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The surprise of the “I”

What we have learned from the Rimini Meeting

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Editor (Direttore responsabile)
Davide Perillo

Editorial Assistant
Anna Leonardi

Art director
Dario Curatolo

Layout
Maria Cristina Mazzù

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

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

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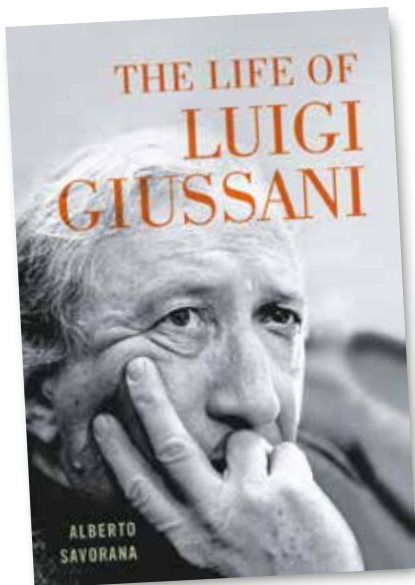
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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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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The wondrous sight

There is nothing more wondrous than seeing the flowering of a person's humanity. Certainly, it almost always happens in a subtle and hidden way, growing a bit at a time, step by step, and one hardly even realizes that it is happening. With only a few exceptions, this process takes place far from the grand stage or the spotlight, but at a certain point it becomes evident. When you find yourself in front of a person on a journey, a person who is mature, and not necessarily in terms of years, you see it. It stands out, and it is all the more visible in a difficult situation like the one we have been experiencing for months, which seems custom-made to strike fear in our hearts, to block all initiative, and make every impetus vanish into nothingness.

In these months of acute seasickness, in the midst of the waves of the pandemic and attempts at starting again, we have seen many people like this, fearless and hard at work. Above all, we have seen them at the Meeting of Rimini, to which this issue of *Traces* has returned in order to look more deeply at that unforeseen dynamic that enables hundreds of women and men throughout the world to make space for an unimaginable creativity, from the organizers to the guests, from those engaged in Rimini to those who followed everything in scores of squares in locations throughout the world. They are links in a chain of surprising choices, but they are above all a series of "I's" who took initiative, not letting themselves be held back by difficulties. What enabled this? What is the origin of their actions?

This same theme runs through the rest of the articles in this issue, from the testimonies in the letters to the report from the U.S., marked by an electoral vigil of unprecedented drama, and in the story relating the facts and episodes that have occurred in recent weeks in very different places but share a common thread: there are people at work whose lives are not prey to nihilism, that subtle fog that envelops our hours with emptiness and doubt ("Is it worth it? What's the use?"), but rather, are grounded in a reality lived "intensely," to use an expression dear to Fr. Giussani, because a little bit at a time, something *other* emerges in this reality and prevails. The true adventure, then, is to know this *other* ever more deeply and to be willing to follow it and allow ourselves to be changed. This is what causes our humanity to flower.

Letters

Xiao Ping, Valeria, Yoni, Andrea, Silvia

edited by
Paola Bergamini
pberga@tracce.it

The happiest time of my life

Fr. Donato, a missionary in Taiwan, sent us a letter from a friend in the community who was baptized five years ago and who is gravely ill.

I'm well and it doesn't matter that I'm dealing with a brain tumor and Covid-19. These things, the pain, the illness, already make up a part of my life. But the thing that's most important for me is that God is there; that He is there is something that never changes. And likewise, my life doesn't change. From a certain point of view, it's always the same: I eat, I sleep, I read, I listen to music, I pray, I take my medications, I do my chemotherapy and rehab. Just as the sun that rises and sets every day, everything is normal. At School of Community, some people have shared their experience as it relates to the coronavirus. Someone said they were scared, others said that they were taking their prayer life more seriously. I didn't say anything because I'm used to having death at my side. Humanity is something very small; everything is in the hands of God and fear only makes life more difficult. And so, I continue to live each day gladly, taking pleasure in each day that God gives me, savoring each small sign of love that He gives me, and committing myself to wholly loving others. I thank God for having given me the possibility of loving and being loved. Thus, even in pain and sickness, I still smile and thank God for having encountered the Movement, which has strengthened my faith and, in spite of the pain, has made my life as a Catholic the happiest time of my life. Lately I've understood that my duty now isn't so much to learn to be in front of pain or a death that approaches, but rather to use the time that remains to me to tell everyone what I have encountered.

Xiao Ping, Taipei (Taiwan)

The unexpected Meeting

I hadn't participated in any meetings, presentations, or other events in preparation for the Rimini Meeting. Then one morning I bumped into a friend who asked if I knew anyone who might be able to print a poster about the Meeting. It was around the Feast of the Assumption and all the printing shops were closed. I made a phone call to some friends, but they had already gone on vacation, and I gave my friend one other contact to try. Saying good-bye, he said to me, "Anyway, if you have any time and wish to give us a hand, just call Angela." I thought for a moment: "How long has it been since I've shared anything concrete with these people? Sixteen years!" But over this period, my desire had never faded. And so, hesitantly, I picked up my phone and made the call. Everything that followed was completely unexpected. I taped up posters, moved panels, cleaned and set up chairs, and gave out hand gel and other things to people I barely had time to say hello to. And yet, returning home, my heart was filled with serenity and I wanted to return the next day. Life always surprises you: you fall, you try to get up and you can't, you try again, and then someone stretches out his hand, giving you the courage to grasp it! I don't know what will happen after this Meeting, but the truth of an encounter I had 36 years ago remains a certainty.

Valeria, Cassano Magnago (Italy)

At the dawn, on the treadmill...

I have faced some difficult circumstances in recent months: I've lost loved ones, I've been afraid of getting sick, our economic situation at home has become difficult. But still, I've been able to live, not just survive, thanks to a friendship that has made Christ present to me. My GS friends and I began each day by praying the Angelus together through a chat, and we set up a program of

studying “together” from 9:00–2:00, just like on a regular school day. In this situation, the hours fly by! These things encouraged me to get up early to exercise. So, I get up at 6:00 and pray while I’m on the treadmill. Sometimes as I’m there, somewhat distracted, focused on the exercise, I raise my eyes and see the dawn. I stop and understand that everything around me has been given to me by Him. This allows me to begin my day in a different way, offering everything I do to Him. During the lockdown, I wanted to help my parents and my brother to not fall into boredom and hopelessness. I noted that they had seen something different in me. They said, “How is it possible that this guy, who could barely get up in the morning to get to school, now gets up to study with a group of Christians with whom he can’t even get together?” After the death of a couple of relatives during the isolation, we were very sad, but I saw what was happening in a different way. I often spoke at home about what we were talking about in School of Community: that someone died and rose and now accompanies us. One evening, my friends in the movement proposed watching a film and I asked my parents if they wanted to watch it with me. Without thinking twice, they said yes. They were so surprised—they liked it and asked me to ask about other similar films. A few days later I noticed that, in spite of their pain, they no longer saw everything as black. One evening, I even saw them pray, something I could never have imagined would happen. In the past few weeks, my mom has been under a lot of pressure because the young woman who was taking care of my grandmother couldn’t do it anymore, forcing my mom to take care of everything. When I saw that she wasn’t feeling well, I reminded her what we had learned from my uncle’s death, and I suggested we go to Mass together. When we were leaving church, she was happy, and Fr. Joaquín came over to say hello. She said to him, “You can’t imagine how many times I’ve thought about calling you or writing you a message. I have to thank you because thanks to Yoni, we’ve been able to face this period in another way.” At home, that very evening, I heard her say to my father, “Your son has placed reality in front of our eyes.”

Yoni, Tenerife (Spain)

“Why do you want to go to Uganda?”

I studied medicine so that I could fulfill my childhood dream of going to Africa. During my last years of study and specialization, my following of the Fraternity group in Uganda was an opportunity to make my desire to go to Uganda concrete, and the

dream became a reality thanks to Enrico Guffanti, a missionary doctor for many people in Uganda, who went to heaven last August 26th. The evening before the funeral, after reciting the Rosary with our friends in the meadow where we met with Fr. Tiboni each summer, my wife and I went to Enrico’s home to pay him tribute.

We were reminded of our meetings in the living room with him and his wife, Giovanna, and of his seemingly innocent smile that was a prelude to this decisive question: “But why do you want to go to Uganda? Did you know that when Fr. Giussani came to see us at Kitgum, on the border with South Sudan, he told us that nowhere in the world was there a more extreme periphery of the Church?” We left in 1998, and just as Fr. Giussani went to see Enrico, Enrico came to visit us during the three years we spent in Kitgum and Hoima. He didn’t let go of us for a moment; he accompanied us in everything we encountered with the gaze of a father who knows he’s helped put your freedom into play. Like we say, if you have a natural inclination, our Eternal Father brings it to fulfillment, not leaving anything to chance. When the time came in 2001 to decide whether to remain in Hoima for another three years or to return, Enrico, together with our friends (Ugandan and otherwise), AVSI and the community, and above all Fr. Tiboni, helped us to choose the more difficult path, that of returning home. After returning home, Enrico and the Ugandan Fraternity helped us to embark on the adventure of work and family life, which threw us into a new missionary environment.

Andrea and Silvia, Carate Brianza (Italy)

The grammar of an experience

Amidst the complexity of today's world, what was the contribution of the Rimini Meeting 2020? A look at an event open to the need to "bring something new into the world," offering a positivity grounded in reasons.



Fernando de Haro

Photos from the *Special Edition* of the week in Rimini (Photos © Meeting Archive).



The meeting with Julián Carrón and Bernhard Scholz.

Downtown Rimini was like a desert as we have never seen it before. The Meeting, which has seen tens of thousands of people coming and going for 40 years, moved back to the old Fiera, now called the Palacongressi—not much space was needed for the two live talks held each day. Public events were held Covid-style: with masks, seats six feet apart, and a limited number of attendees. The real public, the real people of the Meeting, were present virtually. One million people tuned in at the end of August, and the number of on-demand views keeps climbing. Such are the paradoxes and opportunities of the pandemic, including a greater global reach and more “friendship amongst peoples”: in addition to live-streaming in 85 squares in Italian cities, programs were live-streamed in outdoor locations in 25 other countries spanning four continents. This global reach was a surprise that surpassed all expectations for the people who, months ago, decided to take a risk and go ahead with organizing the Meeting. But it was not the only surprise arising from

this unprecedented and astonishing edition, full of novelty and yet familiar because it was anchored in the timeless cornerstones of encounter, a kindled spark of humanity, and the event that happens and, by happening, outlines a method and points out the road. Because of this, it is worth going back to tell the story a month later, to get to the bottom of it, one fact and one surprise at a time.

Attendees passed the roundabout dedicated to Fr. Giussani—with a monument depicting that “X” that made destiny something man can encounter—and parked without difficulty. At the entrance, a volunteer “zapped” each visitor’s forehead with a digital thermometer, while at the same time a group of students 12,000 km away in Argentina were turning on a computer to “enter the Meeting.” The anatomy of that instant is not merely supported by the bones of four decades of tradition. The volunteers who attended the first Meeting and returned this year spoke of a “refounding.” There is very little likeness between the summer of 1980 and that of 2020. Back then it was the time of the Cold War, and now we are suffering from a pandemic that has killed nearly a million people and caused the biggest social crisis since World War II. Psychiatrist Umberto Galimberti, one of the highlighted guest speakers, underlined how our time is marked not only by the virus, but also by nihilism. The challenges have changed. Not even the ashes of the anthropology from 40 years ago remain and, as Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, emphasized in the opening event, this is a “time of paralyzing uncertainty.”



Even in the world of business and politics, everything is different. The Meeting managed to bring together the leaders of the major Italian parties, an unusual feat and a de facto recognition of its importance this year, but the participants' difficulty in moving beyond short-term battles is almost insuperable. As in many European countries, you cannot even find the dust from the wreckage of the political parties and political sensibility that rebuilt Italy in a former era.

The nature of this moment, as the volunteer pulls the trigger of her thermometer and the young man from Buenos Aires moves his mouse, reveals that we are looking at the same experience, but not the same means. "To be alive is to engage in a daily struggle, not to give in to what you already know," in the words of painter Gerhard Richter, quoted in a talk that was led by Giuseppe Frangi. This involves "a reawakening not despite the difficulties, but precisely because there are difficulties that force us to seek out alternative roads and possibilities," Fr. Julián Carrón underlined in describing this year's Meeting, involving the thermometers, the dozens of talks led by people from all over the world, and the biggest public event held in Italy since the lockdown.

Once you entered the Palacongressi after showing your QR code, you heard the new president, Bernhard Scholz, explain, "We could not skip the Meeting this year. This event has always been an opportunity to reflect on social issues and we could not go without that this year." Scholz spoke against the backdrop of the exhibit "Bethlehem Reborn: The Wonders of the Nativity," dedicated to the restoration of the basilica built on top of the place Jesus was born. It was one of four exhibits this year (the others were "Being Alive," "Living Reality," and one dedicated to the K2 expedition). "We are surprised to see the fruits of our naïve trust. These fruits are the echoes, but even more, are an explosion of the interest and availability of many prominent figures who wanted to consider certain questions," Scholz said. These questions, for both on-line and live visitors, were more than sufficient to address the complexity of this time. At the bottom of the questions lies a need to "bring something new into the world," as sociologist Chiara Giaccardi underlined, a need to find a well-founded hope. The Meeting, judging by the talks delivered by its two

most noteworthy guests—Mario Draghi and Fr. Carrón—did not respond to that need with a formula, a plan, or a system. The Meeting's response, its contribution, was the very space it created. "Uncertainty has not affected our ethical commitment," Draghi underlined, later thanking the Meeting for having invited him, making him a participant in this "witness of an ethical commitment" that cannot be stopped by uncertainty. "The Meeting is an example of the reawakening of humanity: it shows that, in facing a crisis with openness to the provocation it is for our life, we can see a reawakening of our creativity and capacity to commit our energies that has surprised many people," Carrón said.

"Devoid of wonder, we remain deaf to the sublime": both Draghi and Carrón expanded upon the Meeting's theme and the search for the kind of wonder that can be the basis for a hope that can take on today's challenges. "Society as a whole cannot accept the idea of a world without hope; it must, gathering all of its energies and recovering a common feeling, seek the road toward rebuilding," Draghi insisted. Two days later, Carrón seemed to want to respond to that call. In a talk with great relevance for civic life (the full text is on clonline.org), the president of the Fraternity of CL laid out the steps necessary to make that hope reasonable: "The pandemic reveals the need to have ground firm enough to be able to face all that happens with a positive outlook."

This is a challenge that, judging by the comments of a number of speakers at the Meeting, whether agnostic or anarchist or otherwise, is not for people looking for an escape. A dialogue about the weight of reality in an environment in which everything seems to be devoured by nothingness, occupied a number of the conversations in *Not Too Much To Ask*, a series of three video interviews in documentary format, featuring Spanish author José Ángel González Sainz, the Strega Prize winner Maurizio Maggiani, and American professors Cornel West and Robert George. González Sainz emphasized that "the risk of a total loss of real things is evident," and therefore, "for me, it is important to keep some tension alive. A tension toward looking at things, facts, at reality." A tension toward reality, which for Maggiani was a recognition of what is positive. Traveling the world to build his anarchic utopia, even in the most inhuman places he visited, he never saw desperation win

out, “even in Tuzla [*the Bosnian city that was the site of genocide during the Balkan war*], people put out flowers in empty jars to decorate their windows as people shot at them.”

“Hope is a certainty in the future based on something real in the present,” Carrón said, pointing out what Galimberti defined as the greatest challenge for his patients and for young people in general. In the ’60s, when he started his practice, the main issues he worked on were related to emotions and sex, and now they are related to the question of meaning. “Positivity about the future has been suppressed, and young people live in an absolute present because the future is no longer a promise.”

According to Carrón, having firm ground beneath us is what allows us to learn from the newness every circumstance brings: “To take advantage of the opportunity, you need to be open to what happens.”

This need to learn from every circumstance, to identify those initiatives of creativity that can save us from the situation we are in, was a frequent refrain among the speakers who addressed the political and economic situation. Many of them agreed that we need to go back to think about and rebuild the things we have taken for granted. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks noted how the naïve optimism of liberalism in the ’90s has disappeared. “People trust their government less now than they did before, and in the United States we trust each other less.” Inequality in society is becoming more and more intolerable.

In the same vein, recorded on the



other side of the Atlantic, a dialogue between Cornel West and Robert George uncovered the need to open political institutions and the financial markets to the power of social ties in order to heal democracy. West posed the question, “How do you sustain these democratic social experiments without having the spiritual and moral stuff for human beings to become citizens, not consumers, not spectators?” Argentine Journalist Ceferino Reato spoke out against the absence of global institutions and confessed to looking at Europe with envy because of its capacity to create spaces of solidarity.

In a world like this, the contribution of a “Christianity that awakens all that is human,” is creating people who are “proof of something different,” people like those encountered

by Spanish sociologist Mikel Azurmendi, one of the “stars” of this year’s Rimini Meeting, who was present by video. Azurmendi said that his interest in Christianity, what made it a presence in his life again, was the result of an ambush—he discovered a group of people he did not expect to find, people who filled him with admiration.

Deep down, this is what remained in our hearts at the end of the week, as the volunteers asked for QR codes at the exit to the Palacongressi. Now is the time to watch, or rewatch, certain talks online, or to listen to a podcast from the Book Corner. And it is the time, above all, to keep our eyes wide open. Who knows? Maybe the same thing that happened to Azurmendi will happen to us: an unexpected ambush. ■

The realism of the mystery

Bioethics expert Theo Boer spoke from Holland about euthanasia and the “culture of death.” What struck him about the Meeting of Rimini? Here is his story.



Alessandra Stoppa

It was Theo Boer’s first experience of the Meeting. As with many others, it happened in a long-distance connection from Holland. A professor of bioethics, he served for ten years on the Ministerial Commission on Euthanasia in the first nation to have legalized it. He brought to the Meeting his sharp, frill-free reflections focusing on numbers, facts, and graphs, asserting that he has seen euthanasia change from a last-resort solution to the default way to die. He recounted that over time he began to think that euthanasia “does not have to do with physical pain, but with something else: with desperation, a lack of meaning, and with a climate of death, where the offer generates the demand.”

Boer teaches at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen. He headed the Bioethics and

Biotechnology Committee of the Conference of European Churches and today is a member of and one of the more conservative voices on the Dutch Health Council. He was struck by the Meeting because it expresses faith “not separate from the culture in which we are immersed,” a faith “with well-grounded reasons, that makes it possible not to lose contact with the world.” He saw this without being in Rimini, and despite participating in a very different edition like this year’s, in the most meaningful way—through a person, the New York neonatologist Elvira Parravicini, a guest with him and Professor Antonio Pesenti at the event titled “Life: a Mystery” (you can find the video on clonline.org), organized for the purpose of looking more deeply at an approach common to all three guests,

albeit in different spheres: that of experience, looking at a need and verifying the validity of one’s own response to that need.

The desire of the Meeting always moves from a hope on “two legs,”—from the testimony of people who face life and problems, who open up new outlooks, and who seek to build a different world. It is interesting when people who do not know each other recognize in each other a companion on the same road. Boer was impressed by the “love and compassion” exhibited by the two other guests, particularly that expressed in the story of Parravicini, who cares for children born terminal and who created a method of “comfort care.” He was struck “above all by the realism of a person who does not have dogmatic positions that say ‘you can do this’ or ‘you can’t do that’ but

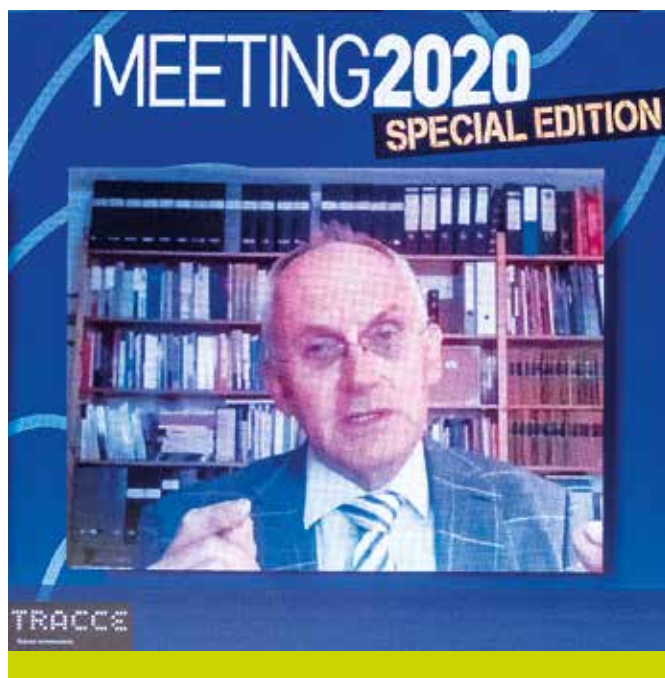


rather gives evidence of practical wisdom.” He added, “This is seen not only in the way she practices medicine, but also in her awareness and reflections.” For Boer, this is crucial in a moment when Christians “are called to a cultural challenge” in which you cannot “offer ‘religious’ arguments that nobody listens to, but only good reasons, valid reasons, for the human person as such.” He speaks of this without emphasis but with the power of one who lives it personally, whose profession brings him into personal contact with very delicate topics such as the end of life.

After ten years, he was very happy to conclude his term on the Committee of Regional Analysis, which evaluates the legitimacy of requests for euthanasia pursuant to the 2002 law. The first year, there were 1,883 requests, most of them cancer patients, but in 2019 the number had grown to 6,369, most of them with other diagnoses. “There began to be various pathologies that were the basis for requests, including psychological suffering, disability, autism, even people with extreme tinnitus.” The most heart-wrenching cases are the requests on behalf of children. One of the arguments in favor of euthanasia has always been the prevention of suicide, but suicides in Holland “have increased by 35 percent in ten years, while cases of euthanasia have risen by 150 percent.” Pressure on physicians has grown, as has the percentage of doctors who refuse to practice euthanasia (from 11 to 19 percent). According to Boer’s research, in some districts of Holland 12 percent of deaths are caused by euthanasia. Now a new bill is under discussion to open the option to anyone

over 75, regardless of the disease in question.

The Meeting offered an outlook on whether there is a real alternative somewhere in between overly aggressive medical intervention and abandonment, two opposite positions that express the same attitude: life is in our hands. “This is a very pertinent analysis,” said Boer, “because doctors either continue to treat patients until there is no longer the least speck of life, or they stop treating entirely.” Dr. Parravicini, who accompanies parents in caring for children during a life made up of instants, be they minutes, hours, or days, said, “When I see my patients, I don’t see just a little child of half a pound or six pounds, whatever it may be; I see two arms that hold the child up to me, two loving arms that called it into life, that enable it



Theo Boer during his talk at the Meeting of Rimini.

to live and lead it to its destiny. What I can do as a physician is respect the fact that their life is given. And if life is given, I follow it." This position is "adventurous and dramatic: you know where you start from, but you don't know where you will end up. I offer my medical knowledge, but the child becomes my guide."

"I agree fully," Boer told *Traces*. "We depend on something else: on others and on God. But in a secularized world, the simple affirmation that life is given provokes this reaction: 'That's ok for you, but not for me.' The challenge is anthropological, based on the fact that the human person's demand for autonomy, absolute control, restricts the very nature of the human." He compared northern Europe to the south: in the latter, one speaks "in the plural," that is, human life "is conceived of as something that we share; people are part of a whole, and the approach is communitarian. Your *we* fascinates me much more than our I."

Does the culture lead to certain laws, or do the laws nurture a certain mindset? The "vicious circle" is inevitable. "What I find dangerous is the idea that death is the solution to all of life's problems." This is how it is presented; it is a position that is "cynical, desperate, and tragically naïve. Believing in life after death is much different from a conception of death that is not at all real or empirical. You cannot be romantic. Death is the end of life, and we have only one."

According to Boer, the "answer" to today's mindset is "being very well informed, comparing ideas, dialogu-

ing, having valid reasons, but above all, welcoming life, recognizing its value and the extraordinary nature of being alive." Debate remains important because "it is very grave to institutionalize death, to have a society where killing is a medical procedure, when society must protect life." But life becomes difficult, even very difficult, and for this reason, "everything possible must be done to alleviate the other's suffering. It is necessary to work and work. More than anything, it is necessary to listen, to be close, to be present."

"I enjoyed the Meeting," he concluded, "because Christians must face these challenges. I think the theme chosen for this year from Heschel is fundamental and very powerful. Wonder is the beginning of faith. It is the beginning of everything." It also becomes a method, as it was in the case of little Samuel, whose story concluded the event at Rimini. The child, born with Trisomy 18, was cardiopathic and had an unexpected problem with his esophagus that made feeding him impossible. While the doctors were discussing whether to operate and how to proceed, a nurse said, "For now, we are alive. Let's live the present, and give him a bath." She got a basin, and his mother, father, and siblings played with him. Dr. Parravicini recounted, "It was a very beautiful experience. Then, when Samuel was in his mother's arms, clean and fragrant, he suddenly changed color. I told her, 'His moment has come. Hold him close, speak to him.'" In a few minutes, his heart stopped. While we were all desperate trying to understand what to do, he abandoned himself to those loving arms." ■

“What if I were square number 121?”



Wael Farouq

A Professor of Arabic and long-time great friend of the Meeting. This year he could have followed it from Cairo, but instead, chose to be there in person. Here he explains why, and describes what he discovered.

For me, the Rimini Meeting is an attempt to give form to a desire for beauty and truth. It is a place where you can meet people whose hearts are continually searching. It is a very particular type of searching because when the answer is found, the desire that drives the search is not sated, but on the contrary, burns with even greater intensity. You also see this in the fact that every Meeting begins with a question posed in the title, and ends not with a response, but with many other questions that arise during the week.

Reading the titles of the past editions over the years, one can reconstruct the riverbed in which this search for truth has flowed even up to our time, and can delineate the context and content of it.

This adventure of knowledge is of-

fered to every heart that is awake. I am struck that those who organize and attend the event of Rimini are certain that the truth can be found in the words and experiences of people whose histories, faith, and political beliefs are totally different from theirs. In fact, the vast majority of speakers do not belong to the experience of the movement of CL because there is a conviction that the truth can be heard in the voice of anyone.

The Meeting is a call to be protagonists of this extraordinary adventure that is the search for truth, marked by the questions that reality poses here and now.

I cannot reject this call. I could not do so this year, either, even though I had many good reasons for staying in Cairo with my family and watching the Meeting on YouTube.

So why did I feel the need to follow it in person? I had to ask myself this question. My answer was that when a friend we love falls ill, we feel the need to go visit him, even though we know our gesture will have no effect on the course of the illness. We feel the need to be present; it is a characteristic common to all cultures. Thus, even though I did not have to moderate any sessions or accompany some guest from the Arab world, I decided to board a plane and go to Rimini, without knowing when it would be possible for me to return to Cairo. I had to be present in that very particular moment.

Prior to arriving, I could not form in my mind an image of how this year's edition would take place. When I arrived at the Palacongressi di Rimini, I saw once again the wonder of the Meeting. One of the



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things that struck me right away was learning that the event would be broadcast in 120 squares throughout the world, and I said to myself, “What if I were square number 121?” Since I was already there in Rimini, I thought I could become a volunteer “ambassador,” proposing for Egyptian newspapers a number of articles on what was happening at the gathering. Certainly, I did not know who would walk through my “square” and who would stop to read me. But the experience of recent years, in which many guests from the Arab world returned from the Meeting with a desire that something similar could be possible for us as well, gave me the certainty that my attempt, however small, could be a real contribution. I discovered that the life of a correspondent at the Meeting of Rimini is not easy. Convincing journalists

far away at their editorial office desks of the extraordinary nature of what one is seeing and hearing requires a great deal of energy. I had to give it my all in order to pique the curiosity of the editors in Cairo. The other challenge was to change the approach I had used in past years. When I had to speak with the Egyptian press, I have always tried to offer my personal testimony about what struck me and how it struck me. Instead, in reporting what someone else says, I have to find the right distance so as not to impose what I think on the testimony of the other. I tried to make this change. All told, in five days of the Meeting, I sent 16 articles to the editors of *Dostor*, *Al-Ahram*, and *Yltrasawt*. Eight were published. Another two should appear online in the coming days. This seems to me a sign that there was interest.



One of the four exhibitions displayed this year, "Bethlehem Reborn: The Wonders of the Nativity"

This made me reflect on the reality of my country and the point at which my culture finds itself. The idea that education to beauty is an instrument for combatting fundamentalism is increasingly gaining ground. The Meeting has played a role in this. For example, when Salah Fadl, my professor and a former professor of literature at Ain Shams University, returned to Egypt from Rimini, he began and won a battle to introduce 40 hours of instruction in art history into all of the university faculties in the country. In the

Arab world, due to what I believe to be a mistaken interpretation of tradition, it is thought that the spheres of beauty and religion must remain separate—the one has nothing to do with the other. It is no accident that artists of value are rare in fundamentalist settings. But it is clear that only beauty can overcome the void.

When I returned from those days in Rimini, I thought of what I brought home with me. I think I learned that ignorance is not the absence of knowledge. Ignorance is not a void and knowledge is not the light that makes the darkness disappear. I understood that ignorance is a fabric of actions, thoughts, errors, and prejudices that were initially motivated by a desire for the good, but did not involve the possibility of observing this desire coming up against a presence. Nihilism is not only the absence of meaning; it is that attitude that causes one to be closed within a horizon of meaning that is impervious to an impact with reality, an attitude of not being willing to change in front of an encounter with a presence.

What presence? The one that generates all the other forms of presence, an original point that is knowable and that can be encountered thanks to the "small" forms of presence. One of these is the experience of the Meeting in these difficult circumstances. The presence, the true one, is an inextinguishable source. It is not an object or a thing. It is an origin, something that continually generates itself. And nihilism is not only the void, but also a choice not to see the presences generated by this original presence. The other word that I rediscovered is "trust." I was among those who asked that this year's edition take place. What it made possible was trust—trust in our experience, in the value of our testimony. This edition generated new forms and new scenarios for the future because of a trust in what we have seen and lived in these many years. ■

Out of nothingness

Some are 20 years old, some adults. They face very different circumstances. But they have one thing in common: allowing themselves to be converted by what happens. Following the lead of the facts shared at a number of end-of-summer meetings. And the fruits of a journey.



Daide Perillo



We could begin with Wafa, a Palestinian in Bethlehem, and her outlook on a life trapped in a historical and political cage, like all Christians in that land (“Here, we are segregated; we cannot live our freedom as we would like. And I blamed Jesus, ‘Why did you choose me to be a Christian woman in the Holy Land? Why are you punishing me? I want to be free; I want to emigrate. I want to leave this land, even though it is Yours, because I’m tired.’”) Then came her encounter with a group of Italian pilgrims—this friendship that fascinated her was the beginning of a journey involving School of Community, dinners with friends... “I cannot think of emigrating anymore,” she said. “I stopped seeing life in the Holy Land as a Christian as a punishment, and started seeing it as an opportunity, an opportunity for all Christians. And I decided to remain here to keep the history of this land alive.”

We could also take up the witness of Min-Je, from Taiwan, a place that for us in the West is another world. “I, too, in this period, have been shaken and frightened by Covid,” she told a priest friend. “Before meeting all of you, I didn’t know what to do or who to ask for help. In you, however, I see a faith that is different than mine or my parents’; we pray to the gods out of fear, but it seems that you are not afraid. Or, at least, that there is something that comes before the fear and overcomes it. Now I know that there is a place that can accompany me to get through this time, and I want to understand its origin. I want to know this God you speak of.” Here, too, we see a journey.

Or we could shift a few thousand miles southwest and hear the voice of Mireille in Cameroon. She describes how the reading from Ezekiel 16, which she heard the day before, helped her to grasp the true nature of these months of trial. “Why should I be afraid, if it is precisely in this desert that God comes to meet me? This is the place of encounter. And so, I would like to say thank you for this place and for this family that helps me to regain everything.”

This is the point: to “regain everything.” Not letting a single hair from your head be lost; seeing that there is not an instant of our lives that is useless for our growth. You see this happening in Wafa, Min-Je, and Mireille, and suddenly realize how decisive the question that has recently accompanied the path of Communion and Liberation—and the lives of all people today—is: What saves us from nothingness? Many, many people are accepting the challenge of these months of the pandemic, and also embracing a proposal. It can be summed up in an expression from Fr. Giussani which Fr. Julián Carrón has made his own in various ways, from *Reawakening Our Humanity* to *The Radiance in Your Eyes* to many encounters, meetings, and conversations: “Live reality intensely.” Verify whether, even in this unprecedentedly extraordinary circumstance, faith makes life richer and fuller, more human.

There is a work in progress that is taking place at a very deep level. It is proceeding at a time of great upheaval within the Movement, characterized in this strange summer by the fact that many gestures did not take place, at least in their usual forms—community vacations, the

Czestochowa pilgrimage, and other events were transformed, as was the Rimini Meeting. It is a work that is marked by an intense and hidden underlying battle, subtle like the moments in which it is unfolding, yet decisive: that between “being and nothingness,” as Carrón said in a recent meeting with a group of friends. “Throughout the summer, in the gestures in which we participated, we could see one or the other winning out. Being or nothingness. The difference was so evident that each of us could verify the things being generated in us by what we saw and heard. Each of us verified whether or not nihilism took the stage again.”

Here they are again, then: the facts. They are so numerous the selection process is necessarily incomplete. Fished out of various contexts (for example, the International Assembly of Responsibles held each year at the end of summer, though online this year), they tell of the path that has been walked in the most varied places and circumstances. They are held together by a common thread: those who agree to follow their impact and the path of knowledge that they open up, a path revealed by a surprising event; that is, those who are moved from their position by facts become more solid, more certain. Little by little, they discover that they are no longer being tossed about by the waves, but instead are making a journey, which is something entirely different. In this sense, the Meeting was an imposing “fact,” both within and beyond the walls of the Rimini Palacongressi, as you can read about in the Close-Up section of this *Traces*. The weeks of summer were peppered with events like it.

Some facts happened before everyone's eyes, such as those reported by Fr. Ignacio "Nacho" Carbajosa, the leader of CL in Spain, who found himself "wounded and changed" by the five weeks he spent as a chaplain in a Covid hospital. At a recent talk, he described the origin of that privilege, saying, "I was in the boat during the storm, but I was there with Jesus. In the midst of the tempest, I saw that the charism's proposal—a gaze on everything that was happening—made Jesus's presence in the boat contemporary." There was a clear, well-defined course: "Living reality intensely makes us more religious, more aware of our relationship with the Mystery. That is the proposal. This, for me, was a starting hypothesis to work from. The passage of these months was useful for this verification; nothing was lost." Once again, we see the "regaining everything" Mireille mentioned. "It is a new judgment," Fr. Nacho said, "flows from the time in close quarters with Jesus in the boat."

You can see what generates this judgment in his book, which is similar to what you can read later in this issue (see p. 18) about the fruits of an awareness within a journey during a momentous time in the US. There are also facts that are less obvious,

coming from more ordinary circumstances, but equally impressive; for example, what came out at the end of August during the Assembly of the CLU, the group for university students in the movement.

Take Giovanni's story, for example. A student in Milan, he found himself amazed in seeing what was happening before his eyes to a friend diagnosed with a serious illness. "I had a 23-year-old girl in front of me who completely abandoned herself [to God] with a surprising gladness." Not anger, fear, or a desire to escape, but "a surprising gladness." "I thought of the journey we walked during the lockdown. I had this intuition that the Lord is asking me, asking her, asking all of her friends to convert."

Then there is Maria, who studies in Padua. "I have often asked myself if anything has changed since March or if, deep down, I start again from zero each day." Her answer was that, no, she was not starting from zero: "Now, when I get stuck—and it still happens often—I know who to go back to and beg for a truer gaze on myself: I go to look for those faces in whom, as *The Radiance in Your Eyes* says, Christ's victory becomes evident." This is a fragility that, instead of impeding one's faith, becomes an opportunity to deepen it.

The same goes for Matteo, another student who studies physics, who, "thinking back on the journey of these months," concluded, "It is a joy to recognize that everything about myself that I consider garbage has become the criterion through which I can receive the response to my question; it is the principle behind my relationship with Christ, the place of His call. This happens not because of sensational events I have witnessed, but because of a mental shift. I feel like I have gained a new way to use reason."

In the face of such stories, of the spectacle of 20-year-olds who, amidst today's radical confusion, "gain a new way to use reason," Carrón, visibly moved, observed: "What is amazing is how this capacity to embrace all of your humanity, the evil, weakness, sadness, etc., is becoming more and more yours. This fact leads to the question: What is happening to make me look at myself in this way?"

This is, perhaps, the key question, the simplest question, when faced with such facts: "What is happening?" What is the *origin* of this change, this new position? Germán, a college student in Barcelona, asked himself this question after the death of his grandfather and "later, seeing how my mom reacted to my dad getting sick. I watched her during the three weeks he was

“What is amazing is how this capacity to embrace all of your humanity, the evil, weakness, sadness, etc., is becoming more and more yours. This fact leads to the question: What is happening to make me look at myself in this way?”

in the hospital, and she wasn't afraid. It seemed as if she had everything, that nothing was lacking. Why did that happen?” He picked up very well on the way that the faith she lived became a possibility for him, as well: “She said to me, ‘Germán, I can only be grateful for everything the Lord gives me.’ And she added a whole slew of things that she saw happening. With that, yes, you can trust reality. It doesn't take anything other than paying attention.”

This is the same thing Fiorenza discovered when she became stuck in Oman after a series of events that would cause many to give up (“first the lockdown, then the curfew, and even more: a pay cut, friends leaving for good, a ban on flights even in the summer...”). She was freed by one certainty: “How beautiful to see that there is a road to walk and a path that becomes human!” She told this story at the Assembly for the Middle East (which was also, of course, online), adding a number of facts and episodes that opened her up to “the biggest surprise of coronavirus: that there is a Person who won't abandon me and never stops calling me,” something that makes you feel at home even with a family of strangers you meet on an outing over a saffron tea, because “He dwells there: reality is inhabited by the Mystery, always.”

So, then, “living reality intensely,” becomes “obeying what God gives me to live each day,” as Silvia, who lives in the UAE, said. In her case, that means four young daughters and a discovery that another is on the way, interfering with their plans and an opportunity to move to New York, where her husband had a job offer. “I obeyed once again, not without a struggle, certain I would experience the hundredfold.” And when “the hundredfold had the unexpected face of Covid”—meaning lockdown, homeschooling, and problems—“it was a chance to ask myself whether my faith and my belonging to the Movement could really help me face everything. School of

Community has never been so helpful to me.”

The true help is realizing how radical this belonging is and how it impacts your awareness of yourself. At another gathering at the end of the summer, a meeting for teachers, Cinetta, who teaches high school in Rome, described her reaction after an assembly between “her” kids and a group of college students. It all came about because she took seriously the deep need of one of her students who said, “All summer long I thought, ‘Why am I so struck?’ Let me try to explain it: the pandemic showed me that I am the movement if I let myself be provoked by what happens and I live the companionship.”

This is what you can go back to: the facts and a journey that helps you live, which, if you are willing to let yourself be moved, changed—in a word, “converted”—generates people like these. Men and women in whom “suspicion is conquered,” Carrón observed in one of the end-of-summer gatherings. “That cannot happen with a discourse. It only happens within an ‘I’ in front of me. It is there that Christ demonstrates his victory over nothingness,” gaining our trust “moment by moment, one fact after another, after another, after another. That is the difference.” One of the most moving stories from these overflowing weeks was told by Fr. Donato Contuzzi, a missionary in Taipei. It is the story of Xiao Ping, which you can find described in the letter at the beginning of this issue of *Traces*. Baptized five years ago, he is now gravely ill. “Lately, he has become the heart of the community because of the way he is facing his illness,” Fr. Donato said. We can see the reason in the last lines of his letter. “Lately I've understood that my duty now isn't so much to learn to be in front of pain or a death that approaches, but rather to use the time that remains to me to tell everyone what I have encountered.” To say yes, and let himself be pulled out of nothingness. ■

What is next?

The presidential election in November, political polarization, unemployment, and racism... these are all part of a single challenge facing American society: "Choosing reality instead of the world of ideas."



Martina Saltamacchia

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In 1859, Fitzjames Stephen said about the *Great Eastern*, on the occasion of its launch as the first transatlantic steamship, that it “or some of her successors... will perhaps defy the roll of the Atlantic, and cross the seas without allowing their passengers to feel that they have left the firm land. The voyage from the cradle to the grave may come to be performed with similar facility. Progress and science may perhaps enable untold millions to live and die without a care, without a pang, without an anxiety. They will have a pleasant passage, and plenty of brilliant conversation... but it seems unlikely that they will have such a knowledge of the great ocean on which they sail, with its storms and wrecks, its currents and icebergs, its huge waves and mighty winds, as those who battled with it for years together in the little craft.”

For some time now, it seems that the goal of many Americans is an effortless journey on the *Great Eastern*, trying to stay safe and not to be troubled too much by life. Then, all of a sudden, the steamship came to a halt. First came Covid-19, and then the societal and economic repercussions of the pandemic and all of its other consequences. The lack of familiarity with the great ocean, with the business of living, causes great anxiety and uncertainty—so, what is next?

For many, the first attempt to respond was to keep living as they did before, searching for an elusive “new normal,” reluctant to face what was happening; they just kept dancing to the music of the orchestra on the Titanic. We offer two examples. On the economic front, the government took a step of historical dimensions at the end of March, allocating \$350 billion in

grants, loans, and subsidies to support small businesses, critical sectors, the unemployed, and private citizens. In the following months, many were in favor of renewing the subsidies which, in the case of the unemployed, are often more than what they earned before Covid-19. In other words, the starting prem-





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ise is that the government will continue to support the country, whose people won't ask where these outrageous amounts of money are coming from and who will repay the debt caused by the spending. A similarly short-sighted solution can be found in education. Teachers' unions filed lawsuits and threatened strikes in states where governors wanted to reopen schools in September—rightly protecting teachers' health, but seemingly failing to consider as well the impact of closing schools


and distance learning can have on learning outcomes, on the socioeconomic disparities among students, and on school finances, especially on private schools. November 3rd is the presidential election. It clear that the political polarization in the U.S. is at a peak right now; however, the real problem is something totally different. Neither side looks at reality, the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, unemployment, and racism. Instead, they use them to promote their ideologies, focusing on uncertain-



ty and promising to eliminate people's fears. Yet "you're never going to do away with fear, anxiety, and insecurity in the human condition. Ever," observed American philosopher Cornel West in a recent interview for the Rimini Meeting, paraphrasing Reinhold Neibuhr, who believed that democracy is finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems. West continued: "We should never be surprised by evil, whatever form it takes, and you should never be paralyzed by despair. He or she that never despaired never lived. Now part of the question in America is that Americans view themselves as innocent, so they figure catastrophe is alien to them." Now that no one can escape the drama, he concluded, "now that the whole world has the blues," and everyone has discovered that they feel sad, anxious, and wounded, "that is the fork in the road in everybody's life. Everybody's got wounds; what are you going to do with them? Are you going to be a wounded lover and helper and healer? Or are you going to be a wounded hater and trasher and reinforce both your wounds and the world's?"

These are questions that have, in the face of the dramatic events of recent months, also touched the CL communities in America. The US has seen deaths and protests, the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement, social unrest, and the movement to defund the police. In the Movement's assemblies, discussions, and conversations over the summer, the first discovery was that no one is immune to the ambient polarization, the divisions between those

who throw themselves into the mix and protest in the streets and others who say that racism is a structural problem that has always existed and will always exist, between the youth who feel the urgent need to react against injustice in order to build a more just society and the adults, who the youth feel do not understand them. The work of the summer brought to light that no one is immune to the instinctive attempt to escape reality, to remove oneself by pretending that everything is fine, believing that ultimately these things have nothing to do with us. For Peter, a PhD student studying physics in Chicago, the killings and demonstrations were something distant that he did not take much interest in. Then one evening, a violent protest march passed below



Anti-racism demonstration at the
Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

his window during the hours of the curfew Chicago put in place to contain the chaos. “Why are these people protesting?” he asked himself. “What makes them risk being arrested for breaking the curfew?” After that he began to become invested, following the news more, to study and to discover that, behind the events of recent months is a world that he knew very little about. At the same time, he came to a painful realization. “I am here to tell you that ‘I want to build a better place, I want to do this, I want to do that,’ but if I think about who I am and who my friends are... If I think about my university, I cannot name one member of the cleaning staff who works there.”

Others found themselves looking at their experiences and the circumstances in their lives, only to find that, as someone put it, they “also participate in this violence, in this lack of love for my neighbor.” If all of these initiatives remain only in the realm of ideas, even if they are good ideas, even though they may bring people to the streets to protest, they do not last. This is because racism is not just a historical problem, but also a personal problem. “I, too, can be violent.” So then, if we ask others to change without beginning from a personal conversion, a more just society will not happen.

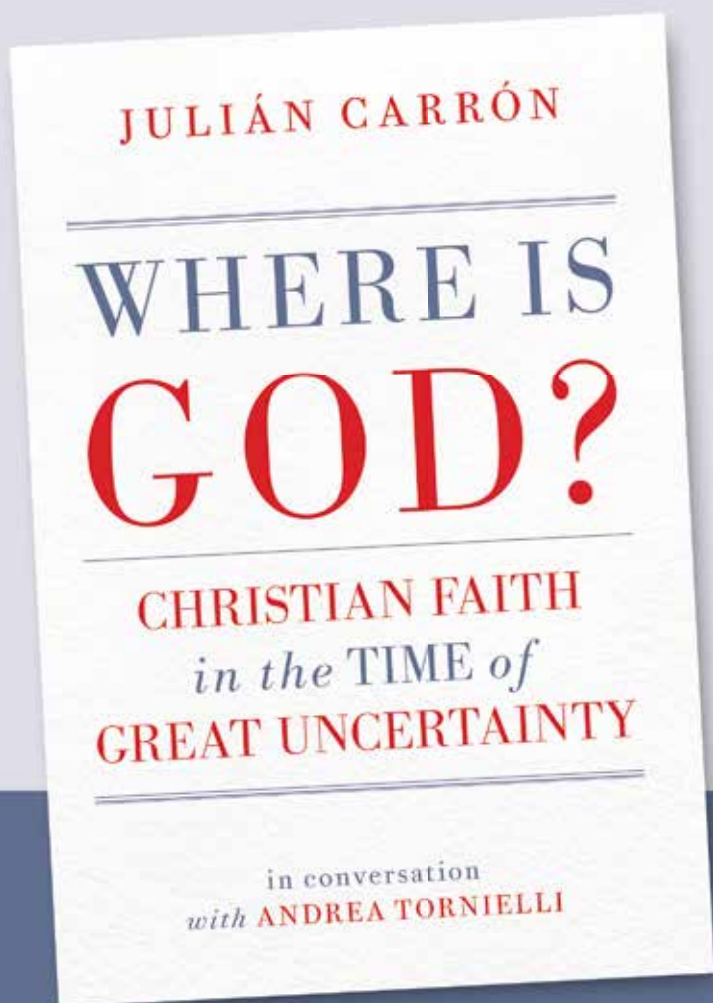
Only by looking at reality, starting by facing the open-ended question of our wound, can a person have the boldness to realize that the steam-

ship has become stranded and take the risk to go down into the cargo hold to get her hands dirty and try to do something. She begins to respond to the need, even when the unimaginable happens, even when everything seems to be falling apart, working as she is able, in any way possible. This is the approach taken by the 140 entrepreneurs, managers, professors, and economists who, when the economic crisis began, came together to form the professional network Ergon. It is a community of professionals who meet weekly to discuss the challenges they face and to help others by mentoring, networking, and assisting each other in writing their CVs and preparing for interviews.

Carolina also followed the path of responding to reality. She is a young principal working in an impoverished area of Boston, in a predominantly Latino school where many of the students are undocumented. When schools closed in March due to the Covid-19 outbreak, Carolina was confronted with two hundred families that had no way of putting food on the table now that their children were no longer receiving the free meal from the school cafeteria provided to low-income families. In the midst of the chaos of the pandemic, the city seemed unable to quickly assemble assistance programs, and providing subsidies and food stamps to undocumented immigrants was not allowed. Carolina approached

restaurants closed due to the new restrictions and asked them to donate leftover food. She began to collect food every week around the neighborhood and to distribute it to the families of the school.

During an assembly in which the question, “How has your life changed and how is it still changing as a result of the changes brought by Covid-19?” was posed, many people described how they found it difficult to be stuck at home and felt trapped into a repetitive daily routine. Carolina responded to the question by talking about these families that struggled to put food on the table and who were sometimes evicted from their homes for not paying their rent. A few hours later, six families called her and said, “Count us in. We want to come with you to distribute the food packages around the city.” This continued throughout the summer, and the families of the school now know Carolina’s friends and their children by name. The real danger, fundamentally, is to live in a world of ideas that does not allow us to grow, that causes us to lose familiarity with the business of living. Instead, people who are willing to dive into reality, to weather the storms, and to build with what they have, develop a joy in living and a love for life that, even in the midst of the dramatic events and challenges of the past months, becomes greater and greater. ■



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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