

TRACES

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03

Generation Covid



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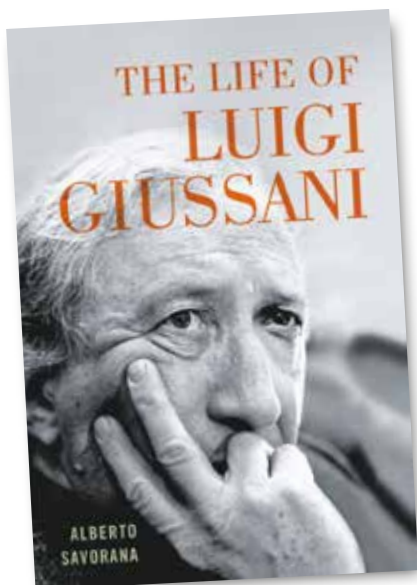
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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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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Generated right now

A year after the pandemic began, the data about how children and teens are suffering is alarming. And what would happen if we saw the same data about adults? We would see that today's denialism is reducing the problem of education to classrooms and teaching methods, when instead we all face the same trials we see happening in young people.

Generation COVID. The meaning of this now-popular expression varies depending on what it refers to: whether to a generation that stands out because it has been traumatized by obstacles and "lost" time, or to a great opportunity to verify what is capable of generating a person's desire to live.

"What can we do?" No question is more understandable today, especially when it comes from a parent. The reply, however, should be clear: "The meaning of life isn't transmitted through our DNA." The problem is the adults', first of all, and it is "the deep fear that everything ends up in nothingness." This is how Julián Carrón replied on January 30th during the online event, "Growing and Helping Others Grow During a Pandemic." The evening was inspired by a letter some teachers in CL wrote to *Corriere della Sera* and by Carrón's book *Education: Communicating One's Self*, a contribution to the Global Compact convened by the pope in response to what he called "an educational catastrophe" to which "we must react." But how can we react? When every effort seems doomed from the start, we need to be walking a road firsthand. "In a society like this, you cannot create something new if not with a life," Giussani said back in 1978. "There is no structure, or organization, or initiative that can last. Only a different and new life can revolutionize structures, initiatives, relationships, everything." In this issue, you will find the stories of people who communicate the gift that sustains this life and who respond to that urgent need for meaning, for oneself and for others, a gift that transcends the confines of a classroom, geographic location, profession, age, or circumstance. These stories tell us that everything educates us, from the way we work and return home to the way we face pain or watch a movie.

Education is always running against the wind, we have heard people say lately. It takes something special to rise up with more power than the wind: in a state of apathy, only a person who speaks to our deep need to be loved gets us moving. Like Antonio, for example, who started teaching after age 50, exactly one month before COVID stopped the world in its tracks. In the conversation held on January 30th, he gave a moving account of what happened with his students: they were overtaken by a gaze on reality that he had met when he encountered a Christian people. "If we have not been looked at in a true way, we cannot look at others in a true way," Carrón concluded on that evening. "Better—if we are not looked at now! If we are not generated now."

Letters

Stefania, Sara, Sasà, Marina

edited by
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Another move

For me this year has been full of challenges above and beyond the pandemic. My husband and I have been asked to endure stressful situations that have required a lot of patience. My family in Italy has been touched by hardships and illnesses that have tried our lives and which have made it hard to be unable to go and visit them. The latest challenge was having to relocate from Ticino to Basel because of my husband's work. He is a medical doctor and his job requires a great commitment of energy and time. For this reason, I found myself spending a lot of time home alone with all my questions about our new life and the journey the Lord is asking us to make. What surprised me the most was realizing that the fragility in my life had become the crack through which I could flourish again, although perhaps in a way different than I anticipated. All my questions about meaning and all my need for answers to the challenges in front of me caused me to desire and to ask that time not be wasted. I realized this at the beginning of our time in Basel, when I immediately began to seek out people from the community. This is very unusual for me because normally, due to my shyness, I prefer to wait for others to approach me. In spite of the effort this required, it allowed me to breathe; to begin talking about things has been the first step in facing the situation without being suffocated, and there was not a single question or situation that I could not discuss with certain friends. I also realized that this was not a good thing just for me, but for them as well, since a desire to live out a friendship was reciprocal. I went all in, and I saw the blossoming of new relationships and the reflowering of others I thought dead. The problem, in fact, is not one

of spending an evening together, but of having people with whom to talk about the urgency of our lives without discounting anything, with whom it is possible to see that, in spite of all the struggles, there is One who loves me as I am, here and now. It is not like I wanted to have all these challenges and a pandemic in order to live my relationships in this way. Like Chesterton said, "Only when you are truly shipwrecked do you find what you really need." It is undeniable that this year's trials, one after the other, have made me so needy that I cannot think of myself as self-sufficient or capable of saving myself. This has marked a step toward a more mature way of living, in my desire not to waste time, in what I need to do, and in my relationships, even if all of this means simply taking care of my house and emptying moving boxes.

Stefania, Basel (Switzerland)

That letter in *Traces*

Exactly one year after *Traces* published our letter about the experience of our daughter, Costanza, being in the hospital, we were contacted by *Traces*—after reading that letter, a couple wanted to contact us. After about three seconds of reflection, I said: "Yes, sure!" expecting and possibly presuming that the couple was living an experience of having a child in the hospital, as we had. We started corresponding via email, and from the start, their experience hit me painfully: a few months before, they had lost their three-year-old daughter. After an initial disoriented moment, I asked why they wanted to contact us; I felt completely inadequate. The mother wrote, "I read the magazine in March after a mother whose child had been released from the hospital left it there for me to read. Your letter was the first thing I read. It impressed me right away: God, through that coincidental event, wanted to tell me something. Exactly two months later, our daughter died. I wanted to thank you because without realizing it, you have been the messenger of something." We kept corresponding.

Some time ago this email arrived: “Here is a precious gift,” and attached was a picture of the front cover of the January 2021 issue of *Traces*. Exactly a year later, an aunt and uncle from the Movement had given them a subscription to *Traces*, and just that very day, our copy had arrived as well. We started looking at the same thing in every sense. I was even more surprised when one Wednesday evening I received this email: “Hi Sara! I’m here! I’m entering this new reality.” Attached was a screenshot showing an online connection to the School of Community. I can only be astonished yet again at how the Lord uses us to touch other people’s hearts, to make them blossom in an unimaginable way.

Sara, Conegliano (Italy)

Nicole’s classwork

Nicole, my ten-year-old daughter, is a fifth-grader, and one day upon returning from school, she showed me an award she received for a piece of writing homework. She is an excellent student, so I didn’t pay too much attention—I simply congratulated her. Two days later, I went to pick her up at school, and one of Nicole’s former teachers told me, “Nicole wrote a very beautiful piece that was read by the principal during the school assembly.” All this enthusiasm piqued my curiosity. The following morning, I received the email with the school newsletter where it was published. “As I walked by the fields I could hear the whistles of the birds like they were telling me something. The echoes of teachers teaching slipped by my ear, the gentle breeze brushing against my skin, the beautiful scent of flowers made a tingle on my nose. As I walked down the dusty playground something caught my eye and filled me with glee: the sight of small children playing. I could feel the blazing sun bring warmth to my fragile skin. The wet grass slid under my new school shoes. At one point I stopped. I just wanted to embrace the world and thank God for it. I looked up in the sky, and I saw birds flying like they were one with the world. As I was going to class I was almost able to taste my sweet delicious pancakes. As I gazed at the sky I realized the sky was as pretty as the sunset and that I live in a wonderful world.” I was incredulous and at the same time moved because it is beautiful to see this happening. I immediately thought of the meeting on January 30th with Fr. Carrón on education that I followed from Kampala. I realized that what she said with the simplicity of a ten-year-old girl is the experience described by Fr. Giussani in Chapter 10 of *The Religious Sense*, when he speaks of the “awe of the ‘presence,’” of the original experience of the

“Other” and of the “given” that in Nicole is the beginning of a journey of the awareness of the “I.” “The awe, the marvel of this reality which imposes itself upon me,” writes Fr. Giussani, “is at the origin of the awakening of the human consciousness.” I tend to easily lose myself in pettiness and in my own ideas; I’m much less simple than the recognition that “I am You-who-make-me.” And in this, I have been educated by my daughter.

Sasà, Kampala (Uganda)

Abraham and the boy at the computer

In Chiavari, a few not-so-young people, mostly in our seventies, learned how to navigate digital tools and made themselves available to help high school students with homework. None of us put forward the objection “I cannot do it”; in other words, we are little old people who do not give up. A sophomore at the technology high school asked that I help him study *The Betrothed* and history. Every lesson we offer is packed with questions and objections related to the topic; they never stop at the surface of the content, but expand their questions to the point where they involve us personally. One Sunday evening (requests arrive always at the least expected time), a student asked me to help him with history, specifically the Council of Nicaea and our creed. He started laughing and asked, “Who says that there is only one God; perhaps there are two or three.... What do we know?” Like a lightning bolt, the Fraternity Exercises we had many years ago with Fr. Giussani came to mind, in which he had us retrace the journey of Abraham and how God manifested Himself to him. Here I am, back in time, seated there listening to Fr. Giussani, hanging on those words that became engraved in my memory to the point that they popped into my head now, here, in front of a computer, while having a conversation with this boy and telling him how God chose one man to whom He revealed His existence, and about the fact that He is the companion for the boy’s life. I felt full of gratitude toward the Holy Spirit and Fr. Giussani, moved in front of the eyes of that boy, glued to the screen listening to what I was saying. At the end I added, “You see, He revealed Himself to Abraham and all the way down in history until He arrived at you.” This is the power of belonging, in time, to that journey of faith, the power of being a witness, the power of being a rebuilder of damaged foundations. A few days later, he showed up again for help with Logical Analysis and also invited one of his friends, who was curious, to log on.

Marina, Chiavari (Italy)



4

Vital education



Paola Bergamini
Photo by Roberto Masi

Is it possible to grow and help others to do so during the pandemic? The public dialogue between Julián Carrón, teachers, and parents has opened a way within this question, which touches the lives of everyone.



“Is there nothing we can do?” a teacher wrote Fr. Pigi Banna, a theology professor at Milan’s Catholic University. The question referred to the alarming results of an IPSOS survey on the problems of young people at school, their disinterest and lack of motivation and the risk that they will drop out. Don Pigi asked on their chat group for the input of some teacher friends involved in Student Youth. “What do you think?” Francesco Barberis, the principal of a private school, who in those days had just finished a meeting with other principals to talk about the difficult situation, exclaimed, “We

must return to the classroom!” Francesca Zanelli, a literature teacher, immediately responded, “What are we talking about? The problem of dropouts was already there. Online lessons only highlighted it, revealing the deeper questions of their pain and unease.” Nobody doubted that the best thing would be to return to the classroom, and they all agreed on the importance of analyses of and possible solutions to the various technical problems. These are all indisputable, but are they enough to heal the wounds they see in their students? The question that has guided their journey of friendship in these months came to the fore: “What do we transmit to the students? Why are we with them?” This is the true point at the origin of the educative relationship, and it is something they cannot keep to themselves. Working on the phone, they composed a letter that does not offer simple recipes or prepackaged solutions, but recounts a “vital” experience of good that happens in the heart of students, and before that, in their own hearts, which gives hope. The letter, edited down for reasons of space, was published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. It was a stone thrown in a pond, whose concentric circles have spread out and touched teachers, parents, educators, and others. A few days after it was published, Francesca received a WhatsApp message from an ex-student she has not seen for ten years and who now works as a nurse. “Thank you for sharing in a few lines what you have discovered. I’m grateful for having met you.”

In that same period, Giovanni Sama, a sales representative and father, read Julián Carrón’s book, *Educazi-*

one: Comunicazione di sé [Education: Communication of One’s Self], and thought, “This pertains to me, to everybody! A person who educates transmits the passion for human beings through her life. This happens at every level, at home, with the family, and at work. It changes reality.” He spoke about it with some friends and wrote to Carrón, “I sense that my life and our verification of faith are played out in the business of education. You don’t have a presence in the world or in the family if first of all you don’t have an ‘I’ changed by an encounter with Christ now, so that, even living like everyone else, you communicate a different life, something all people desire. For this reason, I’d like to propose a meeting on the book.”

The letter raised questions, perplexities, and concerns. Like Giovanni’s request itself, they are the signs of a deep and urgent need. They led to the organization of the January 30th meeting titled “*Education: Communication of One’s Self*. Growing and Helping Others to Grow in the Time of the Pandemic,” a dialogue on the CL YouTube channel between Fr. Carrón and educators, parents, and teachers. One person spoke about the provocation offered by one of his children, another about something that happened in the classroom. The Spanish priest’s answers did not consist of ready-made instructions, but expressed his boundless trust in the human heart and challenged them with the question, “What do you live for?” You truly educate only when you communicate what makes your own life alive. This is simpler, and if you do this, the young person in front of you has something to say to you.



The letter by CL teachers appeared in the Italian daily *Corriere della sera* on January 10th and the video of the event on "Education: Communicating One's Self" are available in English at www.clonline.org.

That evening, 11,000 people followed live, and in the following days the number of views grew to 45,000. The encounter is the beginning of a journey. "Only a new and different life can revolutionize structures, initiatives, relationships, well, everything," Fr. Giussani said to indicate where he expected to find the answer to urgent questions about education. Here we will try to recount some of the sparks of this new life.

The physical education teacher

6 During an online teachers' meeting for a college-prep high school to discuss the new timetable for returning to in-person lessons with half of the students and an on-line connection for the other half, teachers talked about the difficulties of moving from one school location to another and the obstacle course of managing in-person plus online lessons. "Perfect, I enter at eight and leave at three, all for just two hours of lessons," complained one teacher. After two hours of discontent and recriminations, the principal was concluding the meeting when a physical education teacher asked to speak. "I understand how difficult this is for everyone. I've calculated that I have just seven lessons in-person between now and June, and you can understand that for a physical education teacher this is not great. But I want to tell you this: I'm tired, just like you, but I'm not crushed by the circumstances. The most beautiful thing we can transmit to our kids is that there is something positive and that we are ready to live it every day as we enter the classroom and do lessons, running from one school location to another. They need to see in our faces and hear in our words that there is this good. This is how I want to be in front of them. I'll figure out how to reinvent my lessons." There were some seconds of silence, and nobody asked to speak. Then people said their goodbyes and turned off their webcams. A few days later the principal stopped the PE teacher on the stairs. "I wanted to thank you for what you said at the teachers' meeting." She was not the only one to be struck—he also received a series of phone messages. "Thank you, it helped me breathe more freely." "You showed us a turning point in that paradoxical

situation." Leaving school, the teacher told a friend, "Without the meeting with Carrón I would never have had the lucidity to say those words. Listening to him, that good became clearly present."

Class assembly

On a Thursday afternoon, a mother went online for her daughter's high school class assembly. After a quick greeting, some technical information about returning to in-person lessons was given and then the teacher responsible for the class described the situation. Half of the students regularly followed lessons online and the other half connected only sporadically, with all the attendant consequences for their learning. "Is that all?" thought the mother. "We all know that some students never turned on their webcam and are going through a difficult time." One parent asked to speak. "Don't you think there are other problems it would be better to discuss?" A teacher interrupted, saying, "Your children are not little kids. Look at the online register to see their grades, and if there are problems, ask for a personal meeting with the teacher." Finished. End of discussion. The assembly ended. The mother immediately called one of the representatives of the parents for the class. "I don't agree with that teacher. We can't pretend there are no problems. Let's try to contact the parents of these kids to say we are with them, and maybe come up with an idea to help them. In the meantime, I'm sending you a link to a meeting on school that I watched last Saturday. It was useful for me." The next day the parents' representative called her back. "I watched the video and I forwarded it to the other representative." There was a pause of a few seconds, and then she said, "I've never found such an open gaze on the problem of education, on the kids, and on us parents. Something like this can't just be dropped. I thought of creating a chat to invite some parents to talk about how we adults can be of help in supporting our kids. I'll invite some teachers, too. Not everyone thinks grades are the most important factor."

That evening the mother and other parents received an email with the link for the meeting with Carrón. It was signed by the class representatives.



The Giovin Signore and Jep

While he was following the meeting on education, a young literature teacher was thinking, “A good teacher is someone who’s passionate about the subject and tries all kinds of strategies to communicate it as well as possible.” He thought of people who were this way, who never lowered their standards. However, as the dialogue went on, he sensed that they were talking about something different and more interesting. The subject being taught is important, but it has its biggest impact only if there is an “I” engaged in communicating it. It is no longer a question of strategies but of getting personally involved. Quite a challenge.

The next day he had to prepare a lesson for his fourth-year students at a technical school for mechanics on *Il giorno* by Parini, a late eighteenth-century author. He was not enthusiastic about it, thought this lack of enthusiasm would block his ability to communicate. He began reading and realized that the main character, the Giovin Signore, reminded him of Jep Gambardella, the main character of the 2013 film, *La grande bellezza*, directed by Paolo Sorrentino. He started getting excited about it. He created some video clips from parts of the film that show the similarities between Parini and Sorrentino, and the lesson slowly began to take form. In class, the students were so enthusiastic about this new approach that when he asked them what they thought of the work, they said, “Much more interesting than the others!” the “others” being Tasso, Dante, Petrarch, etc. At the next lesson, three students were so eager to paraphrase the text that they almost vied for the privilege.

The figures of Gambardella and the Giovin Signore prompted the students to ask a series of questions about their future. Their teacher listened to them, asking questions in order to understand better, and discovered that they felt lost, buried under the expectations of adults. At the end of the hour he invited them to an afternoon meeting for fifth-year students and added, “And, if you want, when it’s possible, we could eat together.” The students had a busy week full of exams and deadlines, but many said, “Great idea, count me in.” That evening he told a friend, “Ever since I began teaching, I’ve continued to have questions about my professional destiny. It was a surprise to be accompanied in this way, even with a meeting about school on a Saturday evening. These are the features of a kind and mysterious caress on my life that has returned once again.”



8

The father and the principal

“There are some parents who would like to speak with you. They came with their son.” As soon as he saw him, the principal remembered that the boy, a first-year student at the private school, had never participated in the online lessons since they began in March with the lockdown. The boy had disappeared, surfacing only to do brilliantly on some tests: he had a good mind. In the end, they had to pass him and let him go on to the second year. In September, he had participated for a few days, and then stopped.

“Bring them in,” he told the secretary. The man, in work overalls, held his son by the hand. “Good morning, sir. I’ll come right to point. Saturday evening I watched the meeting about school and I know that you were one of the organizers. I listened to the answers of that priest. I only did five years of school, but I understood everything. I don’t want to lose this son. Educate him for me.” The principal looked at the boy, and said, “Come with me.” And he said to the parents, “You too.” They went up the stairs and came to the boy’s classroom. He knocked on the door, then entered and said, “Your classmate has returned.” The students broke out in applause.

As they were leaving, the father told the principal, “In these months, my son has done various odd jobs so he could give us the money for tuition. He’s a good boy, but I didn’t know what to do with him anymore. That meeting gave me the courage to come. It gave me hope.”

The family doctor

A family doctor followed the meeting with Carrón, thinking above all of her own children and how to help them in this difficult period. But the dialogue became a discovery for her profession as well. Certainly, her work involves the routine parts of her job description, working on prevention, making diagnoses, choosing treatments, and monitoring patients, but it also entails much more: “Entering into a relationship with those you have in front of you.” Concretely, and above all in this exhausting year, she accompanies and supports those who find themselves in front of the pain of illness, those who must deal with the decline and disability of their elderly loved ones. It becomes evident in the respect and discretion with which she enters homes to certify someone’s death.

When the meeting ended, she thought of the many requests for COVID tests in the last three months, many not motivated by any specific risk factor, but by a desire for some reassurance in the midst of the uncertainty that has overwhelmed everyone this year. Now with the vaccine there is the same expectation of reassurance. As one woman told her, “Doctor, it’s the end of a nightmare. We’ll get back to normal life.”

She simply responded, “Our life does not belong to us, and when you follow the instructions of the doctors and do what you must do, your only sense of security lies in entrusting your health and thus your life to Him who gave you these things.” ■

“I will grow up”

Passages from a letter by a 16-year-old girl who had recently met Student Youth. She wrote to her teacher after an online meeting with Giorgio Vittadini, the president of the Foundation for Subsidiarity.

My social life was never exactly great because I felt uncomfortable interacting with my peers, and also because I'm extremely timid and had some bad experiences with false friends that left deep scars. I rarely open up to anyone, but when I do I throw myself in 100 percent, despite the fact that I'm often wounded. The more I'm wounded, the less I want to try again because it hurts so damn much. It's like being emptied, deprived of everything, and then left in pieces on the side of the road, abandoned.

When Mr. Vittadini said, “A true friend is a person who pushes you toward the ‘more,’” he made me think about my past experiences, and I thought about how true his words were. Everyone has tried to extinguish my fire, undermining my self-esteem, while a true friend is someone who accepts you for who you are, and not who you aren't. Even though I knew that people were using me, I stayed by their side, if only for a bit of social contact. I was afraid of solitude.

I still dreamed of true friendship that frees you from all shame, one you can count on without fear of being abandoned. More than once I was forced to pretend to be a version of myself that was false, suffocating the voices that cried out to reveal my true colors. After some deep reflection during lockdown, I decided to accept myself for who I am, and now I'm surrounded by people I know I can trust. In fact, I see the sincerity in their gazes and not the emptiness that marked the eyes of those who wounded me. And one of these new people is me. At the meeting, it was the turn for my question. One line in the answer really struck me: “Desire is stronger than fear.” Like every human being, I'm made up of dreams and hopes, but rarely have I had the courage to externalize them or fight for them.

The external world looks like a giant to me, and I'm just a simple puppet. I've always asked myself, What possible chance will you ever have of winning? Everything appears to me as a constant unknown. And yet when Mr. Vittadini pushed me to believe in the indomitable fire of desire, in the flame of my soul, I asked myself how he managed to understand me in such a short time. I don't know, but one thing I do know for sure is that I'm very grateful, because through his words I've understood that what keeps me from attaining happiness is not the world and its unpredictability, but the walls I build myself. I may be just a human being, limited in body and time, but what I have inside, my individuality, is an unbeatable weapon. I continued to suffocate it with useless worry about my unworthiness compared to the infinite, cursing and kicking myself, but these walls were the barrier that kept me from spreading my wings.

I always sought the chance to shine. I looked for this everywhere and all the time, bringing myself to the limit of psychological endurance. I didn't realize that I already held that possibility within; it's just a question of patience, patience to cherish this possibility and patience to make it grow. Only then will I grow up. This “I” doesn't refer to my name, but rather to my heart, big for myself and not for others.

For years I struggled to understand myself, not to love myself, but to feel appreciated. And now thanks you to and all these people I'm meeting I feel increasingly closer to adulthood. The external world doesn't seem so terrifying to me; instead, I can't wait to see the challenges it will set before me on my journey.

Serena

Kenya

The beginning of all the surprises

There are no scripts, schemes, or strategies. Joakim Koech, the principal of Cardinal Otunga High School in Nairobi, describes the risks of educating.



Anna Leonardi

10

Greta arrived at her new school weighing almost 200 pounds. Full of disgust for her own body, she sought to relieve her discomfort by using drugs. Slowly, she overcame this situation, graduated, and is now studying medicine. Ann, on the other hand, was the most beautiful girl in school, but the tension and stress were so intense that she sometimes passed out several times a day. Over the years of high school, she got back on her feet, graduated, and was able to realize her dream of participating in the Miss Kenya pageant. Joakim Koech, the principal of Cardinal Otunga High School in Nairobi, Kenya, has hundreds of stories like these, but he does not file them under “success stories.” He archives them in a file on his computer he named “surprises.” Because for him there are no scripts, schemes, or strategies: “there is only the risk of sustaining something good we glimpse deep down in every boy or girl,” he explains. “Paradoxically, the progress they make is a ‘surprise’ to the de-

gree we hope and wait for it—it is a bit like when a goal comes after 90 minutes of cheering your team on.” This was the case with Henry, who came to Otunga school at the beginning of last school year. He had bad grades and a bad reputation. At their first meeting, the boy’s father said to Joakim, “I’m sending him to you for his last year so you can straighten him out. I punish him; I hit him. With him, a ‘soft touch’ won’t work. Help me make a man of him.”



A class in Nairobi.





Joakim Koech.

to make a man of him, you have to face his mistakes. You cannot define him by this. Punishing him is not the same as changing him. Instead, look at how far he has come up to now." It was midnight by the time Joakim managed to convince him to take Henry home with him.

That evening at the police station became a point of clarity for everyone, the acid test that clarified for everyone what was most essential: you cannot "become a man" without being in a relationship that helps you to begin again. Henry spent his last few months at Otunga preparing for final exams. In a growing outpouring of initiative, he managed to bring even the weakest students in the class along with him. "When I look at him, I see myself," Joakim says. "I, too, was the rebel of the school; I got marks and detentions every day. But then, I got up in the middle of the night to study because I wanted to graduate. No one knew who I really was; no one suspected that all my heart longed for was a spark." Now, when his former high school classmates run into him, they laugh at the idea that he became a principal. He tells them that he changed when he met Romana, the young woman he ended up marrying. "In her eyes, I was perfect. She was not naïve, but she was experiencing something so beautiful in her life that she was not afraid of mine, as broken as it was. That gaze on me was the beginning of all the surprises." ■

The boy was a challenge. He was always late and never did his homework, but it didn't take long for his teachers to realize that he was sharp, with above-average intelligence. So, they put on the pressure. "They wanted to bring him, at any cost, to the point of achieving better results, replicating, in the end, the same treatment his father gave him, just a bit more refined," Joakim recounts. When he realized this, he proposed to his colleagues that they change gears. "I asked them to lighten up a little and focus on the one thing we did see: Henry, though indifferent and unmotivated, still came to school every day. There must've been something that attracted him." They proposed that he stay in the afternoon for extra math studies, since he had a gift for the subject. That was enough for him to blossom. In the course of two months, his grades improved,

not just in math, but also in Swahili, English, and history. "His rebellion, once it was embraced, was transformed into an affection: for his studies, his school, and his teachers." In fact, even his father came to ask what was behind the change. A little while before the end of the school year, one Saturday night, Henry took his parents' car despite having no license and went for a drive in the city with a friend. His father, furious, was waiting for him at home and took him to the police as soon as he arrived. It was 9 p.m. when he called Joakim. "Mr. Koech, 'your boy' really messed up this time. You've been too soft with him." Joakim met him at the police station. Henry was regretful, knowing he had no excuse for what he did. "For me, that was the most important sign, the basis to start over again. I told his father, 'Your son already gets it. If you really want

“Those little ones who challenge my fear”



Dear friends,

In January, we had our presidential election here in Uganda, preceded by weeks of social tension. We had strikes and demonstrations during campaign season and, unfortunately, dozens of people died. The climate was tense up to the day of voting. The internet was shut down to ensure some level of control and to prevent further disruptions, and people were told to vote and go straight home so as not to run into further problems.

That morning, after waiting in vain for the friend who offered to accompany me, I set off by myself to go to the polling station where I was supposed to vote. While driving, I found myself right in the middle of a crowd of soldiers who were ordering people to keep the peace and be careful. Everyone seemed terrified, and I started to feel scared, too. Of course, the presence of the military, which might elicit a feeling of panic, calmed me down in some way. I thought, “It’s better to have them here than the alternative.” As I was thinking this, they helped me to get through, opening a path for me. I felt like I was escorted to my destination like a queen.

Once I got to the voting precinct, I immediately encountered a new surprise. The women of Meeting

Point [*a nonprofit that helps women living with AIDS and orphaned children founded by Rose*] were all there: some chatting relaxedly, some taking the opportunity to set up a stand to sell their fruit. They welcomed me as if I were the president. I was amazed. They were living without fear. No soldiers escorted them, but they experienced a certainty in life that gave them deep peace.

As I got in line to vote, I realized that the polling station had been organized entirely by the students from Luigi Giussani High School or by young people who had graduated from our school. I was really moved because my eyes saw women and their children facing the situation with a cry of incredible meaning. There is Someone who challenges every instant, and there is Someone who challenges my heart in every instant. I realized that what disturbs me is a lack of faith. They, instead, were before me with a one-of-a-kind intelligence, not afraid to get their hands dirty in reality. It made me think of how I, so often, measure myself and them based on my idea of performance or success, which generates a feeling of failure, when instead it is much more liberating to entrust them to the One who is making them in this instant and is constantly saving them. I saw them all engaged in

keeping order, meaning that they were chosen for that task. I, instead, sometimes look at them thinking of a project or with a utilitarian idea in mind, and when the kids don’t fulfill it, I feel like I’ve failed. I look at them with my own measure instead of from the point of view of the great destiny for which God made them and which He accomplishes when and how He pleases. The Lord truly keeps repeating to me: “See how I make things; I make them good.”

You see, we continually look at our own hands, seeking to stubbornly assert what we are able to do, rather than looking at His hands at work, constantly generating and creating us.

In the seemingly surreal situation of the election, I found myself, in the blink of an eye, perceiving the reality before my eyes as familiar. I found myself saying that it was worth going to the polling station just to understand that I have already won, even before voting and waiting for the results. I found myself victorious because I saw Him win. He tells me, “I always win, even when you, with your calculating outlook, think you have lost.” He really does use the little and the downtrodden, like our kids, to confound the wise.

Rose Busingye, Kampala (Uganda)

Lisbon

What do I have to do with the stars?

Everything began for them as the world was closing down. They did not want to put life on hold during the lockdown and instead accepted a proposal. Here is the experience of a group of Portuguese university students and how it gave rise to a book, a magazine, and a podcast.



Daide Perillo

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The book is already being reprinted: one hundred and fifty copies disappeared in three days, and the same number is on the way. The magazine was snapped up as well: now just as many are needed. If you add all the people who are downloading the podcast, you will have numbers that may be small, but are telling. They speak of a freshness, a new vivacity that has not even been weighed down by the lockdown and quarantines. All of this began when the world was shut in at home.

It was a year ago, March 2020. The CL friends received a letter from Julián Carrón, the leader of the Movement, explaining how normal life, even in its most important gestures like the Spiritual Exercises, the Easter Tridu-

um of Student Youth, and the School of Community, would change drastically because it would be impossible to gather together. But those three pages held more than just a warning: they offered an outlook. “Our question is the same as for all people: how can we face this circumstance as men and women?” How can we also exploit “this unprecedented and dramatic time” to verify that one can truly “live always the real intensely,” as Fr. Giussani said? And, “How can we accompany each other in all of this? What kind of companionship do we really need?”

These are questions that penetrate deeply, everywhere. Sofia Gouveia Pereira, the leader of CL in Portugal, began sharing these questions with

everyone because she herself was asking them. “I was struck by Julián’s certainty,” she recounts. “Even in such a condition, one can *live* and not just survive. I wanted to understand that for myself first of all, but also to be helped by friends. It was a verification that we could do together.” So when a small CLU group (university students in CL) spoke to her about their desire not to put their lives on hold during the lockdown, but to be able to do something beautiful together that would help them live, Sofia advised them “what I was saying to myself: we have to make that letter our own.” She translated this into a proposal: “We’ve stopped meeting in person but our companionship hasn’t stopped: be creative.”



Some of the university students of the Lisbon community.

And those students succeeded. They came up with the simple and beautiful idea of meeting on Zoom every Friday evening to watch or listen to something that three or four of them had proposed, like a song or a story, with an explanation of why it was proposed and an invitation to everyone to work on exploring it more deeply, both before and during the gathering. They called it *O que tem a ver com as estrelas?* or, What does this have to do with the stars? This is the question Fr. Giussani spontaneously asked when, as a young priest, he came upon a young couple embracing and kissing. He told this story often, saying that in that moment he suddenly had the intuition that “the true definition of morality” is the relationship between the single instant and the meaning of everything, “the nexus between the ephemeral action and the totality of things.”

That episode is also recounted in the recently published book of the same title collecting the texts of their twelve encounters (between March 20th and June 14th) in which they spoke of films and songs, poetry and art, Péguy’s hope and Johnny Cash’s pain, wonder according to Chesterton and awe in front of the rock engravings of Vale do Côa. There is Pasolini’s “something is always missing” and John Mayer’s *Something’s Missing...* There is life, with all the questions that emerge through an impact with reality.

This was echoed in the editorial of the magazine *O Troco*, “small change,” that came out around the time of the book, published so they could continue the journey. Leonor, one of the students, wrote, “In this demanding mystery that is daily life, the things of this world like photography, music, and theatre can make us look beyond,” and continued, “Being aware of what is around us makes us go more deeply into our own questions. This magazine is written by people who want to show others the beauty they have found, wherever they have found it.” Here it is, the same effort that started a year ago, proposal and verification done together. Leonor, a math major, said “there were five or six of us” at the first gathering. One of them was Francisca, known to everyone as Kika, a friend and study companion. “When Sophia suggested the letter to us, I wasn’t really convinced. But after the first get-together I understood I’d been wrong. There was something interesting there that could change my perspective on everything I like. I discovered that I wouldn’t be proposing myself, but something I was following,” something that comes first. Kika explains it this way: “The story we’d already shared, the friendship, our way of being together, made me certain we could not afford to lose what we were living. The lockdown could be an opportunity.”

They recounted that the first fruit was the discovery, as Constança, a literature student, put it, that “life



does not run on two tracks, one with what you like and the other with what reality puts in front of you. There is only one.” She continued, “The things I study can illuminate the story I have encountered and vice versa. The same holds true for my friends. At the beginning of the pandemic I was afraid. I didn’t want to lose my friends, I don’t know. I feared that we might lose our intensity. Instead, we saw that every moment can be full.” This happened watching the film *On the Waterfront*, which brought out intense questions (“in our experience, what overcomes fear?”) and in reading *Being Boring* by Wendy Cope, which caused them to realize that “even home can be a place where you want to be.” It happened as they explored the desire at the heart of “Hurt,” the splendid hit by Johnny Cash (“If I could start again”), and the hidden need in the poems of Alice di Sant’Anna, the Brazilian writer: “Is there anything in our days that saves us from nothingness?”

Slowly, they verified that yes, there is something. They have made precious discoveries, such as the gusto of “putting myself out there for everyone,” recounts Maria. She uses those precise words: “Putting myself.” Not just sharing things that she likes or knows, but her humanity, herself. “In these weeks I began giving lessons to small children,” continues Maria. “I’ve realized that the joy I experience with them comes from this giving of myself. This is what happened with *Estrelas* and now with the magazine. I studied design, and so I have worked on the illustrations and the graphics. I’m glad because in this

way what I have inside doesn’t remain closed inside me.” And once it is put out there for everyone, it broadens.

“In preparation for the gatherings, each of us worked on the proposal he or she offered,” recounts Constança. “But then, in the gatherings, this knowledge multiplied and was enriched by what the others brought.”

There is another discovery that everyone talks about: the importance of *judging*. “The first time they asked me if I wanted to propose something, I was afraid,” recounts Maria. “But it forced me to make a judgment about *why* I like what I like. Why show it to the others? Only by doing this did I begin to truly enjoy things. When I realized that judging can continuously change my life, I understood that I couldn’t hold back anymore. Now I even judge a film that we watch together as a family: Why is it worth proposing?

Instead, for Pedro the proposal of the stars arrived from far away. “When *Estrelas* started, I was in Bologna for the Erasmus study abroad program and had been in lockdown for several days. I was full of doubts and a big question: What does God want from me? Seeing the birth of a work like this made me understand that the answer didn’t necessarily pass through big things like being with CL friends in Italy, university life, or charitable work, but also through little things like reading a poem or watching a movie. God is there, too. Everything depends on how I am in front of the mystery.”

For one of the evenings, he proposed *Nirvana* by Charles Bukowski. “I study engineering, and poetry has nothing to do with that subject. Someone asked why I talked about literature, what qualifications I had, and in the beginning

I thought it was an appropriate criticism.” And then? “I came to understand that the key point wasn’t my knowledge of Bukowski, but his impact on me. And this I know well.” He, too, needs “something that is forever,” like the “young man” in the poem who watches the snow through the windows of a café in North Carolina and discovers he wants to stay there forever. “You read and you understand the desire he has inside. Bukowski isn’t talking about Christ, far from it, but this ‘something missing’ makes me think of Him.”

The link between the moment and everything: this is what enables you to breathe freely and deeply. “Following Carrón’s letter through *Estrelas* helped me feel freer,” says Leonor. “Because being free means having your heart seized.” This is how she feels: *Agarrada*, grabbed.

It is striking to hear this from a twenty-year-old young woman. This radical beauty spread over the months and reached many others who joined *Estrelas*. “How? The one thing I remember is that I left the first gathering so happy that I wanted to tell everyone about it,” says Kika. “It was so wonderful and so unexpected.” Leonor offered the first proposal, “Terra firme,” a song by Benjamin, a singer-songwriter who is famous in the area. It talks about men at sea, a journey to make to *chegar a algum lado*, reach some shore, and of “a safe harbor that means fearing no more.” Leonor says, “We discussed it a lot, wanting to understand well what it meant, what this port was for him. In the end, I said, ‘well, let’s ask him.’” She found his contact information and wrote, telling him about their gathering. Little did she imagine he would answer, much less that he would say, “I had no idea all these things were in my song:

I just wanted to talk about migrants.” Leonor continues, “We’ve kept in touch, and I’ve sent him the book. I’m happy because I’ve gained a friend.”

Other friends have been added, including many adults, because word has gotten around and the freshness of *Estrelas* is contagious. But above all, many fellow students are among the new friends. “I’ve invited some to *Estrelas* and asked others to help me make the podcast,” recounts Madalena. “I heard one of them tell another, ‘Reading this magazine is an answer, because I know I’m not alone in front of the mystery of life.’ Another, having read *O Troco*, told me, ‘You can see that something has happened there among you.’” And you? “I’m grateful.” Gratitude. It is the sign of a beauty that you receive; it does not come from you, but you welcome it, and through your yes (*agarrada*) you generate. Creativity also comes from there, from following. The students are very much aware of this. After the summer, in the midst of the second wave, they did not want to automatically return to their gatherings. “We thought it would be better not to continue *Estrelas*,” explains Leonor. “It seemed to us that we might only maintain the form of the event, but instead we wanted to allow ourselves to be surprised.”

O Troco—in paper and digital format, and later as a podcast—was born for this reason. When you thumb through it, you find the same vivacity that fascinates you when you have their happy faces in front of you on Zoom, and you think of other faces, other questions about the same words: certainty, proposal, and education. “Carrón’s gathering with teachers? Of course I followed it,” says Constança. “In that dialogue, I saw people totally

engaged, putting themselves on the line. You could understand that for them education is something more than the relationship between teachers and students. You could see this in the faces of those who spoke, that they were ‘children,’ they were following someone. I think it has a lot to do with what is happening among us.” Why? “In *Estrelas* there is also this communication of yourself. Not in the sense of an isolated ‘self’ but of an ‘I’ that wants to verify together with others the experience that she is living, to understand who she is. We, too, have discovered that we are daughters and sons.” ■

The book *O que tem a ver com as estrelas* and the magazine *O Troco*.



Kazakhstan



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A fire below zero



Paola Bergamini

“It is an experience of fulfillment that makes you keep going, not your generosity.” Silvia Galbiati talks about daily life at MASP in Almaty, a nonprofit where Catholics, Muslims, and atheists work together. Broken families, people with disabilities, orphans, and unconditional love. Received and given.

Silvia Galbiati (second from left), the director of MASP, with the young women who have speech and hearing impairments and are part of the sewing cooperative.

Silvia, the director of MASP, a nonprofit affiliated with AVSI that manages socioeducational programs in Kazakhstan, was immersed in the drafting of a new project when suddenly Alia burst into her office. “Today is a big day. During her session with the speech therapist, Tameris said a new syllable!” The Kazakh woman was beaming with joy. After Alia left, Silvia got up and looked out the window. She could see only a gloomy skyscraper, but she was reminded of the snowy peaks (an extension of the Himalayas) that she saw on the way to work and of the clear sky, typical for a day of subzero temperatures in Kazakhstan. Then her thoughts shift to Nasgul, her Muslim colleague who prayed the rosary with her when her father passed away, and to Olan, the driver who took her to the suburbs during the lockdown to distribute face masks and food to families in need. “Alia celebrating the small victory of her disabled daughter made me snap out of my worries. There is always something good that outshines the problems and challenges I face. It is God who takes me by the hand. This has been my experience ever since I arrived in Almaty in 2002. In fact, this has always been true in my life and in my family, when I said yes to my vocation and joined the *Memores Domini*, and then during the mission in Kazakhstan,” she said, and then continued: “Today, the temperature is -10°C . From an architectural point of view, Almaty is hideous: just barracks with a Soviet influence. What is beautiful about it are its people. And the events that happen. You should come stay with us.”

The sign at the main entrance of the youth center owned by the diocese says, “May the experience of the Mystery return to the people, among the people.” MASP headquarters is located inside the building, but everyone calls it simply “the Center.” The quote from Giussani expresses the heart of this place. “We welcome all people so that we can address whatever needs they have, but they feel loved for who they are, beyond their need,” said Silvia. “It is the experience of charity, of a love that is concrete and embraces all of you, for every person who comes asking for help as well as for the thirty employees, who are Catholic, Muslim, and atheist. It is the same experience for

everyone.” This is the starting point for telling the true story of MASP’s work beyond the statistics and lists of activities. It is *something more* that fills life—something that you cannot explain, but is evident.

At the entrance, Nasgul, the education coordinator, stopped a girl as she was entering. “Lera, it is below freezing, why aren’t you wearing a hat?” The little girl put her hand on her head and replied, “I couldn’t find one. My mom was asleep; she came home late last night. She was with a strange man and they sang and yelled all night...” Nasgul hugged Lera. “Don’t worry. I will find a bright red hat for you. Go—the other kids are waiting for you!” There are eighty children in the afterschool program, one of MASP’s activities. The children have difficult family situations and are sent here by social services or by their schools. They may live in houses that are dirty, or have a mother who is an alcoholic, and they often eat fewer than three meals a day. “In Italy, the parents would lose custody immediately, to put things in perspective,” explained Silvia. “We try to encourage the kids to come as often as possible;



The woodworking and sewing workshops.

Abdulla, one of children of Center.



and a bathroom in a nursing home, and she also found Tatiana another job. Everything went smoothly for a month, but one night she got into trouble and the police intervened. There was nothing else Silvia could do for her, and she was angry at Tatiana. She discussed this with her colleagues and all of them agreed not to interfere any longer, but then Nasgul interjected, “We can’t abandon those children. God does not do that to us.” The Center started again. They organized an afterschool group that the younger child could participate in at least twice a week. And no matter what, the driver always picked him up. In spite of the failed attempts, anger, and betrayal, Silvia cares about Tatiana “because she always reminds me that God is merciful to me. He has never left my side.”

Tatiana has not changed, and neither have the situations of most of the children of the Center. Sometimes they become even worse, a tunnel with a dead end. “I hope that things can change. I would take them all home with me and in severe cases, I have done just that, but this is not the solution. During these years, I have realized that I am being asked to say yes to my vocation, which is part of my life history and which they are part of. I must look at them and say, ‘I wonder what God wants from them.’ We try everything and we do the almost impossible so that they may have a better life while still allowing

for the necessary space and time for God to act. This is the key to virginity, a sense of detachment that permits you to remain in the situations you face, asking the deeper meaning of what is happening. God does not act carelessly when he loves us; God does not want to deceive us. God has always acted this way toward me.” Is this the meaning of hope? “Hope dwells in me, but not because I create it. God is the one who attached Himself to me, and He helps me to see the happiness of the children during the hours they spend with us and how they enjoy the friendship we share. It is an experience of fulfillment that keeps you going, not your generosity. In the long run, being generous only takes you so far.”

In 2008, the city launched a census of children with disabilities. “It seemed like an odd thing to do, because I had never seen children with disabilities in the streets,” explained Silvia. “The truth is that they are kept in their homes, and in many cases their mothers are the only ones looking after them because their fathers and other relatives have abandoned them. It is important to get them out of the house and give them a place where they feel welcome.” In order to give them such a place, the Center inaugurated a clinic in its facility that employs speech therapists, psychologists, and physical therapists. As the children grow up, this place strengthens the bond between these children and their families. Sylvia continued:

we pick them up from their homes if they need a ride. We spend time with them and try to show them that there is a place where they are loved, where someone believes that they matter.” Welcoming the children inevitably results in taking care of their families. This is what happened to Tatiana, a young mother dealing with alcoholism and personal distress. So as not to leave her at the car wash where she was living, MASP hosted her and her two children for a few months at the Center. MASP helped her find jobs, but she either quit or was fired because of her behavior. As a last resort, an employee at the Center found them a room with heat

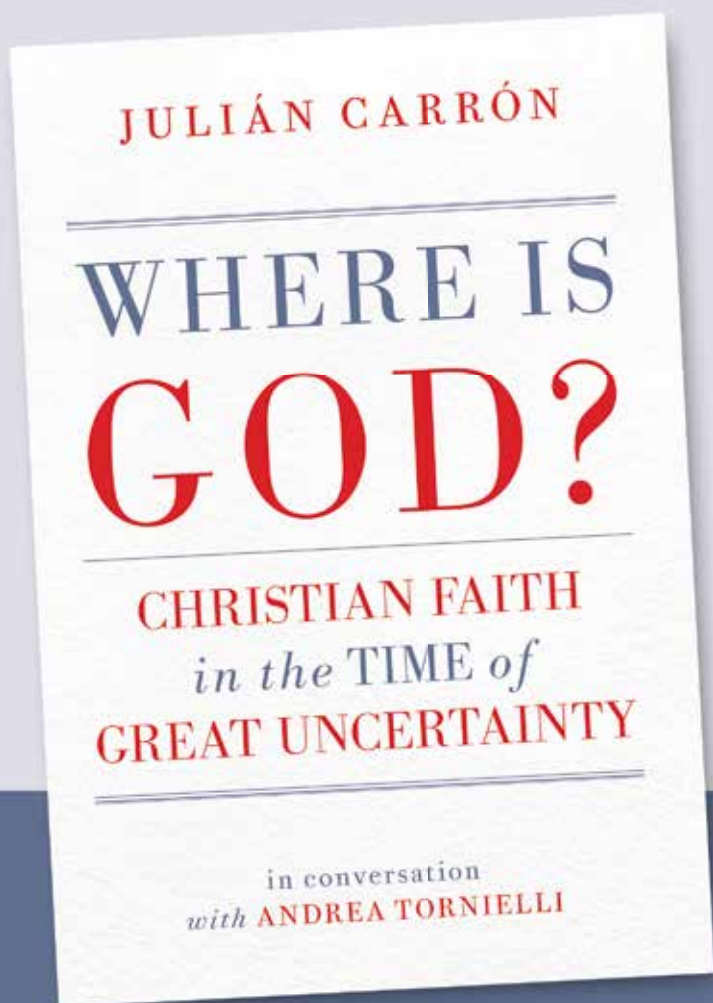


“Some have noted that rehabilitation is good for our ‘special’ children, but asked about their future. The professional training programs originally created for the teens at the orphanages have been redesigned for youth with disabilities. The students learn sewing, baking, felting, ceramics, and woodworking. The teachers are not special needs specialists; they are professionals in their own field, but some of them are so passionate about working with these students that they dedicate themselves completely to it. However, due to the prevalent mentality in Kazakhstan, it is still very difficult for youth with special needs to enter the workforce. Because of this, two years ago, a sewing cooperative was founded by nine young women with disabilities to assemble home accessories. When the director of an important retail chain saw the tablecloths and towels made in the cooperative, she exclaimed, ‘They are absolutely beautiful! And the workers seem so happy.’ A few days later, she put the cooperative in touch with other influential people who could help them sell their products. One of the people assisting them said, ‘My children should come to see how cheerful these young women are when they work.’”

In June, after the lockdown and the resulting closure of nearly all activities were lifted, the clinic reopened. But Ticon, an 18-year-old with severe learning disabilities and gigantism, did not return. His mother, who was devastated by the sudden death of her other son, could not get out of bed. “She does not want to speak to anyone,” said the grandmother on the phone. Then one day, out of the blue, Ticon came back. Silvia and Nasgul spotted

Ticon’s mother sitting in the car at the end of the street and they went to meet her. She got out of the car and said, “I am so angry. Why did this happen? The worst part is that I can’t look Ticon in the face.” They hugged her and said, “We love your son. If you can’t look at him, we will.” The woman was startled and said, “My husband told me, ‘You can stay in bed all day, but you need to go to the Center.’ You help me look at my son.”

The first time that Silvia met Vasia, he was eighteen months old and lived in a shack with his elderly father. When social services came to take Vasia to an orphanage, his father gave him a Bible and \$12—the money he had scraped together by selling empty bottles—and said, “Take these. When he turns eighteen, please give them to him.” Silvia thought to herself, “Who knows where I will be and where he will be?” Year after year, Silvia went to visit Vasia at each orphanage he was transferred to. They stayed in touch, and one time Silvia took Vasia with her on vacation with the Movement. When Silvia gave Vasia his “inheritance” from his father, he did not say a word. After he left the orphanage, Vasia began to visit Silvia. He would tell her about getting a new job or losing a job, he would ask for money when he was broke, and he would bring her gifts when he could afford it. Months went by without him showing his face, but he would always return. “I wish that he, and all the other children, could have had a family. But I also think that in me he found a home, that is, a relationship, where he can rest, where he can come back to, so that he can begin to live again.” ■



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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