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Is there life in the university?



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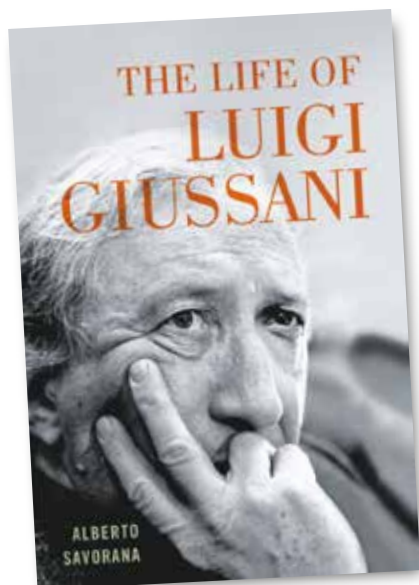
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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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 proposal for life

The state of our universities may seem to be a topic for specialists, something of interest only to those who study, teach, or have 20-something children. Actually, though, a combination of factors makes the university a point of observation that is useful for everyone because it brings to the surface factors that touch us all.

The first of these relates to the context. Everywhere, but perhaps in different ways in different places, universities are becoming increasingly focused on “seriousness,” “efficiency,” “evaluation,” and so on, employing a tangle of bureaucratic abbreviations and references. In this depersonalizing context, people generally feel more and more alone while studying and living, trying to keep up. There are fewer common initiatives and associations, and even a reduced emphasis on politics, while a subtle individualism and a tendency to measure oneself solely in terms of performance is spreading. It is as if the often suffocating characteristics of life after the university relating to the world of work are prematurely making themselves felt.

But the other, and crucial, factor is the young people, who today, generally speaking, face the impact of this crucial period of life with less certainty and apparently greater fragility than ever before. Precisely for this reason their need is ever more laid bare and pressing: the need that something *happen* in that place, that a spark be kindled, that *true teachers* can be encountered. Students need such *maestri*, masters, authoritative adults and companions on the road who do not limit themselves to filling their students’ bag of tools and skills, but instead offer them “a proposal charged with meaning” for their lives, to use a succinct and powerful expression of Fr. Giussani’s, and who get involved with them to verify its truth; if there is one thing that is evident, it is that for a 20-something person today ideas and speeches no longer suffice. (But isn’t this true for all of us by now?) In short, we need fathers.

For this reason, this issue’s Close-Up on the university is full of questions that touch everyone. How is it possible to encounter paternity in action, a proposal for life that lives up to the measure of our desire? Where and how can this happen? What happens to our humanity, to our desire that is thrown wide open, when this encounter occurs and a spark is kindled? In these pages you will find stories and testimonies that offer some tentative answers to these questions. Enjoy reading, and have a good journey.

Letters

Pupa, Tiziana, Caterina, Pamela

edited by
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The true response to solitude

Dearest Fr. Carrón, two-and-a-half years ago, the lives of my husband and I were radically changed when he was struck by illness. He, who spent his life taking care of others, even in other parts of the world, now depends totally on the care of others. In these years, little by little, I have understood what is now almost a new vocation, not only through the experience of the struggle, but above all, thanks to the gifts that the Lord never ceases to give us. The first of these gifts is a new unity between us, a love that with time is becoming ever more true, as if purified from all the human fragility that often complicates things. But each step that God gives us to take must be asked for again and again. Recently, I experienced a very difficult crisis involving solitude. It's not that we don't have friends around us, but they are not enough to dispel the ever-stronger longing for a companionship that would always show me the end goal. Inconsolable, I found this brief prayer one morning in my book of prayers: "Jesus, through Your divine solitude, teach me to know how to live only with You." I was thunderstruck, and I remembered what Fr. Tiboni used to say: "When Jesus is with me, I need nothing else." I have kept this prayer in my heart and it has become clear to me that only the companionship of Christ can fill my life. I have understood why, after asking for Him, the true answer to my solitude, my attitude toward our friends changed. All those layers of crust that ruin relationships fell away, the expectations, prejudices, rancor, and disappointment. I looked at them with new eyes: all of them, just as they are, can be the face of Christ accompanying me, because God has brought us together in the stories of our lives to walk on a journey toward Him. Every week we

go to visit our friends Enrico and Giovanna. For us, each visit is like being in front of the mystery that makes life, a full life, possible in every circumstance. I am often moved by the gesture of deep tenderness that Giorgio expresses when he holds the hands of his friend and by their gazes on each other, so full of affection. Giorgio, who because of his illness has been deprived of so much, knows how to recognize the fullness of life that Enrico reveals to us. I believe that the increase in self-awareness that you talk to us about is exactly this: the certainty that Christ is the hope and positive hypothesis for our lives, always, and that only a simple heart and a pure gaze can recognize Him and thus lead to a true experience.

Pupa, Varese (Italy)

"It is not we who create unity"

On the night of January 19–20, our dear friend, Fr. Georgij Orekhanov, an Orthodox priest, died unexpectedly. In response to an email from an Italian friend, his wife asked us to share with her a little of the Easter joy that the family was experiencing. Two weeks after Fr. Giorgij's death, we can say that we feel his friendship and closeness more than ever, and we want to try to communicate a little bit of what we have seen in these days. The signs of Fr. Georgij's impact on the lives of many were evident in the church at his funeral, which was as full as it is at Easter. The truly incredible thing was the breath of the Resurrection we felt, above all in the presence of his wife, Lena. Through so many tears, this presence was serene, full of certainty and joy. One of us remarked that "Jesus said to the widow, 'Do not weep.' Now before us there is a widow who tells us not to weep." Her outlook pulled everyone along; in it, we found ourselves united, even with people we had never met. The oldest daughter, in speaking to her mother, observed, "It's incredible. Those who were most joyfully close to us were the Orthodox monks from the Optina Monastery and the *Memoires Domini*." No two experiences could be further apart than these, and yet, if you pause

for a moment, it is clear what unites us: the love for our destiny, which is Christ, the Christ who gave us Fr. Georgij and who ran to meet him first so that He could call all of us to Himself. We discovered what unity is even more during these years thanks to our relationship with Fr. Georgij. At a certain point, because of the deep friendship that was born among us in the movement, he had begun to feel the pain of the wound to the body of Christ from the division between our two churches. We heard him say for the first time at a dinner together that “my greatest dream is that one day our children will go into the town square and will say, ‘Enough already, we have had enough of this division, we want to be together.’” We understood then that the affection between us had become so important that it generated suffering in him on account of this wound. We also saw that our mutual witness was this friendship, even if it was lived in the belonging of each person to his or her own tradition. With him, we had begun to better understand that unity doesn’t mean wiping away differences, but rather embracing them. Fr. Georgij loved to repeat a phrase of Fr. Sergio’s: “It is not we who create unity; it is unity that generates us.” And this is what we have lived in these days with his family, his colleagues, and even at home, in situations that are often marked by our limits, commitments, fatigue, and expectations. In front of the death of this priest, we found ourselves united. At the funeral, but also in the following days, while at dinner with guests or in the simplest of things, we found ourselves being quiet or speaking, helping or stepping aside, without the expectation of affirming ourselves, but instead with a desire to contemplate the grace that had been given to us. The one thing that comes to mind is to say along with Fr. Giussani, “Recognizing that all is grace, I ask You for grace”—this is the kind of life we want to live.

Tiziana and Caterina, Moscow (Russia)

“My wife, the Common Fund and me”

Dear Fr. Carrón, in the gratitude that links me to our friendship and our journey, I’m happy to increase my contribution to the Common Fund, although I regret not being able to give more due to our family’s economic condition. This gratitude is even greater today, because my wife, who left the Fraternity three years ago, unexpectedly told me that she read the text of your School of Community I recently passed along to her because I had been so struck by it. She told me that she was particularly touched by the truth exhibited in your words and in the contributions, so much so that she then listened to the interview you gave to Radio Maria. After two years of diffidence, of being closed,

something new happened, something I was waiting for but didn’t expect. I didn’t have any expectations—I just shared with her my reaction to the beauty of what I heard at the School of Community. Only an attractiveness can win, and I’m glad I’m not the one who must produce it. I just need to look for it and stay close to the place where it happens, and it will capture me. If I’m attracted, I’m sure, thanks to God, that my wife will be attracted as well.

Signed letter

Finding Traces at the pediatrician’s office

Everything began on a Monday in the waiting room of my children’s pediatrician. I picked up one of the many magazines that are usually on the table; it was *Traces*. I started to flip through the pages, noticed some of the article titles, and then read an article by Fr. Carrón. Let me start by saying that I knew very little about CL and I didn’t even know who Fr. Carrón was. I liked what I read even though I didn’t understand everything. I have never read anything else by the authors who contributed to the magazine. At Sunday Mass, I saw that in church there was a corner where they were selling magazines, including *Traces*, and I decided to purchase the issue I had started to read. I read it leisurely, but without skipping any of the contributions; I read a few articles several times. I highlighted some phrases that caught my eye: “Why don’t you use your doubts to see how reality responds?” “If you have doubts or questions, pay attention to reality and they will be answered.” I said to myself: “Could the solution be this banal? Is it enough to be attentive to find the answers? But attentive to what?” A few months later I read in the parish bulletin that Fr. Carrón would be holding his School of Community the following Wednesday, and that “pay attention to reality” began whirling around in my head. I was curious and I decided to go. I was early, and people started straggling in. The meeting started with some songs, and then Fr. Carrón introduced the topic for the evening, which was followed by people’s contributions. I didn’t understand everything that was being said very well. The following month I decided to go back again, and this time a couple of my friends with asked me if I wanted to go with them. I felt comforted by their presence, and since then, I’ve only missed one Wednesday. I still don’t understand everything and the readings are difficult for me, but I reread them after every meeting, and thanks to the witnesses and Fr. Carrón’s words, I understand them a little better. Something resounds within me, keeps me attentive to reality, and pushes me to continue.

Pamela, Milan (Italy)

Close-up



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Under construction

Universities of the third millennium and their ongoing transformation: from teaching methods to “third mission”, the system is changing.

We explore the effect of these changes on what is the heart of the university—the vital relationship between those who teach and those who learn.



Alfredo Marra

Governance, evaluations, groups of expert evaluators, rankings, the “third mission,” national assessment bodies, “open badges,” the National Scientific Qualification (ASN), soft skills, competition, ORCID, public engagement, job placement, DID (declaration of immediate availability), rewards-based funding, quality assurance, and VQR (Evaluation of the Quality of Research). These are just a few of the words and acronyms that are now part of the common language relating to the university. This new lexicon—it is no accident that much of it derives from the Anglo-Saxon world—gives us an idea of how much universities have changed over the last few years, and how much they are still changing. The changes originated in faraway places. They are related to the globalization of the economy and of knowledge, which have gone hand in hand with the progressive loss of the central place continental Europe and its institutions formerly held in these two realms. Among these institutions is the university, which has experienced deep transformations in the last 30 years, transformations that have affected Italy at a decidedly accelerated pace over the last decade. In what direction is the university heading? Above all, it is clear that colleges and universities are no longer called upon to just do research and teach at a high

level. They are also asked to form the greatest possible number of students, take an interest in their future careers, produce research that is useful for the economic development of the country, encourage technological exchanges, offer consulting and services to society, and much, much more. Along with these varied demands, universities must compete for the (limited) resources of the state. As a part of this competition, they are forced to undergo constant evaluations of their research, teaching, and their so-called third mission (programs to apply what has been learned to promote socioeconomic and cultural development). At the same time, institutions must work to find additional sources of funding, especially from European funds and businesses.

Certainly, if universities are no longer—as their detractors alleged they were—ivory towers closed in on themselves and deaf to the needs of the outside world, it is because they now have to compete against each other. Solitude and freedom (*Einsamkeit und Freiheit*)—the foundations of the Humboldtian university, which combined research and instruction for the sake of a nation’s progress and had the explicit mandate of forming members of the elite—have been definitively abandoned and

“Students today are inclined to dutifully follow the course of studies and timelines laid out for them by the institution. But nothing is more energizing for a professor than to encounter students who are eager to understand and interested in going deeper into a subject matter.”

replaced by the needs of the market (adapted to apply to learning) that dominates today's culture. As is true in every transition—and even more so in the case of an institution over a thousand years old like the university—it is difficult to predict the outcome of the current changes. Some trends, however, are already visible and we can briefly outline them.

processes of evaluation, but on the other hand, has also led to the hyperregulation and bureaucratization of every aspect of university life.

According to several studies, for example, in just the ten years from 2003 to 2013, the Italian legislature intervened in university policy over 120 times, more than once a month on average. In addition to those interventions, universities must now take into account the mountain of decrees, regulations, and guidelines put out by various government ministries—most importantly by ANVUR (the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Systems)—and by the universities themselves.

Third, as a consequence of the various transformations, and most directly as an effect of the introduction of evaluations of research, the job description of a university professor is changing. In addition to the fact that evaluations-based incentives often give rise to unhealthy patterns of behavior—for example, by encouraging a preference for research topics on which there is greater consensus in the literature (so-called mainstream research) and, relatedly, marginalizing research on unexplored issues with uncertain outcomes—the biggest difference is an acceleration of the pace of production of scientific work. Put simply, professors are forced to publish a lot, quickly, and in the most prestigious scientific journals. It is arguable that even though the number of publications has increased, the quality of the thinking involved has been drastically harmed.

In addition to research and teaching, professors are also required to be good managers, both in their teaching and in preparing winning strategies for selecting graduate students, and in their research, including finding and managing additional resources in the form of grants (institutional funding) and private third-party funding. Finally, for the reasons described above, professors are required to spend an increasing amount of time on ever more invasive bureaucratic activities, including the compilation of reports, summaries, surveys, online forms, logbooks, etc.

What about the students? They, too, are changing. Not so much in the sense that—as certain professors who are nostalgic for some mythical golden age love to repeat—they are not what they used to be. (That, incidentally, is obvious: every generation is missing some things as compared to the one before it, but it also possesses something the previous one did not, something a good teacher knows how to recognize, highlight, and make the most of.) The students have changed above all be-

First of all, after a century, the cultural paradigm that served as a reference point for universities has radically changed. Today, technical and scientific knowledge is dominant, overshadowing the culture of the humanities and social sciences. This priority is to be expected in the age of artificial intelligence, yet the marginalization of the human and social sciences may have undesirable effects over the long term. For example, the development of the capacity for deep thought and criticism which is inherent to those sciences remains indispensable if we want to be able to live with awareness in this complex time. It is only necessary to think about issues like migration, the future of democracy, fake news, and the relationship between humanity and the environment.

Second, the rules of the university have changed. This, on the one hand, has made institutions more accountable to the societies they serve, as exemplified in the above-mentioned

cause the institutionalization of the university has gradually modified their role.

To give an example: until just a few years ago, students could promote many kinds of initiatives on their own (orientation tables for freshmen, study groups, meetings to discuss the arts and culture, test prep sessions, and cooperatives for book-sharing or places to live); now the institution is taking over everything. In certain ways, taking initiative within the university has become more difficult for students, especially because they often do not have enough time. Consequently, students are slowly becoming more like customers to whom universities provide standardized goods and services.

Perhaps this is part of the reason there has been a clear decline in all kinds of student associations or, if you like, a significant increase in individualism among students. Ironically, just as the many activities that are a fruit of the spontaneous initiative of students are starting to disappear, universities are establishing classes designed to help students acquire precisely the same skills they would have gained from working on these initiatives, skills that are in demand in the job market: entrepreneurship, teamwork, and problem solving, etc.

In the university of the new millennium, great importance is placed on student-centered learning, which primarily translates into requiring departments and individual professors to provide a detailed description of the anticipated learning outcomes for every individual learning activity at the end of a course. Acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies must be painstakingly described in a predefined format so that students can understand in advance what he or she is being offered and can verify after the end of a course whether the predicted results have been produced. Student-centered learning also means greater attention paid to international experience—periods of study abroad are strongly encouraged and universities are trying to enter into more and more agreements with foreign schools in order to augment their catalogue of possible destinations and related innovations in teaching methods.

On this front, given that teaching methods that include a more “active” learning style are not easy to apply in a hall crowded with several hundred students in a context that is also characterized by a decrease in the number of tenured professors and an overall lack of resources, the most significant change, which will present a real challenge in the near future, is the introduc-

tion of a growing number of online courses (e-learning). Obviously, it is not easy to say what effects all these changes are having or will have in the future on the relationship between those who teach and those who learn, and therefore, on education.

Generally speaking, we could say that students today are less motivated to go deeper and, when appropriate, question the content of what is taught, and are more interested in conforming to meet the demands coming at them through the medium of the university from the job market and the various international bodies connected to learning (primarily the European Union and the OSCE). Students today are inclined to dutifully follow the course of studies and timelines laid out for them by the institution. In that sense, they have become more serious, though perhaps, through our own fault, a little less critical. There are, of course, exceptions, and they are still the principal source of satisfaction for teachers. Nothing is more energizing for a professor than to encounter students who are eager to understand and interested in going deeper into a subject matter. It is from these exceptions, a number of which are documented in the pages to come, that we all have a lot to learn. ■

By the light of a beacon

Today, what seems important is keeping up with exams, being at the top. But what really makes a person passionate about university life? Some students talk about what is happening in their departments.



Paola Bergamini

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“**N**o, this isn’t working. I’ve had enough.” Davide closed his book with a loud thud. “What do you mean?” asked his friend who was studying with him. “It means I am not taking the exam. I don’t want to study for it like this. I am not enjoying it. Our study plan was too demanding.” Shocked, his friend said, “We can do this. One exam down and we keep going. Come on, we are in the second year studying math. There’s a long way to go...” “You do what you want.” The next time they saw each other, Davide, who had not taken the exam, asked, “How did it go?” “I passed, barely.” “Are you happy? What was most fascinating about what you studied?”

His friend did not reply. A few days later, he looked for Davide and told him, “I will retake the exam. I want to understand better. When I study with you and your friends, I notice that you are happy when you understand an explanation or a formula. Like you said, you enjoy studying together. You are always searching for something.” This happiness is part of Davide; it is part of his life. “It is something that is born from the experience of fullness that I live with my friends in the CLU in Bologna” [*The experience of the Movement at the university*]. This had been something surprising for him. “When I go home for the weekend, even my parents notice. I used to try to explain what CL was, but one night I invited

a friend for dinner and my parents saw what it was. They agreed with me that it was something good.” CLU is the most important part of our journey through the university. It is a companionship of friends that inspires others with a passion for life. The best thing the author of this article saw was this life in action. Those taking part in the experience did not explain it; rather, they described it through the things that happen to them every day. Let’s first look at how they study. Today, Italian universities follow the Anglo-Saxon model, in which what matters is passing exams, always aiming for the highest grades, with competition defining relationships among students. This requires a lot of



studying, but is it enough to create happiness? To live? Stefano, a third-year engineering student at the Bovisa campus of the Politecnico di Milano, is going through a tough time. He is struggling to pass some of his exams. He talks about it with his friends who then send him a letter written by their friend, who says, “I do not study for my future; instead, I am interested in right now. I do not like some of my classes, and I do not study in order to pass my exams. I study because I want to understand myself better.” This is a different perspective. “This companionship makes me so passionate about life that I am not brought down by exhaustion. I can start again,”

said Stefano at School of Community [*The weekly catechesis proposed by CL*].

Every year at the Catholic University of Milan, a group of students in the movement, along with their classmates, organize study groups for the first-year students. The purpose is not just to provide tutoring to help students so that they don’t drop out of the university. “It was during my first year that, while many of the students in my class were anxious about the literature exam, I discovered with older friends a way to enjoy studying, to study a subject more in depth. The fear remained, but a passion was trans-

mitted,” said Andrea. Many CLU students form study groups, and they often lead to an unforgettable experience.

Even so, there are moments in which friendship seems suffocating. At least this was what was perceived by Luca, an architecture student in his last year studying in Milan, after a study session. “We are always here, in the same classroom, with the same people,” he thought. In the hallway, he met another architecture student who was very worried about the exams that he was having trouble passing. “I am sorry,” said Luca. “For me this semester is going very well.” The other student said, “Of course, you study with those people in CUSL” [*the University Cooperative for Students and Workers, a free tutoring service organized by students in the CLU*]. Those people are Luca’s friends. “The things this student said to me helped me understand that I study well thanks to my friends. I would not have given much thought to what the student said if I had not been going to the meetings with Julian Carrón, where I am gaining a new outlook on reality. Carrón looks at my experience as if it were the most valuable thing.” The “meetings” that Luca refers to are really just conversations Carrón has had with some of the leaders of the CLU, which students throughout Italy can watch via livestream. These conversations are an intense work, a place where there is no room

for abstract ideas. What matters is experience. They are fatherhood in action and affect everything. They are something to learn from. As a matter of fact, they are like a light that is turned on, helping people see the experience they are living. Here is a man, Carrón, who is a closer companion than most friends. Little by little, things become clearer.

This passion, this way of being, emerges unexpectedly in the most ordinary circumstances. During an art history class at the Catholic University of Milan, the professor asked who would be able to fundraise for the field trip that was being organized for the freshman class. Giacomo raised his hand. That afternoon he received a message on Facebook asking, “Are you in CL?” “Yes.” “Can we meet up?” Though he was somewhat puzzled by this, Giacomo accepted, and a few hours later he met this person at a café. The other said, “When you raised your hand, I knew that you were in CL.” The first thought that came to Giacomo’s mind was, “He must be crazy! There were two other people who raised their hands... And I am who I am.” The other insisted, “Because of what my mother, who is in the Movement, told me, I was certain from the way you did it that you were in CL.” Giacomo asked himself, “What did he see in me? After all, I am a wretch like many other people, but for me living this experience

gives me the possibility to discover who I am and to find joy in everything because it touches every part of my life. This always becomes more evident when I look at Carrón, how he lives, how he challenges us, asking us questions and not giving prepackaged answers, so that we become aware of what is happening. I find the origin of what I am living and that another is at work in my life. In everything.” The tiny light has become a beacon.

“Everything” also includes the presence of some of the CLU on the student councils, in every department and at the university level, which means that the students are spending time and energy on organizations that are often mired in bureaucracy, and to which it not always simple to make a constructive contribution.

Willy is a third-year philosophy student at the University of Milan. While attending the first meeting of the administrative council at the university, he sensed the weight of the forces that govern the world. He thought, “Nobody can escape the temptation and seduction of power, not even me. How is it possible to love gratuitously in this place?” Over the course of two years there have been arguments, meetings, and conversations with professors and students in other areas of study. “I was able to be present with all of myself because I had a place,

“It was during my first year that, while many of the students in my class were anxious about the literature exam, I discovered with older friends a way to enjoy studying, to study a subject more in depth. The fear remained, but a passion was transmitted.”

the community, where there were people who reignited my humanity. Then there is also my relationship with Carrón: in him I see an affection for and attention to reality that helps me become more and more familiar with the mystery of God. Nothing is foreign to you anymore. The community transmits energy and creativity that you could not have imagined before.”

This is true when studying for the contemporary art exam or when taking pictures of the broken bathroom stalls on the university campus. Willy does the latter “because if this place becomes more beautiful and my friends can live better, then my life is fuller.” In September, a flyer with a quote by Cesare Pavese was distributed; it said, “I sought myself. No one seeks for anything else.” It was an invitation to a three-day conference at Lago Maggiore organized by *Obiettivo studenti* [Focus on students]–Willy’s student government party–and sponsored by the University of Milan; it was open to all first-year students. “I wanted to share our experience with those who had just started at the university; for instance, the way we study as a discovery and expression of self,” said Willy. One hundred students

participated in the three days of shared experience and encounters. Professors from various humanistic disciplines, even professors from other universities, were invited to speak. The president of the University of Milan, who was invited only as a formality, came anyway on the afternoon the conference began, and participated in an open discussion on the theme. At one point, half-jokingly, the president said to Willy, “You should become a professional mediator.” Willy later said, “For me it is not about ‘mediating.’ Rather, I find a curiosity about the other that makes me look for the positive factor inside everyone.”

Being on student council, studying, providing information to first-year students, developing relationships with professors...there doesn’t seem to be enough hours in a day. For Giacomo, an engineering student at the Bovisa campus, all of this activity is wearing on him. It is a struggle, and his friends feel the same pressure. They discussed this one evening over dinner with a friend who is older, who told them, “You are fortunate. What I mean is that you are being called to choose whether it is important to be very organized so that you can manage to fit in everything, or if there is something else at the root of every action.” We felt like we could breathe again. “I reset my outlook. To heck with being organized. I want to live.” It is a way of life, a way of facing every aspect of reality, that is attractive and intriguing, and as a result, the students want to discover what is at the origin of everything. This becomes evident in the question they are often asked: “Why are you like this?”

Every day in the Physics Department at the University of Milan, Filippo observed a group of students that “did a lot of things.” When one of them invited him to a weekend of study and time together, he accepted out of curiosity. He was fascinated by the way they stayed together, studying and singing, but felt that something did not add up, that something was missing. On the last day of the assembly, he said, “These days have been surprising. You shared things that were beautiful. Nevertheless, I don’t find it necessary to give God the credit for all of this.” The response came back, “Does this seem like a unique experience to you?” “Yes.” “What do you think makes us this way?” “You have something that unites you, but I can’t tell what it is.” “The adventure is figuring that out.” It is the adventure of a friendship with Christ. ■

“Think for yourself”



Luca Fiore

An open letter from a group of professors at Princeton, Yale, and Harvard. In a climate where freedom of thought is declining, a few college students took the letter seriously, leading to a year of meetings and work that changed their outlook.

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“**H**arvard, we have a problem.” This had the ring of the distress call from Apollo 13, and it came from an open letter written by a group of Princeton, Yale, and Harvard professors to college students throughout the US. Its message contains an indirect accusation against American higher education. It was the summer of 2017, and the 28 professors who signed it wrote, “Our advice can be distilled to three words: think for yourself.” Put that way, it might seem like just a cliché, but coming from the Who’s Who of culture, it is clear that it was generated by a problem. “In today’s climate, it’s all too easy to allow your views and outlook to be shaped by the dominant opinion on your campus or in the broader academic culture,” the letter states. “At many colleges and universities what John Stuart

Mill called ‘the tyranny of public opinion’ does more than merely discourage students from dissenting from prevailing views on moral, political, and other types of questions. It leads them to suppose that dominant views are so obviously correct that only a bigot or a crank could question them.” It is no secret that this describes the climate of universities in the US. What happened to Kaylana, a student at New York University, could happen anywhere: “As a freshman, I enrolled in Introduction to Philosophy. At the end of the semester, our professor proposed a debate, asking us to choose the topic. There were five choices: two about freedom of speech, one about the death penalty, one about abortion, and one about social media. One student interjected saying he did not see the point of discussing abortion, since everyone would have the same opinion. Just like that, the discussion of this issue was written off. No one objected and we ended up talking about freedom of speech.”

Lorenzo Patelli, a professor at the University of Denver, was stuck by the letter and proposed that his friends in the CLU communities in the US and Canada read it together. This kicked off a long discussion, in person and through video calls, which led the following summer to a written response that was signed by about 50 students and university researchers. “We reflected on what it means to think for ourselves and to be truth-seekers in light of Luigi Giussani’s *The Religious Sense*.” The central observation contained in the response was that if you want to think in a personal way, you first have to be clear about what the self, the person, is. “It is only in under-



standing who we are that we can truly be ‘ourselves.’” The response also posed a series of questions for the professors (“Can you give us some examples of what it means *for you* to think for yourself? What helps you to do so? What does it mean to seek truth? What role should professors have in helping students to mature in freedom?”) and closed with an invitation to

meet with the authors to continue the discussion in person.

“We received thirteen replies and nine professors said they wanted to meet us,” said Miriam Huettnner, the first signatory of the response letter, then a literature student at Harvard. “The tone of their messages was, in all cases, very positive. Robert George, a

“When a professor makes an affirmation, ask him to also give the best argument from the opposing side.”

professor of jurisprudence at Princeton, for example, wrote, “To say I am happy about how you have used our appeal is the euphemism of the year.” Tyler VanderWeele, a professor of epidemiology at Harvard wrote, “I am eagerly awaiting the chance to speak with all of you.”

The meetings with the professors began in the following months. They were small, sometimes with just three or four students. One professor from Princeton, after a long brunch, told them, “It is exceedingly rare that I have the chance to talk so openly about such fundamental and important questions.” Their discussions covered a range of topics: the emphasis in American culture on self-esteem, the future of the humanities in education, the purpose of universities, the emotional reactions of students, and the question of the existence of an objective truth on which constructive debates can be founded. One of the topics was the fact that students often feel offended by issues addressed in lectures and by the way their teachers challenge them. Remarking on this, Jon Levenson, a professor from Harvard, said that if you graduate without ever feeling offended, you should ask for your money back. This, he explained, is what a true “master” should do: push and challenge you. Teachers should be “masters,” echoing the name of the degree of the same name. At the New York Encounter in 2019 Dr.

George participated in an assembly concerning the issues discussed in the “Think for Yourself” letter with the signatories to the response and their friends. During this assembly, Emma posed the following question to the Princeton professor: “My professors know more than I do; therefore I should trust them. Still, not all of them have the same openness to the truth. Up to what point should I trust a professor?” George replied, “When a professor makes an affirmation, ask him to also give the best argument from the opposing side.”

For Miriam, the work sparked by the discussion of the “Think for Yourself” letter has given her new life. “It is as if my college journey really only began when I started to think about these issues. Before, I just felt a vague discomfort.” And this was not true only for her. The work continued and went deeper into a study of *The Religious Sense*. The question the group of friends posed was, “How can the contents of this book help us in our studies?” In the summer of 2019, they had another meeting during the CLU vacation, which they renamed the “Colorado University Workshop,” and in which they shared the fruit of their work. Jessica and Sofia explained how the tenth chapter (“How the Ultimate Questions Arise”) shed light on their neurobiology studies. Emma and Dominique spoke about how looking at Henri Matisse’s work

Icarus helped them grow in their awareness of the desires of the human heart. Quinn, an engineering student, explained what it means for her to say that these big questions help her face even seemingly unrelated subject matter. Matthew spoke about his experience as a biologist and how he grapples with the questions posed by his work in genetic engineering.

A number of months have passed and Miriam, who is doing a master’s in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, thinks back on their work of reflecting and comparing. “I realized that during my classes in which we look at poetic texts, I am uncomfortable. This work is different from what I did with a professor I had at Harvard, with whom I developed a great relationship. I called him to tell him about my difficulties, and he reminded me about his insistence that, during the first ten minutes of discussing a poem, you need to concentrate on bringing out its positive aspects. Only after that can you begin to evaluate its defects. I remembered that he was right: his was the best method for becoming a proper critic.” Amidst her own coursework, Miriam is also teaching a writing class for undergraduate students. “Since I began focusing on this method in my own work, I have also highlighted it in class. It helps me to see how our capacity to go deeper can grow.” ■

Nicco's sense of destiny

Everyone in the faculty esteemed him, from students to professors to caretakers. He ended up in the newspapers because of the way he died, but deserves the front page because of the way he lived. This is the story of a young man from Italy, whose heart, during his university years, blossomed.



Luca Fiore

During the homily at Niccolò's funeral, Fr. Elia Carrai compared the young man to Hermann von Reichenau, the medieval saint who, like him, needed to be transported in a special chair and of whom it was written, "Not even for an instant did he feel 'comfortable' or at least free from pain." Niccolò Bizzarri died in Florence on January 13th for reasons that are still unclear after he was thrown from his motorized wheelchair when it hit a pothole. Niccolò had been wheelchair-bound for the last ten years because of Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He was 21 and enrolled in the Humanities faculty.

His story was covered and debated in the national press because of the circumstances of the accident, but the journalists came to understand that there was much more to it. Yes, the death of a young person, especially a disabled young person, is shocking. But it was easy to see that Niccolò was special long before his death, not only because everyone at the university knew and esteemed him, from caretakers to professors to classmates, and not only because as student representative he had achieved small victories

for those like him who daily faced thousands of architectonic barriers in the university, but also, as Fr. Elia said, because his life showed his family, friends, classmates, and professors that "there is no condition or illness that can rob us of the gusto for life and the sense of destiny." The priest told the over 1,000 people who thronged the Church of the Santissima Annunziata what Niccolò's father, Angelo, had said to him before Mass: "Tell everyone that what made him this way was his participation in the life of the CLU [the CL university students]. Invite them to the Wednesday Mass: they have to know that there is an ongoing life." Gusto for life, and sense of destiny: in today's university, where fascination with knowledge and desire for truth are often crushed by the bureaucratic machinery, these qualities seem increasingly rare. But in the desert, only a little streamlet is needed to create an oasis.

Niccolò's friends Filippo Ungar and Francesco Grazzini told us about who he was. They shared the experience of the community of CL youth at the university and their work as student representatives. "He didn't have an easy character," said Filippo. "But in recent months some of his rough edges had smoothed out. In certain situations, you had to do things the way he wanted. In high school he criticized his Italian teacher for overemphasizing the literary criticism of *The Betrothed* instead of just reading the text. But during these years, what really stood out



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was his desire to live and enjoy what we often take for granted—his studies.” In fact, for Nicco, as everyone called him, every day was a gift. His illness did not leave much room for hope: “It was already exceptional that he had reached the age of 21. Seeing how much energy he dedicated to studying for exams, we thought to ourselves, ‘What the heck for?’ Someone in his condition might instead prefer to travel the world.” Not Nicco. Starting in September, he was in the library every day studying, but before that, punctually at 8:30, he was always there for morning prayer together, and at midday, the Angelus. “His faithfulness amazed us, especially considering how difficult getting around was for him. Two steel ramps allowed him to go up the church steps. Those ramps were the instrument of his change.” Nicco’s faithfulness was the sign of his attachment to the deeper value of the community’s initiatives. “The day he died was the sign-up for the study/live-in experience organized by the community. He was the only person already signed up.” Filippo had known Nicco since high school. “He came to some moments proposed by GS (Student Youth). His father always brought him. But he was

■
Niccolò Bizzarri during an outing
with his friends.

never able to get fully involved with the companionship of these friends. The reason was simple: he had to allow people to help him.” At a certain point, Francesco recounted, at the end of his first year of the university, something in him changed. “They called me and asked if I was willing to help Nicco during the summer vacation of the community. It meant serving him in every possible way, including dressing him, taking him to the bathroom, putting him to bed. But the fact that they asked me meant that he had overcome the shame of having to depend on us. There was something that attracted him and he did not want to miss out on it.” That vacation was the source of the photographs of him that appeared on many websites, with Francesco pushing his wheelchair along the mountain trails.

In recent months he had begun attending a seminar on Plato’s Symposium with a group of philosophy students. “They met every week, and he never failed to attend,” explained Filippo. “They had become friends, and sometimes on Saturday nights he would go out with them for a beer. Then, at School of Community, he would recount how a certain conversation with one of them had changed him.” Francesco added, “You could tell that for Nicco, faith was something that opened him up and made him more curious to know about things and people.” His friends wrote a letter in his memory and sent it to the rector and the professors in-

involved in university governance. A few days later, the department council convened to honor him; the director of the department, Andrea Zorzi, said about him that “in his extraordinary humanity, in the courage with which he faced so many obstacles, in the example of life he provided in his brief existence, Niccolò taught us many things. He was a teacher for all of us, and in our individual and collective future, we should not allow his moral bequest to us to fade away.” In a message to Filippo, another professor wrote, “At the last Program of Studies Council, he courageously served as a spokesman for students who were complaining that the study load was excessive but he added that he understood that ‘this load is necessary.’ He was sincere about this, but also concerned that the students be heard.” She added, “Seeing him every day in the library, concentrating on his books, seeing a 20-year-old realize himself and find satisfaction in his studies is the greatest joy a teacher can have. His capacity to live the present will never cease to be an example for me.” But where did he get this intensity?

Francesco and Filippo were both active as student representatives at the Florentine university. Francesco admitted that “We dream up a thousand strategies so we can be an original presence at the university. But if you think about it, Nicco was a presence simply by being what he was, in the library, in the Plato seminar, in the Program of Studies Council.”

Filippo added, “At the beginning, his disability put distance between us, because we didn’t know how to behave. But in recent months we had become so confident and free that we could spend a whole day together without even noticing his physical problems.” Today his friends see even more clearly that the source of that energy and enthusiasm was “his personal relationship with Christ. The wasting away of his body, lived in gladness, was his gift of self to us, as if he were following Jesus on the way of the cross.”

Only after his death did it emerge that Nicco wrote poems and shared them with a few select friends. One of them says, “Every difficulty is an eternity of challenges: at every step my heart laughs.” Another one says, “No longer chair motor moved / but mind by desire shaken / to seek even in agony / the beauty of the strange companionship.” And, in a message to a friend, he had confided, “Notwithstanding the incoherence of the mistakes I make and the sins I commit like everyone else, I always find myself in front of the fact of my wheelchair, which continually pushes me to seek that ‘strange companionship,’ where I rediscovered ‘that everything is given, everything is new and liberated,’ even my disability.” These were not just words. Something entered him and truly transformed him, so much so that the last words he said before dying, spoken to his mother Carolina, were, “I feel that I’m going to the other side. But don’t worry, I’m ready.” ■



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“*But I am free*”

A man alone, but not solitary, a life that holds true to the promise innate to each of us. Terrence Malick’s new film, *A Hidden Life*, is dedicated to the story of the Austrian farmer and conscientious objector Franz Jägerstätter, executed by the Nazis and declared a martyr and blessed in 2007. The editor-in-chief of *L’Osservatore Romano* tells us about the film.



A scene from *A Hidden Life*, the film written and directed by Terrence Malick, which opened in US theatres on January 30, 2020. In the center, August Diehl plays Franz Jägerstätter.

A *Hidden Life*, Terrence Malick's most recent film, presented in May 2019 at the Cannes Film Festival, was the winner of its François-Chalais Prize and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury. The film marks the director's return to a more linear narrative after a period of experimentation from 2011 to 2017, begun with his masterpiece, *The Tree of Life*. The story is based on the life of Franz Jägerstätter (1907–43), an Austrian farmer and conscientious objector, put to death by the Nazis at the age of 36. Only 20 years after the war, his name became present again in the public memory through the writings of the sociologist Gordon Zahn and the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, both pacifists. In June 2007, Pope Benedict XVI recognized him as a martyr, and on October 26th of that year, the national holiday of Austria, he was proclaimed Blessed in the Cathedral of Linz.

Malik's film starts off with an almost historiographic intention, opening with footage of marching Nazis and displaying a series of dates on the screen, but it soon becomes clear that this film is one of powerful interiority, dominated by the two main characters, Franz and Franziska, skillfully played by August Diehl and Valerie Pachner. Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of the film is the dialogue between the two lovers, most of it silent: the images continually embrace these characters, causing us to perceive the physical intensity of the drama, the power of their loving gazes, and the sense of tragedy looming over this normal family of quiet country people.

Malick at the peak of his abilities shows us love without verging into dripping sentimentality or redundancy, recounting it through the little gestures, half-said words, and inexpressible groanings of a couple full of faith who, in their simple daily existence, are immersed in the small cosmos of the Austrian mountains. The relatively linear construction of the film does not undermine Malick's style; according to British filmmaker Christopher Nolan, Malick is capable like few others of a "form of narration that must necessarily be filmed." This ability is powerfully expressed in the voiceovers that reveal the deeper impulse beneath the images; these take the form of interior monologues, echoes of words spoken or letters read. In fact, the voiceovers in *A Hidden Life* are so effective because, in its essence, the film is about a drama of the conscience.

The whispered voices lead the viewer straight into the sanctuary of Franz's conscience. They originate in silence: Franz is a man of few words, but the words he does have are just. His is a silent voice in the sense that his



Andrea Monda

dwelling in silence allows the creation and welcoming of a space in which the conscience can emerge—his own, that of the other characters, and that of the viewer. Franz/Malick welcomes and hosts us with his silences, leaving to the viewers that which they are capable of, provoking them in the original sense of the word—“pro-voca,” “pro-voice.”

In light of this, it is not surprising that the American director chose to tell the story of this obscure, recently beatified farmer—one can say that Malick to some extent identifies with Franz. Malick is a man like Franz, introverted, reserved, delicate, bound to the earth and to work, and above all, taciturn. In the gleaming world of cinema and the star system, the award-winning American director is almost invisible, as he gives no interviews, does not like to put himself in the limelight, and is affected by an almost pathological shyness. In silence, Malick, like Franz, is a man who lives and acts differently from the vast majority of his colleagues; his is also a “hidden life” that is at the same time openly against the current, decidedly a sign of contradiction.

What can the cinema of Malick be compared to in the rest of contemporary cinema? It is difficult to find something or someone similar. The same holds for Franz: How does

“It is the story of an extended dialogue between a husband and wife. Franziska is the hidden power behind Franz. On the one hand, she seems motivated by responsible realism, and on the other, she is the source of Franz’s continually renewed strength. The two supported each other, daring to engage in gestures of solidarity for the benefit of

he justify his gesture of deep and stubborn protest in which he is totally alone and against the rest of his village? Franz’s paradoxically mute voice is raised against the rising tide of Nazism that submerges everything. He almost always keeps silent, in particular in the days of his incarceration and trial, as if he did not feel the duty (or was not able) to justify his gesture. Like the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah, Franz does not speak. “Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth” (Is 53:7).

As in Malick’s other films, especially *The Tree of Life*, the word is transformed and cedes space to prayer. The groaning and praying voices form the soundtrack for a series of images that—and this is the key to Malick’s art—place the natural world at the center, in this case that of the Austrian Alps. In all of Malick’s

films, nature is always the “other” main character. Here it seems that the alpine fields of Austria, with the tall grass and the grain crops waving in the wind, are a countermelody to the cruel story of men. Human vicissitudes tend toward shadow and desperation, but the contemplative gaze of the director and his characters seem able to sustain hope, as reflected in Franziska’s letters to her husband in prison.

A Hidden Life is a drama about conscience, but it is also inevitably a drama about freedom. The calm power of the main character lies not only in his gesture of protest, but above all in what he refuses to do. Fully alone, against everything and everyone, Franz decides not to become part of the cult of the dominant, ever-spreading power of his time. When the bishop reminds him of his duty to the fatherland,



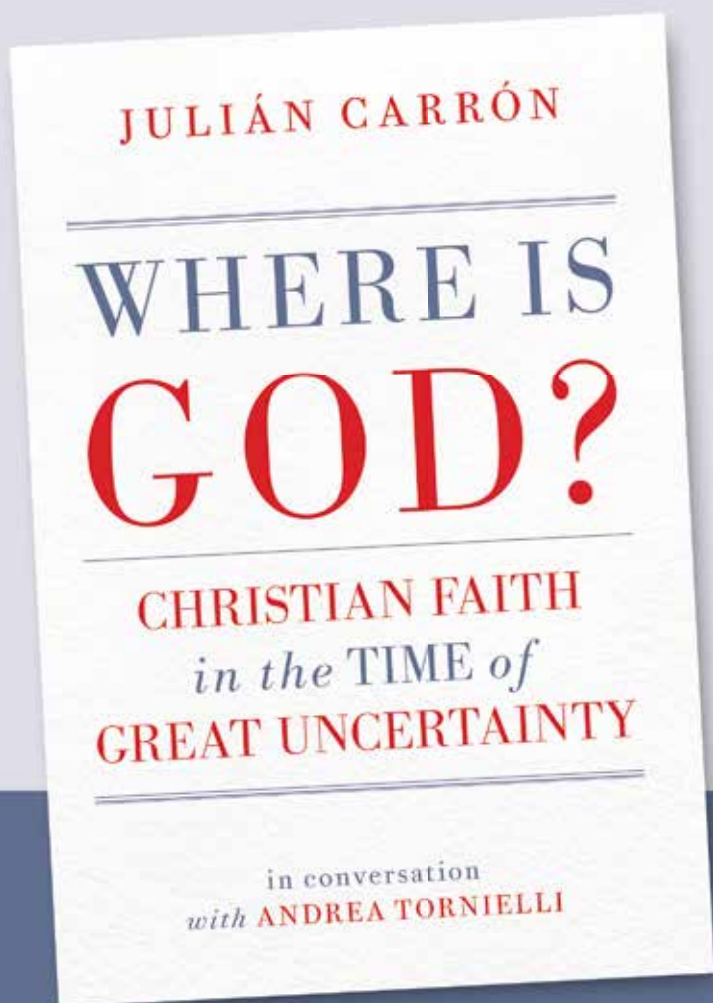
the farmer responds, “If God gave us free will, we are responsible for what we do and what we do not do.” But the most beautiful line in the film, one which encapsulates its entire meaning, is expressed in the four words of Franz’s response to the lawyer who puts the Nazi membership form in front of him, tempting him by saying, “If you sign it, they will let you free.” Franz says, simply, “But I am free.”

This man, alone against everyone, says few words, but everyone is shaken by his kind behavior taken in silence; the military court judge (Bruno Ganz, in his last screen appearance), a few minutes before the final sentence, feels disturbed and asks Franz, like a contemporary Pilate, “Do you judge me?” “No,” responds Franz, “but I feel that I cannot do what I consider deeply wrong and unjust.”

Franz is a man alone, but not solitary. He is a man who loves and is loved. From a certain point of view, *A Hidden Life* is the story of an extended dialogue between a husband and wife, most of it long-distance. Franziska is the hidden power behind Franz. On the one hand, she seems motivated by responsible realism, and on the other, she is the source of Franz’s continually renewed strength. Franz suffers in prison at the hands of his jailers, but Franziska also suffers in her life far from her husband

because of the increasing hostility of her neighbors. The alternating scenes show us how the two supported each other, living for each other, relying on each other, both daring to engage in gestures of solidarity for the benefit of others in need of immediate help. They become two points of light in a world wrapped in darkness. There is a scene, only apparently minor, in which one of Franz’s fellow villagers, a painter of sacred frescoes, asks his friend, “Is this the end of the world? Is it the death of the light?” Yes, in those years of the 1940s the shadows seemed to have overcome, and it was necessary to wait decades before this story could be spoken of again.

Thus, it was necessary to wait for this film by Malick, which draws its title from the words of George Eliot in her 1871 novel *Middlemarch*: “The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number of people who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” Malick has revealed this hidden life, a human existence lived faithfully, and this is the crucial point: remaining faithful to the promise innate to every human life. He has done so in his subtle, discreet style, and thus has preserved the mystery of his subject. What more can we ask of a film? ■



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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