

2016

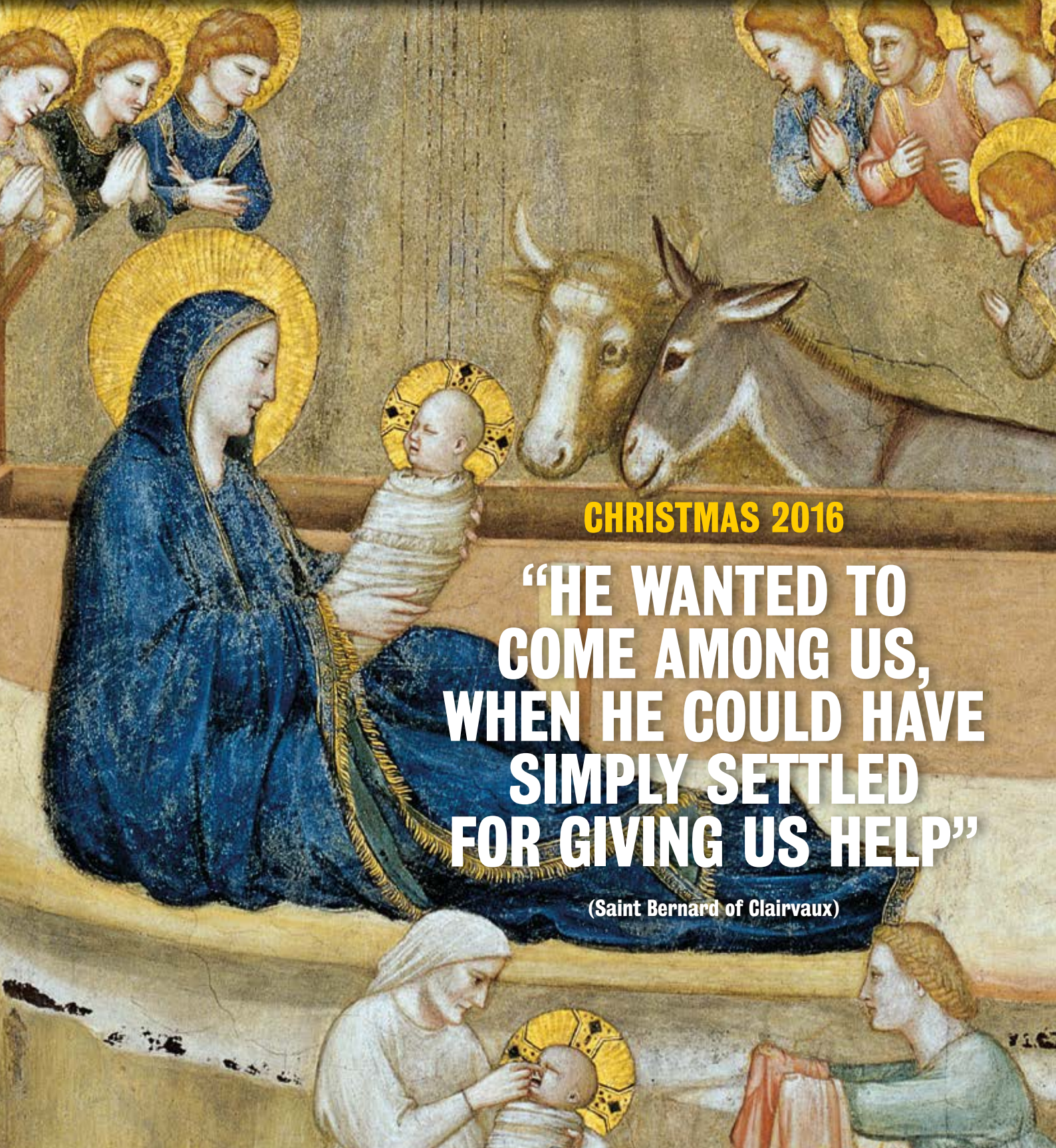
COMMUNION AND LIBERATION INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

TRACES

11

VOL. 18

LITTERAE COMMUNIONIS



CHRISTMAS 2016

**“HE WANTED TO
COME AMONG US,
WHEN HE COULD HAVE
SIMPLY SETTLED
FOR GIVING US HELP”**

(Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

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Photo:

Archivio fotografico del Sacro
Convento di San Francesco in
Assisi: Cover, I/VIII; Reuters: 6-7,
10-11, 22; GettyImages: 12, 16-17,
19, 20-21

Publishers (editore):

Società Coop. Edit. Nuovo Mondo
Via Porpora, 127 - 20131 Milano
Reg. Tribunale di Milano n°. 740
- 28 ottobre 1998

Iscrizione nel Registro degli
Operatori
di Comunicazione n. 6.147

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e Liberazione for the texts
by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

PAGE ONE

**“HE WANTED TO COME
AMONG US, WHEN HE COULD
HAVE SIMPLY SETTLED FOR
GIVING US HELP”**

Notes from Julián Carrón’s Summary of the Spiritual Exercises for Priests offered by Communion and Liberation. Pacengo del Garda (Verona), Italy, October 26, 2016. Available at www.tracesonline.org

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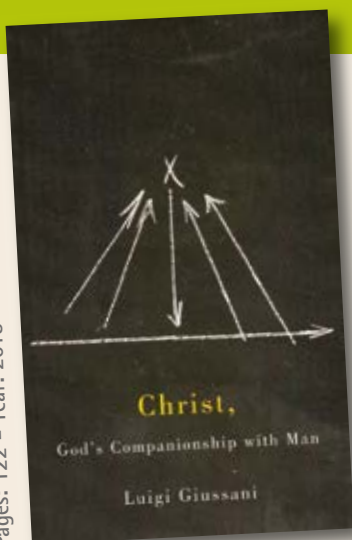
LUIGI GIUSSANI

This volume is a selection of the most significant writings by Monsignor Luigi Giussani (1922-2005), founder of the Italian Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation, which is practiced in 80 countries around the world.

Presented by Julián Carrón, Giussani’s successor as head of Communion and Liberation, *Christ, God’s Companionship with Man* is the most succinct introduction to the breadth of Giussani’s thought, including

memorable passages from works such as *The Origin of the Christian Claim*, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, *Why the Church?*, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, and *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* Many speak of Giussani as a friendly presence, a man who believed that it was possible to live in faith every day and in any circumstance. As a writer and religious scholar who was deeply devoted to his work, Giussani’s teachings and reflections have come to generate worldwide recognition and support.

MCGILL-QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY PRESS



Pages: 122 - Year: 2015

A PARTICULAR HISTORY


There's a strong tie between the cover of this issue of *Traces*—the announcement of the coming of Christmas, in the form of the flyer that CL produces every year to tell the world how decisive that fact is for our lives—and the closing of the Holy Door, marking the conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee with the reminder from Pope Francis that, though the Holy Year has ended, the graces we receive from it are never-ending. “*This is the time of mercy,*” the Holy Father wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*. “Each day of our journey is marked by God’s presence. He guides our steps with the power of the grace that the Spirit pours into our hearts to make them capable of loving.” This is what brings the birth of Christ into the world. Into *our* world, today.

It’s that child, born at a precise moment in history, it’s His particular history (a place and time, a family, and the entire human drama that follows) that reaches us—always through particular faces and events—and makes what the Pope describes possible. Holding the door of mercy ever open to us, for eternity. Continually offering us the possibility to start over, to begin again, to rediscover how we are embraced in our nothingness. There is no wound that God’s mercy cannot heal. There is no division, brokenness, or incapacity that that “power of grace” cannot piece back together. And it is thanks to that infant that we can have this experience now.

It is He who makes that power present. And it is He who brings into our lives a different certainty from that to which we so often want to cling (the security that comes from having understood things, from knowing “how things work,” from becoming more capable), one that is infinitely more solid. It’s the certainty of our relationship with the God who lives among us. All we have to do is look at Him to remember who we are: His creatures. And *what* we are: loved eternally, without limit. There’s nothing we have to dream up or chase after; all we have to do is look, and recognize that Christ is here *now*, alive among us. “He who could have simply settled for giving us help,” as St. Bernard reminds us, is here, at work.

On the *Traces* website, you’ll find a “Page One” that goes right to the heart of these words, along with many witnesses of this Presence in circumstances as varied and surprising as those that life never tires of placing in front of us, as a continuous provocation for our humanity. From the earthquake in central Italy, which for months has forced those who live there to ask themselves if there’s something or someone that allows them to stay standing, living and hoping even when everything around them comes crashing down; to the annual AVSI campaign which aims to raise awareness and funds to sustain eight projects around the world, where a network of over 12,000 volunteers operates to help people suffering because the state of emergency is becoming more dramatic. And, finally, the testimonies we share from the U.S. after the Presidential election. All these stories reveal the fact that Christianity can change the way we look at life, the way we know things. It can change hearts anywhere. Beyond the boundaries of space and time, yet always passing through these, through faces and encounters. Through a particular history. The one that **T** entered the world at Christmas.

CHARITABLE WORK: THE EXPERIENCE OF HAPPINESS

 Dear Fr. Carrón, the last time I did charitable work seriously was about 30 years ago. It's not as if I have never done things gratuitously, or have never helped anyone, but I no longer did this gesture seriously, systematically, or with any commitment. Then a friend from the Fraternity invited my wife to go and spend Saturday afternoon with some people with psycho-physical problems. I didn't take this invitation seriously because I work so hard all week, and there's always something to be done on Saturdays, even if the kids are independent. There's the house, some reading, some exercise. But this time my wife insisted. I went, but mostly just to make her happy. The first impression I had was very tough. These young people, who aren't really young anymore, came running to meet me. One of them drools because he has a problem with his palate. Another has a hard time talking, and with effort he explained that he's responsible for a small garden and they had told him I'm an agronomist. They hugged me as if they had known me forever and I asked myself, in complete bewilderment, where I had ended up. We were there for an hour, trying to sing whatever they knew, even a communist hymn, because it's the only song Ivan knows. He sang with such vehemence that even I sang at the top of my lungs although I never could stand the




communists. I returned home upset. I had been there at their disposal, to give advice about the garden and to sing the communist song next to the drooler who kept hugging me. After two weeks, I went and asked my wife about those guys. We went back many times after that. That hour of companionship always ends with a prayer to Our Lady to offer that gesture and to be able to understand it more deeply. Now that hour is important to me; I wait for it with joy. I experience in that gesture what it means to have a good heart. Spending time with those people, with a program that's different every time, with total availability and an open heart, is also changing my everyday life. I am an entrepreneur and I am steeped in the mentality of our time that leads me to try to obtain the maximum result with the least effort, seeing as I can take nothing for granted, including my salary. I'm in a race and I must run, and that's as it should be, but this moment is breaking apart that closure I felt about myself. It's sweeping away the last meanness that the world places on me, trying as it does to convince me that if you're not like that, you won't make it. The most interesting thing is that the experience of the good heart is not a banal, childlike *naïveté*, but discovering that my happiness passes through there, even when I am at work.

Simone, Rimini (Italy)

A PIECE OF MY HEART IS NOW YOURS

After a meeting with the Pope, an inmate at the Due Palazzi prison in Padua wrote:

 Dear Pope Francis, those 27 inmates that you received on Sunday, November, 6th (and I believe also the others present, first among them Fr. Marco Pozza, our pastor at Due Palazzi in Padua) are still dreaming and they have no intention of waking up because dreams last as long as we let them, especially if, like the meeting with you, the event is of the unrepeatable kind. That afternoon, the streets of Rome, inundated by that blast of air and water, saw that soggy group making its way quickly toward your residence. At the news that you would give us an audience, the dark sky, to us, seemed serene. When you appeared, we couldn't believe our eyes. The charisma of simplicity, not that of apprehension, that your person emanates, made us feel at home, and feeling welcomed, we could dialogue with you, telling you about ourselves. You lightened up our existence, reminding us that hope should never be far from our thoughts because God is with us, and that the last, as they are defined and treated by so many, can be and are children of God. We have lived in total darkness, banging into all the corners of a structure such as a prison has in great supply. By this constant collision, the pain almost becomes a friend and you no longer feel it, even though the bruises are still there and become sensitive each time someone reminds you of who you have been and how



CL CHRISTMAS POSTER

MARY'S SMILE

by Giuseppe Frangi

The *Nativity* of the 2016 CL Christmas poster is part of the Giottoesque cycle in the right transept of the Lower Basilica of Assisi. Giotto worked with the stories of St. Francis at the great construction site of the Upper Basilica in the last decade of the 13th century. After that, he was in Rimini and then in Padua, where in 1304 he finished the frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel. He returned to Assisi with his entourage of collaborators around 1308, having been called there by the Bishop of Assisi, Teobaldo Pontano, to work first on the Magdalen Chapel and then on the *Nativity* cycle. The Giotto who returned to Assisi was already famous; an artist who, in order to keep up with the ever-increasing number of commissioned works, organized a highly skilled studio of workers (very modern in that it used “temporary business associations” with local workers). Giotto appointed under him a master as the head of the studio, a master whose name is unknown but whom the critics have for some time stylistically identified with Giotto and re-baptized with the name “Giotto’s Relative,” because of the clarity with which he absorbed the master’s lessons. It was to him that Giotto gave the responsibility for overseeing the work at the Lower Basilica construction site, following a path certainly laid out by the master. The scene of the *Nativity*, if compared with the famous one in Padua, seems more “fairytale-like” with the crowd of numerous narrative themes: there is the arrival of the shepherds, but also a nursemaid who takes care of the baby Jesus. There is a naïve flavor to this composition, full of so many elements, which in its essence describes Christmas as a great feast. The order in which the elements are arranged shows a balance born of a great pictorial vision (“the reasoning mind” of Giotto, spoken of by one of the most important Giotto scholars, Luciano Bellosi). However, the candor with which the scenes were actually painted reveals that they were executed by a lesser personality, revealing a certain fragility in the design, attempting to compensate for the differences between the artist and the master. The work contains details both psychological and moving, such as the smile radiating from Mary’s face as she looks upon the Son.



you have stained yourself. And this happens often, but you, interested in us, have enabled that dignity which makes man a creature of God to be given again to us, without persisting in the condemnation desired by man, which unfortunately already belongs to us. Thank you, Pope

Francis, for being with us, for taking care of us, the forgotten ones who survive, deprived of the most precious good that God gave us: liberty. I will never ask you to give me back the small piece of my heart that on November 6, 2016 you carried away with you from that

room. I leave it gladly, along with the hug for my birthday. May God give you the strength to carry on with your objectives for world peace and unity. With goodness and hope, a hug from a man from the South, like you.

Mario, Padua (Italy)



Caption: Children among the rubble in Aleppo, in the eastern section of the town.



A HASHTAG FOR A CAUSE

There are eight main projects in the Tents Campaign. Refugees, orphans from the war in Ukraine, youth in Kenya in need of job training...These are not new emergencies, but are becoming more and more dramatic. Most of all, the situation in Syria.

BY PAOLA RONCONI

THE OTHER PROJECTS

● IVORY COAST Master Craftsmen

It is possible to break out of a state of poverty and to improve one's living conditions, and one way is working as a seamstress. In the Ivory Coast, AVSI tries to help men and women through this process by promoting training courses for the artisanal professions, providing resources and implementing microcredit programs. AVSI also supports and facilitates access to educational services for the children of these local artisans (5,000 people) and their families.



● BURUNDI No More Violence

Breaking out from the tunnel of fear and starting again—this is the goal of a project in Burundi which helps women who are victims of rape. This involves healing wounds (physical and psychological); fostering the development of a new mentality in schools and communities, especially in families; and ensuring accommodations and legal assistance. This is already taking place in the MEO Center in Bujumbura.



● KENYA Vocational Training Schools

Job training and orientation for young adults. At the St. Kizito Vocational Training Institute in Nairobi, courses in auto repair, carpentry, hairstyling, and information technology are market-driven ways for entering the job force. The project involves Kenyan youth, as well as refugees from South Sudan and Somalia and their families, with the goal of re-entering their home countries with real job prospects.



The needs in the places AVSI is proposing for its 2016 Tents Campaign are not new: #RefugeesMigrants. *Work that enables a step to be made.*

The state of emergency hasn't gone away, and in fact has become more dramatic than ever before: there are many refugees, people forced to flee because the conditions in their countries make a dignified life impossible. These are people who need assistance in our home country to find a job or to be taught a trade from square one, in order to set their lives back into motion and to restore their dignity.

The hashtag of this fundraiser acknowledges that there is great difficulty today in trying to distinguish between refugees and migrants. AVSI knows this very well, but hopes to go beyond this and help people (any person) in need; if possible, in their home countries, before they might be forced to leave. Also to help them wherever they might end up, for example, in Italy.

HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE

AVSI's end-of-the-year campaign aims to raise awareness and funds with a support network of over 12,000 volunteers (called "AVSI Point"), in Italy and in other countries.

Since 1990, there have been thousands of initiatives supporting the year's proposed projects.

On the AVSI website, you can search for events in various cities, make donations to individual projects, and download materials (images, flyers, press releases, videos) to promote the campaign.

To organize an event, contact: retesostenitori@avsi.org

www.avsi.org

There are eight projects this year (see the summaries in this article), but the concrete measures to assist the suffering people of Syria are perhaps the most urgent.

The numbers are shocking: from the beginning of the war in 2011 to the present day, there have been 400,000 killed and 2 million wounded, many of them suffering permanent handicaps. Outnumbering those who died due to mortar shells and shrapnel are those who have lost their lives due to a lack of medical care. Today, 13.5 million Syrians are in need of aid. Of these, 11.5 million do not have access to medical treatment, and 40% of these are children. In Damascus, more than one million people cannot afford health insurance, while in Aleppo, the number exceeds 2 million.

Here are other facts which provide a clearer picture of the humanitarian crisis in this Middle Eastern country: medical personnel have emigrated en masse; many pharmaceutical

● **UKRAINE**
With War Orphans

In Ukraine, in addition to their material needs, the people face the mutual hate between those who support the Ukrainian army and those who support the Separatists. Since it began in 2014, the conflict has left in its wake many displaced people, a lot of destruction, and a climate of suspicion. This project seeks to help families and orphans, providing material and psychological support, including cultural activities and socialization to foster living together peacefully.



● **ITALY**
Prompt Acceptance

The Tents project supports the Fondazione Progetto Arca through the early stages of welcoming refugees in transit at the Central Station of Milan. There are many women, and also children and unaccompanied minors, who are to be cared for—provided with food and rest, health assistance, and an introductory orientation. First and foremost, help is provided with registration and transition to one of the various welcome centers.



● **ITALY**
Employment Grants

In partnership with Caritas Ambrosiana and the Association Farsi Prossimo, work is at the heart of this project. And with it, the possibility of autonomy. Through job training, the program offers refugees who've arrived in Italy a way to learn a new profession. In what fields? Catering and agriculture, as well as the clothing and hotel industries. To help them try to begin again.



● **LEBANON AND JORDAN**
The Educational Challenge

The crisis in the Middle East has driven hundreds of thousands of Syrians into Lebanon and Jordan. They are refugees now, and many of them are children. AVSI is seeking to help 35,000 of them attend school, to give the older ones the opportunity to learn a trade (in seven agricultural schools run by AVSI), and to provide services for the families in greatest need.



plants have been destroyed; though the machinery in hospitals may be operational, there may not be technicians able to use and repair it, or spare parts available; and there may not always be a stable supply of electricity, potable water, or consistent sanitation management.

DAILY LIFE. Our minds turn to the images that we have gotten used to seeing in the media. Besides these atrocities, there is a day-to-day reality that is more ordinary and gets less news coverage: the lack of obstetricians for the 300,000 births that occur each year. Think about those who suffer from chronic illnesses and who cannot receive consistent care and medication. Think about the 600,000 who suffer from severe mental illnesses, who can receive basic care in only 10% of the hospitals (of those that are still standing). In Syria, there are four hospitals managed by Catholic institutions or that follow the

social doctrine of the Church: St. Louis and Al Rajaa Hospitals in Aleppo and the French and Italian hospitals in Damascus. Only families with middle to high incomes come to these because there is a charge for the services. Though the hospitals have the ability to perform very advanced treatments, and can offer treatments in all specialized medical fields plus clinical and technical support, they now operate at less than 50% capacity due to economic problems, attacks related to the war, and the lack of trained medical personnel. Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio of Syria since 2008, recently made a Cardinal, describes these institutions as “the most treasured among the works of mercy of the Church in Syria, which offers itself as the one who, by Christ’s

command, is sent to heal both body and soul.”

“It is a response to an invitation by the Nuncio that we have decided to fund these four hospitals, so that treatment can be performed without charge,” explains Giampaolo Silverstri, Secretary General of AVSI.

There is funding for operational costs and doctor salaries, for technology upgrades, and for personnel training. “In each hospital, there will be an AVSI employee who will determine the level of poverty of those who request assistance, based on a set vulnerability index.” The Year of

Mercy just came to a close, but the word “mercy” describes exactly “the work of the Church that began 2000 years ago,” says Nuncio Zenari. “After all, the first doctor of the body and of the soul was Jesus.”

Today, 11.5 million do not have access to medical treatment, and 40% of these are children.

The Basilica and the statue of Saint Benedict in Norcia (Italy) after the earthquake on October, 30th.



CHRISTMAS IN NORCIA

The city of Saint Benedict symbolizes the hardships of those suffering the continuing earthquakes in Central Italy, which show no sign of letting up. “Jesus was also born outside home, like us.” There are those who hope and build without waiting for government-assisted reconstruction. We spoke with the prior of the monks of Norcia.

BY ALESSANDRA STOPPA



For three months, thousands and thousands of quakes in one continual earthquake have given no peace to our people in the Italian regions of Umbria and the Marches, all the way south to Lazio and Abruzzo. A few days ago, a woman died of the injuries she sustained on the night of August 24th. She was victim 299. Franca was pulled out of the rubble of a hotel in Amatrice, a city whose populace continues to struggle, while the emergency has spread to many towns and hamlets scattered throughout the Sibillini Mountains, destroyed by the quakes of October 26th and 30th, the strongest recorded in Italy since the one in Irpinia in 1980.

Norcia is the symbol of the suffering of all 26,000 displaced people who will spend Christmas away from their homes. The deserted city looks like a battlefield. The earthquake has cracked the spine of the Apennines and lowered the land by 27.5 inches, and quakes continue, in clusters registered day and night by the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology.

ANNINO'S FACE. But those who can choose not to leave their beloved land, which gives them life and brings them grief, even if remaining means sleeping in a trailer or a tent as winter advances. This time of waiting for Christmas is much different than what they had expected, made up of "mornings when you wake up together and get in line for the bathroom," as Silvana Santucci, an evacuee from Ancarani, recounts. "Days passed organizing all the aid

material that arrives, of which there is a great deal." The idea of celebrating is not out of the question, for just one reason: "We have lost so much," says Alessandra Rossi, from Norcia, "but not even one person was killed." She is cold and sleep-deprived, but doggedly continues dispensing medicine in the trailer that has now taken the place of her pharmacy in the town center. She was five years old during the earthquakes of 1997, and watched her father roll up his sleeves and start again, for her. "Now it's my turn." In the midst of all the bitterness and anger, she is thankful for all those "who are doing everything they can for us: the firefighters, volunteers, Civil Protection workers, everyone." But the biggest help for her is Annino, the face of Annino, an old man she has known ever since she was a little girl. Every morning when she opens her trailer-pharmacy, "he's there to say hi. He comes to greet me. Do you understand? I can't explain it. Every day, he comes."

The Poor Clares, who have moved to Trevi, have suffered a lot from being so far from their convent, but for them the greatest gift of this Christmas is seeing how much people need them to return to Norcia. "They're waiting for us. We didn't expect them to miss us so much," states the abbess, Mother Gabriella Babalini, who knows well how much the cloistered life is an enigma to people, often viewed as "useless." After the earthquake the police told her, "Only now do I understand how important your presence is."

Fr. Luciano Aventi, a Norcia na-

tive, is now the parish priest for Preci, Campi, and Ancarani, where "nobody, I mean nobody, has left." He has literally been conquered by the people. "Since the August earthquakes, they have all been working, without waiting for the institutions, to rebuild the structures that today are a blessing." When Prime Minister Renzi came after the October 30th quake, they begged him, "Let us stay here, trust us." Fr. Luciano lives like everyone else, in a trailer, after "living" for quite some time in his car. Every day he travels throughout the Valnerina and the Valle Castoriana to visit people. "The most important thing is presence: for me, the 'p' of priest is the 'p' of presence." Like the Pope's surprise visit on October 4th to say that "he is with us," to the point of sending at no cost "his" firefighters and a team of restorers from the Vatican Museums to care for the patrimony of artworks.

A DEBT OF EXISTENCE. David Lanzi, patriarch of the firm with his name that produces the prosciutto of Norcia and other cold pork products and cheeses, resumed work on October 31st, the day after the earthquake. He has lived through the earthquakes of 1972, 1979, 1997, and now these of 2016. "I've gotten used to it. The earthquakes wreck things, and I start again." He can only spare a few words on the phone because he has so much to do. "It's going to be tough, but I'm not putting anyone on unemployment." This is something everyone says. "We're mountain people." This is the fiber of people who have



been educated to walk briskly, united in the Christian faith, which here is intimately part of the history of the places and the story of each person. But everything has to be relearned, in order to look to that which does not pass away. “You know what? Everybody here lived like lords. We were all well off, with a good tourist trade even during the recession. And I believe we didn’t realize it,” says Giampaolo Stefanelli, mayor of Norcia until two years ago, who has a son in Spoleto and another in Rome, “but I’m here. I think I owe a debt, a ‘debt of existence,’ I don’t know how to put it. And I want to pay it.”

OUTSIDE HOME. Fr. Avenati tells his people, “The earthquakes took away our homes, but we are becoming a big family. When you live individualism, in an emergency you suffer more.” So then, in the places where people are the most disoriented and community life has become unglued, the unstoppable bishop of Spoleto-Norcia, Renato Boccardo, together with Caritas, made up of parish priests and volunteers, has given top priority to re-creating community spaces. In Ancarano, the people displaced from their homes insisted that the biggest tent should be used as a church, since they no longer had one. This is how they are preparing for Christmas. “Jesus was born outside home, like us,” continues Fr. Avenati. “He fully shared our situation. We feel Him even more as the Savior of our life. So present.”

“Succisa virescit.” Cut it down, and it grows up stronger. The Benedictine motto is the promise behind the trial that has struck the life of many people, of entire communities, with their towns, homes, streets, shops, schools, and workplaces devoid of life.

The first sign that the roots of faith are deep was the image seen around the world the morning of October 30th, women and men on their knees, their hands joined in prayer, in the dust-choked air of the square in front of the Basilica of Saint Benedict in Norcia. In the unreal silence they were praying to God. The façade of the Basilica stood erect there like a stage set backdrop, directing their gazes upward. Behind it there was only a void; the entire structure had crumbled, the masterpiece of the 13th century, built on the place where in 480 the Patron of Europe was born.

That morning Fr. Benedict Nivakoff, prior of the Benedictine monastery of Norcia, was one of those kneeling there. As the earth continued to shake, he went to the square to hear people’s confessions. For the last 15 years, the 37-year-old New Yorker has been living the intense rule that teaches you to “live within yourself,” so vital in the face of the pain of those who have been torn from their homes. Weeks after the earthquakes, he is still amazed by the miracle. “There were no victims. We felt protected and prepared.”

He and his community of fifteen monks, almost all of whom are not Italian, moved to makeshift refuges near San Benedetto in Monte, the monastery in the woods above Norcia. The Basilica and the monastery

in the city had already been damaged, and to their pain, they had to leave them. But everything is a sign for them: “We are called to return to the source.”

What did it mean for you to kneel there?

First of all, it was in supplication for the protection of everyone. At that point we didn’t know whether there were any dead or wounded... It was truly a miracle. But kneeling is also, and always, a gesture of penitence. This is very important, especially after a tragedy.

In what sense?

The Lord saved my life. Why? What do I need to change? This is the first question I ask myself, and it holds true for everyone: whenever a trial happens, whatever it may be, it is a chance, the opportunity that God gives us to change our life. In the trial, you also find salvation.

Why am I alive? If I am still here, it is not to become meaner, but more filled with charity. What happened motivates us to be alert, to look at things differently. To convert.

What is this conversion for you, now?

For example, we decided to get up earlier, and we say Morning Prayer at 3:45, so we can have more time to keep vigil for the people. Now that we are at the Monte and see Norcia from above, every second we see more clearly for whom we make our offering, for whom we fast [from mid-September to Easter, they are having only one meal a day]. In any case, personal conversion is intimately bound up with humility, and humility is intimately united with truth. This means that, first of all, I must live in the truth of who I am. I mustn’t escape or flee from what I am. >>



Benedict Nivakoff.



» Can you explain that?

We don't need to think about being better than we are, or worse. But just as we are. This realism might seem something ordinary and banal, but instead it's much more difficult than it seems. Recognizing deep down that you are little and sinful, recognizing how far you are from God, but without despairing, without turning in upon yourself.

Now you are at the Monastery in Monte. Why do you say that it is a call to return to the source?

If our works, such as our presence in the city, the liturgy in the Basilica, the products of our work, the cultural initiatives—that is, all the ways we transmit to the world the fruit of our prayer, if these works have now been reduced because of the earthquakes, maybe it means that we have to return to the source of our spiritual life, which is prayer, contemplation, silence, and solitude. In this way, and only in this way, will we be certain that the water will start gushing forth again for everyone. We are called to be increasingly aware that our life does not belong to us. We want to understand God's will for us. He has changed the direction of our journey, strengthening it on the mountain.

What does it mean for you to see the Basilica destroyed?

It's really hard. It's like seeing a casket. As I look at it I see the day I put on the novitiate's robe, then that of my solemn profession, and of my priestly ordination. We have received so many expressions of closeness from all over the world. We didn't expect such a strong bond with this place. People express their sympathy, as if there were a death in the family. In this period I've been reflecting on Saint Benedict. When he had the vision of the triple destruction of the monastery of Montecassino, even though his



The people shown on television, on their knees in front of the Basilica of Norcia.

monks were spared, he cried, seeing the walls collapse. His tears are ours. In the liturgy we also celebrate the “birthdays” of churches, the anniversary of their dedication, because the Church treats buildings like saints. It is understandable that one should suffer because of its loss. But certainly the essential thing is the life inside the building.

The place is even more important for those like you who have taken a vow of stability.

Yes, certainly. It is an entirely particular love of a place. If you think about it, the vow of stability is a very radical thing. Existentially, it is a faithfulness: no matter what happens, you are there. Marriage should be this way, but today in the world everything is the opposite. Stability is the core of what Saint Benedict offers us: he created and nurtured the European culture and enabled it to be transmitted over the centuries, but you need to understand how he and his disciples were able to do this. They rooted themselves. They did not give in to the difficulties, of any kind: difficulty with their brother monks, with the abbot, with the climate, with illness... with earthquakes. They remained, and above all, they always went beyond the superficiality of the day.

In fact, you see in what has happened an opportunity for all of Europe. What is this call?

I hope that the earthquake, which has in some way wounded a place that is

at the origin of Europe, offers a new window, a new vision of Europe's origins, its “roots.” This expression is often used, but it no longer tells us anything. Benedict is a saint who doesn't correspond to the immediate images we have today. You can't put him into a box. You can't expect from him a quick, trendy one-liner that explains everything for you. He is very profound and subtle, and so it's a matter of discovering him. If Europe tries to know him, it means going beyond the superficial things. In all suffering, there is an opportunity to prepare for a new birth.

Now Christmas is coming...

For us now, more than ever, it is the moment of expectant awaiting and of the plow. It's the time to sow in order to reap, without knowing when. The important thing is that when Norcia is born again, it will find a stronger and more serious faith than it has today. We have to remember that Saint Benedict spent three years alone, far from everyone, in the cave in Subiaco, until God decided to make him known. The shepherds of the area mistook him for an animal, but from there the first monastery was born. I think that for us and for all of our people, this is like the time of a woman who is waiting for the birth of her child. For nine months she prepares everything well for him. For us, it will not be months, but years. However, if you have more time, you prepare better. **T**

JULIÁN CARRÓN

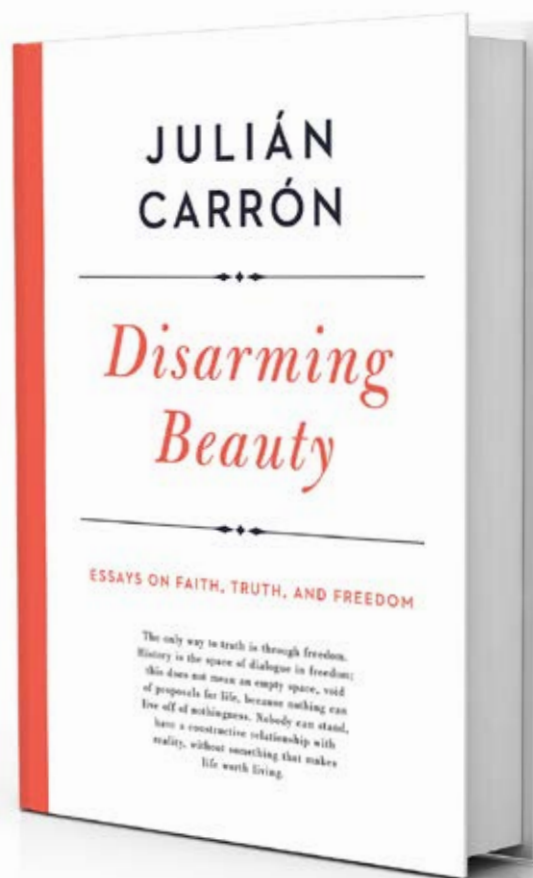
Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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A blurred background of the United States flag, showing the stars and stripes in a soft, out-of-focus manner. The colors are muted and the overall effect is artistic and patriotic.

UNITED STATES

AMERICA AND A PRESENT GOODNESS



What recourse is left to us to build a nation for all? A month after the election of the President an answer to the sense of powerlessness: “Freedom cannot be imposed but only offered freely.” Here we publish an article appeared in *The Boston Pilot*.

BY JOSÉ MEDINA

A week after the election season’s conclusion, speculation and uncertainty have not abated. Searching for a response to the uneasiness, some have taken to the streets to march and shout in protest. Many are organizing for the upcoming political battle. And others are still confident that the democratic system will always prevail and correct any abuse. Faced with either a seemingly fruitless demonstration of dissatisfaction or trust in a faceless system, we are left with a sense of impotence to affect meaningful change on the national stage. What simple, common ground do we start from—especially after such an ideologically charged, divisive year? What recourses are left to us to build a nation for all, from the humble platform of our homes, jobs, and daily lives?

Only a present experience of “the good” will allow us to rebuild. As novelist Wendell Berry writes, >>

A DOUBLEHEADER IN NEBRASKA

The Omaha CL community the day after the elections. Including the vote on the death penalty. “Why do we always defend life?”

The evening after Trump was elected, everyone was there for the CL School of Community in Omaha, Nebraska. As the country tried to work through the shock, there in the heart of America, in a Republican-majority state, each of those 30 friends did all they could not to miss the Wednesday appointment, drawn by the need to look together at a day that hit America like a hurricane. “Irrespective of whether they were happy or disappointed with the results, I was impressed that everyone wanted to share how they had discovered themselves that day, going to the office or to school or speaking with their neighbors,” said Martina, a 34-year-old assistant professor of medieval history.

Like Leah who, going into work that morning, found herself surrounded by an apocalyptic air. “Many of my colleagues couldn’t even manage to sit down at their desks and turn on their computer. I asked myself, ‘How is it that I, despite my many perplexities, came here with even more desire to do what I have to do?’ Within that general uncertainty, I realized I was a point of stability.” And so she found herself mostly listening. “The conversations were something new. Usually, you never talk about politics. Even less about life and what you really care about. But that day, something broke the ice.”

The same thing happened to Martina. At the college where she teaches, some of her colleagues even canceled their classes. “In my department, some people were crying, or hadn’t slept that night. In their eyes, they saw the ‘glorious’ trajectory of democracy caving in, at the hands of their fellow Americans.” One professor of American history

even reached the point of asking herself what sense there was in teaching what she had always taught. “I told her that I was even more passionate now about going to class to educate the students to a true use of reason, because it’s essential in building a society,” she says. “But she stopped crying when I pushed her to look at all the good things surrounding her in life. Starting with her children, her husband, including our friendship.” That evidence was enough to help open her eyes again.

There were many views, but that was not a problem. The desire to understand together was stronger.

For many of them, the words of the flyer “Protagonists of Our Own History,” a collaborative effort of all the CL communities in the U.S. leading up to the election, started to come to life in the moments of that day. “It was exciting to discover in those more honest conversations that it’s possible to go to the heart of the American spirit and affirm that there’s still a good we can work toward together,” Martina explained. “I say this even though the atmosphere here often becomes tense. On many campuses, acts of aggression among students have reached such a level that university administrators are opening new support offices. People feel justified in building even higher walls.”

The months leading up to the election were very lively for the Omaha community. There were many conflicting views, but that was not a problem. The desire to understand together was stronger. They even got together to watch the televised debates: typically an hour-and-a-half of insults. “We were so dissatisfied that, after turning off the TV, we couldn’t just go home,”



John told us. “Often, we were up late, continuing the discussion. And we asked friends to join us to help us better understand issues of taxes, laws, and foreign affairs.” After one of those evenings, John wrote to everyone, “I may have understood for the first time what it means that reality is positive. Looking at each other this way, seeing that esteem we have for each other, I understood that He is with us even in the smallest details. Exactly like when He went fishing with the Apostles.”

Our friends in Omaha didn’t just have the question of picking a President to face. For them, this election was a “doubleheader.” On November 8th, they also had to voice their position on a referendum to reintroduce the death penalty, which had been eliminated in the state of Nebraska in 2015, but was being proposed again by governor Pete Ricketts, who is Catholic and pro-life. “Right away, we found the motivations of the various groups in the ‘no’ campaign to be insufficient,” Martina said. “The secular voices all hinged their entire argument on the financial savings. A prisoner with a life sentence actually costs less than one on death row, because of the extremely complex and drawn-out legal proceedings.” Alternatively, on the Catholic front, with polls showing 80% of practicing Catholics favoring the death penalty, the message was to vote against it out of obedience



a veteran, who suffered from PTSD severe enough to be triggered by birds chirping in the morning. She started working at Los Angeles Habilitation House, a non-profit organization that offers employment and career opportunities to persons with disabilities. After a year at LAHH, she said: “I still can’t sleep, but now I’m beginning to love the singing birds. Something re-awakened in me. Being with you, something re-awakened in me.”

We may dismiss the present good as a failing strategy due to its fragility. Dialogue and encounter, we could argue, are powerless and therefore might be easy prey to those who choose power to affect change. Yet, much of the social change we admire was born from a position of weakness and not of strength. Peace at its root is ultimately powerless. Freedom cannot be imposed but only offered freely. The men and women that in recent times have shifted our paradigms about political change—Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Gandhi—have done so from a position of powerlessness, disarmed, inviting the other to a present good.

A free society will thrive when men and women eagerly witness, rather than preach the principles they hold most dear. No political strategy will substitute for a spirit of cooperation. And that spirit always starts from the living example of a new gaze, a gaze like the one of the priest in Aleppo or of the Los Angeles Habilitation House staff, a gaze that affirms the other before his beliefs. Only a present good makes me want to be good.

Now that the election is past, the work begins. In the words of Wendell Berry, we just need to “give up saving the world and start to live savingly in it.” **T**

» “It is the presence of good—good work, good thoughts, good acts, good places—by which we know that the present does not have to be a nightmare of the future.” Experiences of goodness can generate men and women who engage each other with curiosity instead of suspicion. A present goodness engenders hope, and hope sparks a desire to share and dialogue rather than entrenchment in our own beliefs.

POWERLESSNESS. I have encountered this present good in fragile human realities, in which hope and joy shine despite the odds. I have seen it in Father Ibrahim, a parish priest in Aleppo, Syria. This man met a Muslim at the well of a Franciscan convent who said to him, “Father, when I see how people come to get water here, with a smile and a great peace in their hearts, without fighting, without yelling... I, who’ve been all around Aleppo and seen how they’re killing each other to get to wells, am amazed. You are full of peace and joy.... There’s something different about all of you.”

I have seen that present good in

to the bishops. “We realized that deeper reasons were needed to convince people,” Martina said. Together with Dave, Meredith, Mary, and Fr. Scott, she started out with a simple question: “Why do we always defend life?”

The fruit of their work together, which included gatherings, lectures, and discussions, culminated in the form of a flyer. “We started from the experience each of us has of our own mistakes and our ineradicable need for forgiveness. And from the fact that, because of this, we can’t help but feel suffocated by a justice reduced to an eye for an eye. We desire more, even for those stained by terrible crimes. We desire that mercy capable of changing any heart.”

The flyer didn’t change the results of the referendum, which saw a victory for the “yes” vote with 61%, but it was certainly an original viewpoint, if only because of the fact that it was written with the lives of the 11 currently condemned people in Nebraska in mind. Their executions had been suspended for two years, but now would be carried out. “In reality, that’s not quite true,” Martina explained. “Like in other states, the drug used for lethal injections is no longer sold. It’s a paradoxical situation. They have to find a ‘human’ way of killing. And so another question came to us: ‘Why can’t they find it? What is the real problem here?’”

Anna Leonardi

JOSEPH, THOSE QUESTIONS, AND ME

He abandoned the Church for Marxism. Then, in 1993, his newspaper sent him to see Cardinal Ratzinger. Here's the story behind PETER SEEWALD, author of four book-interviews with the Pope Emeritus.

BY LUCA FIORE

In Italy, he's known for his four book-interviews with Joseph Ratzinger, first as Cardinal, later as Pope, and now as Pope Emeritus. Peter Seewald, 62, was born in Bochum, Germany, to a Catholic family, but during the years of upheaval in the late 1960s, he embraced Marxism and abandoned the Church. At the end of the 1970s, he was the founding editor of the far-left weekly paper *Passauer Kleine Zeitung*. He then moved on to work for *Spiegel* and *Stern*. In 1993, when he met the then-Prefect of the Congregation

for the Doctrine of the Faith for the first time, he was a senior writer for the very secular *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*.

The dislike in Bavaria and all over Germany for the “*PanzerKardinal*” had spread within both secular and Catholic circles. For example, in a meeting with Seewald, psychoanalyst and Catholic theologian Eugen Drewermann spoke of the gentle theologian as “a bloodless man, without warmth. And hungering for a life that must be denied him. I cannot assess the factor of cynicism that must

afflict one when you see questions of faith become very much matters of administration and power.” Still, for that first interview, Seewald managed to rid himself of all the prejudice and clichés, and that encounter was enough to change his life. Not so much, or not only, because it was the beginning of a series of four international best sellers, but because it marked the beginning of his return to the Catholic faith (in 2004 he went on to write *Als Ich begann, wieder an Gott zu denken* [*When I Began to Think Again About God*]).

What is amazing is not so much the fact that a nonbeliever was converted through his dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, but that a man like Ratzinger would entrust his thoughts to the pen of a journalist like Seewald. But as history has taught us, the great theologian was not lacking in surprises.

“How did I win over Ratzinger’s trust? It wasn’t really that difficult. We already reached a good understanding of each other in that first meeting,” Seewald explained, sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Milan the day before the only public presentation of his latest book *Last Testament*. The presentation was hosted by the Catholic University of Milan and the *Centro Culturale di Milano*. “I think he must have appreciated my writing style, and the questions that I asked him. He must have understood that I was sincerely interested in getting a closer look at who he was, in order to understand his thought.” Twenty years down the road, the questions published in *Salt of the Earth* (1996) don’t seem to have lost any of their freshness. “More and more people are asking themselves whether the ship of the Church will still be sailing at all in the future. Is it worth- ➤➤



Peter Seewald, German journalist and co-author of the book-interview with Joseph Ratzinger, *Last Testament*.

» while to get on board?"; "You once said that Christian faith is not a theory but an event. What does that mean?"; and "What is the most fascinating thing about being Catholic for you personally?"

WHAT'S BEHIND IT ALL? In the beginning, Seewald told the audience, it was all supposed to end after the initial interview. Then he was contacted by Ratzinger himself for *Salt of the Earth*. "I'm a journalist; I'm not a theologian, not even a journalist who writes about religious topics [Editor's note: in 2004 he wrote *Gloria, the Princess, a book-interview with Gloria von Thurn und Taxis*]. However, over the years I've had to recognize that I found myself facing a great task. It became ever more clear to me that the image and public opinion of Ratzinger didn't line up with the truth. This false image kept people from accessing his true thought and person."

During his presentation in Milan, Seewald explained that through the years, he never stopped asking himself if there wasn't something Benedict XVI was hiding that he couldn't see. "I never found it, maybe because it's not there." A lesson about journalism or about the man Joseph Ratzinger? "I learned that he's not a perfect person, he has made his own mistakes, like all of us. But I think there is also a vice that is widespread in modern journalism, and that is: starting out by trying to find something wrong, something negative," Seewald explained. "We're talking about a real epidemic in our profession. It happens especially in pieces on the Church or religion. In the end, you never get past superficial details: you worry about organizational questions, or get fixated on theories of reform, but you lose sight of the essence of things. No one dares to go to the heart of the question. It's



COLLABORATION. The other books that originated from Seewald's meetings with Ratzinger are: *Salt of the Earth* (1996), *God and the World* (2000), and *Light of the World* (2010).

a type of journalism steeped in ideology. You're always starting with a pre-established opinion."

Precisely this seriousness in approaching a topic and the desire to get to the real substance of the matter is one of the things the German journalist says he learned from the Pope Emeritus. However, on a personal level, it was certainly not the most important thing he learned. "What changed in me over the years? I'd prefer to stay at the level of external differences. And that's something very simple: I had left the Church, and now I've come back. It was a paradigm shift that is confirmed at the level of awareness, that has to do with how I conceive of my life and how I act. I learned to look at religion not as a problem, but as an opportunity. An adventure. It was the discovery of a new dimension for growth, without which you can no longer live." In the meantime, Seewald had also thrown himself into a journalistic investigative report on the person of Jesus Christ (just as, 30 years before, another

papal interviewer, Vittorio Messori, had done). Seewald's *Jesus Christ: Die Biographie* was published in 2009.

LEGACY. Looking back, Seewald speaks about a "destiny" that tied him to the man who is the Pope Emeritus. Seewald's given name is Peter, and the conversations that resulted in the book *God and the World* (2000) took place at Montecassino, the monastery founded by St. Benedict, the saint from whom Ratzinger would take his name as Pope five years later. Still, all the hours of conversation and meetings weren't enough to give Seewald a perfectly-defined portrait of Ratzinger. "He has a very complex and multi-faceted personality. I haven't met anyone so far who can claim to have fully understood the man you meet through the works of Ratzinger. For many, he continues to be an enigma." But one thing that is clear to Seewald is that "we find ourselves in front of a man who early on had the intuition of his calling

THE JOY OF LIVING FAITH

A book-interview that, following the thread of Ratzinger's memories, introduces us to what transforms his life.

by Tommaso Ricci

to be a servant, an apostle of Jesus Christ. A man who never thought of his life in terms of a career, but rather fulfilled his responsibilities along a path that included difficult and painful moments.”

An ill-intentioned journalist might think that Seewald asserts Ratzinger's genius in order to bask in the reflection of the limelight. However, those who weren't too distracted during his pontificate, or who at least have read one of the book-interviews, know that the German journalist's words are not exaggerated. “We have in front of us the greatest intellectual of our time and a Doctor of the Church for the modern era like no one who is to come. If we can say that the majority of popes are remembered for what they did during their pontificate, for Benedict XVI, it's different. His life's work would have been unforgettable even if he had never made it to the Chair of Peter.” What is his legacy? “He revitalized our awareness of the person of Christ, he showed Jesus in all his completeness. Which was incredibly important for the future of the Church and of the faith.”

There's one aspect in particular of Benedict XVI's character that was most fascinating for the papal interviewer: “I find it mystifying and compelling how he knows how to be humble and courageous at the same time. I've always been impressed by his capacity to go against a certain ‘spirit of the times,’ which required a hearty dose of strength and willingness to be unpopular.” When, after 20 years of visits and hundreds of questions, he's asked what answer most surprised him, Seewald refers back to the first book, *Salt of the Earth*. “At that time, I still had a different picture of him in mind and I asked him how many ways there were to reach God. He answered, ‘Many; as many as there are men and women.’”

In the 1950s, as Europe was rebuilding from the ruins of war and the Catholic Church was center stage in the process of reconstruction, a young priest wrote that the Christian community was “a Church of pagans in an entirely new way. No longer, as once, a Church of pagans become Christians, but a Church of pagans who still call themselves Christians and in truth have become pagans.”

From the very beginning of his pastoral work, Joseph Ratzinger has had the gift of lucid judgment and the courage of *parresia*. And those words, surprising as they were in a Germany united under Adenauer, already garnered the author some irritation in both the ecclesial and political realms.

The sadness at reading a book by Pope Benedict entitled *Last Testament* is powerfully overcome by the joy of returning with him to reflect on the course of his life as a man of faith and of the Church; listening once again to the stories, judgments, impressions, and hopes—all told in his serene and concise voice—of an existence totally immersed in and directed toward the Lord, the anchor and lighthouse of his life.

The familiar and often quite candid questions of the interviewer enhances the enjoyment even for readers who may have some

difficulty entering into the labyrinths of history or theology discussed. Most of the credit, however, goes to Ratzinger who, as is well known, is not one to romanticize or answer impetuously and prefers a calmly measured tone. It's the beautiful form given to his long life, which was certainly not free of struggles, that enchants: the deep, solid, and authentic

faithfulness to the gift and example of faith he inherited from a family of simple and devoted Catholics. Following the thread of his memories that carries us through the decades up to his resignation from the papacy and his current life of prayer and reflection in the *Mater Ecclesiae* monastery in Vatican City, we can see that his constant preoccupation, as a shepherd and a theologian, was to promote a living faith, one that is lived out in openness to reality, but at the

same time not dominated by the ways of the world.

The labels that Ratzinger has collected throughout his life (“progressive” and “conservative,” not to mention many others) can all be traced back to his vision of a Christianity that concretely transforms the life of the person, thereby transforming history, and that keeps its gaze faithfully fixed on God, who is our origin, our traveling companion, and our final destination.



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