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**LIFE CAN
CHANGE**



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The fragility of our era is this, too: we don't believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet.

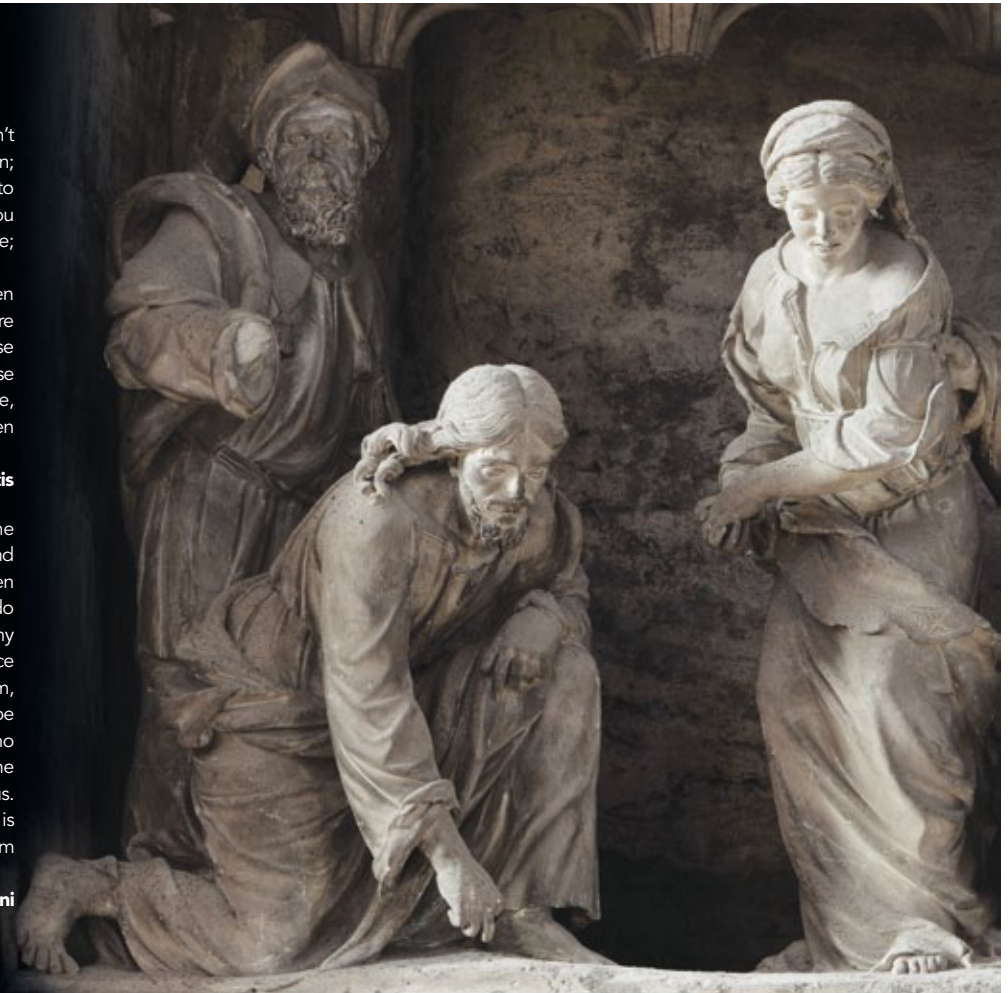
When you feel his merciful embrace, when you let yourself be embraced, when you are moved—that's when life can change, because that's when we try to respond to the immense and unexpected gift of grace, a gift that is so overabundant it may even seem "unfair" in our eyes.

Pope Francis

When the centurion saw Jesus, when the Samaritan woman felt herself looked at and described in detail, when the woman taken in adultery heard him say, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and do not sin any more," when John and Andrew saw that face look on them intently and speak to them, they were immersed in his presence. To be immersed in the presence of Christ who gives us his justice, to look at him: this is the conversion that fundamentally changes us. In other words, it leaves us forgiven. It is enough to look at him again, to think of him again, and we are forgiven.

Luigi Giussani

COMMUNION AND LIBERATION



LOOK AT THE FACTS

There is so much arguing in the world and among Christians. People debate, often with vicious intensity. Divisions are formed that last for centuries, each side supported by mounds of good reasons. And suddenly, seemingly insurmountable barriers, fixed as they are in the twists and turns of history and politics, collapse. We saw this in Cuba last month, with the stunning embrace between Pope Francis and Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia: nothing of the kind had happened in a thousand years. It is all the more amazing if you look at it together with what surrounded that encounter. A few days before, the Pope had released a surprising interview, full of openness toward China, and a few days later, he invited Ahmad Al-Tayyib, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, the Egyptian university that is the point of reference for Sunni Islam, to Rome.

These three breaches in as many walls followed those opened in Central Africa, where Francis' visit suddenly drew together factions that had been at war for years, or in Havana, when even Raúl Castro and Barack Obama thanked the Pope for his decisive role in re-opening contact between Cuba and the United States. These events were unthinkable according to all the geopolitical analyses, yet they happened, and these very facts also pose questions, one of which is, What made them possible? What is the source of these things? How can there be a flowering, or re-flowering, of a unity that seemed historically impossible?


There are no quick answers. Time and space will be needed to understand. But it is striking that a moment after that embrace with Kirill, as the world began to run through the text of the *Joint Declaration* that surprised everyone (as you will read in the following pages), Francis began his comment by saying, "We spoke as brothers; we have the same Baptism." This is where the Pope looks. The same Baptism: Christ. The same criterion for facing reality: faith. This is the source of the encounter: the return to the Essential.

This is not an exclusively spiritual premise: it is what makes it possible to get to the heart of problems, because if there is one thing evident to the whole world, it is that moving in this way, the Pope gets to the heart of problems. How? He enters so deeply that he nudges the parties in conflict to the point where they can see a glimpse (at least a glimpse: then it is clear that there is a long road to travel...) of possible solutions to conflicts that have been open for decades—like the painful question of Ukraine.

In any case, he enters by the main door, instead of through one of the thousands of service entrances that seem to us to be more effective shortcuts, but which inexorably end up in quagmires with no results. He enters, keeping his gaze fixed on Christ, and not on analyses, balance sheets, or power games, and thus he does so continually giving credit to the parties in conflict, to the spark of good in each one, in any part of any conflict. Father Antonio Spadaro, in a recent article in *La civiltà cattolica*, spoke about mercy as the main key to understanding Francis' "political" vision, one in which we can "never consider anything or anybody as definitively 'lost' in the relations between nations, peoples, and states," because the measure of history is different, and is not our ideas, no matter how right they may be.


These are crucial issues, which, in turn, open and bring to light many other questions, including the role of Christians in the world, and above all, the meaning of witness and taking sides, of dialogue and unity, key words of the experience of faith that are even more decisive today (as we will see clearly in the "Page One" text—soon published in the *Traces* and CL websites—that is an account of a recent Assembly of CL responsables). But in the end, at the bottom of all these vicissitudes, there remains one dramatic question: Who truly makes history? Do we, with our projects, or does Jesus, upon whom we fix our gaze? To answer, look at the facts. **T**

"CAN I MEET THIS MAN?"

 Dear Fr. Carrón: I would like to thank you for your article, "Traditional Rights and Founding Values." You helped us take a step back and look at reality in all of its factors. Last year our daughter told us that she is homosexual. Our first reaction was sadness. What we desire most for our children is eternal happiness, and in these cases you can't help but think, Now it will be more difficult. But instead, we are called to truly believe what Fr. Giussani told us: that circumstances are essential to our vocation. And so I began to understand that, for my wife and I, this circumstance was given to help us, and it was given to my daughter so that through this wound, she might find Christ. With this thought, I couldn't wait to show the article to my daughter. She is not in the Movement and normally would never have read a CL document, but the first thing she said when she finished reading it was, "Can I meet this man?"

Signed letter

LUNCH AT THE RESTAURANT: WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

 In October my son, Giovanni, called to tell me that something terrible had happened to his friend, Federico. He was in the Emergency Room after a serious accident. After eight hours of surgery, the doctors were able to save him, but they had to amputate his leg. As soon as it was possible to visit, his friends stayed close to him, so much so that my son, Andrea, told me, "When we go to see him, there is a line to get in." I remembered him in my evening prayers, but felt I




needed to do something. It broke my heart to think of his mother's pain. Weeks went by and I decided to write to her. I wrote that what happens to us is for a present Destiny, even if now it might seem difficult and mysterious; and that even in the most difficult circumstances, this Presence does not abandon us. She answered me, saying that, as parents, they thank the Lord for having kept their son alive. Not only did she not curse, but she was thankful, and added that she would like to meet us. From then on, the dialogue between us (in the meantime, her son had returned home) grew to the point that, one Sunday, we organized a lunch. At one o'clock, my family and some university students went to their restaurant in Milan. They had closed the restaurant just for us! We spent the whole afternoon together with a joyful familiarity, as if we had known each other forever. During dessert we gave our friend a gift along with a phrase from Fr. Giussani: "Every day, every hour and every moment, the battle can be won, in the measure in which we live the memory of Christ, the awareness of Your presence, O Christ. This is the greatness of the company, that makes this memory a hundred times easier, that makes this

Presence a hundred times more obvious and familiar." He read it out loud and then commented, "This is what has happened to me since I met you." His mother added, "You are so lucky to have friends like these, who have never left you and who have accompanied you this way." While she spoke, she looked at us so intensely that at a certain point, I too began to look around and ask myself, "But what am seeing? What is here?"

Alcide, Italy

THOSE ENCOUNTERS AT THE OUTPATIENT CLINIC

 I spent almost the entire day in the oncology unit of the outpatient clinic. I saw numerous people pass through my room for their chemotherapy. I saw many worried and suffering faces, along with others who were more serene, more "upbeat." Then, in front of my bed, there came a very flashy transsexual. The nurses already knew him, but they were nonetheless embarrassed by how he presented himself and they tried to take care of him. I found myself somewhere between scandal and curiosity. I was sending a message to Cinzia, so I described him. She answered, "I will say a prayer for him or her." This stunned me: not scandal or judgment, but mercy. And it changed my gaze. I looked at him as a man who suffers like I do, who has my same questions about illness, who is afraid like I am, who has hopes like I do, who seeks relationships that support him (you could see this in the way he attempted to talk about himself to the nurse who was attending him). Now I have him so present that I have prayed for him many times, asking for Jesus to



THE EASTER POSTER

THE WRITING IN THE SAND

by Giuseppe Frangi

The group of sculptures with Christ and the adulteress is part of the sequence of scenes with the life of Jesus (forty in all, with more than two hundred statues) that surround the choir of the Cathedral of Chartres. The project began at the start of the 1500s and was carried out over two centuries. The group with Christ and the adulteress was completed by Jean de Dieu, a sculptor from Arles, who lived between 1652 and 1727.



This group of sculptures responds fully to the philosophy that, in that time, asked artists to show a sobriety and a respectful reverence toward the episode represented in their art. France had left behind a harsh counterposition with the Protestants on the matter of images, and the new approach, introduced first by the Jesuits, suggested a strictly narrative reading, respecting the devotional function of those very images. In this case, Jean de Dieu faithfully fixed the moment in which Christ, in front of the insistence of the Scribes and Pharisees who wanted to put him to the test, begins to write on the ground. He has just challenged them by saying, “Let whoever is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her,” and he bends down again to write in the dust. There is nothing left for the “interrogators” to do but to go away, defeated, “one by one,” as told by John.

reveal Himself to him. After him, in the same armchair, came a sculptor, an acquaintance of one of the nurses who came over to say hello. At one point, she suddenly she asked if he believed in God. Perhaps she had seen, as I had, that he was anxious. He said no, that he was a confirmed atheist. The friend pressed him, asking how he could then explain a child’s smile or the sky. He dropped the discussion with a sneer of bitter irony. I tried to chime in by saying that if he loved artistic beauty, then he must have a desire for great things, but he let everything drop, pretending not to have heard. Now he, too, is one of the faces for whom I offer my prayers.

Mariella, Bresso (Italy)

CHARITABLE WORK AND THE HOLY LAND



Dear Fr. Carrón: in these months, my relationship with a colleague who defines herself as atheist and who defines me as unbearable because of my happiness, has become more and more free. In November, I told her about the food packages that we deliver to some needy families. I asked her if she would like to come along. She said yes. At the end of the day, my friends asked her, “Maybe we’ll see each other again?” She answered, “Yes. I’ll be here the next time.” After Christmas vacation, she asked me, “Are we delivering packages on Saturday? I’ve cleared all my commitments.”


We went, and after visiting a single mother of four, she said to me, “What a beautiful smile she had. At work they have everything, but you never see a smile like that. I would like to spend more time with you and your friends because when I am here, I don’t want to leave, whereas an hour ago I was crying because I was so sad. Here there is a different positivity.” When I told her that I was invited to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she became really angry and I couldn’t understand why. She said, “If something happens to you, what will I do? I will have to go and find someone else in the Church who lives like you do.”

Stefania, Italy

5 CLOSE UP



SOMETHING PRESENT



Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill together at the José Martí Airport in Havana on February 12th.

It was an historic meeting: a Pope and a Russian Patriarch. **PAOLO PEZZI**, Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Mother of God at Moscow, explains how the embrace between Francis and Kirill in Cuba, not only opens a new chapter in history, but also helps us understand how the Pope looks at the world, politics, and mercy.

BY LUCA FIORE

I don't want to say that they had prophetic powers, but those icons that I had them place on the altar in the Cathedral... I wanted them to depict St. Peter and St. Andrew, who, you know, were two brothers. One was father of the Latin Church in Rome, the first Pope, and the other was the head of the Church in Constantinople, where the Church in Moscow originated, so much so that Andrew became the patron of Russia." Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, of the Archdiocese of Mother of God at Moscow, thinks back to that gesture, a little less than a year ago, and of that embrace between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in Havana on February 12th. "It's an embrace between Peter and Andrew. Looking at the pictures I thought, that embrace, that encounter, contains everything."

It was an event dreamed of by John Paul II, sought after by Benedict XVI, and mentioned by Pope Francis from the time he first stepped out onto the balcony at St. Peter's. Every attempt seemed blocked by obstacles built up over centuries and by the more recent strains on the relationship: the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine, the Catholic Dioceses established in Russia after the fall of the Soviets, and the resulting accusations of proselytism. Archbishop Pezzi himself

came to Russia as a missionary with the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo in the early '90s and long experienced the cold of Siberian winters and of relations with the Orthodox Church.

Now, there's a meeting under the gateway of José Martí airport, a long discussion and the signing of a *Joint Declaration* that will make its mark beyond the confines of the two sister Churches. From persecuted Christians to secularism, from defending the family to the refusal of relativism. Their actions were accompanied by words, tempered by the "elders" of ecclesiastic diplomacy; new formulations of ancient issues. But in the end, one image is fixed in the heart and mind of the Catholic bishop living on Orthodox soil: "The Pope saying, 'Finally! We are brothers.' And the Patriarch responding, 'Now, things will be easier.' From now on, every time I look at the icons in the cathedral in Moscow, I can't help but think back to that embrace."



Monsignor Paolo Pezzi.

What did you feel, watching the Havana encounter from Moscow?

Gratitude. When I found out it was planned and when I saw that it really happened, I was full of gratitude. The most important thing for me was that the meeting happened. At a prayer vigil in our Cathedral, the night before the meeting, I said that for us Christians, encountering



one another has great value. Christianity communicates itself through an encounter. You need men truly alive to encounter each other. If this is possible, then there's hope and many possibilities will open up.

What is your appraisal of the *Joint Declaration*?

It includes some points of newness and, I'd say, this is good. The Docu-

A Thousand Years of Distance

EDITED BY MARTA DELL'ASTA

988 The Kievan Rus', Medieval reign, converts to Christianity through the Church in Byzantium, and enters under its influence, though all are part of a yet un-divided Church. The region breathes in the anti-Latin sentiment of Constantinople, but because of the geographic distance there are no causes for direct conflict for at least five centuries.



A Byzantium Church in Thessaloniki (Greece).

1054 East-West Schism: Rome and Constantinople break ecclesial communion; the Pope and the Patriarch mutually excommunicate each other. The main reasons for the conflict are the *Filioque*, the doctrine on Purgatory, the species used for the Eucharist, and, most importantly, papal primacy.

Velikoye, Yaroslavl region (Russia). During the Orthodox Epiphany, the faithful celebrate the Great Blessing of the Waters.



ment says many things and maybe you could speculate on some expressions used in the Russian versions. But I'm not a professional exegete. In any case, I see two important aspects. First, it underlines the need for a common witness. The task of the Churches, which deep down is the task of every Christian, is that of witnessing to Christ. If it's possible to do that together, then the power of

the witness is infinitely stronger. If, then, we add the fact that the content of the witness is proclaiming mercy, forgiveness, an embrace—the embrace we saw in Cuba—then this aspect takes on even greater power.

And the second aspect?

I don't know how many people will agree with me on this, related to a topic as specific and delicate as that of

Ukraine, but I think it's important that the Document speaks of Greek Catholics as a Church. This means recognizing above all that good *is* coming from this Catholic entity, too. And that the "other" can be thought of, not as a political or religious adversary, but as someone to speak with, someone to encounter. There probably aren't many who read the passage this way, but for me that aspect is present. >>



Europe after East-West Schism.

1204 The Fourth Crusade, declared by Innocent III, instead of being directed toward Jerusalem, sacks and conquers Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Christian Empire. The sacking is brutal and spares neither churches nor monasteries. It leaves a bloody stain on the memory of both Churches. The Russian Church is only indirectly affected.



The ancient walls of Costantinopole (now Istanbul).

»» What is the relationship between witness and the search for unity?

I think that when you make witness a priority, you are already starting from something unified. Otherwise, you couldn't talk about witnessing together. What unifies us may be very fragile. The Declaration refers to a "common tradition," though that has many holes and wounds. But I think that [unity] is first and foremost the recognition of something that is already there, not something that we have to add or fix. There is that as well, but first it's the affirmation of something that is there. If we start from the treasure we already have, from the experience we have of Christ, then we can also communicate it, we can offer a witness.

Francis aggressively sought to make this meeting, already hoped for by his predecessors, with an approach that many people think doesn't take into account the unresolved issues from centuries past.

I think that this Pope and his approach are part of "God's surprises," which Francis himself speaks about. He's always catching us off guard. We have to get in the habit of letting God surprise us. I think that the approach the Pope chose is the most effective one, saying, "If you call me, I'll come;" not setting preconditions for a meeting, but saying in front of everyone, "We are brothers, we have the same Creed..." These words ex-

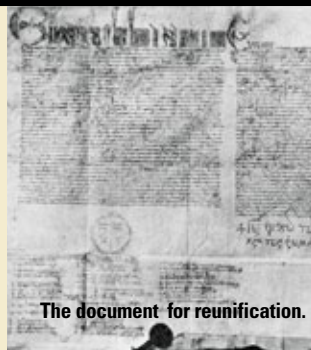


press an outlook from which problems, according to God's time, not ours, could possibly be resolved. One thing is certain: outside of this outlook, the tensions will never be broken down. From that perspective, I'd say that what happened is very interesting. Let's not forget that the Pope, immediately after signing his name, said: "Unity is achieved by walking forward." This doesn't mean

that common declarations are bad; it means entering into the mindset of encounter, of meeting face to face; not considering the other to be an adversary, but as a possible companion on the journey.

Some have mentioned a "diplomacy of mercy;" a non-political attitude that has "political" effects because it breaks down tensions and sets

1439 Council of Ferrara-Florence: a new attempt is made at reunifications, after deepening theological reflections that lead to a unity of dogma and autonomy of liturgy. An agreement of unity is signed, but upon their return to their homeland, two-thirds of the Byzantine delegates renege and the Russian delegate is arrested by the tsar.



The document for reunification.

1453 Fall of Constantinople, an event which severs the physical and political tie between Christians of the East and West.

1589 The Metropolitan see of Moscow is elevated to a Patriarchate, thus separated from Constantinople. The Russian Patriarch would later be abolished by Peter the Great in 1721 and substituted





Patriarch Kirill in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, at the conclusion of the Great Blessing of the Waters which took place on January 18th, on the eve of the Epiphany as celebrated by the Orthodox Church.

of what was done for the U.S and Cuban relations, of the courageous trip to Central Africa, or the prayer vigil for Syria.

Will the meeting in Cuba change your daily work?

One thing that has already changed is the way I carry myself. Especially since I became bishop, I've realized something: the space between your "personal life" and the service to the Church is almost eliminated. Which means that today, when I wake up in the morning, I'm more grateful. When I get to work, I'm more inspired to look, to ask, and to search for how God will try to amaze me. I desire even more to be converted. This is the change, the new viewpoint, that Francis' and Kirill's embrace has introduced in my life.

And for those from the Orthodox world around you?

One good thing that I've noticed, and have been struck by, is a lessening fear of encounter. After the embrace in Cuba I've seen some Orthodox seem less afraid, for example, to come and see the Catholic Cathedral in Moscow. Of course this could be partially an emotional reaction, like saying, "There was a meeting... let's go see who these Russian Catholics are." However, I have a positive reading of the effects, which I see within the same logic of the encounter. **T**

new processes into motion.

I'd venture to say this is exactly Christianity's task. Jesus Christ did not think about solving political problems, but by offering Himself He also offered a perspective for facing and resolving problems. The Church has done this throughout history. Her task is to prompt, indicate, and give tools; to propose gestures that, among other things, foster

political solutions. And her audience is made up of men and women of good will, not excluding those who have political or other kinds of power and responsibility. This is the direction Francis is going. Of course at times he does it in a very radical way, but this is part of the nature of Christianity and of the Church. In some cases, we've seen almost immediate political consequences: think



The fall of Constantinople.

with the Holy Synod, a body under the leadership of a layman. The Patriarchate would only be restored in 1918, with the start of the revolution.

1596-1859 The "united Churches" are formed. Following internal crises in their Church and under political pressure, some Orthodox bishops move under the jurisdiction of Rome with their Dio-



Iosif Stalin.

ceses, maintaining the Byzantine rite. Their separation causes a wound, still open today.

1946 Under pressure from Stalin, a false Council is held in L'vov, Ukraine, which dissolves the Greek-Catholic Church and merges it with the Orthodox Church. Fierce persecutions of Greek Catholics follow. The Church of Moscow tries to ap-

A FRIENDSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

He is Ukrainian, Orthodox, and CL member. **ALEKSANDR FILOENKO** tells what this encounter meant for his life.

BY LUCA FIORE

“See what our friendship with Catholics has brought about?” At the end of the Sacred Liturgy, the first since the meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Cuba, the Orthodox priest turned to Aleksandr Filonenko, professor of Philosophy at the University of Kharkov, with a smile of surprise, satisfaction, and of hope. In the small wooden church planted in the frozen ground of the Ukrainian countryside, there was no question that the subject would be mentioned in the homily: “The Pope and the Patriarch are two bishops who met. It is understandable that there are people among us that would want to give them advice, because the thing that comes most naturally to us is to give advice to other people. Even though, in this case, none of us has ever been

a bishop. For this reason, it is better to focus on something else: to see that Christian love makes it possible for unexpected encounters such as this to take place.”

Kirill is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which Filonenko belongs. Filonenko also lives the experience of the Catholic movement founded by Fr. Giussani. Asking him



Aleksandr Filonenko.

what the embrace in José Martí means to him is to ask him *everything*: it means to ask him to speak about what he holds most dear. “Even just to know that they met, without having seen or read anything, would have been more than enough. For us, in the

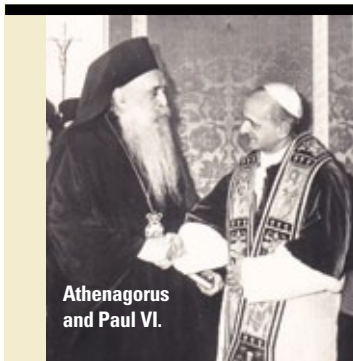
past few years, the friendship between Orthodox Christians and Catholics has become a possibility. A promise for a future life. The exceptionality of this is not that they gave us permission to be friends, but that our

friendship has been recognized as valuable for the destiny of the entire Church; and it was done in a very clear way.”

The Ukrainian professor explains that, in Cuba he saw in action the approach that Julián Carrón had used in 2010 in a conference in Moscow. On that occasion, the Catholic priest had quoted the presentation at the Rimini Meeting made by Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk: “The Person of our Lord Jesus Christ is the indisputable ideal, the perfect criterion, the incorruptible beauty that is above all, in everything, and for everyone. In Christ the Savior, there is no internal division.” And Carrón added: “This is the root and the path to a true ecumenism that aims to face the challenges of our time. And this is the real reason why we consider you such close friends.”

“Therefore, I felt that Carrón’s words were a call to the entire Church, not just to the Movement. Now I can say that what I live is not just some strange experience, unknown among Orthodox Christians. That this experience of friendship between the Churches, encountered and experienced in the context of CL, is now recognized as the experience of the entire Church.”

PRAYER. Especially in the case of the Orthodox Church, the event in Cuba sparked a myriad of reactions and interpretations. “On one hand, there



Athenagoras and Paul VI.

appropriate their property. The hostility between the two Churches grows.

1964-1965 Rome and Constantinople takes steps: Athenagoras and Paul VI meet for the first time since the Schism and revoke the reciprocal excommunications. In the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the terms “sister Churches” is introduced.



Michail Gorbaciov.

1988 Freedom of religion is re-established in the USSR on the millennium anniversary of the land’s Baptism. Even the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine requests legal status.

1991 Greek Catholics in Ukraine reclaim the Churches commandeered in 1946. John Paul II establishes new Catholic dioceses



Russian children in line to kiss the cross in a church of the village of Bolshaya Murta, north of the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk.

the *Joint Declaration* and I realized that it too is a gift, it began as a prayer and ends as a prayer. Amazing.”

THERE WAS NO PROTOCOL. And yet, as Filonenko recounts, in the days following, many Orthodox commentators continued to repeat that this was merely a diplomatic meeting. “There is a metaphor that everyone is using: the sinking ship. When the boat is sinking, they say, there is no need to continue to argue. The boat is supposed to be Christian society. Instead, I don’t think anybody saw what for me was very important: that this was a moment of great freedom. I noticed this, for example, at the end, when the delegations greeted each other. It was very clear that our bishops, as they approached the Pope, did not know whether or not they were supposed to kiss his hand. One could see that the first bishop looked at the Patriarch expecting a nod. They did not know what to do! There was no protocol! This was something that had never happened before and no one knew the proper ceremony. We know that this Pope is very much a free man and not particularly attentive to etiquette. That was apparent when he wanted to embrace the Patriarch while sitting down; and that, for me, was the most moving moment. Our Church is not used to this freedom. And I was glad that she was able to experience it in that circumstance.” **T**

is the meeting as such and on the other hand the judgment that is given on that meeting. In my case, as I have explained, I have a positive judgment. However, what you have to keep in mind is that there is a richness in the encounter that cannot be reduced to our interpretations. The discussions that ensue can be disastrous, and I see that I also take part in this. It is very difficult to leave things as they happened.” How is it possible to remain in the exceptionality of the event? “Through my memory, I try to go back to the things that struck me the most. When it was announced that the Pope and Kirill were to meet,

the Metropolitan Hilarion wanted to underline that this meeting was diplomatic, not religious. For us, this observation was cause for much pondering. But when it was the Pope’s turn to speak, he immediately thanked the Holy Trinity for having allowed this meeting. I thought to myself: the fact that the Pope said this is almost automatic; he could have added something more. But then, right afterwards—as he was sitting down—he wanted to embrace the Patriarch. It was there it was evident that for him there was no distinction between a diplomatic encounter and a religious encounter. Then, the next day I read



A Greek Catholic Ukrainian priest.

in the Russian Federation. These actions have a cooling effect on relations with the Orthodox.

2000 For the Jubilee of Salvation, John Paul II coins the expression “Colosseums of the 20th century” and remembers the shared martyrs of the Churches. For the first time, reference is made to an “ecumenism of blood.”



John Paul II celebrates the beginning of the 2000 Jubilee.

ABDULLAH'S QUESTION

“Not an epoch of change, but an epochal change.” The Pope’s provocation was the theme of AVSI Foundation’s Annual Meeting in Italy, which brought together representatives spread throughout the world. From Lebanon to South Sudan, they tell us what their work looks like in today’s world.

BY ALESSANDRA STOPPA

The work we do here is even more important now than when we started.” Marco Perini has been in Lebanon for seven years, helping people, day in and day out, who “are more in need today than before.” There are refugees from Syria, Iraq and Palestine who fled their homes but never made it to the West. They are still there, living in tents, with the same needs they had in the beginning (oil, food and medicine), but with diminished hope. “Living as a refugee is very difficult. You lose confidence in everything,” says Perini, who has just re-

turned to Lebanon after AVSI’s Annual Meeting. He was one of the 80 world-wide staff members who met in Milan for five days of work and consultation, together with outside guests, experts, professors and journalists, from February 15th-19th.

As the theme for the meeting, they chose a provocation from Pope Francis’ address in Florence last November: “We are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change.” So, what does it mean to be an aid worker within this change, and why would someone choose this line of work in a world like ours? Especially in places where the need is growing rather

than shrinking and where political power is unpredictable; where it’s a matter of life and death, where death is not only if they kill you? “They’re still on their feet, but as persons, they’re dead,” Perini says. He watches the men in the refugee camps pass entire days in front of their tents, smoking, coffee in hand, faces glazed over. The best solution is to head for the Mediterranean, or to the Balkans. “Or, join forces with ISIS. Not because they’re terrorists,” he qualifies, “but because the alternatives imply huge risk. Otherwise, they’d never go so far as they did.” Letting their own children drown in the sea or setting »



A member of AVSI's staff in the Marj el Kok refugee camp in Lebanon.

» off on foot in the snow in former Yugoslavia, all to perhaps end up blocked by barbed wire.

ZEBAN AND THE GARDEN CENTER. Humanitarian aid is necessary and indispensable, but “it is even more important to find hope again; the dignity they’ve lost,” Perini says. “We’re aiming to give them back moments of life, like when a child goes back to living as a child.” A school has been established for two hours every day, with rules and homework. And for men, a chance to work, to come home at night like a father again, tired and with a paycheck. “Finding work is very hard, so we’ve been organizing “Cash for work” projects: things that are useful to society, like repairing sidewalks or drainage canals, cleaning up the forests,” Perini goes on to say. “This is also important for the communities to live together, as the refugees become a help to the Lebanese community that’s hosting them.” Above all, it’s anything but a kind of “humanitarian aid” that gives 200 dollars a month to those who meet certain parameters. “The result, besides building dependency, is a dehumanization. It is not that they make so much more with “Cash for work,” but *how* they make it is different.”

“We want to know what’s really at stake,” explains General Secretary of the AVSI Foundation Giampaolo Silvestri, speaking with us after the Annual Meeting. “We want to meet the challenges posed by our age. We can’t be spectators. If we don’t change the way we work and do development, we’ll just suffer through what’s happening. Those who won’t change are slowly dying. We want to be present in this epochal change, with our proposal, a proposal that puts care for the human person, the true force for development, at the center.”

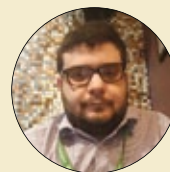
Josiane Khalife, who works with AVSI in Lebanon, where she grew up, was

“I WORK WHERE WAR IS NORMAL”

AVSI is one of the 16 NGOs present in Syria. Anton Barbu talks about what they’re doing for the people: “What they need is not up to us.”

Anton Barbu is Romanian. He’s 29 years old and he moved to Damascus a few months ago to open AVSI’s first office and its projects in Syria. He’s a guest of the Franciscan brothers of the Custody of the Holy Land, in the midst of a city of destruction and constant danger. Mortar shells continue to fall: “You never know when or where.” One morning on his way to work, one exploded about 100 yards from him. He pulled himself up, stunned and disoriented, his ears ringing like crazy. Close to him, a boy was eating a *manaish*, a kind of bread, for breakfast. He hardly flinched. “Here, war is the norm.” As we’re writing this, the world is watching the beginning of the ceasefire (and its violations) with little trust in it, not knowing if there’s really been a change. What’s certain is that people are at their limits. The Syrian pound continues to plummet. “If in 2011 a government employee was paid 400 dollars, today it’s about 60. It’s not even enough to pay for public

transportation. You go to a store and go back four days later and it’s closed.” Around the city, you only see women and children; the men are off fighting. “The numbers are incredible,” Barbu continues. “Of 20-22 million people in Syria today, 13.5 million (6 million of whom are children) are in need of humanitarian aid. That’s more than 60% of the population. Then there are the 4 million seeking refuge in nearby countries, without even counting all those trying to get to Europe. The number of internally displaced is also increasing: more than two million of them are living just outside Damascus.” And after five years of war, 250,000 people have lost their lives.



Anton Barbu.

What is AVSI doing?

We’ve been organizing fundraising for the Christian community in Aleppo, sustaining the work of the brothers of the Custody of the Holy Land, who welcome 200 refugees each day. The situation there is even more dangerous: the city is under siege.

also at the meeting in Milan. She’d seen war many times with her own eyes, but never like the situation now. “Even if the conflict ended today, what would these people do? Where would they go? And what will happen to an illiterate generation?” she asks. “This is why we focus on development through work and education. The crucial element is opportunity for the future.” The aim is to prepare them, especially the young people, for when

they’ll go back to Syria. To do so, they’ve started training programs in agriculture, baking, sewing and computer science. Around 70,000 people are being accompanied through AVSI’s projects.

Zenab is a young refugee woman who came from Idlib, in northwest Syria. She had actually found a job in a Lebanese agricultural company, where she made coffee and cleaned offices. When she heard about AVSI’s training

Here in Damascus, we started collaborating with an Italian hospital, working with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in the Babtuma neighborhood, with UN agencies and the Syrian Red Crescent. With the help of Italian humanitarian aid, we're concentrating on emergency needs, like reestablishing sanitary systems, infrastructure for water, latrines and wells for the more than 5,000 people in Sahnaya, a city south of Damascus controlled by the government, but close to the areas held by the rebels. Before the war, the population was 100,000; now it's 350,000.

Do the people feel abandoned?

That is a good question. Yes, people are becoming hopeless. In part because, from the political point of view, with the exception of Russia and Iran, the country has been left alone. The embargo is breaking the people, who no longer have a normal life. It would take thirty or forty years of aid to recover. People in Europe don't understand, as they say, "These people aren't refugees; they have iPhones, Samsung Galaxies..." But they're not economic migrants. They're professionals, specialists, students who are fleeing a conflict. Seven out of ten Syrian children have known nothing but war. And if so many people choose to leave, that's something we need to figure out. To the East they find terrorism, to the West there's Europe and the hope of a life of safety and a job.

Is there a realistic solution?

The solution can only be a political one. An agreement among the governing groups and the rebel groups. There are tons of them; the latest in-

formation we have has a count of 2,700 different groups, and most of these are disorganized bands of people. They need to deal with those who are willing, because the terrorists refuse every kind of negotiation. They're against the entire world, not just against Syria. The great Caliphate ISIS is attempting to include Italy, Spain, the Balkans, France...

What's the status of humanitarian aid?

Humanitarian aid is provided in two ways: directly on the ground, which is the case for the 16 international NGOs working here, including us, who are allowed by the Syrian government in the areas under its control; and then through cross-border operations. They send convoys with goods and help from nearby countries, but without really knowing where they're going or who they'll reach. All of the world's biggest agencies are working cross-border, but they can't work in Syria. We have to keep in mind that, last year, humanitarian aid totaled 2 billion dollars. And it covered 25% of the need.

What has made the biggest impression on you over the last few months?

The women I meet in the streets. They're desperate. They look at their children and they don't know what to feed them. But they don't beg; it's not something they do.

What gives you the strength to work there?

Just doing it. If I do my work well, I help these people. If I stop, I lose an opportunity for them. But the point is helping them without demeaning their dignity. Humanitarian aid can't be equal

to logistical help; it can't just be buying 100 kilograms of rice from the FAO and distributing it. That's not a project. We aim to help the people in a way that completely involves them in the projects. Helping them to become protagonists. For example, I was able to leave the refugee camp in Dadaab, where I spent four years, because our local collaborators had learned and knew how to work autonomously.

What's life like for the Christian community in Aleppo that you sustain?

The heart of it is the presence of the Franciscan brothers. They're the reference point, and they're not leaving. This means everything for people. Here in Damascus, the Catholic community is very small. There are mainly Greek Orthodox, Maronites, and Copts. In reality tough, I don't see much of a separation, as extreme need makes their unity even stronger.

Why did you say yes to going to Syria?

Because someone needed to do it. My wife is in Romania and I don't know when I could bring her here. At the end of the war, the most difficult work will begin, and that is reconstruction. It will be hard. Let's hope that the big donors, meaning the UN and the governments of the various countries, like Italy, will continue to give aid. This is the biggest crisis in the world since the Second World War. I understand that for small donors, giving money for a generator is not that flashy. It's not like seeing a picture of a child who, thanks to your help, can go to school and writes you a letter about it. But we are not the ones who decide what is needed.

programs, she signed up. "She finished them and then went back to apply at the same company. Now she's a plant specialist," Perini says. "This is a road forward." This is what has kept him here for seven years. "It's not a sacrifice; my life is really beautiful. If I can do something so that Zenab no longer lives like a refugee, that is worth a lifetime of work." He adds, "I receive much more than I give."

The tools to use for intervention

are constantly being discussed. "Our work changes every day. You start out thinking in terms of a few months, then it becomes years," Khalife says. "It means staying with them, struggling and seeking together to imagine a future. I'd never swap this job for another one, as it gives you so much. It's changed me a lot." She says nothing disappoints her anymore; nothing is deserved. "You see these young girls in dark tents; little boys who

don't talk because of what they've lived through. We try to accompany them, one by one, but you can't do this with everyone." And when you're overwhelmed by the scale? "At those times, I go out into the field. I spend time with people. It always helps—it keeps me positive. Really seeing that they love me. One day they called me from the first camp where I started working, saying, 'You have to come, we have a problem.' I got >>>

» there and there was nothing. They just wanted me there.”

Simone Manfredi is from Catania, Italy. He’s 31 and works for AVSI in Barghel, a tiny village in Lakes State in South Sudan. The community makes its living through small-scale agricultural work, sponsored by AVSI. “We also manage a boarding school for the UN, where we hold vocational training with useful fields like agriculture, construction and sewing.” As he was already on his way to Italy for the Annual Meeting, his staff was evacuated because of an attack. “A clash between clans. They came from another village and they started attacking at six in the morning, continuing until noon.” The people escaped to the jungle, but there were around 20 victims. “Plus the fighting broke down the fence around our compound and stray bullets injured some of our students.” The attackers were barely more than boys. Anyone could own a Kalashnikov in that area, and the clashes often come from tribal rivalries. “The biggest problem is a vacuum of power. The number of federal States has gone from 10 to 20, and nominations for leaders still haven’t been made. They have taken advantage of the anarchy.” Here there is no war, yet this violence has more victims than there are in the three northern border states, where there is a war. “It’s an unpredictable environment,” Manfredi says. “Attacks could come at any moment.”

In the midst of all this, AVSI is helping to train young people so they can work, pay their school fees, and live in a protected environment. “The Government has complimented us on the school and the people here love it a lot. During the last civil war in 2013, all international organizations had to leave their sites and they lost every-



Somali refugees in the Dadaab camp in Kenya.

thing. When the AVSI staff came back, everything was in its place. People came to sleep at the school to protect it. Seeing this, how attached the people are to us, really motivates me.”

WITHOUT PRECONCEPTIONS. AVSI has been working in Kenya for 30 years. It’s built a dozen schools, now all locally run, and has carried out many projects, including the expansive educational program in the Dadaab refugee camp, the largest in the world (600,000 people). It’s been open since 1992, and entire generations have been born there. AVSI has built structures and classrooms for them, and has held onsite trainings for teachers (most of whom are Muslim), who now instruct 60,000 children.

“We’re used to life where there are always future prospects; these people aren’t,” says Andrea Bianchessi, who heads up the projects in Kenya. “The question that wells up in your heart gets stronger and stronger: What’s worth living for?” There, nothing is as “nice” as it is in Europe, most people have no access to healthcare (“When you’re sick, no ambulance comes”), and you’re always on your guard for an attack. “They say to expect them suddenly, at any moment. The people I meet, help me live my days more seriously;

they help me to not live a thoughtless life. Then, this work is really beautiful, as it’s all about one thing: accompanying *that* person.”

Ignatius is from Kibera slum. His mom has AIDS. He was one of the first students at Little Prince elementary school, and now he’s finishing his thesis in political science. When they celebrated the 15th anniversary of the school, in front of everyone, he spoke about how much he struggled and how he was always supported. He finished by saying, “I would like to become the President of Kenya.”

Here there is another kind of new outlook. Not just a happy ending, but “the chance to walk on the journey of life together,” Bianchessi says. “And the wound is always open.” He thinks of Abdullah, a young boy growing up in Dadaab, after having fled from Somalia with his family. One day he came up to Andrea and said, “The national meeting of scouts is taking place in Nairobi, but we’re refugees and can’t go.” Silence. “But I have my scout badges...” He proudly shows him the badges on his back. “Why can’t I go?”

Andrea knows well that the authorities don’t let anyone leave the camp for security reasons. But that’s not the answer. He doesn’t have an answer, except perhaps his being there. “Learning to change every day, without preconceptions: being open to everything.” **I**

#10forSyria
 The AVSI campaign that gives anyone the chance to give concrete support (even just \$10) to the Syrian people:
www.avsi.org and
www.avsi-usa.org

UNITED STATES

Francesco Boin is
Associate Professor
and Director at the
Scleroderma Center at
UCSF.

WHAT'S BEHIND IT ALL?

Living faith in San Francisco: here is the testimony of **FRANCESCO BOIN**, a physician and professor at the University of California, where the most familiar evidences are dead and buried, and everything is immersed in a "natural religion."

BY ALESSANDRA STOPPA

“Here, everything is organic, even the paint on the walls.” This struck him right away. Francesco Boin grew up in the midst of the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy, but for the past year has been living in San Francisco, where everything is organic and everything is good. There are those who go grocery shopping in their pajamas and those who live in trees to prevent their being felled. Even before you have time to set down your suitcases, somebody asks you if you need some marijuana to face the day. During the sign of peace at Mass, two men kiss each other passionately. “It’s like everything is immersed in a natural religion.” The religion of spontaneity.

A NON-STOP RACE. Certainly, in San Francisco, work does not seem to be the all-consuming passion that it is on the East Coast, where Francesco labored for sixteen years to make his way into the American system, with impressive objectives and outcomes. He has lived in the United States since 2000. After earning his degree in Medicine, with a specialization in Immunology at the University of Padua, he took exams and went through the selection process to gain an internship and residency in Internal Medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. After even more selection processes, he did another specialization in Rheumatology, with five years of a laborious “boot camp” to finally become a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and today, at the University of California, San Francisco. It has been a gruelling non-stop race. “But it’s not over. You never reach the finish line. Here, academic positions are renewed annually and you continually have to procure funding, produce research and publish it, and



submit projects to government and other agencies. It’s a struggle for survival.” Even more so if, like Francesco, you create your own laboratory. “It’s a system based on merit and excellence, which makes the most of one’s abilities, but it’s also a meat grinder.” There is always some form of evaluation looming over you. “Especially if you are an immigrant.”

Today he is an American citizen and feels very grateful for the pressing toil that never cut him any slack, not even allowing him to take a breather with his successes, to rest on his laurels. “This incredibly demanding reality has helped me to ceaselessly ask the deep questions. ‘In all this, who am I? What am I truly seeking? What gives breath to my life?’” Renewing his answer to these questions

has given him stability in a world that constantly raises the bar.

TWO MILLION DOLLARS. Francesco is a member of the *Memores Domini*. The vortex of a life like this, far from home in an environment where the most familiar evidences are dead and buried, has tested the faith handed on to him by his parents (“I grew up with a lively sense of life as a gift, guided by Providence”) and deepened in the encounter with the Movement in the university. He slowly began to see that work is either a part of your life, or it takes your life away from you. For Francesco, it has become a place where “I can discover more deeply what I hope for, what I desire, and what ultimately moves me.” This is also true now, on the other coast of



the United States, in California, where work is not so consistently all-consuming. The idea here is not to get too worked up about things: you can go to meetings in jeans and a t-shirt, relaxed, and faculty meetings can be followed by a walk together on the beach, to “build the group.” This style seems to express the sense that there is more to life than work. “But the nature of this ‘more’ remains entirely confused. There is the aspiration to be part of something bigger, and yet people fear any kind of objective belonging. A strong sense of individual freedom dominates: everyone must be guaranteed the possibility of self-expression. But it is a neutral value, not to be messed with.” A parish priest ended up on national news because he did not allow female altar

servers. When interviewed, eight-year-old girls complained they were discriminated against and that their rights were being violated. “They absorb this idea of freedom,” so absolute that it ends up becoming a prison. “It’s a paradox,” he says. “The exaggerated concern about respecting others ends up distancing people from each other.”

Two months after his arrival, a 23-year-old nurse who worked in his division died. His colleagues organized a moment of remembrance. There was a little altar with a small waterfall illuminated by a candle, and quiet

background music. In the presence of his anguished parents, they took turns standing up and talking about who he was for them, and about his abilities. Francesco also decided to get up to say what pressed most on his heart. “In front of death, we feel an urgent need for life to have a destiny, for it not to end. This is the moment for discovering the ultimate perspective for living the present. We can’t dilute this need in memories.”

His parents thanked him. This was not obvious, because “people are very reluctant to risk expressing what they really think, »

“The exaggerated concern about respecting others ends up distancing people from each other.”

» to say something that may be politically incorrect.” They are conditioned by an idea of freedom that doesn’t throw you into reality, but paralyzes you.

“We Christians can respond to this mentality with a reaction, a form of defense, or a relationship,” one that opens you to others, to their hearts that yearn like yours.

FRANTIC SEARCH. Francesco was invited by a very wealthy patient to a fundraising gala at the Museum of Modern Art. A monitor showed in real time the donations as they came in. In 37 minutes, two million dollars were collected. He looked at the people at table as they donated, and they were already talking about the next fundraising event. “You see a need that is never satisfied, a frantic search to do something useful.” Later, in the car on the way home with his patient and her husband, she burst out, “I’m sorry, because this evening I’d hoped to be able to talk with you about beautiful things. It’s always a joy when we can spend time together.” “I thought about that need,” says Francesco, “and the fact that money can’t meet it, and that I have been given something more precious, to be able to give it in turn.”

When he was still at Johns Hopkins, during a lab meeting in which all the researchers presented and discussed the results of their work, his boss recounted that the editor of a prestigious journal had expressed doubts about some data in one of their articles.

He said, “I want to ask you a question. Why do we have to be irreproachable in our research? Why shouldn’t we cheat?” General silence. He continued, “Because with our work we contribute

“People are conditioned by an idea of freedom that doesn’t throw you into reality, but paralyzes you.”

to discovering a little piece of truth: it may be little, infinitesimal, but we want to discover what is true in reality, the Truth with a capital T.” Francesco was moved. “What is true in reality for me has a face, Jesus. For my boss, it is an intuition, but for me it is a reality that I have encountered.” What his boss said was a provocation that gave him new momentum. “It enabled me to rediscover the source of my passion for scientific research, and above all, to understand that each person moves in life to discover what is true, motivated by an ultimate attraction to the truth. This is true for everyone and in everything.”

A college student he was treating sought him out because she had gotten pregnant “by accident.” She

was taking drugs that could harm her baby and her mother had told her right away to have an abortion. “Doctor, what do you think?” “Don’t think of it as a problem that you are shouldering. Whatever decision you make, you’ll carry it with you forever; it is a question that deals with your ultimate meaning of life. You have to look deep inside and ask yourself what you truly desire for this child. After all, it might be your only pregnancy; you’re not the one to decide. If you want, I’m here for you.” Three days later she called him. “I desire life for this child. I’m keeping it.” He accompanied her as best he could, in the steps she took, and also in the desperation that assailed her when she called to tell him she had had an abortion, unable to withstand the relentless pressure from her family. “But she had discovered what was true. The theme of life came out of her experience, because reality holds





San Francisco, California.

that which corresponds to the heart. We need something that can overcome the fear of looking at all of it, all the way.”

WOUNDS AND ATTRACTION. Even in a world like this, where you can do everything you want, reality forces you to search your soul about the desire to be happy. “At this level, I too have to do this soul searching: me for myself. Only in this way can I accompany the other.” He sees this with his patients, who have autoimmune diseases like lupus or scleroderma, which can be treated but not cured. These are chronic diseases, “so there is a big temptation for the patients to let themselves go, to give up fighting,” and depression is common. “How can I give them courage? I can’t take away their disease; that wouldn’t be realistic. But I tell them that I’m willing to walk with them,” to look together at the circumstance that threatens

their happiness, and to discover its meaning. “This sharing changes everything, even the medical aspects of their condition. The first way I can help them is for me, for myself, to respond to the wound that reality inflicts on me.”

Mere words alone do not enable you to enter into the drama opened up by life as it is. “The true cultural battle here is to rebuild, starting from a fullness of life, lived. So my task is to yield to the attraction that reality generates in my days, and to the discovery of how Jesus responds to my need. The others become aware of this, because what attracts them is the breath that enables me to live. Being a witness is possible when they see in me what they are looking for.”

“So then, have you settled your family in?” asked the head of all the clinics of his division, when he invited Francesco to dinner a month after his arrival. “No, I’m not married.” “Ah, you’re divorced?” “No, I’ve never been married.” “So you have a girlfriend?” “No, I don’t have a girlfriend.” His boss stopped: “Well, don’t worry, here in San Francisco you’ll find a man right away. And you can even get married.” Francesco cut to the point, “No, look, I’m not gay. That’s not my thing....” Shortly after, they began working side by side on a project, every day for several months. When his boss invited him out for dinner a second time, halfway through the evening, he said, “I really have to ask you something. You have to help me understand. You don’t have a woman in your life, you don’t have a man, but you have a point of stability in your life. It’s obvious. What’s behind it all?” “Look, my life is not random,” Francesco responded. “It’s a dedicated life. I’m Catholic, and for me the experience of faith was an encounter with a Presence so alive and so attractive that I gave my life to Him. My point of stability is this relationship.” His colleague remained silent, then

“Looking at our three children, I get a lump in my throat wondering what support I am giving to their lives.”

said, “Thank you. I understand that it’s something that’s missing for me. I keep doing leadership courses on how to motivate the staff, how to give my all, but I find these courses suffocating, useless, and abstract. My wife and I aren’t religious, but recently, looking at our three children, I get a lump in my throat wondering what point of view I’m passing on

to them. What support am I giving to their lives? What you tell me helps me, and I understand that it’s the most important thing. Can we continue talking about it?”

ARTIMONDO

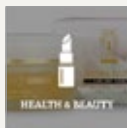
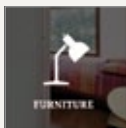
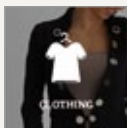
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