simone approached me like a wild cat. We were sitting in a group and working on a scene in which Ubu’s henchmen were supposed to kill his rival. In my ear he whispered, “I have an idea for how to do it, but I will only tell you.” We sat in a corner and

he began to describe to me a scene of escalating violence and torture. It was a complete piece, a mix between Eduardo and *Gomorra*. I was thrilled and said, “We must write this down, start dictating it!” Before joining the other youth, he grabbed my arm and as he snatched the sheets of paper from my hand he asked, “Marco, can I sign it?” He had begun to sense that the things around him and the life of the stage could become his own.

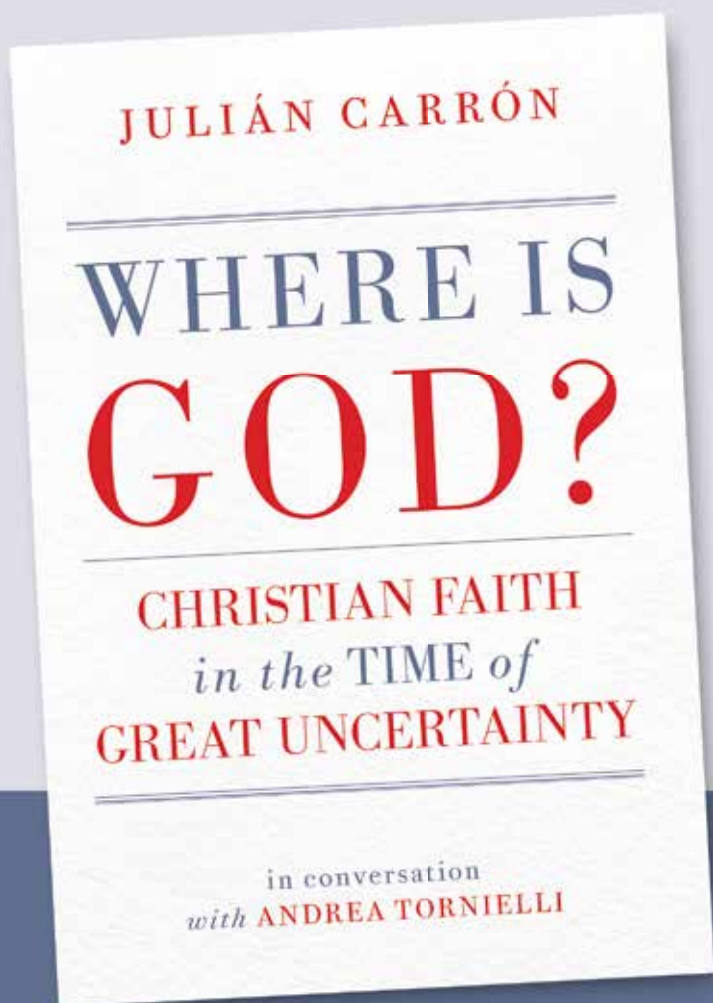
**So then the non-school program can be compared to the “dark forest,” a meeting place that is also where a journey begins...**

The theater is a place of belonging. In a time of “non-spaces,” where people are often condemned to being part of an anonymous mass or mimicking superficial characters, the theater is the kingdom of people whose eyes meet. “You and I together” is a subversive act in the eyes of the world today. The theater can touch the heart of every individual because it says, “I am telling your story.” When we open ourselves to others, we become open to Another.

### Another with a capital “A”?

Yes, because in the theater, just as in other places where one has real experiences, you are pulled away from falsehood and become grounded in the mystery. What allows us to see clearly? Maybe we need a crossed gaze: one eye looking at what is happening here and one looking toward the sky. Our “daily workshop” is centered in the polis and the Mystery at the same time. I am filled with emotion as I think of Antoni Gaudí, who, while standing on the construction site of the Sagrada Família with his feet planted in the mud watching a stonecutter, never stopped asking, “Lord, speak to me!” ■





# WHERE IS GOD?

CHRISTIAN FAITH  
*in the TIME of*  
GREAT UNCERTAINTY

Julián Carrón  
*in conversation with*  
Andrea Torielli

Should we battle a plural and relativistic society by raising barriers and walls, or should we accept the opportunity to announce the Gospel in a new way? This is the challenge Christians are facing today.

In an extended interview with Vatican expert Andrea Torielli, Julián Carrón examines the historical moment we are living through in order to revive the essential core of Christian faith. Starting from the realization that the world is experiencing an evolution in which the difficulty of finding shared values and natural morality makes sincere dialogue between believers and non-believers challenging, Carrón reflects on the possibility of communicating the essence of the Christian faith in a form that can inspire interest in modern times.

Addressing the central questions concerning the announcement of Christian faith in today's less regimented society, *Where Is God?* discovers and rediscovers the contents of Christianity and asks how they can be witnessed again in a society that is not yet post-Christian, but potentially headed in that direction.

Julián Carrón is President of the Fraternity of the lay Movement of Communion and Liberation and Professor of Theology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

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