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COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

A “particular history is the keystone of the Christian conception of man, of his morality, in his relationship with God, with life, and with the world. Our hope is in Christ, in that Presence that, however distracted and forgetful we be, we can no longer (not completely, anyway) remove from the earth of our heart because of the tradition through which He has reached us.”

Luigi Giussani

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e Liberazione for the texts

by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

CLOSE UP

“HERE I CAN BE MYSELF”

The story of the young prisoner from Naples who helped with the Food Drive and the stories of those involved in this gesture of charity (and others) joined in “active continuity” with the Pope’s message for the World Day of the Poor.



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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.

Monsignor Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy, which has hundreds of thousands of adherents around the globe. In *The Life of Luigi Giussani* Alberto Savorana, who spent an important part of his life working and studying with Giussani, draws on many unpublished documents to recount who the priest was and how he lived. Giussani’s life story is particularly significant because it shares many

of the same challenges, risks, and paths toward enlightenment that are described in his numerous and influential publications.

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

LIVING THE ESSENTIAL

What makes it possible for 145,000 people (Italians and others, in other parts of the world) to give freely of their time on a Saturday to ask others to donate something to the poor, encountering over and over, millions of times, a very concrete “yes”? What is so powerful about such a gesture that it engages everyone everywhere, from men who served in the Italian Alpine Corps to fanatical soccer supporters, from prisoners to immigrants, and families, students, retired women and men.... in other words, a people?


Generosity, certainly. There was enormous generosity evident in the November 25th Food Drive. This alone would be something to look at with wonder, because when the generosity is so impressive and widespread, it cannot be reduced to mere sentimentalism, a spurious breeze of optimism among the usual dark thoughts about the future, about “how things aren’t the way they used to be,” about young people today, etc. After such an event, certain judgments should be reflected upon, reconsidered, corrected.

But this is not enough. There is more to explore and understand, because beyond the very important aspect of “doing good,” an event like the Food Drive is an enormous opportunity to open our eyes. If we don’t turn the page quickly to move on to other things (even another good initiative: Christmas is coming...), such an event can make us understand something crucial about *who are* and *what we need* as individuals and as a people. We are poor, beggars for everything, because we are made of an endless desire, and need to share life with the poor in order not to lose ourselves.

In moments like these, the structure of the human person emerges in all its clarity. We realize how the beggar truly is “the protagonist of history” (Pope Francis reminded us of this a short time ago) and how charity is “the law of life,” to use another expression dear to Fr. Giussani. By living moments of this kind with awareness, realizing what is happening, not taking anything for granted—not even something in which we have been participating for years (this was the 21st annual Food Drive)—we can rediscover how certain gestures are the expression of “an origin” that must not be lost from sight, as Fr. Julián Carrón, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, said recently: “They flow from faith” and help deepen our understanding of faith.

This is why we have dedicated the “Close-up” article to the Food Drive and other similar gestures, because they help us learn “the law of life.” These range from long-familiar gestures, like the AVSI Christmas Tents, which is a rooted tradition by now, or very new ones, like the event initiated in Romania by those who opened their hearts and minds to the latest of the many gifts Pope Francis has given the Church: the World Day of the Poor, November 19th. In his message on that occasion, the Pope said that when we welcome the poor, “they can be teachers who help us live the faith more consistently” because “they show us in a quiet and often joyful way, how essential it is to live simply and to abandon ourselves to God’s providence.” We need to do this—in order to be ourselves. T

THE LAST EMBRACE FROM FR. PAOLO

 I consider myself a true, authentic former CL member. A certain Fr. Paolo Bargigia, the pastor in my area, met me and then I joined GS at the start of high school. We would get together for Vespers and for School of Community with him. He had such a strong charismatic presence, so different from others, involving a kind of attention that didn't exist anywhere else. Then during our university years, we met for Lauds, we studied, went to classes, ate together, and went home long after dark. There was no gesture of the Movement that I didn't follow: School of Community, Mass, living with others, the Exercises, summer vacations, etc. After I had finished college and was married, my wife and I moved to Syracuse for my work. There our neighbors were another family from the Movement and we continued to live the experience with them, which helped us to grow personally and as a family. After three years, my work took us to Friuli where perhaps because of the distance or professional struggles or a series of issues with our children, but more than anything else (looking back), because of the loss of our initial fascination, my wife and I drifted away from the Movement. Because for us the Movement and our faith were intertwined, and one could not be sustained without the other, we also drifted away from the faith. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, we no longer felt like going to School of Community. There was always a good excuse to stay home. Then Fr. Paolo was struck down with ALS. I




went to see him only once, but that was enough. For a person to live such a situation with gladness is something that can have no explanation. It was as if something that had struck me as a young man had happened again. I had never experienced someone so ill paying such attention to me. I felt like a person suffering from thirst who unexpectedly is able to drink cool, fresh water: there's nothing better. My wife and I decided to take a quick trip to the Rimini Meeting, where we became re-acquainted with some friends. While we were there, Fr. Paolo passed away. I felt again the embrace as we recited the Rosary shortly thereafter, and in the pain, I like to think that the end of the life of Fr. Paolo, who had marked my beginning, was for me a new beginning. Soon after that, there was a dinner in Florence with the engineers from our time in CLU where I saw again people who had been so instrumental in my becoming the adult I am today. The truly impressive thing is that the depth of certain relationships had not suffered from almost 20 years of not seeing each other. It was as if we

had just seen each other the day before. I have many interests, so I have no shortage of personal relationships. I'm certainly not alone, but this gaze on me and such a profound correspondence with what I desire cannot, in my opinion, be found anywhere else. So began my new "beginning," and you can imagine my surprise at my first Beginning Day after ten years or so, when I saw the theme, "At the Beginning It Was Not So," which described my situation perfectly.

Massimiliano, Italy

DISCOVERING THE SIDE I WANT TO BE ON

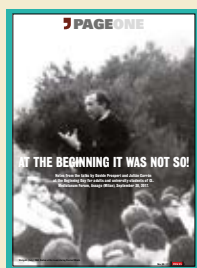
 Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to go on exchange to the University of Edinburgh. My time in Scotland was the first time in my life that I made my own decisions based on the what I truly wanted for my life. In Montreal, I found myself routinely going to School of Community. When I arrived in Edinburgh, I thought I could live without School of Community for a bit and it would not matter because when I returned to Montreal I would fall back into my routine again. But living without this friendship with me abroad ended up being quite a struggle. I was often alone—I went to Mass alone and studied alone and my heart became quite restless. After a few weeks, I emailed the community of Edinburgh, and the next week I went to School of Community. Lucia said, "We've been waiting for you." She knew I was in town because Barbra, the CL secretary from Montreal, had emailed the community months ago telling them a student was coming. I was overjoyed



THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIFT

“COULD YOU BRING *TRACES* TO ME?”

Last year, my mother (who recently turned 84) began reading *Traces*. She sees the magazine arrive each month and if after a little while I haven't brought it to her, she asks, “Have you already read the *Traces*?” “No, why?” “When you finish, will you bring it to me? I like reading the letters... Nothing else, but the letters are really beautiful.” I confess that many times I barely leaf through it, putting off reading it until I can do so when I have more time, time I never manage to find. So sometimes I've answered, “No, but I'll bring it to you anyway because I don't have time to read it now.” At some point, seeing her interest, I started buying an extra copy for her. In the month of October, I didn't have a chance to get her a copy, so toward the end of the month, she asked me, “I haven't seen the *Traces*. Didn't it come this month?” “Yes, it came. I'll give you my copy.” She insisted, “I love to read it, then I give it to my friend, Rosanna.” My mother and this friend have long chats on the phone in the evening in which they tell each other about what they've read in *Traces*. A few days ago, while we were waiting to go to dinner at



a restaurant to celebrate her birthday, we were sitting in front of the television. Between a word here and there and comments from the broadcast, she said, “This month beat them all! There's never been a better *Traces*!” I turned toward her, curious and drawn by her enthusiasm. “What did you like best?” “The letters are beautiful, the stories... What was inside. I don't read everything because sometimes the articles are difficult, but this month it was super!” Still not understanding, I asked again, “But what exactly?” “What was inside, with the excerpts from Fr. Giussani, from Cardinal Ratzinger's homily. You have to let me have it because it's so beautiful and I want to keep it. What was inside, with the old photos!” Finally, I understood. “The insert! It's the text from the Beginning Day from Fr. Carrón!” She added, “Beautiful! It's beautiful; I read it and reread it! Twice! Then I gave it to Rosanna and she gave it to one of her friends.” The next morning, I woke up early to read *Traces* online and now when I read it I think of my mother and her words.

Mariolina, Piacenza (Italy)

to know that I was wanted and that I had made it there on my own, not because someone was suggesting I go. This was the first time I made myself a proposal and responded to it because it was something I needed. Now back at home, I make myself this proposal every week. Now I understand why I go to School of Community, and it has a new meaning for me because I realize how essential it is. It's like what

Carron kept repeating at the end of the text from the Spiritual Exercises: “One can choose the side of the sepulcher or the side of Jesus,” or in other words choose life. For me going to School of Community is choosing life. Yet, since I've been back, it has been difficult to do everything I want to do and to follow through on my proposal because things keep coming up that prevent me from doing so. I feel like

God is not making things easy for me. Because I am constantly required to ask myself what I really want, I have not been able to fall back into my old routine. Last fall, I would not have been sad about missing a School of Community, kick-off day, or study weekend, but this year it has caused so much sadness, sadness which forces me to constantly verify my proposal

Emma June, Montreal (Canada)

CLOSE UP



**“HERE I CAN
BE MYSELF”**





These are the words of a young prisoner from Naples, spoken as he helped with the Food Drive. These pages recount the experience of those involved in this gesture of charity (and others) joined in “active continuity” with the Pope’s message for the World Day of the Poor. They participated in order to recapture the origin of what we do, the origin of our own good and the good of others.

BY DAVIDE PERILLO



The wind in my hair feels good: I’d forgotten about that.” This is how 20-year-old Ali’s experience of the Food Drive began as he left the Nisida youth detention center on the way to Naples to help with the Food Drive. He was sitting next to an open window in the back seat of a Ford C-Max driven by 45-year-old Giovanni Iovinella, known affectionately as “Felice,” an architect who, in addition to working at his studio in Succivo, near Anversa, since 2012, has also been helping out at least three times a week at the prison, traveling on the bypass past the jetty at Bagnoli to the prison located on an island connected to the mainland by a spit of land. Sitting in the back seat next to Ali was another 20-year-old prisoner, Ciro (the names of both young men are fictional, to protect their stories and lives).

The Food Drive is a strange event. Fr. Giussani once called it “the common fund of the Italians”: a gesture of charity capable of involving an entire country, between those who donate (at least five million people, according to this year’s estimate) and those who collect the products, later delivered to the poor. >>

CLOSE UP

» On November 25th of this year, over 140,000 volunteers participated, coming from all sorts of locations, some you would never think of, like Nisida. This youth detention center hosts about 60 young men and, in another section, 12 young women, all of them between the ages of 15 and 25, the cut-off age for being able to serve their time here for crimes committed when they were minors. Most of them come from the area, from a universe that the rest of the world knows about from the film *Gomorra*. Here, this particular universe is so close that it seems to be *inside* the place: the conversations, the words, the looks...

Many come and go through the prison, almost all of them with very hard stories. Ali is from Casablanca and has lived in Italy almost all of his life. He grew up in an environment that quickly led him off course. Ciro has been living on the street since he was 12. Today he was to have seen his sister for their first conversation in four years, but he preferred to go to the Food Drive. Wearing a black leather jacket, he pulls out a comb every so often from his pocket to fix his hair.

OPENING THE ROAD. Their destination is a supermarket on Via Foria, at the corner with Via Duomo, in the center of Naples. Behind the supermarket the road rises toward the Cathedral and Saint Gennaro, while on the other side of the road is the beginning of the infamous Sanità neighborhood. All around them is Naples and her humanity, the joys, and sufferings you can read on the faces of those on their way to do their grocery shopping, who pass in front of the volunteers wearing yellow plastic vests. There are nine volunteers, most of them university students. There is a good feeling, lots of gaiety, which spreads to many of those who enter



with their shopping carts and accept the bags handed out by the volunteers “to help the poor.” Many others will say no, or not say anything at all, but this is normal. It is a simple proposal that in some way brings what people have inside to the surface.

Ali puts on his vest right away, but Ciro takes a bit longer to be convinced. They did not have time to prepare by reading the Pope’s words. Only at the last minute were they told they would be allowed to leave prison to participate. “There’s no use raising their hopes only to see the permission get bogged down in bureaucracy,” explains Felice. Now they are there, smiling, giving flyers to those entering or sorting the donations given by the shoppers as they leave—pasta, stewed tomatoes, vegetables, etc.—in the cardboard boxes lined up outside the store.

“The first year we did the Food Drive in the prison,” recounts Fe-

lice, “it was 2012. The kids had their lists for groceries, which arrive every Wednesday. They asked to add ‘baby food.’ One of them was allowed to leave to bring what they had donated to the collection center in a cardboard box labelled “IPM Nisida” written with a highlighter because they didn’t have any pens. I’ll never forget it.”

Felice’s involvement with Nisida had begun a few months earlier “by chance: I only knew about it from an Italian song...” He went with a friend who had to go there to do a course on safety, and they needed to meet with the director to organize the details. “I found myself in front of a person who had the prisoners’ best interests at heart, and who really wanted them to learn something that would be useful for making a living.” The same man, Gianluca Guida, is still the director there. But even more importantly, Felice found himself in front



“We are called to draw near to the poor, to encounter them, to meet their gaze, to embrace them and to let them feel the warmth of love that breaks through their solitude. Their outstretched hand is also an invitation to step out of our certainties and comforts, and to acknowledge the value of poverty itself.”

Pope Francis

of those young people. “Their energy, their desire to do things, their restlessness... they asked, ‘So, architect, what are we going to do? When are we going to start?’ I called my friend and said, ‘Look, keeping them seated watching slides and explaining things is not going to work. We have to invent something else.’”

This “something else” was training for the construction industry. The day before the Food Drive, as we walked along the corridors of the ancient Angevin castle, Felice showed me the work they had done. We saw the big rooms that had been restored, antique pavements brought back to their original beauty, and the plaster walls of the corridors “that *I did*”

Ciro said proudly, as Gennaro explained how they had knocked down walls and built stairs. This is one of the programs that the young men can participate in. There are others that teach them to be pizza makers,

or pastry chefs, or to make ceramics. But at Nisida they also study theatre and writing, and last summer they even began a workshop on the art of making Nativity crèches. These activities serve not only to teach them a trade and open a road, no matter how narrow, once they leave prison; they also serve them here, now, inside. “Spending time with Felice, I’ve met someone who put trust in me,” said Ali during a pause in the Food Drive. “It was the first time in my life I had encountered such trust. I don’t want to let him down.”

“SO WHERE IS THIS JESUS?” It would be easy to frame it all in terms of sociology, to take shortcuts with explanations about absent but indispensable fathers. And it would all be true. But “trust” is a two-way word, one that does not allow you to take for granted anything on either side. “The first year they let me take the kids out-

side for the Food Drive, I was very worried,” recounts Felice. “I expected to have officers escorting us, but no, there were no guards. As soon as we got in the car, I locked the doors. Then outside, it seemed to me that they didn’t see any of the things that struck me, like the sea, the day, the beauty. They just looked at the cars, and the cell phones people had.” As they returned to the prison, there was complete silence. “I thought, they have to go back and they’re sad. But before they got out, one of them said, ‘Feli, thank you, because I understood that I can do good, too.’ He was blown away. But the truth is that they blow me away all the time. They help me not take anything for granted, not myself, not my story or the gestures we do. This is why I need them. They have no filters, and they’re full of questions.” These questions will not be satisfied with speeches as answers. A few months ago, Fr. Eugenio >>



NAPLES. The supermarket where the young men from the Nisida juvenile detention center helped with the Food Drive.

» Nembrini, one of the leaders of CL and Felice's friend, went to the prison to see them. Felice recounts, "They didn't even have the time to exchange a few words, and one of them asked him point blank, 'You're a priest, right? So show me, where is this Jesus?' Well, this is a question I always want to have, today and every day."

TWIN GROCERY BAGS. It is the same here at Via Foria, Raffaella told me. The 26-year-old engineer has a short term internship contract that will finish in a few months. She said that this morning she had no desire to come. "But in a moment when everything is confused, I needed something that put me in front of myself again. Here it happens," when confronted by the fellow who does not even look at you, and by the woman who says, "God bless you," as she hands you a package of pasta, and in front of the old woman who leaves the supermarket with twin grocery bags with the same contents, and says, "One is for my family, and one is for yours." And in front of the young men from Nisida, with whom Raffaella quickly formed a bond, and with the other volunteers in the yellow vests. "They should be hopeless, but instead, you look at them and you see a beauty that I often

“ These guys should be hopeless, but instead, you look at them and you see a beauty that I often struggle to recognize in my own life. I'm the one without hope when I do things merely out of habit...” ”

struggle to recognize in my own life. I'm the one without hope when I do things merely out of habit..."

Ali is also used to hearing "no." But when he gets a harsh "no" from those who enter and do not want to donate, he just smiles. "They tell me to get lost? Well, I just keep smiling. I'm patient. I wasn't before, but I've learned by butting my head against the wall." His words are echoed by Ciro at the end of the morning when I ask him if he is happy. "Why not? Here the faces you see are a change, and the things you talk about are a change, and you change, too." How's that? "There in prison, you're always on the defensive. Here I can be myself."

It is mid-afternoon, and we head south for Fisciano, near Salerno, where the Food Bank warehouse of the Campania Region is located. Every year, over 150,000 pounds of food are sorted here and then distributed

to feed 151,000 poor people. The food collected during the Food Drive is brought here by truck. There are about 20 volunteers and others will arrive later. Ali and Ciro help unload. One of them wants to use the forklift, and the other piles cardboard boxes onto pallets. Late in the evening, in the noisy, happy confusion of trucks and volunteers who come here even with their families to lend a hand, a fellow starts cooking flatbread for the people of the Food Drive, and another entices his children into playing hide and seek so they won't be underfoot in the hustle and bustle of people and boxes.

The young men from Nisida told me about their desires. Ali would like to be "a barman, or a restaurateur, and then in time open my own place. The important thing is to go away from where I lived before, because otherwise there's too much of a risk

that I'll lose my head again. It's like a castle of cards: you make one wrong move, and everything falls down and you have to start all over again." **C**iro tells me about the certificates he has earned in prison, "I want to be a pizza maker." It will be an uphill climb, but it is possible. Certainly, they are no longer alone. This experience makes me understand better why the director of Nisida really wants his young people to experience moments of this kind, "to build positive relationships outside prison."

THE TURNING POINT. I also can better understand the story Felice told me the day before, as we drive up to Nisida. "Some time ago, there was a young man from Somalia, Abdul Karim, who was going through a difficult time. I noticed him on the job site: he wasn't working and he kept to himself. The director was concerned, and so was I. I asked another prisoner, Luigi, to stay close to him and get him involved. "No, sir. Why me? I don't want to." But a short time later I saw them together, one with a hand on the trowel, the other taking his hand, moving it on the plaster, guiding it. "See Abdul? This is how you do it." It was a turning point for me. I'm the one who needs that hand, in every moment."

The deadline to have the young men back on Nisida is midnight, no mess-ups allowed. Felice said that this time, too, the return trip was in silence, maybe a bit less silent than after the last Food Drive, but still a strong silence. "This was the first time that I've done good," said **C**iro. "I've always done bad things to survive. But good exists, certainly. We're not all bad." They saw it, and showed it to others. "The experience they had is theirs. But it questions me." I asked Felice what it told him. "That I'm grateful for this Jesus who I saw today." **T**

TO FOLLOW AN INVITATION...

Here is what happened in Bucharest during the World Day of the Poor launched by the Pope's message.

BY ALESSANDRA STOPPA

"The poor don't need our help." Just a few words, spoken at the end of the day by Sister Letizia, a member of the Missionaries of Charity. "The poor need our conversion." Simona listens to her and thinks about all that has happened since the morning, as Sister Letizia repeats the "rule" that Mother Teresa illustrated for the powerful of the world, demonstrating the entire Gospel on five fingers: "I/do/it/for/Jesus."

Bucharest, Romania. It is now evening, and the Missionaries have opened their chapel to pray and give thanks for this first World Day of the Poor, an event that other associations and movements also participated in. Everything began solely from the desire that leapt in Simona's heart when she read Pope Francis's message for the November 19th World Day of the Poor. She felt that his radical invitation, so concrete and free of rhetoric, was meant for her. "It really made me reflect and question myself, especially how I relate with people, when I get so obsessed by the many things to do."

Simona Carobene is the director of FDP, the Protagonists of Education, an NGO which began in 1996 through a friendship with some AVSI volunteers, and grew in the

charism of Fr. Giussani. As the director, Simona oversees projects in Bucharest, Cluj, and Cojasca, working with families on the margins of society, such as the Roma (gypsies) who live at a dump, together with children, disabled people, and AIDS sufferers.

She has dedicated her life to the "thousand faces" of poverty, precise faces. But the Pope's message was like a breath of fresh air. She gave it to her friends, colleagues, and members of the Administrative Council to read... In Romania there is no such thing as the Food Drive or the AVSI Tents campaign, but this did not affect her desire to respond to Francis's invitation to love "not with words, but with deeds," asking us to look at the charity lived by the first Christians that leads to "a true encounter with the poor... If we truly wish to encounter Christ, we have to touch His body in the suffering bodies of the poor." Simona was also struck by the Pope's desire for the World Day of the Poor to become "a tradition" that "concretely contributes to evangelization in today's world."

THE FOCUS ON "DOING." When Simona shared the message with other movements and associations, many got involved, among them Caritas, Catholic Action, the movement **>>**

CLOSE UP

» of the Carmelites, and the sisters of Mother Teresa. Together they began to organize a concrete gesture for the day, putting their initiative in the hands of the Bishop of Bucharest, Ioan Robu, who was surprised but got involved personally, as did the Apostolic Nuncio, Miguel Maury Buendía, who chose to spend his birthday with them and the poor.

As the days passed planning the initiative, Simona found she was tired and worried: the “doing” had taken the place of her wonder. “I realized this during the CL Beginning Day. The theme, ‘At the Beginning, It Was Not So!’ continually came to mind. I asked myself what had struck me in the Pope’s words, and I couldn’t even remember them very well. So, very simply, I followed the method: I picked up the text again, which I had abandoned in a drawer, and I re-read it. I was surprised anew, and it moved me again.”

IN TALL APARTMENT BUILDINGS. November 19th arrived. In the morning they participated in the Mass at the Cathedral with the Bishop, and at the Offertory brought a basket of food, a blanket, and a Bible. “In the homily, going through the Pope’s letter, he helped us center our hearts on the most important things.” Then about 100 of them gathered for lunch together. “Something far beyond our expectations happened,” continues Simona. “The poor gave us a gift: they brought us together. They taught us about the unity of the Church.” The Jesuits, the Franciscan sisters, the Pope John XXIII Community Association, the Knights of Malta, Caritas... “Even though we have known each other for a long time, we had never gotten together like this. The groups ‘introduced’ themselves and each



PLAYING GAMES. A moment during the Day of the Poor in one of the most dangerous areas of Bucharest.

“ **Something far beyond our expectations happened. The poor gave us a gift: they brought us together. They taught us about the unity of the Church. Even though we have known each other for a long time, we had never gotten together like this.** ”

spoke about its own origin.”

After lunch, they went to Ferentari, one of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Bucharest, where the sisters of Mother Teresa live. They were joined by the parish priest, who was eating with 50 poor people. The Nuncio also arrived, so they celebrated his birthday together. In the midst of those tall, grey, run-down apartment buildings, they gave the Nuncio a gift (food and a blanket for him, too) and sang and danced, then everyone headed out to the street to play games with the children.

“There were also ten people from the John Paul XXIII Community

Association who had come from Italy specifically for the celebration,” recounts Simona. She was warmed by the gratuitousness of those who had come, the happiness of the children, the whole little flock of Christ, the King of the poor, as the Pope teaches, and the Nuncio’s attention to the people, to every detail. She reflected on all that simple beauty, “which we could never have expected to create by ourselves. God was creating it.” Motivated by this beauty, at the end of the day the participants expressed their desire to meet again. Only in this way, as the Pope asked, can the Day of the Poor become a “tradition.” **I**



GIFT. Rose Busingye with “her” children around the Toyota minibus.

GAIA'S MINIBUS

Sparked by a journey to Uganda, a girl's desire gave rise to an original way to support the AVSI Tents Campaign.

BY PAOLA RONCONI

Gaia is a student in her third year of the scientific high school. In July 2016, when she was 17, her father, an industrialist from Legnano, Italy who has been supporting AVSI projects in Africa for years, took her to Kampala, Uganda, for three days. “Unfortunately *only* three days!” exclaims Gaia. “They were stupendous, intense days.”

Together they visited the places in the Ugandan city that are part of this year's AVSI Tents Campaign ti-

tled “Where is Home?” “The first day we toured the Luigi Giussani High School, a beautiful structure, something we in Italy would envy, very clean, enormous, and well-equipped.” Meeting with teachers and students, Gaia asked the students, “What have you learned from this school, and what will you take away with you when you leave?” One girl answered, “I've learned that the value and desire of my heart are so great that they can change the world.” Gaia was perplexed. “It seemed like one of

those pre-packaged answers, but actually as soon as the thought crossed my mind I looked at that girl in front of me, my age, and just the fact of having thought those things... Well, come on, I said to myself, she's not lying.” Gaia understood that African society is very different from hers. “Many people live in sheet metal shacks and have very difficult situations. In general, in this country the human person is not viewed in terms of his or her value. The person is just a number or a means for reaching a goal that is usually economic, even in family life. Often the father doesn't work, and there's a very high rate of alcoholism. The ones who work are the mothers, together with the children, and they are often treated as objects.”

TO BE VALUABLE. Other details helped Gaia understand how people live in Uganda. “Outside the AVSI schools, in both private and public schools in Kampala, the students are punished harshly if they don't get >>



AVSI. The Tents Campaign 2017/2018 of the international NGO AVSI supports four projects focused on human development and education. Clockwise: three hospitals in Syria, a nursery school in Iraq, the activities in Portofranco, and courses for young people and teachers in Uganda.



“ It seemed like one of those pre-packaged answers, but actually as soon as the thought crossed my mind I looked at that girl in front of me, my age, and just the fact of having thought those things.... Well, come on, I said to myself, she’s not lying. ”

» good grades, because the school needs good results from the students in order to be considered ‘valuable.’ If a student gets 60 out of 100, she or he gets caned 40 times, the difference. The violence is incredible. Someone told me about the charts hung on the school walls showing the ‘consequences’ of errors students make.” For Gaia, the words of that girl began to take on flesh. There is so much need for a “home,” a place to be embraced for who you are.

After visiting the high school, Gaia and her father went to Kitintale, a neighborhood in the eastern part of Kampala, to visit the Welcoming House, which hosts about 80 or-

phans, from infants to 20-year-olds. Some of the stories are very tough—some were found in trash bags, while others were taken from their parents for mistreatment or for having made them sniff glue to make them be quiet. Rose Busingye, who directs the home, tells Gaia and her father about the kids’ daily life. They wake up at 3:30 in the morning because many of the children have to walk hours to get to school. The littler ones get a ride to school on a motorcycle that goes back and forth, taking three children at a time, a maximum of 15 times. “It would be nice to have a minibus,” Rose tells Gaia, with that smile well-known to the readers of *Traces*. The

next day, their final one in Uganda, “we visited the elementary schools and the nursery school, and then we went to see ‘Rose’s women,’ the AIDS sufferers who are cared for and treated. We spent the morning there. These very beautiful women, in every sense, dedicated a song to us,” says the girl.

RETURNING HOME. That summer, Gaia could not stop thinking about all those faces, those lives so full of pain and grace, the eyes of the children. “One night during vacation I couldn’t sleep. My mind wouldn’t stop. At three in the morning I got up, got a pen and paper and started writing down ideas that were whirling around in my head, with one goal: to raise money to buy a minibus for Rose’s children.” But how? Gaia thought about selling gadgets at school, but too many would need to be sold to earn the thousands of euros needed for a minibus. “I returned home from the vacation and talked with my brother Matteo, and with Stefano, Marta, Gaia, Emma, Chiara, Carlo, Luca...” By putting their heads together, they came up with the “On the Road” project, which involved selling T-shirts, everywhere and to everyone.

They began in November, on the Open Day at her school, Tirinnanzi High School of Legnano. “We got started, and the word spread, and ‘On the Road’ began to take off. We were asked to sell T-shirts at concerts, during basketball games, at Christmas parties, and at various evening events.” At 15 euros per T-shirt, they raised the money needed. In November 2017, Gaia received a video from Rose, surrounded by “her” children, in front of a Toyota Hiace, the minibus.

And now? More AVSI Tents. “The Welcoming House needs a bigger refrigerator, and also a new table and chairs. ‘On the Road’ keeps going.” **I**

IT IS CALLED SILENCE

Zacchaeus, the woman with the hemorrhage, and the life and questions of university students, discussed at dinner and during the lessons. We went to the Spiritual Exercises with Fr. Julián Carrón. “It is a feature of our epoch: unease in front of unease,” but there is another possibility for looking at oneself.

BY LUCA FIORE



RIMINI. The four thousand university students gathered at the Expo Center, November 17th-19th.

“I went to a friend in the community to ask him why he hadn’t yet signed up for the CLU Spiritual Exercises. He studies theoretical physics and is one of the most intelligent students at the university. I was a little scared to go to him, because he’s a lot sharper with words than I am. When I invited him, he countered: ‘Why do you want to go?’ I explained what had been happening to me in recent months, and at the end of my story, he said, ‘OK, I’ll go, not for you, but for what is happening in you.’”

Matteo from Milan told this story at dinner with the leaders of university students in CL and Julián Carrón at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises. There were 25 young people around the table who do not give the impression of being “leaders” or “heads.” Matteo himself, to explain “what is happening” to him, said this:

“Responsibility for the community is the first circumstance in my life in which it is clear that I am not enough for myself. The things that are happening to me force me to ask Christ to sustain me.” Carrón grinned. It was evident that these conversations fire him up—even more so when the students’ questions are brazen.

THE PROMISE. Dinner was a succession of stories about false starts, things poorly understood, openings “notwithstanding my own reservations.” Carlo from Turin said that he invited eight classmates to the Spiritual Exercises, and was turned down eight times, “but when I got over the embarrassment I realized that the invitation had introduced something more into my relationship with them.”

Melisa, a leader of the students enrolled in Medicine in Milan, said she realized that 10 third-year students

(in a three-year degree program) had not registered for the Exercises. This was justified, seeing as they were to graduate the day after the return from the Exercises in Rimini. “One of us said, ‘They’re grown-ups, let them work it out.’ Then I happened into one of these friends who hadn’t registered, and a dialogue opened up... The person who’d said ‘they’re grown-ups’ was there, and later told me that he would go talk to the other nine...”

“Do you see?” Carrón spoke up. “That other person thought he already knew what those ten students were thinking. Instead, that dialogue showed that there was much more to discover. If we lose a bit of reality along the way, how can we think we know? Reality is what enables us to understand: reality always calls us to conversion. This is more important than avoiding mistakes.”

**“What does it mean to be here?
It is a gesture of love for ourselves, of
tenderness toward ourselves,
of attention to our destiny.”**



The platters with the fish entree arrived and almost nobody took notice. The intensity of the conversation gave no sign of lessening. Andrea from Turin asked, “How can the event of Christ become more familiar?” Carrón: “You have to look intently at what happens. It is called *silence*. If you don’t go back and reflect on it, in the end you don’t even realize that it happened, and you lose it. There is no need to add more content to what has happened. The issue is that our heads are full of things, me first of all. This is why I am so surprised by what happens in you and what others see in what we live.” He pulled out his cell phone to look for a quote by Giussani. “Culture is the gaze of Christ upon us. This gaze becomes our gaze on reality. For us, culture does not add something to the original encounter, timidly perceived, glimpsed, sensed. It adds nothing.”

Giacomo pursued this line. “But even in the moments of silence thoughts pile up; even in silence there can be agitation and restlessness...” Carrón answered, “This, too, you can learn. Like how you learn to be with your girlfriend. At times silence is a struggle. It’s like in life, something has to happen that frees us from our thousands of thoughts. ‘He was seen, and therefore he saw.’ This is the promise.”

Beginning with the title “He was seen, and therefore he saw,” a quote from Saint Augustine about Zacchaeus in the gospel, the great topics Carrón would talk about during the lesson and assembly were raised at the dinner with the CLU Center.

THE UNEASE IN FRONT OF UNEASE. Looking at the 4,000 students who filled the silence of the Rimini Exposition Center hall, they seemed like young people you meet everywhere. Some

still had baby faces, others had beards that were too long. There was a girl who had dyed her hair pink, a fellow with a cashmere sweater, and another one with a tattoo on his neck. A photo would not suffice to distinguish each of them from all the others.

“What is the most striking thing in this moment as we begin our Spiritual Exercises?” Carrón asked. “I’d like to know your answers. I’ll tell you mine, so you all can compare your ideas with it. For me, it’s the fact of being here.” Well, yes, why did they come? What were they looking for? What did they expect from the three days? Is it possible they had nothing more interesting to do on a mild November weekend?

“What does it mean to be here? It is a gesture of love for ourselves, of tenderness toward ourselves, of attention to our destiny.” Carrón said that each person had arrived with her or his own drama and unease. “It is one of the features of our era: not only the enormous diffusion of unease among young people, but also the unease in front of this unease, feeling ashamed of every difficulty.”

He quoted a passage from the book by the Italian journalist, Antonio Polito, *Riprendiamoci i nostri figli* [*Let’s Take Back Our Children*]: “Notwithstanding all our efforts, notwithstanding the continual striving to build an identity that is appreciated, young people on social networks find no happiness. According to a study by the University of Sheffield, the more time they spend on Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram, the more they feel unhappy with their appearance, their family relationships, their progress in school: in a word, dissatisfied with their life.”

But is this fatal? Or is there another way to look at these difficulties? “What if this unease is a sign of our greatness? What if it is a sign of the ‘eternal mystery of our being’ of >>>

» which Leopardi spoke?” In response to these questions, Carrón read the gospel story of the woman with the hemorrhage, who desired to touch the hem of Jesus’ mantle, certain that doing so would be enough to heal her. “What urgency she must have felt, after so many failed attempts with the physicians, to make such an audacious gesture! Nothing stopped her. Rather than making her skeptical, all her attempts generated in her an even more radical urgency.” Carrón continued, saying that the three days of the Exercises were an opportunity to dare, like that woman, to place our whole selves in front of Christ “without being ashamed of anything, with the same trust, with the same certainty of being taken seriously.”

SOLUTIONS AND TIME. Massimiliano, the CLU secretary for the past two years, is studying Law at the Catholic University in Milan. Equipped with an earphone, he walked around behind the stage, checking that everything was going well. He is a calm and pragmatic fellow. Andrea, who will soon replace him in this role, was there with an earphone, too, but his expression was understandably more concerned. All the secretariat’s efforts are designed to ensure that the gestures will meet the great challenge issued by the Movement. “What have these two years meant for me? They have been an opportunity to see close up how Carrón proceeds, to verify through what we do whether what he tells us is true. For me, the greatest correction was that when there is an organizational problem, by temperament I would go straight to the practical, technical solution. But Carrón isn’t this way. He wants to understand the nature of the problem. Most of the time, this means that you have to give yourself time. It’s teaching me to be patient.” We asked him why these young people are so free to engage



with the leader of CL without fear of saying the wrong thing, and to engage in their own efforts. “It’s true that it happens this way. But you shouldn’t generalize,” explained Massimiliano. “Many times we’re free, but other times we aren’t. It’s not something automatic. It happens when it happens.”

This observation about not generalizing was also made by Paolo, a leader of the community at the Polytechnic University in Milan. One has the impression that this realistic approach also arises from participation in the CLU Center, which meets with Carrón every month. “For me, he’s a friend with whom I feel I am on the road to destiny,” Paolo explained. “He needs the relationship with us, too. You see that he enjoys the steps we take, that he’s enthusiastic. In fact, Carrón proposes to everyone the things we conceive of together.”

At breakfast, Carrón met with some of the communities. At eight in the morning, in front of a croissant and cappuccino, there was already a very intense conversation. The perspectives of some of the young people were truly wide open. It was amazing that there was never a moment of silence

between the end of the answer and the beginning of the next question. And the answers, nine times out of ten, were in the form of questions posed to the person who had raised a question.

The lesson Saturday morning on Zacchaeus began with everyone listening to two songs, “L’illogica allegria” [“The Illogical Gladness”] by Giorgio Gaber, and “La note che ho visto le stelle” [“The Night I Saw the Stars”] by Claudio Chieffo. Carrón said, “The power of reality is truly impressive when we let it speak to our hearts. Even if ‘all the rest crumbles apart,’ something can happen that makes me so enthusiastic that ‘I couldn’t sleep anymore.’ Who wouldn’t want to live this way?” Yet, even when this happens, with time, the wonder vanishes. So then, how do I rebuild a nexus with reality? At this point, Carrón spoke about the episode of Zacchaeus to show the method: “He was seen, and therefore he saw.” Carrón explained the consequences of this encounter, of this extraordinary *happening*: it enables us to know ourselves, gives us a new way of looking at reality and other people, and creates a new perspective that unmask ideology.



“What urgency the woman with the hemorrhage must have felt, after so many failed attempts with the physicians, to make such an audacious gesture! Nothing stopped her. Rather than making her skeptical, all her attempts generated in her an even more radical urgency.”



Powerful questions were asked during the assembly. Marco asked, “Instead of feeling ashamed of my unease, I bask in it. You talk about tenderness for oneself: what is this tenderness?” Susanna: “How can I believe that One who places such a wound in me can love me and truly leave me free?” Valeria: “Contingent things don’t satisfy me anymore. Nothing lasts. I don’t understand how the love of Christ can pass through these things to reach me.” Teresa: “How can I understand whether this human difference you talk about originates in Christ or is just the fruit of an individual temperament?” Pietro: “Often the kind of silence I experience is simply being closed inside my own thoughts. How can this become constructive?”

A MOTORCYCLE AND BEAUTY. In response to this last question, Carrón asked

Paolo to speak, who said, “In this period, silence is becoming a question of life or death. It was a gorgeous day: the sun, my motorcycle, the asphalt. Exceptional. The classic day when you think of nothing more than the rush of leaning that motorcycle into the curves. But as I returned home something happened that I never would’ve expected. I had to stop. I had to stop and look. I felt the need for a moment with Him: to regain awareness of Who fulfils everything in my life, to realize that even the beauty of that day couldn’t fill my heart. This is why I need silence. To stop and let that Presence penetrate inside me.”

“Do you understand? Christian silence is born of an attraction,” Carrón said. This is what happened to the cousin of Matteo, from Florence, who recounted at the dinner of the Center about a friend: “This is his first time

here. He’s not in the Movement. So Friday evening I went to ask him what he thought about the introduction. He said, ‘I was blown away. Give me the keys to the room. I want to go to bed right away. I don’t want to ruin the beauty of this moment.’” “It has happened again!” Carrón said, enthused. “Do you see? The event continues as event. You cannot take away that happiness from him, because it isn’t in your hands.”

The young people swarmed out of the hall of the Expo Center. Many had the theme of a song by the French artist Zaz that was sung during the three days, *Si jamais j’oublie*, in their heads. It says, “If someday I forget about all our nights, about the song of the guitar and all our screams, remind me who I am and why I am feeling so full of life right now.” **T**

A SEED AMIDST WAR

How is it possible that in a country devastated by war young men would choose to follow Christ instead of running away or enlisting? Over the years, we have documented the story of a monastery in Bangui converted into a refugee camp. Today, the conflict continues, but something is flourishing in the “periphery of the periphery of the world.”

BY FEDERICO TRINCHERO

It seemed the war in the Central African Republic had ended. But that is not the case. The relatively peaceful situation in the capital, Bangui, can be misleading. In recent months, in the more remote regions of the country, rebel groups—whose identity and objectives are not always well-defined—have claimed hundreds of lives, burned down homes, and forced thousands of refugees to flee to surrounding cities and villages.

There is a risk of becoming accustomed to war, almost as if it were inevitable, as if it were the only way to live together... Instead, for those far away, the risk is forgetting about the war. Raise your hand if you remember anything about a conflict in this region, or if you even know the exact location of the country. The title chosen by Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, the former journalist for *Le Monde*, for

his new book about the tormented history of this former French colony is not far from the truth: *Oubangui-Chari, le pays qui n’existait pas* (*Ubangi-Chari, The Country That Did Not Exist Before*). Though twice the size of Italy, it is a country that is rarely discussed in the media.

Then, in 2013, the latest in a series of coups caught the world’s attention. It was unlike any of the coups d’état that had preceded it: it resembled an invasion by a foreign army. Among the rebels who seized power—a very diverse yet mostly Muslim coalition with the name *Seleka*—many were Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries. The new president, Michel Djotodia, could not establish order; there were raids and violence, and the national army was in shambles. Out of despair, a faction of the population formed aggressive vigilante groups (*anti-bala-* ►►



COMMUNITY. Fr. Federico Trincheri, Carmelite missionary, with his young brothers in front of Saint Marc Major Seminary in Bangui.

TESTIMONIES

» ka). Many in these groups were Christian, but the bishops were quick to distance themselves and to condemn the violence.

Later that year, on December 5th, the capital was attacked. In a matter of days, the country had become embittered. Months of constant war and people fleeing the violence followed. France intervened to prevent the conflict from becoming a genocide between Christians and Muslims. Djotodia was forced to resign and the National Assembly replaced him by electing a woman, Catherine Samba-Panza. The war rages on through more or less gruesome phases despite the deployment of a UN mission of 12,000 soldiers.

In November 2015—in the face of an overwhelmingly negative outlook for the country—Pope Francis decided to kick off the Jubilee Year of Mercy here. Shots were fired hours before his arrival, adding an element of uncertainty until the last minute. Yet, the visit went perfectly, and this was the first miracle. Bangui was declared the “Spiritual Capital of the World.” As the doors of the Cathedral opened, a new beginning was in sight. Second miracle: the fighting ceased. In March 2016, a new president, Faustin Toudéra, was elected. The elections ran smoothly, and no one challenged the results. Slowly, the refugees returned home. The country was on the road to recovery. But then, the country’s strength began to falter, and the rebels started committing violent acts once again. War is terrible but for an impoverished country like the Central African Republic, it is a death sentence.

Two facts express today’s dramatic situation. First, 80 percent of the country’s territory is still occupied, or in any case controlled, by the rebel



groups: they decide the laws instead of the State, which is struggling to establish its presence, and is on the point of giving up. The election of the new president, the strong presence of the UN, and the copious assistance from the international community all seemed to indicate progress, but so far, the results have been disappointing.



Father Trinchero.

The second important fact is that the latest UN report places the Central African Republic at the bottom (188th of 188) of the Human Development Index. We are the poorest country in the world. Meanwhile, the ground beneath our feet is rich in gold, petroleum, and diamonds. Our wood is in high demand in Central Africa, and agriculture, due to the climate and abundant rainfall, could be widely practiced and profitable. Let us not forget our youth, our greatest treasure: 50% of the population is under the age of 18. Yet, there is a widespread absence of the most basic infrastructure, and the roads, if they are not coping with one of countless

soccer matches, are lined with crowds of unemployed youth, or youth selling items on a small scale... All await the new Central African Republic that seems ever so distant.

In the face of this desolate reality, there is no shortage of reasons to lose hope and give up. But it is pointless to continue to blame the enemy, who has never been truly identified, or to wait for someone to appear by magic to change the situation. This is the moment to start changing the situation, and for the people themselves to enact this change, in a great and long-awaited wave of love for themselves.

“ON THAT 5TH OF DECEMBER...” Over the last three years, the story of our Carmelite community—living in the periphery of the periphery of the world, within a few kilometers of the battleground—has become intertwined with the story of this country and its capital. On that 5th of December, the day the war broke out, we began an unforgettable human and Christian journey, as intense as it was unexpected. In a matter of days, 10,000 refugees found safety



THE SEED. The Carmelite community visiting the cemetery near Saint Paul des Rapides, standing before the graves of the first French missionaries who pioneered the evangelization of the country. Left, the profession ceremony for three young novices who made simple vows in September.

within and around our monastery; the church was turned into a dormitory, the refectory into a hospital, the chapter house into a maternity ward, and my room into a medicine storage room. We thought it would only be for a few days, but these past three years have given us the opportunity to live the Gospel without setting a foot outside our home and without second thoughts... there was no time to think about it. There is no hero among us, we are just a small community of friars who did not want to give up.

There were 12 of us, then, as the years went by, before we knew it, our community had grown. Today there are 20 members. I am the only Italian, but I admit that I hardly notice it, because our life together makes us one; it makes us one family. In September, seven young men entered the novitiate in our convent in Buoar, in the northern region of the country: among them is Aristide, the indefatigable nurse in our refugee camp, working night and day serving the sick, wounded, and expectant mothers. Thankfully, because some ref-

ugees have left, we will not have to hang a sign on the door of the convent that says: "We are sorry, but the maternity ward is at full occupancy..."

It is hard to believe that even while we were not far from the neighborhoods where the violence of war brought death and destruction, here at Carmel prayer never ceased, the sense of fraternity grew, and life thrived. Children were born in the refectory, while new friars were also "born" in the monastery.

A GREAT HONOR. How is it possible that in a country decimated by war there are still young men who chose to follow Christ instead of leaving or, worse, enlisting in the rebel militia groups? Some may see it as a way of escaping suffering. This interpretation is not only false, but is offensive to Africans. If that were the case, there should be many more of us... given the large number of youth and the salary per-capita. Should a young man enter with less than honorable intentions, he would not be able to remain on this path. As a matter of fact, each vocation is a mystery that is not bound

by human rules, calculations, and predictions. Could it be that these young people have experienced firsthand that only Christ can give them true peace in their hearts? That He is the only treasure worth spending one's life for? And that those who choose to live the Gospel with their brothers can also participate in the development of the country?

A few weeks ago, we visited together the cemetery near Saint Paul des Rapides, the oldest church in the Central African Republic. It is undoubtedly one of the most sacred places in the country. It was here that, in 1894, the evangelization of the Ubangi-Chari region began through the courage and faith of a few French Spiritan missionaries. Starting in Brazzaville, they went along the Ubangi River and reached what was at the time a small village next to a colonial train station. Many of them perished at a young age, within a few months of arriving in this land, having fallen victim to tropical diseases. Their bodies lie in this cemetery, and their names are now covered by the layers of lime on the cement crosses of the graves.

As I reflected on these heroes of the past, I observed my young brothers. The heroes buried here would never have dared to imagine that their hard work would produce such a bountiful harvest. The "heroes in the making" above ground do not realize that they are the fruit of those seeds that, at about their same age, died so that the Central African Republic would come to know Christ. Of course, the fruit is not ripe yet; some will be able to break off from the tree and ripen elsewhere. But it is still fruit nonetheless. I, an unworthy successor of those heroes, have had the unexpected blessing and great honor of observing the growth—without getting in the way too much, and growing myself as well—of the seed others sowed before me. **T**

JULIÁN CARRÓN

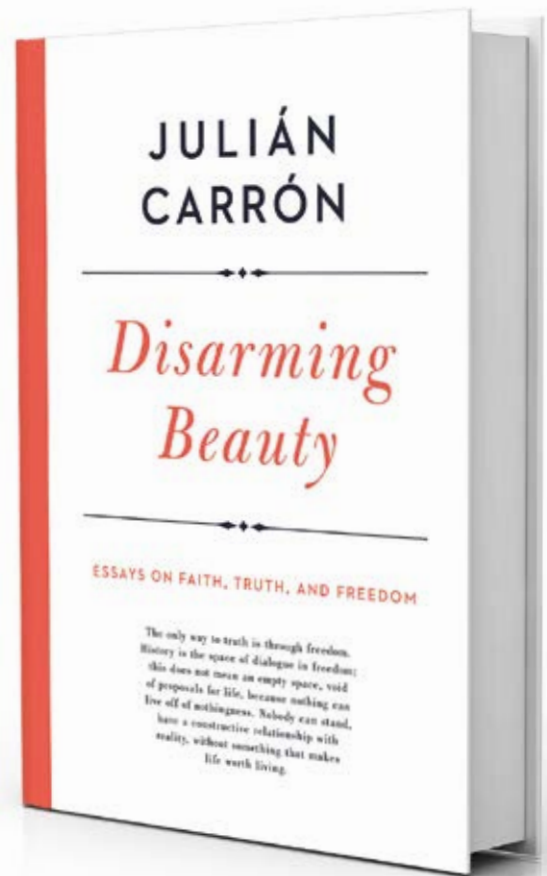
Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



In *Disarming Beauty*, Julián Carrón addresses the most pressing questions facing theologians today and provides insights that will interest everyone, from the most devout to the firm nonbeliever. Grappling with the interaction of Christian faith and modern culture, Carrón treats in very real and concrete ways what is essential to maintaining and developing Christian faith, and he invites an ongoing conversation about the meaning of faith, truth, and freedom.

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