

THE WORKSHOP OF HOPE

It has been under attack for some time and created debate, even within the Church. And yet, as the Pope says, it “is the most beautiful thing that God made.” Why? While the Synod is at work, we will explore this reality that involves everyone.

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PAGE ONE

"IN YOUR EYES SHINES THE STRANGENESS OF A SKY THAT ISN'T YOURS"

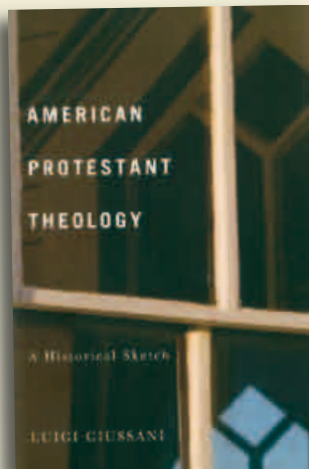
Notes from the talks by Davide Prospero
and Julián Carrón at the Beginning Day
for adults and university students in CL.
Mediolanum Forum, Assago (Milan), September 26, 2015.



| | | |
|------------------|---|-----------|
| Editorial | Sowing in Crooked Furrows | 3 |
| Letters | Edited by Paola Bergamini | 4 |
| America | Papal Visit Caught Off Guard by Andrea Torielli | 6 |
| Family | Interview Let Its Light Shine by Stefano Filippi | 27 |
| Africa | Kenya Good News from Dadaab by Davide Perillo | 32 |

LUIGI GIUSSANI

276 pages – format 6 x 9 inches
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In *American Protestant Theology*, Luigi Giussani traces the history of the most meaningful theological expressions and the cultural significance of American Protestantism, from its origins in seventeenth-century Puritanism to the 1950s.

Giussani clarifies and assesses elements of Protestantism, such as the democratic approach to Church-State relations, "The Great Awakening" Calvinism and Trinitarianism, and liberalism. His rich references and analytical descriptions reconstruct an overview of the development of a religion that has great importance in

the context of spiritual life and American culture. He also displays full respect for the religious depth from which Protestantism was born and where it can reach, and expresses great admiration for its most prominent thinkers and spiritual leaders, including Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich.

Further testament to Giussani's clear-minded and comprehensive knowledge of Christianity, *American Protestant Theology* makes the work of a master theologian available in English for the first time.

MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS

SOWING IN CROOKED FURROWS

It was a historic visit for multiple reasons, and the article found in this issue of *Traces* captures them well. Amidst the meaningful moments of Pope Francis's trip to Cuba and the United States, one stood out as particularly touching for mothers and fathers. It was in Philadelphia, at the World Meeting of Families. During the festival, the Holy Father—as he is wont to do—set aside his prepared speech (which, by the way, was also beautiful) and spoke off the cuff. He told the story of the difficult question a child once asked him (“What did God do before He created the world?”), about the Love “so overflowing” that it had to “come out of” itself; about Creation. And later, about the “most beautiful thing that God made... the family. He created man and woman, and He gave them everything.”

There could be no better introduction to the Synod on the family. It's the second in the course of two years. It's been highly anticipated by the media—which are already speculating who will win, the “progressives” or the “conservatives”—and even more by the faithful, by God's people. Not so much for it to untangle the increasingly complicated questions put in front of us by today's society (such as the issue of Holy Communion for the divorced and civilly remarried), but because the family is really in need. It needs to be defended and sustained because “we cannot call any society healthy when it does not leave real room for family life,” as Francis reminded us. What it needs first of all is help to rediscover itself—its strength today, as always, is the enormous power it has.


The first way to help in this rediscovery is to stop talking about it in the abstract, “reducing it to an ideal model,” as sociologist Chiara Giaccardi notes in the interview that you will find in this issue. Family is first of all a life, a “concrete-living,” as Romano Guardini said. It's a very human place—the most human of all—full of wounds and limitations. Yet it's also a place—perhaps the only place—where it's still possible to learn day in and day out that our frailty and limitations are not what define us, but rather, an opportunity for growth. It's like the knot that binds a net together: living within it we can recognize that being tied to others, being in relationship, helps us to become ourselves. It's an environment whose true strength is in the *ordinary*.

There's yet another reason the family is a vital topic today, both inside and outside of the Church. The Pope spoke about it again with the American bishops, when with simple realism he noted that “until recently, we lived in a social context where the similarities between the civil institution of marriage and the Christian Sacrament were considerable and shared. The two were interrelated and mutually supportive. This is no longer the case.” Here too we see the evidences of the past becoming blurred; they are no longer crystal clear for everyone.

We could sit and mourn times past, the Pope says, taking refuge in phrases like: “‘It was all better back then,’ and ‘the world is falling apart and if things go on this way, who knows where we will end up?’” Or, he continues, we can choose “to accompany, to lift up, to bind up the wounds of our time. To look at things realistically, with the eyes of one who feels called to action, to pastoral conversion. The world today demands this pastoral conversion on our part.” Conversion. And witness, because “a Christianity that ‘does’ little in practice, while incessantly ‘explaining’ its teachings” becomes “a vicious circle.” We need to “*show* that the ‘Gospel of the family’ is truly ‘good news’ in a world where self-concern seems to reign supreme! Families transform the world and history.”

Francis closed the speech saying: “If we prove capable of the demanding task of reflecting God's love, cultivating infinite patience and serenity as we strive to sow its seeds in the frequently crooked furrows in which we are called to plant—for very often we really do have to sow in crooked furrows—then even a Samaritan woman with five ‘non-husbands’ will discover that she is capable of giving witness. And for every rich young man who with sadness feels that he has to calmly keep considering the matter, an older publican will come down from the tree and give fourfold to the poor, to whom, before that moment, he had never even given a thought.” This is Christianity. This is what the Synod is in service of, and this is what sustains the life of the family. **T**

THAT MEXICAN WOMAN IN THE CROWD OF PHILADELPHIA

 When I was asked to work at the CL booth at the World Meeting of Families' Papal Visit, my first reaction was, no! I don't like big crowds of people. And why should I go to Philadelphia if the Pope is coming to New York? Although I was a little sad that I would be missing the Papal events in NY, I couldn't get rid of the nervous feeling I had as the days drew nearer to my trip to Philadelphia. The World Meeting of Families was completely overwhelming: seeing hundreds of thousands of people from literally all over the world, I could not help but be completely taken away by the spectacle. If you're willing to travel from Chile, Mexico, Ukraine, Nigeria, and Canada to Philly, then there must be something that is happening now. When I arrived to where all the booths were, which was where I would be working on Thursday and Friday, I began to feel anxious. I sat at the CL booth, which compared to the others was small and simple. We had our pamphlets, a few panels on the Life of Fr. Giussani, and us. As simple as our booth was, I was amazed by how many people stopped. Many people who stopped only spoke Spanish so I found myself explaining CL in Spanish, which I had never really done before. A woman and a man from Mexico stopped and asked, "Why is it called Communion and Liberation? How do you reach this liberation?" I found myself totally taken aback from these questions because so often I avoid answering them. I told them that CL is centered on Christ, and through a union with Christ you can be free in




what you do. I told them that for me it is important to meet with people in CL because it is through this dialogue that we can walk together on this journey with Christ. I realized that in order to become myself I need to be with those people who remind me and help me to be who I am. She replied, "Yes, the 'I' is important." I have never heard anyone outside of the Movement use the "I" before. I said, "Yes! It's like John and Andrew, they followed Christ because of his humanity and I want to live searching for that same presence in everything that I do, in my work, with my family, because only in this way can recognize His love for me and be free." The woman looked at me and said, "Could you repeat what you just said? I want to record it so that I can bring it back to Mexico to show the single moms, because I think they should know this." Speaking to cameras is not my thing, but I did it because I wanted to share with these people in Mexico, in my terrible Spanish, that they too can live this way. I realized that this is why I was there—to talk to that woman. On Saturday I went to the Festival of Families after trying and failing to get into Independence Mall to see the Pope. As I was there, waiting for the Pope to parade down to the stage for the

Festival, I saw someone familiar. It was the woman I spoke to on Thursday. I met this woman once and I see her again in the midst of tens of thousands of people. She just smiled at me. I pray that every day I can be moved the way I was by this woman.

Winnie, New York (USA)

THE GIRL FROM THE FLYER AND MY AILING FATHER

 Hello, Fr. Julián: Looking at the flyer for the Beginning Day, I had the desire to have that gaze, the gaze of that young woman which seems to me to be a happy one, one that I don't have. I hung the flyer up at the office. I am a fifty-five-year-old who has spent most of his life in the Movement, but that's not enough to be happy. When circumstances grab you and demolish your "I," having a "service record" in the Movement is not enough. A presence is needed. For a few days now I have been sad and heavyhearted; my daughter cannot find work and my workplace has become difficult. This sadness seems to wear the person out. At times I have envied my friend who, in spite of also having a precarious job, is happier and more present. What does he have that I don't? This afternoon, full of sadness, I left work early and did something that I usually find burdensome: I went to the nursing home to visit my father who suffers from Alzheimer's. I went in and saw him sitting in a wheelchair, alone in the lounge area. As I came closer I noticed that a smile had spread across his face. I sat beside him and we began an intense, disjointed dialogue. The time for dinner had almost passed and I asked an attendant,



A PRIVATE AUDIENCE

MEETING THE POPE WITH FR. CHARLY'S KIDS

Thanks to the friendship born at the Rimini Meeting, I accompanied Fr. Charly and his kids to the private audience with the Pope. The kids had presented the exhibit, "A Community on the Outskirts, the Villera Church in Buenos Aires." They explained what their life was like in these shantytowns "in emergency" and what the Meeting had been for them. While the Pope asked them for more details, I observed his simplicity and attention. At one point, a young boy said, "Jesús accompanied us and helped us by being our translator." So the Pope turned to me and asked, "Jesús, the kids have told me what the Meeting meant for them. What about you?" "Your Holiness, seeing how these young people relate to reality, the curiosity that moves them, has changed me. My friendship with Fr. Charly has helped me to value even more your paternity, for which I thank you. Now it is easier for me to understand the words you spoke to us on March 7th in St. Peter's Square: 'Centered on Christ and in the Gospel, you can be the arms, hands, feet, minds and heart of a Church which goes forth.'" I also wanted to tell him this: "I have been greatly moved by the freedom of the organizers of the Meeting



because this year there were some economic problems. And suddenly, the Meeting takes care of these thirteen kids and decides to bring them to Italy. A responsible told me, 'We asked ourselves, what do we desire? To be frequently quoted in the newspapers for having invited prominent personalities or for having true witnesses?' This truly moved me." The Pope then answered me, "In a meeting with university students, one of them told me all of the things they were doing to help the poor. I asked if he thought that was enough and he said yes, but I told him, 'something more important is missing: to be beggars.'" The Pope does not ask us to do something but to come face-to-face with the poor, to be one with them. When we said our goodbyes, another gift, he called me again by name, "Jesús, you have no idea how happy I am about what you have told me." Javier Prades told us during the sermon of the last Mass before vacation, "I hope that when you come back, you can say, 'This summer has changed my life! Thanks to what I have lived, I have grown in my affection for Christ.'" Thanks to meeting these people, I can say that.

Jesús Ángel, Madrid (Spain)

"Don't you usually bring him to the dining room?" "Yes, but I waited because I saw you two together so serenely." "Could I bring him and feed him?" "Of course!" After dinner, we returned to the lounge. We looked into each other's eyes and I was filled with gratitude for the fact that through him, the Lord had called me to life. When the time came to say goodbye, in one

of his few moments of lucidity, my father asked me to stay. Before they brought him to his room he again smiled at me and said, "You are my child, I love you very much!" I looked into his eyes and left before anyone would see my tears of gratitude. They were the same eyes as the girl on the flyer: it was Jesus who was telling me, "I love you as you are, even if you are

sad, moody, or gloomy." How did I understand that it was Jesus? By the fact that, soon after, the world suddenly became my friend. On the way out I greeted an elderly woman I didn't even know. I arrived home and said to my wife, "Let's recite Vespers together." To live in gratitude is a whole other life.

Fabrizio, Italy

5 AMERICA

CAUGHT OFF GUARD





**Commentary on the Pope's visit in Cuba and the United States.
From the intervention at the UN to the little school in Harlem.
Days of weighty gestures and humble admonitions:
the disarming power of the Gospel outlasted every challenge
and category up through the intimate prayer, "Watch over
all those people who saw me."**

BY ANDREA TORNIELLI

“When the plane leaves after a visit, I see the faces of so many people. I get the urge to pray for them and say to the Lord, ‘I came here to do something, to do good; perhaps I have done some wrong, forgive me, and watch over all those people who saw me, who thought of what I said, who heard me, even those who criticized me, all of them.’” In that most personal answer given by Francis during the press conference with journalists on the plane from Philadelphia to Rome, followed by the affirmation, “you can’t say that in the newspapers,” we can find the key to understand the long trip that brought him to Cuba and to the U.S.

It was the “disarming” trip of a Pope who came first and foremost to encounter, to get to know, embrace and to share; of one who, thanks to his gift for witnessing through both gestures and words, was able to find place in the hearts of a many; and leaving speechless those who either tried to put him into the box of their prejudices, or thought they had already “figured out” his visit and the presumed “difficulties” the Latin American Pontiff would face in the U.S.

DOOR TO THE U.S. Francis initially wanted to make his entrance into the United States traveling across the border with Mexico, the same that so many immigrants attempt to cross.

It was deemed impossible because he could not travel to Mexico without stopping at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the capital city. Instead, thanks to the thaw in relations brought about with help from Vatican diplomacy, the Caribbean island governed by the Castros became the door to the U.S.

In Cuba, Francis followed in the footsteps of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to support the patient progress to which the Church in Cuba has dedicated itself for years. As soon as he set foot in Havana, in the presence of Raúl Castro, Francis referred to the softening of relations with the U.S. as an “event that fills us with hope,” “a sign of the victory of the culture of encounter and dialogue,” and “an example of reconciliation for the entire world.” He asked that “the Church... continue to support and encourage the Cuban people in their hopes and concerns, with the freedom and all the means needed to bring the proclamation of the Kingdom to the existential peripheries of society.” The rest of his Cuban sojourn had a pastoral tone. Celebrating Mass in the Plaza de la Revolución under the looming shadow of the likeness of Che Guevara, the Pope underlined that “service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people,” at the same time inviting Cubans not to let themselves be taken in by “plans which can be seductive, but are unconcerned about the face of the person beside you.” To be great, we have >>

» to become small and “care for the frailty of others.” It’s a simple and concrete proposal: to “always look to the faces of our brothers and sisters” who suffer, to touch “their flesh,” sense “their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffer’ that closeness” in trying to help them. Because “whoever does not live to serve, does not ‘serve’ to live.”

After Wojtyla’s visit, Fidel Castro had reestablished Christmas as a national holiday, and after Benedict’s, Raúl did the same with Good Friday. This time, the Cuban Church hopes that Francis’s visit will lead to allowing them greater access to, and more, channels of communication.

EXCHANGE OF GLANCES. Without question, one of the most moving moments of the stop in Cuba was the Mass in Holguín on September 21st, the Feast of St. Matthew, the day on which 72 years prior, Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s life was changed when he felt the gaze of Jesus upon him just as when He called the tax collector. The sun blazed and the humidity was unbearable. Raúl Castro was in the front row with a wide-brimmed straw hat. Half the city was waiting for hours to see Francis.

In his homily, the Holy Father reflected on the “exchange of glances” that transformed the life of Matthew, a sinner, a tax collector hated by the people, who only “the power in [Jesus] eyes” could make “get up from his table and follow Him.” God always precedes us, as Francis underlines. “Even if we dare not raise our eyes to the Lord, he always looks at us first.” He goes beyond “appearances, beyond sin, beyond failures and unworthiness,” or social conventions. Because He came not to seek out the righteous and the perfect, but sinners; all those who feel “unworthy.”

In the United States, where political and ecclesial life suffer from over-

*“Each of us can say:
‘I, too, am a sinner,
whom Jesus has
looked upon.’
I ask you to take
a moment to recall
with gratitude
and happiness that
moment when
the merciful gaze
of God was felt
in our lives.”*

Pope Francis



simplified polarizations—Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative—Francis treaded carefully, with the unarmed and disarming power of the Gospel. His first public words were spoken on the South Lawn of the White House, with Barack Obama at his side. “As the son of an immigrant family, I am happy to be a guest in this country, which was largely built by such families.” The admonition about the urgency of changing pace in dealing with the immigrants pushing across the Mexican border was

not made *ex cathedra*. Instead, the Pope spoke of himself and of America, of the truth in her values and founding fathers. He did the same thing the next day in the much-anticipated address to Congress, the first address by a Pope on Capitol Hill. Bets were made about who would applaud for what during the papal address. Once again, Francis caught them off guard. He didn’t bring in a balance sheet to carefully weigh out pro-life or pro-family statements and admonitions, or defending the poor and immigrants.



HAVANA. Moments from the visit in Cuba. Below, the meeting with Fidel Castro and, to the left, with Raúl.



His style is one of humble admonition and a personal witness that strikes to the heart of the person in front of him. “We, the people of this continent, are not fearful of foreigners, because most of us were once foreigners. I say this to you as the son of immigrants, knowing that so many of you are also descended from immigrants;” and “when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past,” such as those committed years ago against the Native Americans.

Francis also asked for an end to the death penalty. His speech was framed around four great Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton, each who defended liberty, the rights of all persons, social justice, help for the oppressed, and dialogue. It’s as if Bergoglio were saying: America, remember who you are!

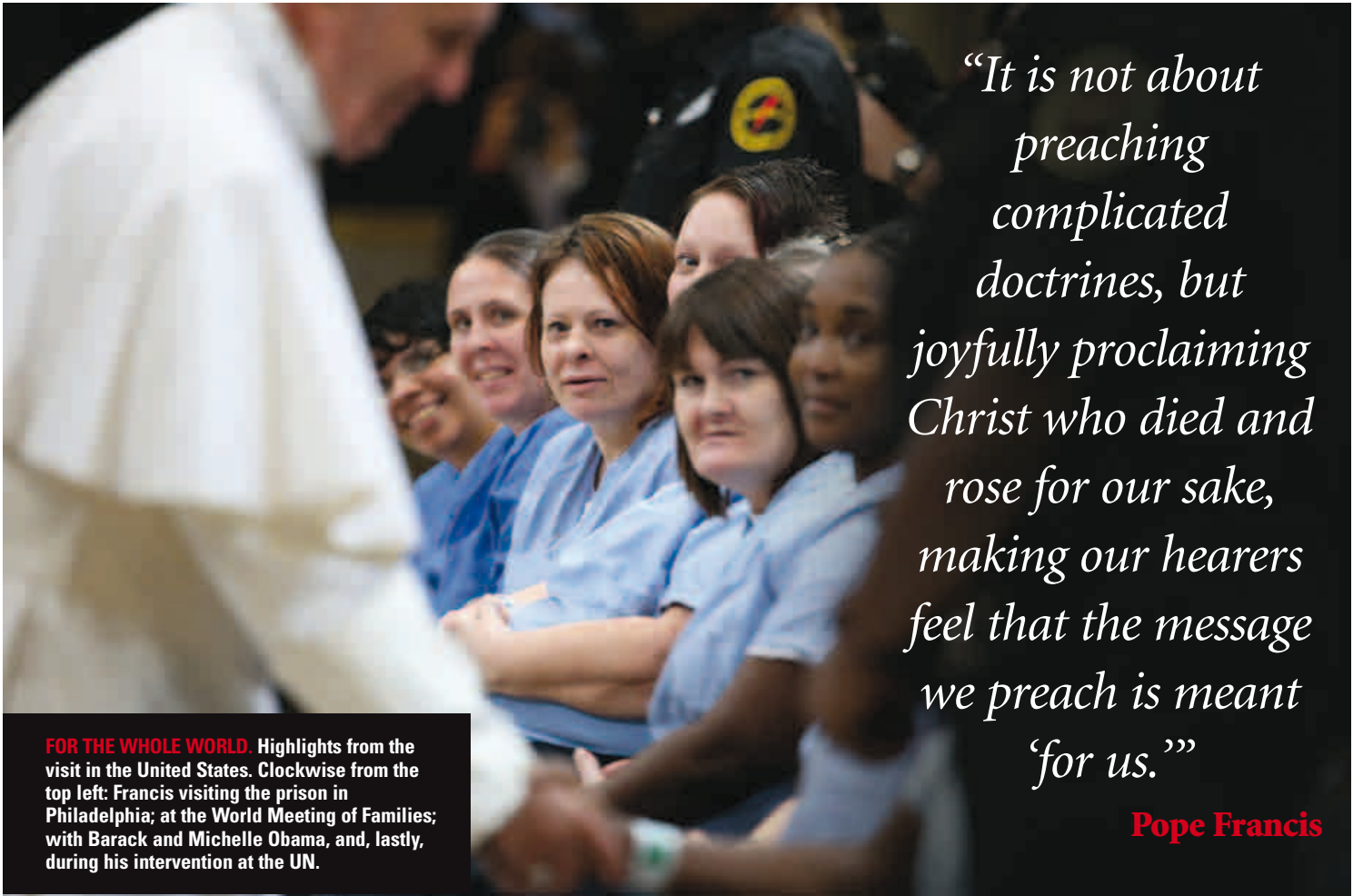
The most novel aspect of the significant speech to the Congress was the invitation to not fall into the temptation of oversimplification, a common

operating mode for much of contemporary politics and information. It’s this that divides the world all too easily into good and evil, the righteous and sinners; and is very convenient when you want to justify wars and armed conflict because they help to demonize your opponents.

Francis certainly didn’t try to hide the threats of religious fundamentalism. The “brutal atrocities,” he explained, inflicted upon the contemporary world, leaves “open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters, demands that we confront every form of polarization which would divide it into these two camps. We know that in the attempt to be freed of the enemy without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within. To imitate the hatred and violence of tyrants and murderers is the best way to take their place. That is something which you, as a people, reject.” His intervention at the UN was in the same vein. Francis invited the world to defend the rights of those who are excluded from their environment “with force.” He asked for the dismantling of arms that make us “nations united by fear,” that conflicts be prevented using negotiation, and he called for reform of the UN and an increased presence of the Security Council.

A BROTHER AMONG BROTHERS. There were crowds that welcomed the Holy Father wherever he went, from visiting the school in Harlem to the prison in Philadelphia, but the highlight of his time in the U.S. were two addresses given to bishops. With the North American bishops, Pope Francis spoke as a “brother among brothers.” He asked them not to use “harsh and divisive language,” nor to restrict themselves to making “proclamations.” We need to “find room in people’s hearts” without ever making the cross into a “banner of worldly struggles.”

With the bishops gathered from >>



“It is not about preaching complicated doctrines, but joyfully proclaiming Christ who died and rose for our sake, making our hearers feel that the message we preach is meant for us.”

Pope Francis

FOR THE WHOLE WORLD. Highlights from the visit in the United States. Clockwise from the top left: Francis visiting the prison in Philadelphia; at the World Meeting of Families; with Barack and Michelle Obama, and, lastly, during his intervention at the UN.



» all over the world for the World Meeting of Families, he asked that they go beyond complaints and condemnations of what’s wrong around them: “As pastors, we bishops are called to collect our energies and to rebuild enthusiasm for making families correspond ever more fully to the blessing of God which they are! We need to invest our energies not so much in rehearsing the problems of the world around us, and the merits of Christianity, but in extending a sincere invitation to young people to be brave and to opt for marriage and the family.” He invited them to “waste

time” with families, staying with them and sharing their difficulties, knowing how to stay close to those who are “lost, abandoned, wounded, broken, downtrodden and deprived of their dignity.”

DOWN FROM THE TREE. If “we prove capable of the demanding task of reflecting God’s love,” the Holy Father concluded, citing Gospel scenes that are applicable to today’s questions, “cultivating infinite patience and serenity as we strive to sow its seeds in the frequently crooked furrows in which we are called to plant—for very

often we really do have to sow in crooked furrows—then even a Samaritan woman with five ‘non-husbands’ will discover that she is capable of giving witness. And for every rich young man who with sadness feels that he has to calmly keep considering the matter, an older publican will come down from the tree and give fourfold to the poor, to whom, before that moment, he had never even given a thought.”

Pope Francis offered us a living example of this outlook and approach, of pastoral conversion, during every stop of his American voyage. **T**



**“IN YOUR EYES SHINES
THE STRANGENESS OF A SKY
THAT ISN'T YOURS”**

Notes from the talks by Davide Proserpi and Julián Carrón
at the Beginning Day for adults and university students in CL.
Mediolanum Forum, Assago (Milan), September 26, 2015.

**Notes from the talks by Davide Prospero and Julián Carrón
at the Beginning Day for adults and university students in CL.
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JULIÁN CARRÓN

Let us ask the Spirit to re-awaken in us such an affection for Christ, such an attachment to Him that we can testify to Him in all the aspects of our life.

Come Holy Spirit

La mente torna [The Mind Returns]

I wonder as I wander

DAVIDE PROSPERI

Welcome to this gesture with which we begin a new year together. I would also like to greet the friends who are joining us by satellite link-up in various cities of Italy and abroad.

“The most beautiful day of the week is Monday, because on Monday you start again, you start again the journey, the design, you begin again the actuation of beauty, of affection” (L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo [From Temperament: A Method]*, Bur, Milan, 2002, p. 31). This line by Fr. Giussani explains why we never tire of starting again, because we are more attached to this beauty than any other interest, and so we ask our great companionship to help us not lose heart, so that day after day, year after year, our affection for the source of beauty may grow.

At the 1964 Spiritual Exercises in Varigotti Fr. Giussani said, “We have to fight for beauty, because you can’t live without beauty. This fight must embrace every detail, because otherwise how will we fill Saint Peter’s Square one day?” (the reference is in L. Amicone, “Il 25 aprile di Rimini,” [The 25th of April in Rimini], *Tempi*, n. 18/2004, p. 20). Last March 7th we filled that Square. We had requested an encounter with the Pope to ask him how to maintain the freshness of the beginning that is crucial for our Movement’s ability to continue to be useful to the Church and the world. I think we are all here today because we think this experience is valid for our own life. But how can we be increasingly useful to the Church and thus serve the glory of Christ in the world? The Pope responded by entrusting us with a task, as we remember well: “Centered in Christ and in the Gospel, you can be the arms, hands, feet, mind and heart of an ‘outward bound’ Church” (Francis, *Speech to the*

Movement of Communion and Liberation, March 7, 2015).

And Carrón took this up again at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity. “How can we recognize this presence? By the fact that it decenters us from our reductions, from our distractions, and brings us back to the center, Christ... Christianity is always an event” (*A Presence Within the Gaze*, p. 34. Available at: <http://english.clonline.org>). We have to realize that this indicates a direction, that is, that we must re-center on the primacy of the event, continue again and again to open ourselves to Christ as an event who happened in the past in history, who happens in the present in ever-new ways, and who we are called to follow. We saw it at the last Meeting. The method God uses to enter into history is that of a free choice: the choice of a man, Abraham. In the midst of the multitude of people who tried to give a name to the Mystery, one man alone was chosen and called by name by the Mystery, “Abraham...,”

so he could speak with Him familiarly, as a son with his father. This same method describes our history.

In fact, one of the things that strikes me about the Movement is how it all began. You can read about it in Savorana’s book (*Vita di don Giussani [Life of Fr. Giussani]*, Bur, Milan, 2014). Years ago a boy began to feel a yearning that his life not be useless. He did not know, could not imagine how he might end up being useful, but the one thing he knew for certain was that he did not want to live in vain, that whatever the Lord would ask of him, he would give himself entirely to do, so that his life would be useful to the world, useful to His design. And you know, I recognize myself in this: I, too, feel this yearning! But most of the time we do not take seriously this thing we all have inside, to the point of saying: “I will spend

my life, all my life for this.” Instead, we are here today because this boy became a man and then grew old, and remained faithful all his life to this yearning, or rather, faithful to He who indicated the road for fulfilling this desire. The charism that seized this man, and generated a people within the life of the Church, seized him for the world. We who have been preferred—because nobody owed it to us that we should have encountered what we have encountered and that many do not know—we who have seen, we who have been chosen, who have, so to speak, seen the unmistakable features of the face of Christ through the persuasive

We who have been preferred—because nobody owed it to us that we should have encountered what we have encountered and that many do not know—we to whom it has been granted to experience Christ as an invincible attraction, we have been chosen for the world.



testimony of a companionship that is humanly decisive and brings peace to life, we to whom it has been granted to experience Christ as an invincible attraction, we have been chosen for the world. We have been given this experience of knowledge so that we would communicate the beauty to everyone. If not, what meaning would this preference have? It would be an injustice.

I never cease to be moved by the story of the man born blind. This poor wretch looked at himself the way everyone looked at him: he was his “affliction.” His was a life without hope. There were many like him and they all looked upon themselves in the same way, according to a certain perception widespread in the Judaism of the time: they were punished physically because they were bad, impure within, sinners! But that man chose him that day and the blind man acquired his sight. Questioned by the teachers and wise men, he answered: “I only know that before I couldn’t see and now I see. I see reality, not only physical reality, but I see the truth of myself, of what I am. I am not what you say I am. I am what I saw shining in the gaze of that man as he looked intently at me, looked at *me*, the nothing I am, looked at me with friendship.” Precisely that day, that man born blind was chosen so that the glory of Christ could shine through his change, so that the others like him could also know that truth of themselves and of the world, of everything, and would be free. From Abraham onwards, God has always used this method, and we are of the same

lineage. Thus, our life becomes useful if it is lived for the purpose for which we have been chosen, as a father said at the funeral of his three-year-old son who had died of cancer: “For the remembrance card we chose this line that describes him well: ‘The important thing in life is not to do something, but to be born and to let yourself be loved.’”

Thinking back on the year that has gone by, starting with the judgment on Europe and the collapse of evidences—we remember it well—today’s initiative centers on Fr. Giussani’s question: in the current situation in which we find ourselves, is it still possible to communicate Christ with that fascination, with that persuasiveness of reason and affection that bowled us over?

At the Meeting, we had numerous encounters with witnesses to the faith, as well as other surprising and perhaps unexpected encounters, as you find well-documented in the September issue of *Tracce*.

I wondered what strikes a person who encounters something like this; why is one struck? Why can one say, as Pietro Modiano did, that “just [by] the fact that a place exists where questions of this kind can be asked,” that is, true questions, “coming from far away, I no longer feel far away” (*Tracce*, n. 8/2015, p. 12)? This describes the basis of wonder.

What one encounters is a subject who is different, a people with a rich identity and history, and thus one encounters a proposal. Those who meet it may like it or >>>

» not, but the fascination of an original presence is in the proposal of that living experience that tries to relate to all the aspects and interests of the human. We saw this, for example, when we distributed the flyer "A Call to Build Anew," about the Italian administrative elections in May, and the crisis of ideals that characterizes Italy, in which we proposed the rediscovery of the other as a good, and not as an obstacle to be overcome, through the fullness of our "I," both in politics and in human and social relations.

And so you understand that the limitless openness that characterizes Christian dialogue brings an unavoidable implication: there cannot be true dialogue unless I bring awareness of my identity. This is the method with which we enter into the comparison with everything. True dialogue requires that I have mature self-awareness. In *The Risk of Education*, Fr. Giussani tells us that without this maturation in the awareness of self, my "I" will remain blocked by the other person's influence or my rejection of the other will make my position unreasonably rigid. Therefore, it is true that a dialogue implies openness toward the other... but... it also requires maturity on my part and a critical awareness of what I am." (*The Risk of Education*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2001, pp. 94-95). Therefore, on many occasions in these years we have returned to two foundational concerns, offered as hypotheses to everyone, for constructing a new society: 1) the Christian community, inasmuch as it is guided, is the place where you gradually discover how Christ responds to the questions of life, and grow in familiarity with the truth, to which today it would seem almost impossible to aspire; 2) over time, this sure familiarity with the truth you have encountered makes you capable of vital engagement in society, and also total openness, a freedom that allows you to express the newness of life given by the Christian experience in a persuasive and fascinating way, free from "immutable" frameworks that do not always respond to the needs of our time. I was able to see this clearly three weeks ago, participating in a meeting with five hundred GS teenagers and teachers. What helps to make us certain and solid in the awareness of our Christian identity, is what makes us grow in the journey toward destiny. We will have the opportunity to return to these things this year, reading the book Carrón has just published, *La bellezza disarmata* [*Unarmed Beauty*].

In all this, let me say, we recognize God's irony. Against the apparently incontestable advance of the powers that be, Christ does not counter with another power, but with a

Against the advance of the powers that be, Christ does not counter with another power, but with a rag-tag human companionship, "a companionship of women and men" chosen by Him, so that His presence will never be lacking in space and time.

rag-tag human companionship, "a companionship of women and men" chosen by Him, so that His presence will never be lacking in space and time, and with it, as Giussani once said with a stupendous image, "From the mystery of Christ's resurrection a new light floods the world, fighting for territory, inch by inch, pushing back the night." (L. Giussani, *Tutta la terra desidera il Tuo volto* [*The entire world desires Your face*], San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2015, p. 116). We have had many witnesses to this, first among them Father Ibrahim, a parish priest of the Latin Rite community of Aleppo, who together with the family of Myriam and others like them are the hope of a people struggling to find a reason for continued hope. They continue a history, begun at the dawn of the Church, of Christianity, and are aware that for this reason the Lord wants them there in the Middle East, to be fruitful there.

We must support our Christian brothers and sisters in this task, because they are a seed, and the seed must be protected.

Similarly, when I see some of our young people who love each other in a way you would not think possible, in such a pure, intense and at the same time transparent way, thrown wide open to everyone, I see in them the most convincing and contagious answer to the problems that fill the discussions about the morality of our times. Let me read you what a 24-year-old CL member wrote to a friend: "I love her. And I love Christ. Yes, I can finally say that I love Him! I love Him and I want to give Him everything... I want to give everything for His Kingdom. I want to spend the rest of my life for His Kingdom, because I am happy, because I am grateful. He has conquered me.... And this happened through her. I love Him through her and I love her so much, because I understand that He gave her to me. The world has changed for me; I am changed. Everything is similar to what it was before and yet everything is new.... You know well, I lived for so long tormented by the desire to see Him Present in the flesh, a flesh that I could see and touch... and then a flower budded. Suddenly. The Love of the Father blazed into my heart and my life. Now I love life. I love it so much, and I even love what I suffered. Yes, I love it. I love my suffering because it was suffering worthy of being lived: my suffering was the torment of the desire to see the Incarnation, to see Christ become incarnate in my life. This is living. This is Life." The beauty of a sacramental companionship like ours, the greatness of the Movement, is what makes this kind of loving possible, because a young man could not talk about

his love for a young woman in this way without Christ, without the experience of the human that is born through our companionship: Christ truly "fulfills the human." God's response to the "crises" of our times is not a discourse but the event of a beauty, an unarmed beauty. What beauty? The fact that the Infinite, the Divine, can enter into the flesh of the relationship between a man and a woman in flesh and blood, transfiguring it and strengthening the affective capacity to the point of making it an image of Himself, His glory. Within and through the sign, here and now, the Mystery enables us to really experience Him to the point that, through the reciprocal love between a man and a woman, as in true friendship, in Christian communion, it is truly the Infinite who makes Himself present. This Beauty can be encountered in a sign, in a human reality, fragile and "rag-tag" as it may be, and yet in which a Presence shines that is not of this world. This sign is the Church, which the Movement has taught us to love. Those who live the relationship with this Presence tend to fill all of reality with positivity and hope.

For this reason, we ask: how can the Christian witness respond today to the emptiness and fear that threaten to destroy the gusto of living?

CARRÓN

1. THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND THE FORM OF TESTIMONY

"The circumstances through which God has us pass," said Fr. Giussani, "are the essential and not secondary factors of our vocation, of the mission to which He calls us. If Christianity is the announcement of the fact that the Mystery became incarnate in a man, the circumstance in which you take position on this, before the whole world, is important for the very definition of your testimony" (*L'uomo e il suo destino* [Man and His Destiny], Marietti, Genova, 1999, p. 63).

It seems to me that after the journey we have made this year, as Davide just said, we can better understand these words of Fr. Giussani's. The more you want to live the faith in reality, the more you are interested in understanding the context in which you find yourself, not out of simple sociological interest, but precisely to comprehend the nature of the witness we are called to give.

In order to grasp the importance of circumstances in identifying the form of testimony to which we are called, perhaps it can be useful to re-read the story of the clown and the burning village, found at the beginning of Cardinal Ratzinger's book, *Introduction to Christianity*, published in

The more you want to live the faith in reality, the more you are interested in understanding the context in which you find yourself, not out of simple sociological interest, but to comprehend the nature of the witness we are called to give.

1968. "Anyone who tries today to talk about the question of Christian faith... soon comes to sense the alien—and alienating—nature of such an enterprise. He will probably soon have the feeling that his position is only too well summed up in Kierkegaard's famous story of the clown and the burning village.... According to this story a travelling circus in Denmark had caught fire. The manager thereupon sent the clown, who was already dressed and made-up for the performance, into the neighboring village to fetch help, especially as there was a danger that the fire would spread across the fields of dry stubble and engulf the village itself. The clown hurried into the village and requested the inhabitants to come as quickly as possible to the blazing circus and help to put the fire out. But the villagers took the clown's shouts simply for an excellent piece of advertising, meant to attract as many people as possible to the performance; they applauded the clown and laughed till they cried. The clown felt more like weeping than laughing; he tried in vain to get the people to be serious, to make it clear to them that it was no trick but bitter earnest, that there really was a fire. His supplications only increased the laughter; people thought he was playing his part splendidly—until finally the fire did engulf the village, it was too late for help and both circus and village were burned to the ground.... It is certainly true that anyone who tries to preach the faith amid people involved in modern life and thought can really feel like a clown, or rather perhaps like someone who... walks into the midst of the world of today dressed and thinking in the ancient fashion and can neither understand nor be understood by this world of ours" (*Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1990, pp. 15-17).

For this reason, certain forms of communication of the faith today appear so strange that they cannot be taken seriously, and rather, evoke laughter.

Now we can understand better Fr. Giussani's concern since the beginning of our history, since it began; when nobody could have imagined what would happen, when churches were still full to overflowing and the faith seemed to be having great success, when all the Catholic associations had a large number of members, Fr. Giussani—like a prophet—identified the problem. And in order not to appear like a clown himself, from the very beginning, he sought to show the pertinence of faith to the needs of life. It was not that in the 1950s faith was not preached—the Church continued to do so—but already back then many no longer perceived it as pertinent to the needs of life. For this very reason, many students who Fr. Giussani encountered at »

» the Berchet High School had abandoned the faith, even though they came from Christian families. Fr. Giussani experienced first-hand the importance of the historical circumstances for defining his witness. He, someone who knew Catholic doctrine very well, had to reflect on the best way to communicate the truth, the same unchanged truth, in a context that was rapidly changing.

The world in which we are called to live the faith is totally different from that of the past, even the recent past. It is one where secularization advances, along with the collapse of evidences before us. As a consequence we can add to this a seemingly invincible passivity, numbness, and boredom that gravely cloud recognition of reality. This situation is the greatest challenge to faith and the Christian announcement today. It is a challenge that concerns us first of all. If we, too, consider faith as a clown's act, if we fail to perceive it as pertinent for life, we too will begin to lose interest in it. So just imagine the others!

Each of us is forced to respond to this situation that we are confronted with and that provokes us. In fact, as Fr. Giussani said, "experience is the impact of a subject with reality, a reality that, as a presence, invites and questions him ('makes him a problem'). The human drama lies in the answer to this problemization ('responsibility') and the response is evidently generated in the subject. The strength of a subject lies in the intensity of his self-awareness, that is, of the perception he has of the values that define his personality [what he holds dearest]. Now, these values flow in the 'I' from the lived history to which the 'I' itself belongs.... The radical genius of a subject lies in the strength of the awareness of belonging. For this reason the people of God becomes a new cultural horizon for each subject who belongs to it" (*Il senso di Dio e l'uomo moderno* [The Sense of God and Modern Man], Bur, Milan, 2010, pp. 131-132). By the way we respond to the challenges of the present, "you understand whether and how much we live belonging, which is the deep root of all cultural expression" (L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino* [Man and his Destiny], op. cit., p. 63).

Fr. Giussani identified two ways we live belonging, from which flow the two cultural faces with which the Christian engages in the world: faith and ethics, the event of faith and ethical values. The Church—he said in 1997—on many occasions "faces the world, I won't say forgetting, but taking for granted and as obvious... the dogmatic content of Christianity," that is, "the event of faith" (*ibid.* pp. 63-64), that is reduced "to an *a priori* abstract in one's head" (*ibid.* p. 67), and thus she becomes entrenched on ethics,

on values. It is as if we said, "I already know what the faith is, so now I have to think about what to do." Thus almost unconsciously, considering the content of the faith obvious, we shift to ethics. Consequently, the cultural face of Christianity is no longer the event of faith, but values.

In responding to the challenges of living, none of us can avoid saying what we hold dearest, what the essence of our self-awareness is: the event of faith or moral values. I am amazed how much this attitude we often discover in ourselves, that is, taking the event of faith for granted, does not correspond. In fact, it is in contrast with the elementary experience of living that we constantly find, for example, in certain songs like the one by Mina to which we just listened, *La mente torna* [My Mind Returns] (words by G. Mogol, music by L. Battisti). What does it say? That when you arrive, when the you arrives, "my mind returns"; that when "you speak to me" I am I. Remember when we quoted Guccini? "I do not exist when you are not there" (*Vorrei* [I would like], words and music by F. Guccini). Only when you are there, you rip me away from my thoughts. That is, the "you" of the other is so much a part of the definition of the "I" that it awakens the self awareness with which one faces everything. Therefore the relationship with a certain "you" is what enables a way of staying in reality that is entirely different, truer, determined by the new self-awareness that it awakens in us. Consequently, belonging to the "you" defines one's cultural position. Anyone listening to the song understands immediately what the composer holds dearest: the you that makes the "I" truly "I," finally "I."

The elementary experience of living shows how deeply I need a you in order to be myself, to be "I." The Lord who made us knows well how much His You is indispensable for our "I." In His attempt to make Himself known to man, the Mystery "bent" to this elementary experience. In fact, to enter into relation with us, He made Himself experienceable according to the form of experience that characterizes us, the relationship with a you, so that through Him everyone could understand the importance of the You of the Mystery for oneself, for one's own life. Bending Himself to the human way of relating, God entered into reality and called Abraham to generate an "I" entirely interwoven with His presence, a presence that his Mesopotamian contemporaries could not even imagine, as our friend Professor Giorgio Buccellati said at the Meeting. They could not conceive of an intimate, familial relationship with fate, with destiny.

What does all this mean? That Abraham's choice introduced

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compassion. In this
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moved with
compassion for your
destiny.**



a newness into history, such that faith is not just an accessory, a rite or devotional practice, but that which constitutes our “I,” our staying in reality. The reason everything began with Abraham is the desire of God: “Let us make a man live the experience of Ourselves in the innermost depths of his ‘I,’ so that he can see the nature of the ‘I’ that I have created. But if the experience of My Presence does not vibrate in the innermost being of a man like Abraham, people will not be able to understand who they are and will not be able to understand who I am.” Imagine what an experience the prophet Hosea must have had to be able to say, “My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred” (*Hosea* 11:8). This God, this You, has such intensity of life that He cannot look at us, relate with us, without this surge of emotion, without this vibration, without this compassion for our destiny. In this way, He showed women and men what they are, because nothing can re-awaken the “I” like seeing a You moved with compassion for your destiny. So then, it is not surprising that one who has been re-awakened by this You can say, like the prophet Isaiah: “Your name and Your title are the desire of our souls” (*Is* 26:8). This means not excluding from the perception of self the content of the experience of faith. If we exclude it from the way we say “I,” our belonging will be to everything, but not to the Mystery that entered into our life, and therefore we will give witness only to what we manage to do, what we will be able to imagine, our attempts, but we will not be able to

communicate our belonging to the Mystery, as instead happened to a person who, arriving at work, was asked by a colleague, “What happened to you? Why do you have that expression?” She had not done anything yet, but her colleague saw something different in her.

This is why when we gave ourselves the question for the summer vacation, “When have we discovered and recognized in our experience a presence in the gaze?” we were not asking a question for visionaries, for people searching for some kind of mystical experience, but we were calling into play those who have found themselves looking at reality with a newness within, those for whom the content of the experience of faith is not taken for granted. Without this newness, without this impact on our gaze, faith is reduced to something devotional that does not define our way of staying in reality, does not define life.

In order to reach His purpose, Fr. Giussani explains, “God... does not intervene from outside like a suffocating clause, like barriers of laws, a prison to be caged in, but emerges from within, the source, the deep companionship without whom we can do nothing. He emerges from within our existence, because He constitutes us and it is necessary to bring Him inside the things of which life is made, because otherwise [life] would not be life. It is necessary to discover Him and follow Him within the realities of existence, because He is the God of the living, and without Him the realities of existence would be >>>



» semblances of things, schematic and formal. In this way, we are called to experience the sense of the human that the modality of His self revelation, His presence within historic existence, reminds us of and produces” (*Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Bur, Milan, 2007, p. 31).

Re-reading the history of the people of Israel, like re-reading the history of the Church, heir of that people, Fr. Giussani constantly sets us in front of two possibilities. Today, just as it was then, each of us is placed in front of a clear alternative: “Barriers of laws” or “a presence within existence.”

But if the event of faith, its dogmatic content, is accepted as obvious, and everything is reduced just to explanations or dialectics or ethics, what interest can it evoke in us? It will not hold our attention, not even for a minute. None of our attempts can produce the human newness through which Christ fascinates us and makes us interested in Him. Abraham could never have produced an “I” like his if the Mystery had not taken the initiative, attracting him to Himself. In the same way, John and Andrew would never have been able to produce that human newness that entered their lives through the encounter with Christ. Today, more and more, every person, each of us and those we encounter, all find ourselves in the same dizzying position: in this nihilism that surrounds us, in this situation of spreading emptiness where everything is equal to everything, is there something that manages to seize us, to attract us to the point of determining all of our “I”?

Pope Francis identified the issue in his message to the Meeting: in the face of this strange anesthesia, “in the face of our numbness in life, how can one’s conscience be

awakened again?” (Francis, *Message for the 36th Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 17, 2015).

This is the crucial question against which all visions, all proposals must measure themselves, ours included. In fact, each of us, in every one of our actions, takes a position in front of this radical challenge. Each one responds, implicitly or explicitly, to this question in the way we get up in the morning, how we go to work, how we look at our children, etc. So then, what can awaken us again from the numbness of life?

2. THE ATTRACTION OF BEAUTY

As we have said, a suitable provocation is needed to reawaken the person’s elementary experience. In the same way, such a provocation is needed in order to emerge from numbness. As Fr. Giussani underlines, “original human experience,” that is, the religious sense, that set of evidences and needs that makes me human, “does not exist actively, if not within the form of a provocation.... In other words, within a modality in which it is stirred” (*Dall’utopia alla presenza 1975-1978 [From Utopia to Presence]*, Bur, Milan, 2006, p. 193). Thus, the truly radical issue is the existence and communication of a suitable provocation that can favor the true redemption of a perception of oneself. In fact, certain encounters, because of the provocation they represent, set fully into action the original consciousness of ourselves, and cause our “I” to emerge from the ashes of our forgetfulness and reductions.

This enables us to understand why the Pope, referring to those who are discouraged by the current situation, wrote to the Meeting, “For the Church, this opens up a fascinating journey, as was the case at the beginning of

Christianity.” Precisely this situation was for him a “fascinating” opportunity. What persuaded Zacchaeus, Matthew, the Samaritan woman, and the woman taken in adultery? A list of laws, imposed from outside, or His difference? We discover the answer from their reactions. In fact, they said, “We have never seen anything like this” (*Mk* 2:12). Or: “Never before has anyone spoken like this one” (*Jn* 7:46). They were swept up by the experience they were living with Christ—“the dogmatic content of Christianity, its ontology” to use Giussani’s expression—which communicated the mystery of His person, not the values, which not even His disciples understood: “If that is the case between a man and his wife” they said in response to His words on the indissolubility of marriage, “it is better not to marry” (*Mt* 19:10). Why did they continue to follow Him? Why didn’t they find Jesus’ strangeness to be like that of a clown? Just read the Gospel with this question, and you will rediscover it all anew.

Could it perhaps be, as Fr. Giussani said, that others perceive Christians as clowns because we have taken for granted the event of the faith and have shifted over to ethics? We can defend the correctness of our doctrine, shout it out to everyone, but they will not be struck in the least, and their way of looking at us will not change an *iota*. We can cry out about all our sacrosanct reasons, we can point to our ethical values, legitimate as they may be, without succeeding in shifting the others even a hairsbreadth. Instead, they will see us as a bunch of clowns. Christianity reduced to a set of values or laws to be respected seems like a clown’s act to them, and we Christians seem like clowns, part of the circus.

Is there anything that can disrupt this situation? Is there anything that can grasp us and the others deep down, grab them in the core of their being so they stop thinking of Christianity as a clown act? Yes, there is. Today, as in the times of Jesus, Christians stop being identified as clowns and “force” those they encounter to begin a process whose point of arrival is unknown. A priest friend who lives in England told me: “I saw a mother with a small child, a year and a half, as I was leaving Mass, and she said to me, ‘I’d like to talk to you about Baptism.’ I had never seen her before. A couple of weeks later I went to her home and we began chatting. As often happens in England, the parents were not married. The child had been conceived *in vitro* and I also found out they have another frozen embryo [this is the situation: a child in the freezer!]. I said to myself, ‘with this couple, I certainly can’t make a shopping list of all the things they haven’t done right. Yet this woman

evidently sought me out because there was some glimmer of interest.’ So I asked her, ‘Why did you come?’ And she answered, ‘Actually, I was baptized as a child, and lived as a Christian. It was beautiful—school, church—but then I drifted off. And yet, I want this for my children.’ As I was about to leave, I stopped and told her, ‘I understand that your husband was sick, that you have had many problems, but I wanted to tell you one thing: actually, God has never lost sight of you. It’s not that He made a mistake and forgot you, and didn’t look at you, as happens with you and your child. Many times your child doesn’t understand the things you do, the things you allow, but in reality you see a good within him, and it is the same with God, who has always looked at you, has always had you present, and wants to do something great with your life and in the life of your family through the pain and the things that have happened to you.’ That woman started crying. Afterwards she began coming to Mass every Sunday. I understood that I couldn’t simply look at the list of ethical issues she hadn’t respected,

because the point was for her to find a possibility for her own life, and this is what happened. The rest, slowly but surely, would be worked out.”

I think this is an example of starting from the content of faith and not from ethics in the relationship with the other.

This priest friend then told me about another episode. “A woman wrote me an email saying, ‘I would like to become a member of the parish.’ I went to visit her and asked, ‘Why do you want to belong to the parish?’ ‘Because I want this thing for myself and my children.’ ‘What does it mean, that you want to belong to the parish? Are you Catholic?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are you Anglican?’ ‘No, actually, I’m not even baptized.’ ‘Ah, okay, so

[as often happens] your husband must be Christian and you are coming closer to faith through him.’ ‘No, no, my husband isn’t Catholic, or Anglican; he isn’t baptized either.’ ‘So your parents are? There must be some connection with the Church. Why do you want to come?’ [full of curiosity]. ‘I’ll tell you the truth. I am a professional babysitter and so is my mother. Every day we put together eight, ten children in my mother’s house, which is big, and we take care of them while their parents are at work. In these years of work I have seen that the children from your school and parish are different, and their parents are different too; and so I want this thing for myself. What do I have to do?’ I told her, ‘I’ll introduce you to some mothers, and then if you want to come to School of Community, there are also people who are preparing for Baptism, and in this way we can see a bit. You can also come to Mass if you want.’ >>

If we exclude the content of the experience of faith from the way we say “I,” our belonging will be to everything, but not to the Mystery that entered into our life. We will give witness only to what we manage to do.



» ‘Actually, I thought I wasn’t allowed to go to Mass, that it was prohibited because I’m not Catholic, but to tell you the truth, I’ve snuck in twice now.’ ‘And what happened?’ ‘My week was different because those songs, those things.... So many things I don’t understand, but maybe there is one thing I do understand and it nourishes me all week long.’ It’s true that there are people who are returning to the faith because they no longer are prejudiced and faith is no longer taken for granted, but this is different, because these people who I encounter can’t even take it for granted, simply because they don’t even know what it is, and so they can’t even have prejudices.’

When people see this different life, they are amazed, as we have just heard. Like the story Fr. Ibrahim told us, of a Muslim who went to the well of the Franciscan convent of Aleppo and said to him, “Father, when I see how people come to get water, 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” (*The Fragrance of Christ Amidst the Bombs, Traces*, n. 8/2015, p. 13).

A friend who works in California told us about the same kind of amazement. “I work with people with congenital disabilities and with veterans who have serious traumas from their war experiences. Every day I deal with human limits, both physical and mental. There is a woman

in her forties who has spent her life in the military; she suffered physical violence that has caused her to experience the last fifteen years of her life as if anesthetized. These traumas have made it impossible for her to live a positive relationship with reality. She can’t go shopping at the supermarket because when she’s in the midst of the aisles she’s afraid someone will attack her. She hasn’t been able to keep a job. She would wake up at three in the morning hearing birds singing, ‘I went crazy, I wanted to kill them all! It was unbearable!’ A few months ago, after a year of working with this woman (in the sense of teaching her a job) and living life with her, she told us, ‘I still wake up at three, and I still can’t sleep, but now I’m beginning to love, even to look with love at the singing birds. Why? Because there was a gaze upon me that re-awakened all the expectant awaiting in my heart.’” Our friend in California added, “This woman is not in the Movement, but she used these words: ‘My heart is alive now.’ Why? ‘Because I saw someone and something that re-awakened in me all the possibility of being myself.’ The beauty of this year, above all the encounter with the Pope, has made me understand that my one responsibility is to live life inside that attraction that reached me. He’ll take care of the rest, because He is the one who changes the life of the other. A few weeks ago, a colleague and I were invited to a conference to talk about our activity. Normally, when they are introducing you, they say what you have done, what you do and the degrees you’ve earned. So the person

began by describing who we are, the company for which we work, but at a certain point he stopped and said, 'Guido and Nancy are the heart of what we are doing.' I was moved by this, in the sense that I have simply lived—and this is striking—without giving speeches, and someone who didn't know anything about me could say, 'I look at you for the heart you express, which is the root of what we, too, are doing.' That, seeing you, someone should say, 'I identify with the heart you express,' I think is the greatest testimony you can give; it comes from living inside the attraction of the encounter with Christ."

What changed this woman who had been condemned to live her relationship with reality in such a distorted way? The newness that entered into history with Abraham, and that has reached us and communicates itself through us, almost without doing anything in particular. We give it to her simply by living alongside her. The outcome is simple: "I'm even beginning to love the birds," those she wanted to kill before. This means that the Presence that passes through us is able to change life: it is so crucial that without it, as another song by Mina says, everything is lost: "And if tomorrow... I were to suddenly lose you / I would have lost the whole world, not just you" (*E se domani [And if tomorrow]* words by G. Calabrese, music by C.A. Rossi). Without this You, the "I" loses the whole world. It loses everything. But, Fr. Giussani says, we think this is like a fairy tale! "When you wake up in the morning, when you have difficulties or disappointments, anxiety or obstacles, the image of an Other who accompanies [your life], who reaches all the way down to you [just as you are] to restore you to yourself, is like a dream" (L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano*, op. cit., p. 27). Therefore in every moment, each of us runs the test: the gesture you do reveals whether for you the dogmatic content of faith is a real fact or a fairy tale, a dream. This defines what we belong to. We can be distracted, can remain with all our limits, but the Fact passes through us, if we are defined by the content of the faith. We bear it in us to such a degree that it re-awakens in others affection for reality.

So then, when we do not live a relationship filled with affection for reality, when we complicate life and experience the relationship with reality like a form of violence, it is not because the birds are ugly or the circumstances are against us; it is not because of illness or the boss or whoever fails to understand us, or because everything is mistaken or bad. No, no! The problem is that the You is

missing, that You that makes it possible for everything—everything!—to become friend, even the birds, who that woman previously wanted to obliterate.

What do these testimonies document? How is it that the people encountered did not perceive Christianity as a clown's act, and Christians as clowns? They caught sight of a newness of life within their existence. In the circus of the world, with all its actors, with all its clowns, with all the interpretations in vogue, in this world in which everything is "liquid"—as Baumann says—in which one thing has the same value as another, what is so powerfully real, so attractive that it seizes us totally, and we do not want to lose it?

"The human person recognizes the truth of herself," underlined Fr. Giussani, "through the experience of beauty, through the experience of gusto, through the experience of correspondence, through the experience of attraction that it evokes, a total attraction and correspondence, not total quantitatively, but total qualitatively! ...The beauty of the truth is what makes me say, 'It is the truth!'" (*Certi di alcune grandi cose 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things]*, Bur, Milan, 2007, pp. 219-220). Attraction means "I draw you towards," that is, you are drawn beyond yourself toward an other.

This is why he said that "people today, endowed with operative possibilities as in no other time in history, find enormous difficulty in perceiving Christ as the clear and certain response to the meaning of their own ingenuity. Institutions often fail to offer this response in a vital way. What is missing is not so much the verbal or cultural repetition of the announcement [a doctrine is insufficient, no matter how fiercely insisted upon, just as a list of things to do is insufficient]. People today perhaps unknowingly await the experience of an encounter with people for whom the fact of Christ is such a present reality that their life is changed. [What dispels the circus of clowns is the reality of Christ, a reality so present that it changes the lives of people who you meet on your journey]. A human impact is what can shake people today: an event that echoes the initial event, when Jesus raised His eyes and said, 'Zacchaeus, climb down right away, I'm coming to your house'" (L. Giussani, Speech at the Synod, 1987; in Id., *L'avvenimento cristiano [The Christian Event]*, Bur, Milan, 2003, pp. 23-24).

Where can I find this beauty that attracts and re-awakens me? How can the "I," lost in boredom and numbness, find itself again? Fr. Giussani said it definitively: "The person finds herself again in a living encounter, that is, in a »»

What persuaded Zacchaeus, Matthew, the Samaritan woman, and the woman taken in adultery? A list of laws, imposed from outside, or His difference? They were swept up by the experience they were living with Christ, which communicated the mystery of His person.

▶▶ presence she runs up against and that unleashes an attraction, that is, in a presence that is a provocation. It unleashes an attraction, or in other words provokes us to the fact that our heart, with all that constitutes it, with [all] the needs that constitute it, is there, exists. That presence tells you: ‘That of which your heart is made exists; see, for example, it exists in me.’ The attraction and provocation deep down in us are only given by this” (*L’io rinasce in un incontro 1986-1987 [The “I” is Reborn in an Encounter]*, Bur, Milan, 2010, p. 182).

The encounter with this presence unleashes an attraction, sets off the spark.

3. THE SPARK

“The truth,” continues Fr. Giussani, “is like the face of a beautiful woman; you cannot help but say she is beautiful; you can’t do otherwise! [It imposes itself]. But, this comparison aside, truth is something that inevitably imposes itself. You have a fraction of a second in which your heart is moved. It is what I called the spark.... That spark, the intuition that it is true for you, can be wispy, can be all foggy, and confused—but it is mistaken to say confused [he corrects himself]; it wasn’t confused; at least for a tiny bit, it was a spark, therefore not confused—it evoked, maybe hazily, an emotion or surge of the heart in which, even unconsciously, ‘we found ourselves grateful for and amazed at what happened,’ as you said. In other words, that spark caused poverty of spirit to emerge, maybe just a bit, a tiny bit, like a speck of dust, of poverty of spirit. That spark was like a fire, an ember of fire that went down to our bone, laid bare our bone, that is, our heart, passed through the flesh and generated an instant, an experience, of poverty of spirit, simplicity of heart (‘grateful for and amazed at what has happened’).” Fr. Giussani concludes, “The spark, this spark, trips the switch for a new consciousness of your origin” (*Certi di alcune grandi cose 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things]*, op. cit., pp. 207-208, 215). When people perceive this spark in us, they stop thinking of us as clowns.

An architecture student writes: “We were preparing the exhibit on the Cathedral of Florence. The architect who designed it and was to work with us during the week before the Rimini Meeting, said to us when we reached our stand, ‘Hi guys, I’m not in the movement of CL. I was given the responsibility to do this exhibit and I’m here to work with you.’ As soon as he finished saying this, he changed into work clothes and began working with us,

painting, moving heavy things, spackling... That evening he ate with us where the volunteers gather. For five days he worked with us and ate with us. A lovely relationship began. On Sunday he let us know that he was returning to Florence for work and would not be coming back to Rimini. However, to our great surprise, Tuesday morning he was back, ready to work, and happy. ‘Guys, I’ve come back because I missed it all so much! I’ve never seen people work this way. You have something that the others don’t have. I had a lot of prejudices against CL before coming here, but I was concentrating on one point without looking at all the rest.’”

Another person recounted, “In those seven days of vacation each person had the opportunity to see that another measure had made space among us, and when it happens it is impossible not to realize it. Three Chinese friends who are with us at the university for a two-year cultural exchange, and who we met a few months ago, realized it. They were struck by all that happened. *In primis*, by the fact that such true familiarity was possible among people from such geographically distant places. They had never been welcomed and embraced like this. They saw in action ‘a charity that moved them.’ Matteo said that based on what he had seen, the difference between the Catholic religion and Buddhism is that the Catholic religion is a life, not a series of rites to perform, and that he is much more attracted by this life that he has seen in action.”

A university friend spent the whole summer with other companions, involved by her professor in a project. One day she suggested to her friends, “Guys, there is something beautiful that you absolutely have to see.” It was the Meeting of Rimini. Here is what happened. “Because of the friendship that had begun among us, they came and were amazed, amazed also to see that I myself, who already knew the Meeting, was amazed, because I was looking at it through their eyes. It was an incredible day, full of encounters. They were very happy. In the car on the way back, the Greek girl looked at me and asked, ‘What’s with those people?’ I said, ‘I don’t know. What’s with them? You tell me.’ She said, ‘They are free. They are happy.’ And then, ‘The people you introduced me to, have playfulness in their eyes. They have playfulness in their eyes and they are like little children.’ She continued to insist that I explain that liveliness in their eyes that she saw. So I told her that I had asked myself the same question when I met them: what is this playfulness? And so I told her what happened to me,

When we complicate life and experience the relationship with reality like a form of violence, it is not because everything is mistaken or bad. No, no! The problem is that the You is missing, that You that makes it possible for everything—everything!—to become friend



how I converted, and told her that those people were Catholic. She was dumbfounded, and added, ‘So Christianity is an encounter! I don’t like rules, but what you are saying is that it is an encounter. I would follow that playfulness in their eyes to the ends of the earth, because I want that for myself.’”

If our young friend had not accepted the unexpected project for a summer different from the usual ones, she would not have seen what she saw. And what did she see? The repercussion in someone she hardly knew in front of people who are free and happy, who have playfulness in their eyes. The spark is in their eyes. “Where does this playfulness in their eyes come from?” she asked. From the fact that they are good? In their eyes shines the strangeness of a sky that isn’t theirs. They are “like little children.” They are wonderstruck by that sky. What has to happen, to make an adult so childlike? That Greek girl knew nothing about Christianity, but she said, “I would follow that playfulness in their eyes to the ends of the earth.” This is anything but a clown’s act! Anything but clowns! This happens now, exactly as it did two thousand years ago.

During his recent visit to Cuba, commenting on the calling of Saint Matthew, Pope Francis said, “Matthew himself, in his Gospel, tell us what it was like, this encounter which changed his life. He shows us an ‘exchange of glances’ capable of changing history. On a day like any other, as Matthew, the tax collector, was seated at his table, Jesus passed by, saw him, came up to him and said: ‘Follow me.’ Matthew got up and followed Him. Jesus looked at him. How strong was the love in that look of Jesus, which moved Matthew to do what he did! What power must have been in His eyes to make Matthew get up from his table! We know that Matthew was a publican: he collected taxes from the Jews to give to the Romans. Publicans were looked down upon and considered sinners; for that reason they lived apart and were despised by others. One could hardly eat, speak or pray with the likes of these. For the people, they were traitors: they extorted from their own to give to others. Publicans belonged to this social class. Jesus stopped; He did not quickly turn away. He looked at Matthew calmly, peacefully. He looked at him with eyes of mercy; He looked at him as no one had ever looked at >>>

» him before. And that look unlocked Matthew’s heart; it set him free, it healed him, it gave him hope, a new life, as it did to Zacchaeus, to Bartimaeus, to Mary Magdalen, to Peter, and to each of us” (Francis, *Homily*, Plaza de la Revolución, Holguín, Cuba, September 21, 2015).

Today, as then, there are facts, ways of living Christianity that are not perceived by others as a clown’s act, but as the most fascinating thing. In these facts, the content and the method coincide. They need no type of additional power: the attraction of that “playfulness in the eyes,” of that “exchange of glances” suffices. No medicine, no drug, no guru, no power, no success, no strategy is able to produce this playfulness in the eyes.

This triggers the decision. “The decision is generated only by the discovery that your ‘I’ is attracted by an Other, that the substance of my ‘I,’ the substance of my being, my heart, is identical to ‘being attracted by an Other’.... This Other is the meaning of the dynamic of my ‘I,’ of my living, of this dynamic that is my living. When I say ‘I,’ I say a dynamic striving toward an other, toward an Other. An Other is what constitutes my life, because the Other attracts me and I am this ‘being attracted,’ I am constituted by this attraction... [‘I would follow that playfulness in the eyes to the ends of the earth’]. Therefore, the decision is generated there, where you discover this nature of yourself, this ‘being attracted,’ such that, like Saint Paul (always quoted): ‘I live, not I, but another thing lives in me.’ In fact, the attraction is another thing that lives in me and that makes me live. The decision is generated when this realization clicks in, this awareness of being a new person, of this newness in your self-perception, in your sentiment about yourself. This is a moment in which you truly conceive yourself—as a man and a woman conceive a child, and they conceive it because of an attraction. The example doesn’t run with a hundred feet, but it’s the most profound analogy one can make. It is truly a conception of self that comes from this deep embrace between my ‘I’ and the Other, whose attraction I discover, accept and acknowledge. Without simplicity of heart, without purity of heart, without poverty of spirit, this does not happen, because, where there is no poverty of spirit, this attraction is felt, but not totally acknowledged: there is a reserve, and thus there is no ‘conception.’” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose 1979-1981* [*Certain of a Few Great Things*], op. cit., pp. 216-218).

This dynamic can help us understand the meaning of following. I say this to answer a person who asked me, “What does it mean to follow?” Following, like deciding,

is easy: “I would follow that playfulness in their eyes to the ends of the earth.” Why is following easy? Because it means going after the attraction that seized me. The problem is that often for us, following is not going after the event that seized us, with all the awareness of what happens. For us, following becomes a kind of voluntarism, a kind of compliance with certain rules, a doctrine, a set of values to defend. Instead, Fr. Giussani shows us that following is a move, a decision, provoked by attraction, because the problem of freedom is whether it finds something that is so fascinating that you want to adhere to it! For this reason, it is as if in every word, in every challenge we face, we have to constantly learn the nature of the faith, the nature of Christianity, its ontology. Otherwise the same Christian words become like stones that no longer mean anything to us. Instead, to understand them you just need to let yourself be surprised by those moments when the event happens, when beauty happens,

as we saw so clearly happen at the Meeting, during the encounter on Abraham and the challenges of the present, when, as the violin piece ended, Professor Weiler took a deep breath and added, “One needs a minute to recover...” (“The Choice of Abraham and the Challenges of the Present,” *Traces*, n. 8/2015, p. X). It is this! This is the moment when you start anew. From here you start anew. Following comes from this: that attraction of the violin provoked that deep breath. It is easy! Following is also an event, like the initial encounter, to which we must consent.

So then, if it is so easy, why does it seem so difficult for us?

The problem is that we often resist this method, which is the method of God. This is truly sad: even though things like the ones we just heard happen, and others that we tell each other about every time we gather, we resist and we do not learn from them. This means not following. It does not mean not following *me*—to what end?—but rather, not following what He does and that I want to be the first to follow. This is our problem with following: even though we continually see the event, the encounter is the only method able to set the “I” in motion. It is what God did with Abraham and with John and Andrew. We continue to think that there is a more incisive modality or method for attracting the “I.” Instead it is very easy: just follow what Christ does.

“The other evening I was talking with my classmates in the class on the family, and a girl was having trouble understanding. She changed when I told her what happened in my family. I had run away from home more than once;

When we respond to the challenges of reality, we always allow our belonging to show through, that is, what we hold dearest, and this becomes our cultural position in the world.

I was violent with my father and for two years never spoke with him. What changed my family was not laws or a revolution, but the encounter I had four years ago with my friends of the Movement. Living in this relationship, where all my sins were forgiven, living a new beauty and gusto of life, my family blossomed again. That relationship changes me and changes those around me, without my even worrying about it. I told her about a cousin of mine: she and her family live in another city and every year come to spend their vacation with us. Last year they came at Christmas, and we simply ate and opened presents together. After lunch my cousin came to me and said, 'I have the impression that my parents are together for me, not because they love one other, and instead I see that your family is united. I would like the same thing.' When she told me this, I wondered what she had seen. Just a few years before my family was anything but united; I didn't even eat with my family before coming to Milan. She was struck by how we ate. Then she told me, 'When we were children we used to play together, then you became a beast, but now I see that your eyes have returned to those of a child.' This really struck me, so I simply invited her to do charitable work with my friends. We took food packages to people in the poorer neighborhoods. She talked about that afternoon as the most beautiful of her life. The day after she returned home, she called me in tears. 'I feel such a strong sense of missing something; I've never felt it so strongly.' At first I thought she seemed a bit sentimental, but then she said, 'This morning at seven I woke up and went downtown to Town Hall, to the office for young people, and asked at the window where I could find the people from Communion and Liberation.'"

But we think we have a more powerful method, one that is more historically incisive for convincing people! So I ask you, do any of you truly think that the method you imagine could be more incisive than the one chosen by God? We cannot claim to recover with our activism what we have lost in life. This, therefore, is our responsibility: to not resist the method of God.

Once again Fr. Giussani enlightens us, identifying the ultimate reason for this resistance, which is not, as we might imagine, a lack of coherence, but rather, an affective aridity. "Our radical lack, what leaves us with this foundational indecision, is an incapacity for savoring beauty, a total acerbic unripeness for aesthetic enjoyment, and thus a stunning resistance to being pervaded by joy, gladness, and therefore by vivaciousness—by vivaciousness! Because only that which

is beautiful, that seems beautiful to you, that makes you alive, that is, that catalyzes the energy of your life, is your life. It is this atrocious deficiency that is noted in you, as young people of today, this tremendous deficiency of wonder in front of beauty, of a capacity for being receptive to beauty. Instead, the outcome that strikes you is that which provokes pure reactivity. The outcome with which things reach you is that of reactivity: they provoke in you a reactivity and they block you in yourselves, so that every thing that comes in front of you is to be used for yourselves, exploited. Wonder, receiving beauty is the opposite: your eyes... wide open to listen, to look, to receive.... Yours [he was saying this in 1980 to university students] ...is an incapacity for affection," caused by obtuseness. The spark we spoke of, continues Giussani, "is something that happens and is received according to our affective capacity, or in other words our aesthetic capacity, our aesthetic enjoyment, aesthetic sense, that is, our receptive capacity for beauty.

Do any of you truly think that the method you imagine could be more incisive than the one chosen by God? We cannot claim to recover with our activism what we have lost in life. This is our responsibility: to not resist the method of God.

And poverty of heart, or simplicity of heart, is the ethical attitude that permits aesthetic development. Observe how a child looks at things: with eyes wide open! The beauty and the vibration of reality pour into a child, but we who are close by, are obtuse" (*Certi di alcune grandi cose 1979-1981* [*Certain of a Few Great Things*], op. cit., pp. 220, 223). This obtuseness causes the feeling of strangeness Pavese described: "In your eyes shines the strangeness / of a sky that isn't yours" (C. Pavese, "Notturmo," [Nocturne] from *Lavorare stanca, 1936-1943* [*Le poesie aggiunte, in Le poesie*, Einaudi, Torino 1998, p. 82]). Fr. Giussani commented on these lines in this way: "It smiles in

your eyes: you are made of the sky, of heaven, for heaven, by Another, and this smiles at you, because your heart is a thirst for happiness and beauty. A sky, a heaven, that is not yours: however, you do not want it" (*You Can Live Like This*. 1995 Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Notes on the Meditations by Luigi Giussani, printed in 1996, pp. 31-32.)

When we respond to the challenges of reality, we always allow our belonging to show through, that is, what we hold dearest, and this becomes our cultural position in the world. I was stunned by how Fr. Giussani, a few days after the 1981 defeat in the referendum on abortion, speaking at a gathering of leaders of the Movement, identified the core content of the self-awareness of those who were active in the referendum, that is, what they held dearest, from which their cultural position flowed: "The point for leading the Movement that flows from this vicissitude of the referendum is sadness, the sadness of >>>

» seeing that the event of Christ did not and does not count as the value of life.” What happened during the referendum, he says, was the expression of what happened in the ordinary life of the communities: “In the normal life of our community and in leading the Movement, this transparency of the value of faith in us does not exist. It is Jesus Christ who does not matter to our people.”

And he indicated with precision the road to follow. It is worthwhile to listen to him, if we do not want to miss the train again. “Jesus Christ must be evident for our people! This is the direction. ‘I know nothing if not Christ’ and this historic Christ, who, as outcome, has been eliminated. Christ becomes present to the others if He becomes presence in me! I am the presence of Christ: He passes through this communication of the event of His person, the mystery of His person [as shown by all the testimonies we read]. There is a corollary to this point: understand that the Movement will be saved by this minority! The cornerstone of the future is the real witness” of those who adhere to Him.

And he added, “It is extremely difficult, difficult in the statistical sense of the term, to find people who truly live, who gather together in companionship for holiness, that is, for faith, in Christ, to learn the faith, to live and testify to the faith. This difficulty is intensified by the fact that it will be quite difficult statistically for our adults to find guides in this sense, provokers in this sense. The Movement will be carried [forward] by those who will not listen to the minority [as happened with the outcome of the referendum, with the fact that those opposed to abortion stopped at 32%] minimally as diminution, because their heart will be expanded by the value. And there is only one value, one! Because life is not a value, if Christ did not exist! The event of Christ. The Movement will be brought forward by those who have had this encounter, and the sign that they have had this encounter is the capacity for fraternity, for companionship.” The Movement will be brought forward by those who, like John and Andrew, were unable to erase the experience they had with Christ, the dogmatic content of the faith, and stay together for this. Therefore, Fr. Giussani insisted, “The future of the Movement is called the witness of the adult,” adding a line of his: “This is the moment in which it would be beautiful to number only twelve in the whole world” (FRATERNITY OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION, *Audiovisual documentation*, CL National Council, Milan, 30-31 May 1981).

So then, what is testimony? “Being a presence in a situation means being there so as to perturb it, such that,

if you were not there, everyone would realize it. Where you are, the others will get angry or will admire you, or they will seem indifferent, but they can not fail to recognize your ‘differentness.’”

What is the nature of this testimony? “The true announcement comes through what Christ has perturbed in our life; it happens through the upheaval He brings about in us: *we make Christ present through the change He works in us. This is the concept of testimony*” (L. Giussani, March 19, 1979; “1954. Cronaca di una nascita,” Appunti da una conversazione con un gruppo di giovani, in *Un avvenimento di vita, cioè una storia [The Account of a Birth. Notes from a conversation with a group of young people, in An event of life, that is, a history]*, EDIT-Il Sabato, Rome, 1993, p. 346).

As we have seen, this testimony, far from being irrelevant and making Christianity seem like a clown’s act and Christians like clowns, arouses curiosity and interest to the point of opening a totally unexpected dialogue, even with people who are apparently far off. This is how we can respond to the invitation Pope Francis extended these days to the American bishops, which I felt was a call for myself and us as well: “I know that you face many challenges, and that the field in which you sow is unyielding and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one’s wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition. And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God’s riches and our poverty. We

are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response. Dialogue is our method, not as a shrewd strategy, but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love (*Mt 20:1-16*).... Do not be afraid to set out on that ‘exodus’ which is necessary for all authentic dialogue. Otherwise, we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain. Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing. (*Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America*, Cathedral of Saint Matthew, Washington, D.C., September 23, 2015).

What is the nature of this witness? “The true announcement happens through the upheaval He brings about in us: we make Christ present through the change He works in us.



THE FAMILY

LET ITS LIGHT SHINE



It's not an abstract model to brandish. It's something "concrete" to live. Made of fragility, salvation, wounds. In light of the Synod of Bishops, sociologist **CHIARA GIACCARDI** reflects on the causes behind the crisis of the family and on the power of its (imperfect) beauty.

BY STEFANO FILIPPI



We need a realistic and not ideological outlook, a “concrete-living” (as defined by Romano Guardini) and not an abstract model: this is how Chiara Giaccardi, professor of Sociology of the Media at the Catholic University of Milan, speaks about the family. She and her husband, noted sociologist Mauro Magatti, have six children—five biological and one foster child—and they live in a house designed to be open to welcome children or strangers in need. She participated in the closing presentation of the Rimini Meeting dedicated to the family: a place where people continue to learn the value of relationships. In one of many reflections she said, “The family is the place where, with the help of others, I overcome what I’m lacking; I overcome it in a relationship, not individualistically. My limitations aren’t erased, but they are made into opportunities to be in relationship.”

What do you expect out of the Synod?

I like that the opening was preceded by a prayer vigil in which families accompanied Pope Francis and the Synod Fathers, so that their work might be illuminated by the light of grace and that they be truly attentive and responsive to the “living concreteness” of the family, and not to the gap that may exist between that and the “ideal” model. Reality, even with its limits, is always greater than an idea; it’s the only antidote to ideology. The reality of the family is comprised of richness and fragility, salvation and wounds; it’s a resilient force that, in the midst



Chiara Giaccardi.

VOCATION AND MISSION

The Synod opened on October 3rd with a prayer vigil for the family in St. Peter’s Square, requested by Pope Francis. The 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is gathering in Rome until October 25th. The theme is “The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world.”

The preparatory document is the synthesis of last year’s extraordinary Synod, dedicated to “The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization.” There are 270 Synod Fathers: 54 from Africa, 64 from the Americas, 36 from Asia, 9 from Oceania, and 107 from Europe. Of these, 22 come from Eastern Rite Churches. There are 51 Auditors (including 17 married couples), 14 Fraternal Delegates (from other ecumenical communities) and 45 Pontifical Appointees.

of trends that push in the opposite direction, not only endures, but becomes an incubator for social and ecclesial renewal.

And what would you ask of the Synod Fathers?

A greater awareness, new partnership and a return to what is essential. I’d like to see the creative, enduring ability of the family recognized and sustained. Also, that the work done, of attentively listening to reality, help to widen the focus of all families and not just settling the two issues that can be an excuse to divide public opinion and, unfortunately, the Church.

Do you mean Communion for the divorced and remarried and same-sex marriage?

All the attention is focused there, in part thanks to the media. For families who are persevering with our unnewsworthy joys and difficulties, it’s a little discouraging.



PREVIOUS SYNOD. Paul VI Hall during last year’s extraordinary Synod of the Family.

What is it that families need?

Openness to share their experience, partnership, welcome and recognition; these more than clarity or scruples.

Is the family under attack?

This is an image on which much of the defensive rhetoric is founded, those that propose barricades and an aggressive counterattack. It’s not that there isn’t an attack: it’s there. But it’s certainly not just today.

Do you mean the laws on divorce and abortion previously passed?

Romano Guardini was already writing about it in the ‘50s and ‘60s in his book *Ethics*: “According to the most distant points of view, we see today a tendency to put the family into question, or even to dissolve it.”

What’s the reason behind the attack?

Referring again to Guardini: the family “constitutes the strongest natural obstacle to the assimilation of the individual,” and so it is a danger to the “system” in which ➤



THE FULLNESS AND A HEAVENLY RAY

The Address by Fr. **JULIÁN CARRÓN**, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, during the Prayer Vigil for the Synod on the Family with Pope Francis at St. Peter's Square, on October 3rd.

"For the Church, the family is not first and foremost a cause for concern, but rather the joyous confirmation of God's blessing upon the masterpiece of creation. Every day, all over the world, the Church can rejoice in the Lord's gift of so many families who, even amid difficult trials, remain faithful to their promises and keep the faith!" (September 27, 2015).

These words spoken by Pope Francis in Philadelphia explain the reason we've come together this evening: to thank God who continues to generate families, the proof of which is visible in those present here today, and to ask that He continue to bless our families.

Where does the Church get this optimism? From the certainty that the Lord is faithful to His Church, to His family. In this, she offers the right outlook for us to have as well, indicating what we should place our

hope in. How can we grow ever stronger in this certainty? By going to the heart of the reason that two people get married. As we were reminded by the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: in "love between man and woman, ...human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness.... All other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison" (2). It's the same experience witnessed by Giacomo Leopardi in his hymn to Aspasia: "Lady, your beauty was a ray of heavenly / light to my thinking." The poet perceives a woman's beauty as a "heavenly ray," as the presence of the Divine. Through her beauty, God Himself comes to knock at man's door. The beauty of women really is a "heavenly ray," a sign that points to something beyond. This means that if they don't encounter the reality indicated by that sign, the place where the promise awakened by the

other finds fulfillment, husbands and wives will be condemned to a prison of unfair expectations, and their desire for the infinite will be destined to go unsatisfied. Christ, Beauty made flesh, places "His person at the core of man's affection and freedom," at the "heart of his natural sentiments, fully and rightfully establishing Himself as their true root" (Fr. Giussani). Only He can fulfill the promise awakened in us by the other. Our families will be able to reach their fullness, to forgive each other, to face all challenges, and open themselves to others inasmuch as they welcome Him into their homes.

This is how we can witness the beauty of our families, and the good that they represent, to all people. By demonstrating that Christ makes it possible to love without expecting anything in return, because "everything for me You were and are" (Ada Negri).



» it's much easier to have things fragmented, like in the ancient motto "divide and conquer."

Has there ever been a "golden age" of the family?

Probably not. The family has had crises, challenges to face, struggles and enemies in every era. However, they are not all "outside."

Where are they, then? Are they on the inside?

Sometimes we're not really helping the cause we want to defend by taking up the family like a sword against the opposition. The family is not in crisis because it is being attacked. It's not the fight against same-sex unions that will increase the number of marriages or make them more solid. The crisis of the family is internal: families have breathed in too much individualism, and have become a kind of protective cocoon, that in the end doesn't generate much life. Social rhythms have been formed around the individual; cities are inhospitable for the elderly, children and people with disabilities; living spaces are designed for isolated nuclei, making it almost impossible to live a life ordered to the family without depending on external services and help that not everyone can access.

So, do Catholics need to admit they've been at fault?

We need to ask ourselves if the families that we've constructed, if our model for life and the quality of the relationships we establish is attractive for a young person who is trying to imagine his or her future. If we really believe we are the keepers of a light, let's let it shine, and not limit our-

selves to railing against the darkness around us.

What is this light?

The vibrant and life-giving intermingling of genders and generations, the welcome that extends beyond blood relations, and capacity to generate beyond the biological dimension.

But the principles should be defended...

Of course, however I see a very strong temptation among Catholics, even with good intentions, to fall back onto strict principles, like a kind of barbed wire, to defend the family from external attacks, to keep those inside who might escape, and maybe even block the return of those who have fled, repented, and want to come back. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "He who loves his dream of a community more than the community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter."

At the Rimini Meeting you said, "to love the family as an abstract model is to destroy it."

The family is flesh and blood and it is inevitable that it will carry wounds in varying depth and severity; they aren't signs that the "product" is defective. This is because, the closer you are to another, the easier it is to get hurt. However, when cared for, the wounds can heal. And the scars, which aren't erased, become a testament to forgiveness—contrasted with the forgetfulness and neglect that make us inhuman.

How is it possible to harm the family, despite wanting its good?

It happens when the family is de-

Families have breathed in too much individualism, and have become a protective cocoon, that doesn't generate much life.



fended using abstract arguments instead of it becoming a living witness. When we stubbornly defend a vision that's now tired and frustrated, that too is partially responsible for the crisis we now see: that of the nuclear family closed in its own house, in its private life, to be defended from any outside interference. It's an idea of family so steeped in individualism that it's almost unrecognizable. It's not this impoverished historical vision that we should defend, but rather the vibrant, generous and life-giving nucleus that constitutes the truth of the family: the ability to welcome life.

You also said that the family is a "narrative community." What do you mean by that?

Today's world lives exclusively in the present, accumulating fragments and measuring freedom and value in terms of quantity (of choices, of likes, of contact, of retweets...). In a world that only seems to know how to count, the family teaches how to "recount," to tell a story: not living



only in the present, but receiving and transmitting a common history, feeling part of it, and keeping alive the memory of those who made us what we are. Without this construction of time, sustained in part by this telling, lives collapse.

It's a question of education: of communicating what makes life worth living.

Today's adult generations suffer from a lack of communication: they are afraid of "brainwashing" younger generations, but often this is just an excuse for not really taking care of them. Maria Zambrano wrote: "You are really alive only when you pass something on to others. Living in a human way means communicating." Recounting the past gives continuity and meaning; it's a way of strengthening one's belonging. Paul Ricoeur reminded us that the other, who witnesses the promises I've made, is in some way also a custodian of my identity. We've given up this mutual reminding each other of the promises we've made in the name

of the individualistic principle of non-interference, and so we've lost the precious resources of stability and lasting bonds.

It's been said that the economic crisis could be an opportunity to start over again. Is there something good in the crisis of the family as well?

It's an opportunity for rethinking and for renewal. It's something that Guardini perceived would be necessary when he wrote, more in note form than in a polished reflection, that "the issue must be faced in a new way..." according to a "new understanding of foundation and construction." If the family has lost its ability to be a welcoming hearth (just look, for example, at the various reactions to the influx of migrants), then it's lost its identity. The family is not a nest, it's a "knot." It's a

knot in a wider net, to which it contributes and in turn is sustained.

What kind of new realities do you foresee?

Without community and a breath of air from the outside, a family can't endure; it implodes or becomes distorted. Living hospitality is a way of witnessing to the generative beauty of the family, educating oneself to not let the fire of life—of embracing, sharing, making space for, passing on a future—go out. I imagine different models of living that are less individualistic and defensive models in which it is easier to help each

The family is not a nest, it's a "knot." It's a knot in a wider net, to which it contributes and in turn is sustained.

other, share joys and burdens and support those who are vulnerable. As Pope Francis said, we have to let the Spirit bring "happy disarray to Christian families and the city of man will rise from its depression!" **T**

GOOD NEWS FROM DADAAAB



The Dadaab refugee camp is the world's largest, and at its center there is a black hole: the future. Even so, **MARIA LEITÃO works here to educate young people to be film directors. Here, where "human hope is nonexistent," something is happening.**

BY DAVIDE PERILLO

“When I first arrived, I couldn't sleep for days, because they filled me with questions and I had no prepared answer for them. I tossed and turned at night, asking myself, 'What is hope for them? And for me?'" "They" are the four hundred thousand refugees of Dadaab, Kenya, packed into the largest refugee camp in the world, an hour by car from the Somalia border. Maria Leitão, who goes by Bebé, 49 years old, Portuguese, arrived here just over a year ago. She works for FilmAid, an American NGO. Having lived in East Timor and Haiti, she knew the pain and the greatness of places where



THE CAMP An aerial view of a section of the camp of Hagadera, in Dadaab, Kenya, near the border with Somalia.

need is all encompassing. But she was not prepared to find in the desert a city suspended in time, with no roots and no tomorrow.

There are lines of tents and shacks, set up since 1990 by the United Nations Refugee Agency, the UNHCR: sand, heat, a fence surrounding the camp. “They come from all over Africa: Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, Ethiopia, all countries with political problems or natural catastrophes.” There are the utterly indigent and Latin scholars; criminal gang members and mothers of families. “There are twenty-year-olds who were born there and others who have just entered.” But for everyone today, the prospects are the same: a very long stay, perhaps

forever, because now no one is allowed to leave the camps. Since the humanitarian trouble has been exacerbated by the risk of terrorism, from the Somali Al-Shabaab and massacres like that in the University of Garissa, just sixty-two miles west of the camp, Kenya has put the lockdown not only on Dadaab but also on Kukum, the other refugee camp near Sudan, with 180,000 people and the same black hole: the future.

Until last autumn, some refugees were permitted to enter Kenya, and some had found work and started families. Then the government said,

“Everybody back,” and suddenly these people had to return to the shacks of the refugee camp. At least twenty thousand, it is said. But the numbers here always bounce around, like the number of those sent back home to Somalia after the 2013 accord, which was said to be between eighty and one hundred thousand—but nobody believes it. About seventy NGOs are working in the camp, bringing assistance, food and education. FilmAid assists with unusual instruments: videos, above all, and with magazines. “We use them to inform, to educate, or simply to entertain,” recounts Bebé from her office >>



Maria Leitão.



AT SCHOOL. Bébé and her bodyguards at the entrance to the camp. Right, children of the Dadaab camp during an open-air lesson. Some young people during a lesson of video production by FilmAid.

» in Nairobi. There are videos that teach people how to wash food, how to treat certain illnesses, or how to avoid violence. The films are seen in groups and then discussed, or watched on a big screen set up on a pickup truck in the open areas where spectators mix with those who thought up and filmed the video, that is, other refugees. In fact, the uniqueness of FilmAid is the fact that the refugees themselves make the videos. FilmAid's primary work is to teach journalism and video production. "We give lessons in direction, sound, and lighting," says Bébé. "The kids learn storytelling and how to make documentaries." They even produce a magazine, *The Refugee*. "Between the two camps we give work to about a hundred people. It's a good thing. They feel valued, earn a small wage, and have a job to do eight hours a day." They learn trades that they would like to do away from the camps, were they allowed.

This is also the dream of Smart, who we see in an autobiographical video. "Being a refugee was not my choice, but neither is it an excuse not to reach some goal in life." Such as Farida, who would like to become a director. And Bithu, Abdirashid, and Ojully: "The conversations with them always wear

me out. 'I'd like to go to Hollywood,' 'I want to be a journalist.' But what prospect do they have? They are in the prime of life: being 20 here is like being 35 in Europe. And you can't give false answers—not to them, and not to yourself. You can say, 'Cheer up, the future will be better,' but you know it isn't true unless a miracle happens. Here, human hope is non-existent. I lost sleep over it in the beginning." And then? "I thought of the prisoners in Padua, in Italy. For them, the only chance is if hope is present now, in a human relationship that makes every present thing a Presence, that can encompass everything. The one answer is Christianity. But you can't say this, so quickly. You can't jump to the conclusion right away. You have to go deep down into the Christian words and see them happen."

BODYGUARDS AND THE HEART. She sees them continually, in small but real facts, in relationships that show "a horizon that wasn't there before, and both you and the other person recognize it." For example? Bébé reflects a moment. "Look, in certain situations human malice worsens," she sighs. "In the camps there are people who ask

sexual favors of girls in exchange for a job. I had to fight to get rid of them. But in this way I met Afmahani, a Muslim girl. She told me about it, and I said I would do everything in my power so she could live with dignity. She asked, 'Why? Here it's the law of the jungle.' I answered, 'Because you are precious. Infinite.'" Bébé saw the Christian words happen in a conversation with Geffe a few days ago. "Do you have a husband? Children? No? Why don't you get married?" I answered, 'because God has given me so much and I am so happy that I want to give Him everything.' He looked at me and said, 'So then, you're Catholic. Only a Catholic could say this.'" Or again, "One day I went into the classroom. I am not a teacher; I work in the back office, make the 'machine' work. But that day they were talking about resumes and I was struck. The teacher said, 'Write your personal information, the languages you speak...' But I permitted myself to interrupt, and said, 'Kids, a person looking to hire someone wants a special person. Don't put things that say little, like favorite sport: soccer, that doesn't tell me anything. Millions of people play soccer. But you, instead, who are you?' Someone raised a hand, timidly. 'I've learned to play the music



of the Turkana, a tribe here.’ ‘Good, this tells me about you!’ Another said, ‘I studied journalism.’ ‘Perfect: this tells me you may be closed up in here, but you’re not idle. Kids, look, you are unique. Each of you is. And I want to know this.’” This led to an unexpected conversation “about the mystery of life, not just about resumes.”

Who knows where those resumes will end up? “It seems absurd to teach a trade to those who will never be able to do it outside here. But at least a video about childbirth can teach women that a hospital is not just a place where you go to die. Or another video on food teaches people to wash things before eating them.” Simple things, but in the midst of the desert they can make the difference between health and disease, life and death, or change your idea of yourself: “A few days ago, a woman told me, ‘Thanks to you I have understood that women have rights.’” Lightning flashes in an increasingly dark sky. The Dadaab camp has become the special terrain of the Al-Shabaab terrorists: they circulate weapons, recruit, even train among the shacks. Many want to close the camp or move it to Somalia. “If the government did so, Kenya would be even more in the crosshairs,” says Bebé.

She can only enter the camp with bodyguards. “I am a white Christian woman who works for an American NGO. The risk is too great.” But is there talk about terrorism in Dadaab? “No, silence.” And yet many NGOs are closing their offices, and Nairobi is making it more difficult for visas. “Three months ago it seemed that they were going to revoke my visa, and I thought, here we go again, I have to leave. I was anguished. Then, it only took a moment in which I recognized Jesus present, and I could breathe freely again. I told myself, ‘You’re an idiot. You were expecting a visa and instead you should be expecting Him.’” It has always been this way, when she worked at a Lisbon television station after graduating from university, then after eight years, in a publishing house, then a law office, then with the opportunity in East Timor, in a hospital that was tasked with opening a maternity ward (“John Paul II had asked the Portuguese Church to do it”), and in Haiti, after the earthquake (“I was supposed to stay a few

months and I ended up there for two and a half years”), in Mozambique, and now with FilmAid. Always with her heart restless, never settled.

One day, at lunch with some refugees, Bebé asked what they most missed. “The answer surprised me. Everyone, absolutely everyone, said, ‘A home of my own.’ Many come from devastated places, with terrible poverty and shacks made of mud. In comparison, they are better off here, and yet they miss a home. I wondered, what is a home, then? The walls, or the bonds, the relationships, your identity? For me, what is it?”

ALWAYS IN COMPANY. Bebé is a member of *Memores Domini*. She lives alone in Nairobi, not in a “house.” “In the evening there’s nobody to ask me how I am, or how my day went.” Almost all the members of the CL community live on the other side of the city. “I rarely see them. I can’t move on my own because it’s dangerous, and they don’t have cars.” The solitude is great. “But the presence of Jesus is greater. A home is not the walls, it is the relationship with Him,” to be lived in the circumstances, just as they are. “I understood there that Christ is my identity, my home. Since He is the One who makes me, I am always in company. It was very moving for me to realize this.”

She is planning another trip to Kukuma, where she spends seven to ten days a month. It is slightly safer than Dadaab, but dangerous nonetheless. Is she afraid? “Certainly, at times. Previously, I never would have run these risks. If you do it, it is because you are more certain of a relationship, and that relationship is your hope.”

(@dperillo14) 

“Many come from devastated places, and yet they miss a home. What is a home, then?”

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