

**TRACES**

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05

# America, Americas

From north to south,  
a journey to discover  
how faith helps us live



## TRACES

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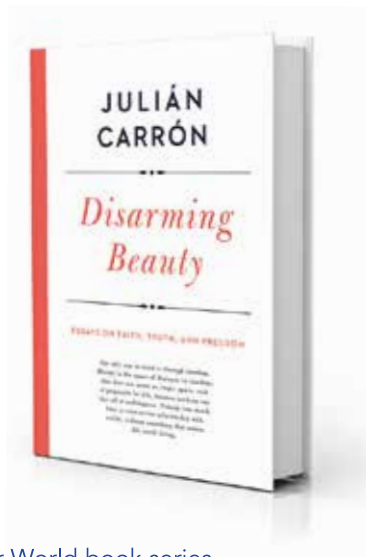
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## JULIÁN CARRÓN

# *Disarming Beauty*

### ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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## A life that broadens life

“**S**eeing a Path Forward” was the title of the tour through America to present the biography of Fr. Giussani, which concluded a little over a month ago. If you think about it, this title presents the main question facing all of us no matter our circumstances or where we live: finding a road to carry us forward, following a path. In other words, we need to run into something that allows us to see our lives as a journey designed to help us grow and become more human, not as a random series of circumstances or disjointed problems to solve, one after another, especially when the twists and snags get more challenging—God only knows all the varied ways the journey of life can become arduous.

**All that we have described in the following pages** fits this quest perfectly. We see an experience of life and of faith that offers itself as a “trustworthy companionship for those seeking a way forward,” as you will read in the travelogue of Alberto Savorana, the author of the biography and a witness, in the course of the barrage of events he saw firsthand throughout the US, to dozens of encounters with people who, having discovered a certain way of living Christianity—Fr. Giussani’s charism—say they found precisely this: a help for their lives, a daily companionship at work, in their relationships with their kids and with their friends, in the problems they face, etc. It is an unexpected newness in a context in which, too often, instead of being viewed as a life, Christianity is reduced to a cultural position or a set of values and ethical norms—no matter how correct—to be defended in the face of mounting challenges. This is even more true now as the Church faces the trial of an unprecedented crisis of faith resulting from the drama of clerical abuse.

**This is identical to what happened in a different way in South America.** There, the circumstances, as well as the challenges, are different (just think of the dramatic suffering in Venezuela), but the problem, deep down, is the same for everyone: how to live a full life, one that is truly human. There too, at about the same time (the occasion was the assembly for local CL leaders with Fr. Julián Carrón), a series of encounters and occurrences took place that bear witness to that same vivacity and relevance that can be found in a certain way of living the faith within the concrete and profound needs we all share no matter where we live. Christianity, as Fr. Giussani always demonstrated, is an event; it is a life that broadens life. Today—by the grace of God—people continue to encounter that life and find within it a road for themselves. It is a gift we receive and certainly not something that is based on our merit. How grateful we are to be able to share it with everyone in our world today!

## Silvana, Nicola, Lapo

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
*pberga@tracce.it*

### **Mondays at the home of my patient**

Dear Fr. Carrón, I had eagerly awaited the Exercises, waiting for them to come like the fulfillment of promise, and my waiting was not in vain because we were flooded by an experience of grace and beauty. I met the Movement at the university when I was twenty. Today I am sixty and I have never left this road. I can be distracted and inattentive, but I have always stayed since I know that I am helped to be a truer person. Like everyone, I have gone through difficulties, joys, and pain in my life, particularly with my three children. I'm a pediatrician and I always say that if I had not met Christ, I would not be able to do this work. Otherwise, how could I stay in front a child's illness and a mother's pain? Tomorrow, like every Monday, I will go to visit a small, two-and-a-half-year-old little girl who has a rare and serious genetic disorder that has paralyzed her completely. She can only cry or close her eyes to say no. Children were made to laugh and play. Tomorrow her mother will open the door for me with her usual sweet smile. She has the strength to smile even though she has not slept for almost three years because she must be sure that the respirator doesn't stop (often alarms or false alarms are unpredictable and go off at all hours). There is never a complaint, only gratitude that her child is still alive. But tomorrow, the long and grueling road that brings me to her house will be easier for me, since it will be even more evident that Christ on the cross is there. This little girl in her pain is loved and preferred and she becomes ever more an instrument for my salvation. Where can we learn this way of looking at reality if not

in the Church that reaches me in these faces and in the face of my husband who always accompanies me when I go to visit her? In fact, I would not be able to do this alone—the impact with this suffering is too great. I write to you out of gratitude because I understand that we are preferred and loved, strangely just like this little girl who was called to a different reality, but all of us are wrapped in this same love!

**Silvana**, Patti (Italy)

### **The Notre Dame fire and the elections**

You stop in front of the TV looking at the images of Notre Dame in flames and you realize that it isn't obvious that you would feel pain or sadness. Perhaps it is my smallness, but your mind runs immediately to the fact that your house is safe and that, all in all, you and your family is safe and sound. These are trivial sensations when each minute that passes in every corner of the world presents unforeseen events, novelties, risks, dangers, and tragedies that in the end no one can avoid. And yet in this apparent situation of momentary tranquility and comfort, you feel something breaking inside in front of those flames. It's as if it were *your* house on fire. You have a small heart and you can't help but feel the tiny crack inside. This morning in front of my students, I asked myself why it is that today the tendency is toward a very strong euroskepticism. Many governments are populist and in favor of autonomy. We are still immersed in Brexit. Countries raise barriers at their borders to save their identity. And yet why did we experience the fire at Notre Dame as a personal, national blow to the heart? It's as if St. Peter's cupola had fallen in, as if the roof of my house had started to collapse and I couldn't be at peace anymore. Does a true Europe still exist in our hearts, even before it exists in the bureaucracies and institutions? I looked into the eyes of my students in the fifth year of high

school and I said, “In May, you will all go to vote in the European elections but do you have, do we have in mind what we are going to do? Does it have anything to do with what happened last night, those flames, that pain that we felt as if we had lost our common home? What do we have in front of us in this round of voting? Trends, the advice given on the internet, what our friends and family tell us according to traditions and the winds that blow, a vote cast with our gut? Or finally, can what happened begin to make us open our eyes to who we truly are, to the greatness that our soul bears, that our heart has hidden within it; this greatness and solidarity, brotherhood and depth that the Notre Dame fire can bring out, that can make spring forth again in us? Can we remember who we truly are?” Can we remember that Europe which was born before the institutions from a magnanimity of feeling, of reasoning, of praying that is innate in the existence of each of us? There's a short story by Raymond Carver entitled “Cathedral.” Two Americans, one of them blind, are in front of the television. They're watching a documentary on medieval cathedrals. The blind man asks his friend to describe for him what a cathedral looks like but he cannot. He doesn't know where to begin. The blind man invites him to guide his hand on a sheet of paper to help him draw it. They try, and while they are drawing, they begin to feel happiness; they perceive a greatness that makes them stronger friends, that corresponds fully to their hearts. What Carver described is the challenge that awaits us all.

**Nicola**, Ancona (Italy)

### The Pope and I in Rabat

Dear friends, I am full of gratitude for the pope's visit to Rabat. The point in the School of Community that has made me reflect the most in recent days is when it says, “She [Mary] could have said, ‘It was all illusion, it was only my imagination.’” So often I assume the exact same attitude, saying to myself, “I was mistaken, I have been blinded. I thought that God was everything but instead, my life has taken me somewhere else. Life is hard and the stories don't stand up.” Fr. Giussani's statement that “faith is exactly that strength full of attention with which the soul adheres to the sign which God has used and stays faithfully with this sign in spite of everything” has proven to be true for my experience in these months. Even in my Moroccan adventure, God continues

to surprise me, sending me signs and making me understand that I have not been blinded. In spite of my smallness, my unfaithfulness, and despite the surrounding environment (99.9% Muslim), the friendship between me and Jesus continues. Actually, I understand ever more that there is no other happiness outside of my relationship with Him. There are no althoughs, buts, ifs, or other excuses. One of my fears about this adventure was of being alone. The evening before I left, I bumped into a friend of mine whom I hadn't seen for years and he said, “Look, in Rabat, I know a young guy from the Milan CLU. I'll give you his number.” I met this guy and the two of us began to do School of Community. It's beautiful with just two people because no one can do the work for you. I realized we weren't just doing School of Community, but we were actually constructing a small piece of the Church. Now that he is gone, I'm alone again but I don't feel alone. The other thing I was worried about was being far from Italy and far from charitable work: no Gozzini jail, no Meeting Point, and no Food Bank. As soon as I arrived, I realized that charitable work in Morocco is not optional. It isn't something to make us feel better; here, charitable work is a duty. The level of poverty, the number of people who have been abandoned, is a thousand times greater than in Italy. I began to live gestures of charity dictated by the demands of reality. Finally, God's last great surprise was the pope's visit. In the beginning I couldn't believe it. It couldn't possibly be true that Francis would come right there to Rabat while I was there. It was a sign that has fed my faith. The pope's visit and the climate of a not goody-goody brotherhood that has been created between Muslims and Christians has thrown me back into life, into dialogue. A great desire was born in me to live with intensity the days that led us to Easter. Is there a greater sign of Easter?

**Lapo**, Rabat (Morocco)

# A road open to all

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**W**hat follows is a description of some things that happened a few weeks ago over the course of a few days and after hundreds of miles of travel. They are united by a thread we have sought to bring to light in the following pages. A series of book presentations on *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, the English edition of the biography of CL's founder, was held across the US. There were ten events in eleven days, and it was a journey full of dialogues—both on and off the stage—that the book's author, Alberto Savorana, recounts in his compelling travelogue. It is a documentation of what can happen when you encounter a way of living the faith that responds simply to the problems reality places before you.

Zooming out, you can see the remarkable pertinence of this way of living for responding to a number of critical questions facing society today, in America and elsewhere: questions that arise from the crisis in education, the nature

of freedom, how to relate to authority, the battle over values... What does Fr. Giussani's life—and that of his sons and daughters, of those who follow his charisma today—offer to those working on these hot-button issues confronting everyone? The answer is made very clear in the following articles which give us a taste of what was said at the presentations and of the firsthand experiences of the speakers.

This same pertinence of Christianity to daily reality—and the same wonder at the contribution a charisma of faith offers to our world today—is what emerges in the pages of the next section, which is about the other half of the continent: Latin America. There, you will find a chronicle of the meeting of CL leaders and witnesses from Venezuela that is a window on a different set of problems and dramas, and on people who, by the grace of an ongoing gift, face them without being suffocated. And in doing so, point out a road open to all. (dp) ■





Oklahoma.



# A change is gonna come



Alberto Savorana

The author of Fr. Giussani's biography looks back on the encounters he had during his ten stops in the United States and Canada to present the book's American edition. Theologians, journalists, educators, lawyers, and ordinary people describe what the charism (and its fruits) have to offer for men and women today as we face an unprecedented crisis.

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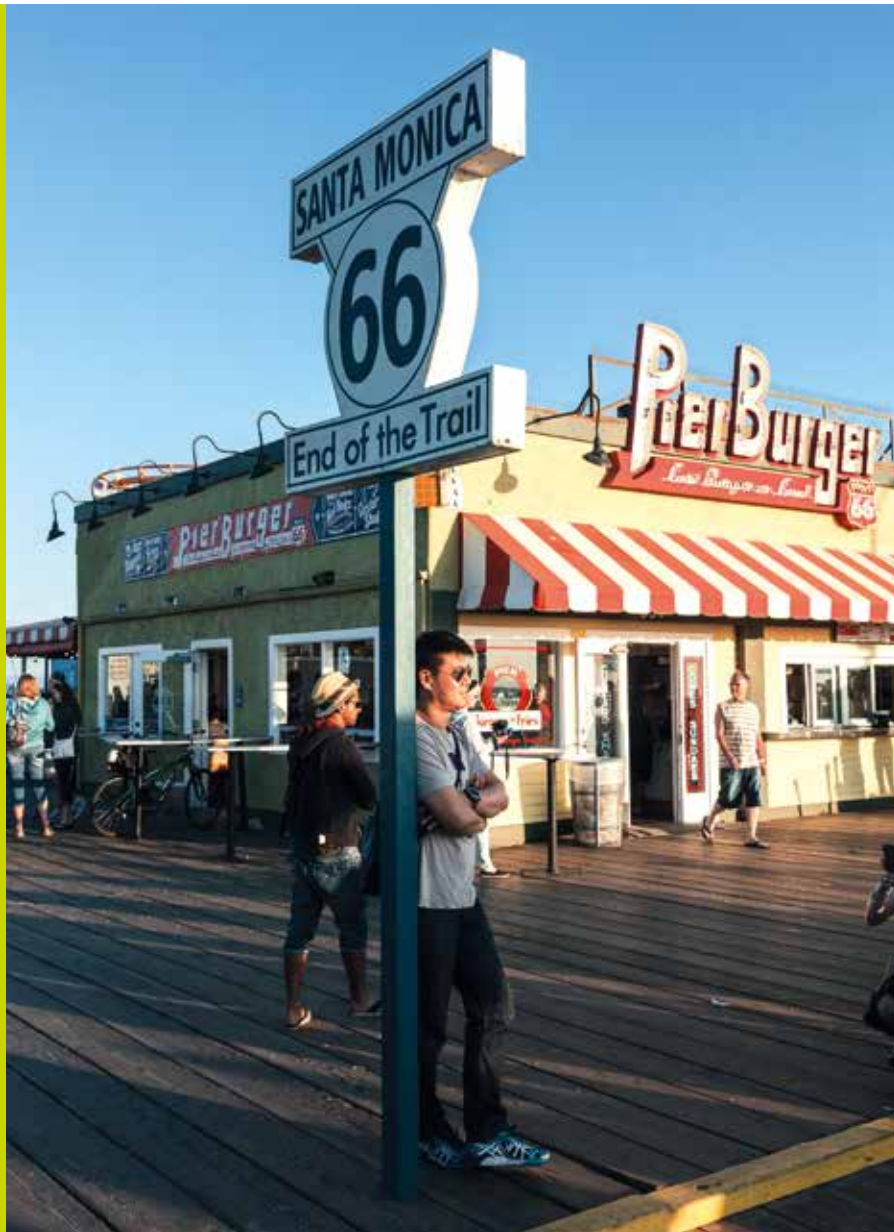
**T**he morning before I left, saying good-bye over the phone, Julián Carrón said to me, “Keep your eyes open! And go in peace.” Because of those words, all my worries on the eve of my departure (10 events in 11 days; a flight to catch every day, jumping between time zones; the language problem) had dissipated by the time I reached my first destination in New York, where Jonathan Fields and Ken Genuard sang “A Change is Gonna Come,” a song written by the king of soul, Sam Cooke, to kick off the event. The title of the song described something that was about to happen through the words of the panelists: Margarita Mooney, an associate professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, described “a reawakening of a person’s desire for truth,” and Anujeet Sareen, a portfolio manager for Brandywine Global mentioned the discovery that “your heart is made for the infinite” and “the wonder and joy at that fact.” Fourteen years after his death, Giussani has proven to be a trustworthy companion for those Americans “seeking a path forward” (the title given to the book tour). Their encounter with him has involved something new, a breath of fresh air in a place where faith is often lived out as moralism that only knows how to say no, or is conceived of as something to defend in the face of our unprecedented social crises. All of the panelists had encountered the fruits of Giussani’s charism before reading the biography. They all said that what struck them was a fascinating way of living everyday life. They saw a kind of Christianity that was, in some ways, totally unfamiliar, communicated in a “providential way [...] for the post-modern man who doesn’t understand himself or reality” (J.D. Flynn, the editor-in-chief of the Catholic News Agency), and which offers itself as a companion for the journey.

Helen Alvaré, a law professor at George Mason University, jokingly revealed the nature of this companionship when she said, “I’ve been traveling the last few months, giving a presentation a week at different universities around the country, and I’ve been forced to carry the book because it’s too big for my briefcase or backpack. But it has provoked many wonderful conversations. You have no idea how many people want to know what possibly can be drawing you to read a book

that big and schlep it onto a plane with you.” At the end of one presentation, a woman came up to me and said, “Since I discovered them, the books of Giussani and Carrón are always there on my table; they are my daily companions at work.” She introduced herself and told me that she is a palliative care doctor who works every day with patients who ask to be able to die so they do not have to suffer any more, words that took on great significance.

**It was a trip studded with surprises,** ones that left me feeling inadequate in the presence of the people I met. I saw the profound weight of such questions as: How do we educate our young people? What is our role in the life of the church? No one I met claimed to have the right answers to these questions. Everyone was looking for a path for the future, full of curiosity. These were Catholics who have not resigned themselves to a diminished faith and are not satisfied with partial answers to these questions just so that they can get by. Almost all the panelists were struck by the way Fr. Giussani faced the cri-





Santa Monica, California.

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sis of '68 without mincing words, always starting with Christ. I had the impression that, in some way, they are living the same things now within the American church and are beginning to realize that Christianity as a tradition or a moral system is no longer capable of moving people.

Speaking in Omaha, Michael Waldstein, professor of New Testament at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, underlined that "if the Catholic Church were supposed to preach morals only, then we would have no ground to stand on—the church would be nonexistent." For him, Giussani's big contribution was the fact that "Christ is the only answer to the longing of the human heart." In Miami, Rod Dreher, one of the best-known Christian journalists in America, said, "In 1968, Giussani realized that we are at a point in history in which no one will be reasoned into believing in Christianity because of an appeal to tradition; this is because people no longer place a value

on tradition. People today will only be converted by what Giussani called an 'event'; that is, by meeting a 'presence charged with a message,' from which all the rest derives."

This is what had happened to the speakers who encountered the CL communities sprouting up here and there in the US: they saw in them a road, a chance to begin again. Reading Giussani's books or the biography began to explain what makes a group of friends that awakened their curiosity so different. They discovered a way of living the faith that overcomes any activism in a country where the church has based a good part of its reputation on its influence on society and politics.

John Allen, a well-known Vatican correspondent, admitted during the Denver presentation that, "Years ago, I confessed to Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete that I did not understand Giussani's books and he said to me, 'Get to know us for a while, and then Giussani will start making sense.' He was absolutely right. When Giussani told Hans Urs von Balthasar that he admired his work, Balthasar responded, 'Yes, but you created a people' rooted in Giussani's insistence that Christianity isn't a philosophical system but an encounter with a person."

I met people who were taking their lives seriously, which made it easier for them to find in some aspect of Fr. Giussani's thought an answer that was up to the challenges of education and the urgent need for a Christian presence in the world. Knowing how much the idea of *experience* and the concept of *event* are still viewed sus-



**Alberto Savorana** is in charge of the press office, public relations, and editorial activities for Communion and Liberation. He worked for the Italian television channel Rai-USA and was editor of this magazine from 1994 to 2008. He is the author of *The Life of Luigi Giussani* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

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iciously as being captives of subjectivism, I was surprised by the way these people grasped the cultural importance of an “encounter” for receiving the Christian announcement. One example was Fr. Scott Hastings, the vicar for clergy and judicial vicar for the Archdiocese of Omaha, who, after showing a series of slides describing the critical situation in the church, exclaimed, “My life as a priest is full of joy. How can this be when it seems that the Church is on fire?” He answered by saying, “[Jesus] seeks us, as He did with Zacchaeus, with the Apostles... For Giussani the method of Christ is that He enters into even the ordinary circumstances. My life is filled with joy because I know Jesus and the place where I meet him, most of the time, is here.” As he said this, an image of the CL community in Omaha appeared on the screen.

The dramatic circumstances of the American church can be interpreted, according to Jesuit Fr. John Meehan, the interim director of the Newman Center at McGill University, as “a call for deeper authenticity, and I believe Giussani has much to say about this.” Greg Erlandson, the head of the press outlet for the US Catholic bishops, identified the urgent need today as, “Rousing the sleeping ones. The desolation Giussani found among kids at the Berchet High School in 1954 sparked in him the desire to awaken the faith in these students. How? Not from a program, text, or pedagogy, but from a presence.”

**In America, like everywhere** these days, issues surrounding education constitute a national emergency; this was noted by teachers, bishops, mothers, everyone. The overarching question is, “Where can we begin again?” In Chicago, Timothy O'Malley, a theologian from Notre Dame

University, threw out a challenge: “We need to reawaken the religious sense. Giussani proposes a method, a way of educating young people according to the integral nature of human experience. This road is a far cry from secularism and sectarianism; it is a road that accepts the risk of the other person's freedom.”

Margarita Mooney highlighted a key point: “Giussani uses common words in uncommon ways. For example, it is surprising the way he speaks about ‘authority’: not as an abstract word, but a personal one. In class, we communicate through who we are. This is the most important part of education: to reawaken in our students the desire for truth.” Jon Balsbaugh, the president of the Trinity Schools Network, showed what Giussani had to offer for his work when he said, “It is a mistake to think more information is enough to provide a Christian education for students; there is something deeper. For Giussani, education is for all of life and humanity. Therefore, some deep grasp of the human condition is actually a prerequisite to understanding Christianity as something other than a set of practices.” Jason Blakeley, a professor of political philosophy, underlined that “a formalistic and reactionary Christianity, made up of abstract values, formulas, and ideology, is at risk of becoming completely divorced from the revolution of flesh and bone that Giussani championed. The message of the Gospels is reduced to a moral code. Christians would do well to learn from Giussani's call to convert from armed formalism to authenticity. How did faith start? It started with ‘come and see’: an event.”

In Montréal, Christine Jones, the president of the Catholic Pacific College in Langley, British Columbia, observed that, “Giussani's genius, intuition and way of communicating the Christian fact is that everything that happens carries a meaning greater than us, intentioned toward a loving presence.” Educating, then, is “introducing each person to this reality pregnant with meaning.” Stephanie Stokman, a mother and educator, has asked herself how to educate her children in the faith, and finds that Giussani points the way: “A person cannot be educated in a Christian way just by studying books or hearing sermons; it is a whole life.”

How can a person remain a Christian today? Alvaré

spoke of the new light Giussani has shed on her professional life, after her many years spent representing the opinions of the American church to government institutions. “Transmitting the faith cannot start from pride or fear; it must start from really knowing Christ as a source of freedom. You must always be in conversation to overcome the moralism of those who merely say, ‘No, you can’t.’ Giussani experienced that lack for which Christ is the answer. What determines the form of our presence in the world is witness.”

So then, how can we help people? “Doctrine and formation are good, but there is something deeper you need to do: reawaken the subject so that he may recognize Christ when he encounters Him,” Balsbaugh said. Meehan echoed the same thought, saying, “Giussani posed questions, inviting his listeners to take their own humanity seriously so they would be able to recognize the answer. Christianity is the experience of an encounter.” This was a theme underlined by many speakers: Giussani’s educational method relies on a reawakening of the “I” that puts a person in the proper condition to find the answer.

“Nothing is more unbelievable than the answer to a question that is not asked,” said the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. What kind of question must that priest and those three students have had to drive eleven hours from northern Florida just for a

one-hour presentation in Miami? Conor Hill, the headmaster of the Chesterton Academy of the Holy Family near Chicago, traced the original contribution Giussani offers back to two formulations: “Live reality intensely,” and “Christianity is an event.” In Los Angeles, Kristi Brown, who teaches at the Colburn Conservatory of Music, noted, “The thing that made Giussani great, that made him so attractive was that he was completely himself. His students said he talked to them in a way that no one had spoken to them before. It’s a question of following his method, of taking your own needs seriously and being aware of yourself.”

**One thing was evident**, and without it I would not be able to explain the richness of the dialogues I engaged in while in America: Christ remains present through the particular presences of his followers. Bishop Steven Raica of Gaylord, Michigan, never met Giussani, yet in Evansville he said, “Paradoxically, I think I have met him because I have met those who know him and they haven’t disappointed me.” Exactly the same thing happened to Sareen: “What I know of Fr. Giussani comes from the people he touched [...] and that has changed my life dramatically.”

Meeting the communities that organized the presentations, it was very clear that I was seeing “particular histories,” so small compared to the vastness of the country that hardly anyone knows they exist except for those who run into them. Marcie Stokman, the founder of the Well-Read Mom

book club present in many places in America, said, “In meeting some friends, I met Fr. Giussani, who invited me to take my desire seriously, to live reality intensely, and to follow my heart.” Grateful for this history, on the last evening of the tour, during a dinner at the home of John Zucchi (it is thanks to him and Philip Cercone of McGill-Queen’s University Press in Montréal that *The Life of Luigi Giussani* was published in English), Meehan and Jones performed an on-the-spot concert for voice and piano.

I was hosted by families on my trip, and I always felt at home because of the total continuity with the experience I live in Milan. For many people, the circumstances of life are not easy—it is not a question of poverty, but of the pressures of the environment—and every step must be earned at the price of sacrifice. Yet I did not hear any complaints, because of their awareness that they possess all the tools needed to progress on a human journey, whether in a big city or in the country. Miriam Cruz-Bustillo from Miami confided, “I am a lawyer, and often have to work in an atmosphere of tension and fighting. The School of Community helps me to take a step back and wonder about what I am doing. Who is the other standing in front of me? Do I treat him as I would treat Christ? In this way [it] has become a conversion for me and my husband.” This is the experience each speaker had stumbled upon, so different and so attractive, which made them understand that “now that you have met me, you can never lose me again!” ■



# The Giussani experiment

*The life of the CL founder transformed his way of teaching and of looking at the crisis of the church. “His thought is medicine for what needs healing in Christian education today” because it’s focused on Christ and on experience. An interview with the theologian Timothy O’Malley, who spoke at the presentation of Giussani’s biography in Chicago.*



Oatman, Arizona.



José Medina

“**A** risk.” This is how he describes the way of Fr. Giussani, a path that continuously educates a person through experience instead of theory. This is because “Christianity, truly, is a life lived.” Timothy O’Malley, a husband and father of two children, is the director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy at the renowned Catholic university in Indiana, where he studied theology and philosophy before attending Boston College to further his studies on Saint Augustine. As a philosopher, theologian, and educator, he has faced, from the start of his career, the same themes—and problems—that marked the life of the founder of CL and that impact the Church today. His encounter with the Italian priest through texts and witnesses, through books and people, has significantly affected his way of looking at these topics. He spoke publicly about this in one of the most well-attended presentations on the biography of Giussani, in Chicago on March 18<sup>th</sup>. Now, in the following interview, he goes into greater detail.

**Tell me about how you came to discover Luigi Giussani?**

A few years back, I was teaching a course on the philosophy of education in which we read the works of several prominent thinkers. One of my students asked if we could read Giussani’s *The Risk of Educa-*

*tion*. When I read it, I found it to be one of the most engaging texts about Christian education in our present day.

**What struck you?**

Giussani’s attention to the role of human experience and his seriousness about proposing tradition in such a way that it can transform human experience. Giussani helps us reclaim a sense of history, a sense of religious tradition that is dynamic and engaging, which involves but is not reduced to the affective dimension. I quickly realized the wealth of opportunities for the renewal of theological education, for catechesis, that were all possible from Giussani, and I began to read his other works. Now, I use *The Risk of Education* in the courses I teach on Christian education at my university.

**How do your students respond to Giussani’s thought?**

Very positively! It has transformed the way my students teach their own courses. They suddenly recognize how they could teach in a way that accounts for the full affective dimension, the full desire of the person, while at the same time offering a profound proposal. Some of my students began to do additional work on Giussani. They began to read his work and conduct research based on it. Some of my students who are involved in dialogue with



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**Timothy O'Malley** was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. He is director of Didactic Education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life and director of Notre Dame Center for Liturgy at Notre Dame University in Indiana.

atheists employ Giussani's method. I use it to teach second graders the Eucharist. It is proving to be far more effective for this purpose than what they find in textbooks.

**What are the current approaches in religious education and how do you see that Giussani can help with its renewal?**

There are two approaches taken by religious education textbooks and formation programs. They most often stress the need to repeat a text or doctrinal formulation or avoid the text altogether and deal only with the individual's experience. I think both these approaches are problematic. The first involves only a repetition of the creed, almost quite literally. Learn the creed. Learn the doctrine and that is it. This approach is fearful of human experience because of its unpredictability. The second method focusing only on individual experience replaces what has been offered in the tradition, reconstructing it according to our own wisdom. As a result, the individual is disconnected from the community. What I found remarkable in Giussani and *The Risk of Education* is that it actually shows how the deepest dimension of tradition is an experience, and that experience is lived in a deep and transformative way through the tradition. We must propose to the young person, or to the old person for that matter, that this hypothesis of tradition, the path we offer, is already an experience. Giussani provides an understanding of education that involves the affections, that involves desire, that involves the fullness of

who we are. This doesn't bracket out our coming to know precisely what the tradition itself describes. This tradition is not just a set of facts, but it is connected to the primary event, the event of Jesus Christ. It's the echo of this event through history. I find Giussani's thought to be medicine for what I find needs healing in today's catechetical and theological education.

**“Desire” is a word that many prefer to avoid.**

We are creatures who desire. The engine that drives us is what we love, what we move toward, where we are directed. This is who we are as human beings. The question is not *whether* we desire but *what* we desire. The church needs to talk about desire: what we love, what we move ourselves toward, because we are creatures who desire. Desire is essential to who we are as human beings.

**What did you take away from reading the biography? What was striking?**

A good deal of what Giussani did was an experiment. It did not initially emerge out of a theory. It concretely emerged out of gathering people together to discover who Christ was, to take up this task, to make a culture, to move Christianity away

from a series of abstract propositions that are part of a merely traditional Christianity and to actually breathe life into it through a community of friendship, of faith, and of love, but also to create spaces where this could be carried out in politics, in art, in every dimension of life. The experiment was effective because Giussani was reflective and attentive and was able to identify its specific shape and form as he went along. To watch that unfold over the course of the biography is extraordinary.

**You travel around the country visiting parishes. In your opinion what is the biggest need you see?**

First, Catholicism has to move away from mere maintenance to a rediscovery of what the institution of the church is in the first place. The church is actually an encounter with the event of Jesus Christ. I find that many people have forgotten this. They are very interested in changing structures or changing the church but forget the event of who Jesus Christ is. Second, we must understand the close link between that event and the building of new structures and new cultures that allow people to encounter it: community that echoes and leaves traces of the event of salvation in the world.

**What do you mean that Christianity is an event?**

What I mean is that the Word became flesh. The reason, the order, the very meaning of the universe became flesh and stays flesh. That when Jesus was risen from the dead, His body was transformed but remains a body. In that sense, Christianity is an event that happens in time and in space and that forever transforms the nature of time and space. We hear in the scriptures the proclamation that the Lord is risen, that Jesus Christ is ascended to the right hand of the Father, that the church is Christ's body. These are not mere propositions. We are saying that we have access to the depths of love, divine love, that has forever changed what it means to be human. So, when we think about the structures of the church, these are not just structures built for their own sake. All of them exist to connect us to this primary event, to the enfleshment of the word as the source of the greatest love, the greatest hope for all that it means to be human, which is now revealed in God dwelling among us.

**America is living a particular situation of crisis, what is the way forward?**

What we can do is to live out this event more clearly in the world. A lot of people want to focus on reforming the institutions of the church but reform and renewal take place in local communities. The crisis we experience is a crisis of institution and the way to respond starts from local communities living this event in a variety of ways. ■

# *“I never want to go back to life as it was before”*

From Mexico to Argentina, societies are divided by corruption and politics and the church's credibility is in crisis. Here, the Movement's proposal is lived as a possibility that people are not crushed by power of any kind. Stories and contributions from the communities in Latin America.



**Alessandra Stoppa**





The Pan-American Highway, which connects Alaska to Argentina and crosses through 17 countries, in the Nazca desert of Peru.

**W**hen Fr. Giussani died, Juan Emilio watched the funeral on television from the other side of the ocean with some friends from the small community in Chile. Fourteen years have passed, but he still remembers a comment he heard one girl made: “Now the charisma will die.”

“Those words hurt me, yet not even I could have imagined how alive they would be today.” He had met the Movement 20 years before Giussani’s death, when Chile was living under the Pinochet dictatorship and in the midst of a difficult family situation. He grew up without a father and was orphaned as a boy when his mother died. “For us, the Church has always been a ‘mother,’” he said, “the only one to protect us, to defend the needs and the rights of the people.”

Today that “mother,” in Chile more than anywhere else, is staggering under the weight of the scandals. People are distancing themselves. “So it surprised me that this year at our Lenten retreat, where there have always been about 100 of us, instead there were 400. I think also of the new high schoolers who are discovering the beauty of the church through GS and who trust the adults. None of this is thanks to our efforts. We have just been faithful to the experience that makes us happy, following the history that has reached us.” Just as it was for him in 2005, after many years of involvement, when he heard the new leader, Fr. Julián Carrón, say, “The center of our friendship is Christ.” “It was as if he were speaking to me. It was earth-shattering, stripping away my organizational mind-set, which is

attached to particular forms. Today it is beautiful that the look and form of the way we stay together is not the same as yesterday or the day before. It is generated by what is happening.”

**Three hundred people** from all the communities in the Latin American countries came together in Brazil for the ARAL (“Latin America Leaders Assembly”) with Carrón. They are all immersed in troubled societies, each with its own character, but with the shared struggles of corruption and strong political polarization, as well as a widespread clericalism, one of the biggest concerns of Pope Francis, who warned against the temptation of “dominating spaces, forgetting the believers who burn out their hope in the daily struggle to live the faith.” It is all the more notable then, in such a context, that the people responsible for the Latin American communities in the Movement are almost all lay people native to the region, a sign of a deeply rooted charisma engaged in everyday life. Oliviero is from Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, a violent place of kidnappings and homicides related to drug trafficking. “Now I look at my country and see more than just violence. In the relationships that have grown over the years with a wide range of people, including the city’s big businessmen, I see a new and concrete openness that is breaking down the usual personal interests. I see people working to help their neighborhoods for the first time, people asking us to work together to build a peaceful society because it now seems possible. This is one of the things for which I am most grate-

ful to the Movement: it gives me the simplicity to recognize what is exceptional in other people.”

**During the assemblies** of the ARAL, young people and adults entrust the path they are walking to Carrón. Geographic distance is never even mentioned because of the way they live his paternity and the tools given by the Movement. They ask, in various ways, what their life can contribute to the world, today and not tomorrow, with their colleagues, friends, and children, in the church or in politics. And they are looking for answers without sugar-coating things or leaving anything out, whether it be the complex situations in which they live or their personal character. “There is no greater contribution than a reawakened ‘I!’” Carrón says, broadening the discussion. Citing Giussani, he adds, “We are not afraid of power,” in whatever form it takes. “We are only afraid of people who are sleeping.” It becomes clearer why certain people present who live simple lives hidden from the world make a great impression: because the limitless impetus of their hearts has not fallen asleep; it allows itself to be generated by a friendship. “It was not a given that God would chose the form of a friendship,” said Fr. Julián de la Morena, the leader of CL in Latin America. “He could have chosen other forms, but He gave us a mysterious friendship that becomes a fertile soil, through which the Church communicates itself to the world as an embrace.”

For each of those present, everything began with an unexpected encounter, impossible to conjure up and

The Latin American Assembly of Leaders (ARAL), which took place in Brazil March 29-31.

impossible to erase, whether it happened recently or long ago. Kierkegaard wrote that what really counts in life is seeing something so great that “everything else is nothing by comparison,” so that even if you forgot everything, “you would never forget this.” Jesús Carrascosa (known to all as “Carras” and an international leader of CL for many years) was thinking of the dense fog in Milan as he rode in a car with Giussani, who said, “But the sun is still there.” Carras wanted to laugh, but the priest was not joking and kept insisting, “But the sun is still there” because, he continued, “If you have seen a ray of sun even once in your life, you can never again forget it.” How powerfully such simple words must have been incarnated in order to win over a man who had always been ardently seeking during the course of the anarchic fight in Franco’s Spain, in the underground press, and through the preference for the poor. He had become a “victim of a Christianity without Christ” and “thrown away” the faith “because you throw away things that are useless to you.” Only the encounter with a living Christ was able to ground the profound unity between the ideal and his humanity, between his desire for justice and his deepest human questions. It would have been impossible for this to be revealed over time (he looks youthful at 80), had he not been a son, first of Giussani and now of Carrón. “The charisma is a person touched by Christ, who becomes more persuasive, more insightful and pedagogical, as I see in those who are following. Life expands—the experience of communion, the love for your wife, everything!”

**Without a road**, an encounter is not enough; over time it is as if it never happened. The awareness Giussani had in living through the challenges of ’68 came up again and again during the gathering, especially one central point: the tenacity of a path. “But what path is Giussani speaking of?” Carrón asks. “The same one as from the beginning of his first hour of class. A method founded in experience, the criterion used to judge everything. And just being in the Movement is not enough to keep you from losing the method along the way.” Geronimo is from Argentina, and said, “I thought I was a good Christian, living the Movement well and participating in all the gestures. I thought so until all my problems exploded,” at which point all his humanity came out. First he was angry with God, “because instead of perceiving the problems as an occasion

to verify whether the encounter we had was capable of responding, we ‘return them to sender,’” Carrón underlined, and continued, “Instead, the opportunity is that of living life as a vocation: in everything, there is a Person calling us.” Geronimo went on, “After a month, I realized that I was the one who needed to change. So I started to ask for help. Help to go to Mass, to be present in all I was doing, to participate in the Movement not as a toll to pay, but as an urgent response to my need.”

The attendees are provoked from every side: daily struggles, difficulties within the communities, failures or successes that leave them unsatisfied, family problems. Giovanna from São Paulo spoke of a friend who was fascinated by the experience she had in meeting Giovanna, but who “gets stuck with her refusal of the Church, of the idea she has formed of it,” and uses as an objection to what she sees. “The open battle in your friend,” Carrón said, “is the same one we all live, between an event and the mentality we absorb. But the fact that this battle exists is the first sign that Christ is real, is present! Our contribution to others is what we learn thanks to the grace of the charisma: the connection between reason and experience.” Camillo, a young man from Chile, has not been able to forgive his brother who ran away from home. “I am able to forgive, instead, the people I encounter at charitable work” when faced with their limitations and mistakes. “Do not change the method God uses with you,” Carrón told him. “It cannot be forced. It is by participating in the beauty of the place where this happens to you that you will see it spread to encompass all of your life.”

**Living an openness to being generated with no rush**, Otoney, of Salvador de Bahia, can say that today he may not have the tenacity and energy he had at the beginning, when he was a recent convert from atheism, but after 26 years in the Movement, “There exists a presence and hope at the core of my I; there is something new inside me that changes how I live my work, my marriage, my responsibilities and relationships. Before, I used to delegate my responsibility to the Movement’s proposals and to what others said, but now I am discovering what I desire and what answers it.” To Carrón, he said, “I thank you for continuing to provoke us to make a judgment and for being the first to accept my judgment. This makes me become mature and helps my desire to follow to grow. It causes



me to make judgments not in a childish way but in an adult way, taking seriously what you say and seeing if it is true for me.”

Where is the charisma alive today? This question was echoed by those present at the Assembly, many of whom never met Giussani. “This cannot be an abstract conversation,” said Carrón, “Every person must verify whether there is something in the present that is changing her, that touches every aspect of her life, that allows her to experience something new.” His response shows that he clearly saw people who were yearning for something real, who are walking on the path that Giussani opened for everyone—to live reality with intensity. “To be his children,” Carrón emphasized, “does not mean that you repeat what he said; rather, it is letting yourselves be surprised, as he did, by reality, by what is happening now.”

According to de la Morena, one of the most profound contributions of the charisma, especially when people are surrounded by a mentality that avoids reality, is a careful attention to reality, “to the thing happening right in front of me. Christ coincides with the present, with what is happening now. It is not a special gift for ‘seeing’; instead, it comes from a charisma that demonstrates an attention to reality that no book, sociology, or study can give. And I can only know Christ now, in what I am facing now, not one minute before or after.” This is the source of action, of people up to the challenge, who face situations in a beautiful way, even the most hostile situations, for example that of Venezuela. According to de la Morena, another aspect of this attention is that “the charisma creates a place where people speak openly about

themselves,” where a judgment by an authority is not intimidating; instead, it is seen as a “good” for life. “We can look at each other without being scandalized because Christ is present. This is what makes it possible to embrace the dramas lived by others.”

**What keeps us from** reducing the charisma? Alejandro from Argentina has experienced what it means not to carry the authority of a father within oneself. He spent 34 years in the Movement reading the same words over and over, forming an intellectual attraction, “applying what I thought I had understood, but I did not internalize what Giussani said.” Beginning “to risk my heart and my need in a real way is transforming my life. I want to relearn everything.” “With a correct discourse, we get lost,” said Carrón. “By thinking that I am being faithful, I can negate Giussani’s own method. Only by risking my humanity on my path can I prevent myself from reducing the charisma” by going into the depths of myself, wielding the radical nostalgia that constitutes me. “If Christianity is not an event that reawakens our whole humanity, it is not for us. Only Christ can do this: he exalts and throws open our desire.” For Paula, a shy Brazilian girl, who lives in a world where reality is deafening and faith is an unbearable moralism, this means, “From the moment that I met Christ and began this journey, I have had the courage to fully live my desire for the Infinite. I live everything in relation to this and I discover that I am grateful and free. I never want to go back to life as it was before.” ■

# Living in Venezuela

*The situation in the country is deteriorating. There are those, like Gabriela, who have been forced to give up everything in order to save a child. But even here, it is always possible to build, because today, “if politics is not friendship, it no longer interests true women and men.”*



Alessandra Stoppa

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Crisber is a young woman who recently encountered the CL community. She had been trapped in her home for 48 hours because of a blackout that left the city and most of Venezuela in the dark and with only intermittent gas, communications, and water services for days. At a certain point she asked her parents what they were waiting for. “For the lights to come back on,” her mother said. “But at that moment, I realized that I was waiting for more.”

This gives us a glimpse of a vigilant humanity that cannot be frustrated, neither by those in political power, who for years have reduced the population to hunger, nor by the darkness caused by the massive blackouts in the country that have been occurring since early March. These have been followed by electricity and water rationing, with dire consequences for the economy and for daily life, such as an inability to move or communicate, or to conserve the already scarce food. Some are waiting in the lines

for water at cistern trucks or sewers, and some are collecting condensed drops from plumbing pipes. Most of the hospitals are out of commission, resulting in scores of deaths. The weather is becoming quite hot, and the situation is at a breaking point.

**After the long days of darkness** without any information about anyone, “after all sorts of false starts and obstacles and difficulties, we got together with our friends in the Movement and shared what food we had. It was one of the most beautiful meals we’d ever had,” recounted Fr. Leonardo, the leader of the community. “Looking at those gathered, I was really impressed by how enthusiastic they were about this grace of being able to meet again. Nobody complained about the challenging and intense reality facing us. The people who came to my parish church in those days were absolutely desperate. Why weren’t these friends the same way?” Being able to participate in the Assembly of Leaders in Brazil at the


end of March was certainly not a given for the Venezuelans, considering the difficulties of the journey and the dire living conditions of their families. But in talking about these conditions, Alejandro from Caracas clarified things for everyone. “For us, it’s easier to verify whether faith truly responds to our lives. We can’t dilute life in material well-being.” Ernesto, a university student, arrived without luggage after “an odyssey,” but said “I’d do it all over again because I’ve found a treasure, which is this walk together, where I’m learning that even pain is my friend.” Then he added, “The shirt I’m wearing isn’t mine.” He offered no explanation, but the importance of the communion he was experiencing in his life was clear. In February, Fr. Carrón sent them a message expressing the Movement’s care and closeness: “Give Christ the opportunity to surprise you by allowing Him to enter into your lives, which are so challenged in this moment. I am certain that He will not fail to amaze you.”



They were amazed at how powerful the companionship of Christ is. This was evident in the light in their faces and in their stories, even the hardest ones. Gabriela was a university student in Mérida, from a well-off family. But this made no difference two years ago when her son Agustín was born with serious health problems. There was no way she and her husband could obtain treatment for him in Venezuela, so they had to emigrate. “I left university, everything. I had no idea where we would end up. I only knew that wherever we went, the one thing I would need was the experience of the Movement.” On January 27, 2018, they entered Columbia as refugees. “We had nothing, only a suitcase.” She was still shaken as she spoke, because it was hard, “very hard. But I would be willing to lose everything again.” She talked about the table where they eat now every evening, and how every evening “it’s the sign of the presence of Jesus.” Their friend Fr. Julián gave it to them. “Before being a refugee, it wasn’t important for me to sit at a table to eat. Now it is.” The day they brought it to her, she told her husband, “This table is here not because of Fr. Julián, but because Christ gave it to us. If we do not acknowledge this when we look at it, the entire journey up to this point will have been for naught.” During that journey they had no roof over their heads, and some evenings, no food. Every day she asked, “Lord, what are you calling me to?”

“I didn’t want to lose myself in everything that was happening to us,” Gabriela continued. One of the most difficult things was looking for a job. “They

Venezuelan refugees on the Pan-American Highway. Santander de Quilichao, Colombia.



Some volunteers at the Assembly of CL Leaders of Latin America.

ask you for references, and there's nobody who can put in a good word for you." She started all over again, accepting a job as a waitress. "I worked twelve hours a day. I was exhausted, and lived everything mechanically. Then I called a friend and said, 'Help me to look at what I don't see.' She simply told me to offer the work for the holiness of my son. The next day at the restaurant I still had the same pain in my knees and the same weariness, but what she said was so crucial and everything was different." They began looking again for a place to live, and then discovered that Agustín was manifesting serious delays in his development. "We wanted to face this fully, and love him exactly the way he was." This enabled her to bet everything on all the possibilities in front of her son: he had said only seven words, but in a few months was able to say 150. There was the beautiful experience of friends from near and far who mobilized to provide treatment, food, and a washing machine. "Because of this, I'm no longer afraid of being needy, because I gain the presence of Christ through concrete faces. Only He enables me to face life."

Gabriela is one of over three and a half million Venezuelans who have had to leave their country in these last two years. Fr. Julián de la Morena, the leader of the Movement in Latin America, said, "We realized right away what was happening. We were at the Spiritual Exercises of the university students in 2017. On the last day, two of our young people said good-bye to us, not knowing whether we would ever meet again, because they and their families were leaving

the country. We saw the first signs of a phenomenon that would reach the dimensions it has today, involving the entire continent."

The community got moving in order to face the biggest challenge they had ever experienced by responding to specific needs. They did not take sides, but got involved with people, helping them look for jobs and seeking opportunities to share. Needy families did not content themselves with economic assistance from the Movement. "There was the risk of taking this assistance as our right, but we asked ourselves what we were educating ourselves to. How would this be any different from the welfare culture that has ruined the country?" Each member of the community started out from what he or she knew how to do in life, initiating new projects. After two years they wrote a flyer, "Friendship with the Venezuelan People" [which you can find at [english.clonline.org](http://english.clonline.org)]. The word "friendship" may seem strange in this harsh context, but they believed in what they were seeing. "The government could change and Maduro could leave," said Alejandro, "but hope does not come from some other person in power." Pope Francis said in a recent address to a group from the Pontifical Commission for Latin America that "politics is a vocation to service, a lay diaconate that promotes social friendship for the generation of the common good. Only in this way does politics help the people to become protagonists of their history and thus avoid the so-called 'ruling classes' believing that they are the ones who can settle everything," without actu-

ally settling anything. The life of the Movement in Venezuela speaks of this conviction: today, politics does not exist unless as friendship, or perhaps, as de la Morena put it, "if politics is not friendship, it no longer interests true women and men." In the midst of the collapse of all solutions, the community is increasingly aware that the one true power is a person whose conscience is reawakened.

**Alejandro, an engineer,** is married and the father of four daughters. Ten years ago, he left a career in management to begin a social assistance project, Trabajo y Persona, which provides occupational training to those with fewer opportunities. It began as a very small reality, but has grown over time, and has become stronger in the Venezuelan crisis. Today they collaborate with giants like Ford and L'Oreal to form women, men, and young people in six Venezuelan states by means of entrepreneurship programs and formation courses involving everything from chocolate to furniture to mechanics. One of the emergencies of these years of migration concerns the elderly people who have been left behind alone. Trabajo y Persona has created the only diploma program for educators assisting these people. The first day of the blackout, stuck in traffic and trying to get a cellphone signal, while schools, offices, and universities were closed, Alejandro saw one of his kids running in the street with his backpack. "Carlos, where are you going?" he yelled. "To work!" He was going to an event of Trabajo y



Persona scheduled for that day at the French Embassy. Notwithstanding the problems of security and transportation, Janette also came, having walked all the way from a distant neighborhood, doing her best to fulfill her task of bringing the sweets. She did not understand Alejandro's amazement. "You taught us that we have a responsibility—an 'I' that becomes the protagonist of the square meter that is each person's responsibility has the power to change not only Venezuela, but the world."

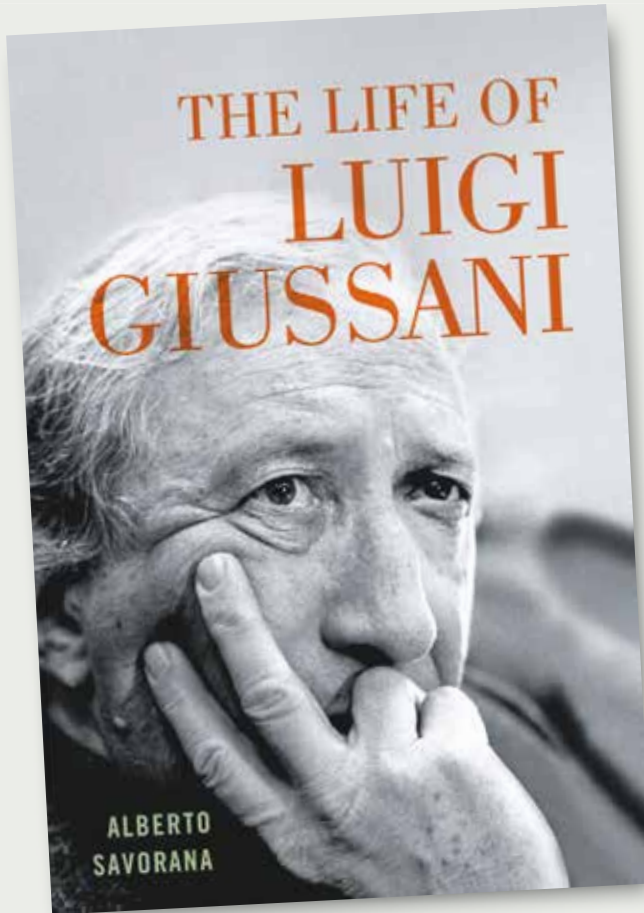
The March issue of *Traces* told the story of José Francisco, a 29-year-old from Mérida, whose passion for music was destined for a dead end, but instead found an outlet in production work with Aquiles Báez, one of the country's greatest guitarists. What was happening in this work was beautiful. In the beginning there were differences of opinion with the guitarist and difficulties with other professionals who were involved. But José Francisco was very curious about their friendship, and working together with them opened him up, changed his ideas, and made him passionate about the work, to the point that he did something that was neither expected of him nor foreseen: he composed a piece of music, creating it ad hoc specifically with the qualities of the other musicians in mind. José Francisco articulated what he has been learning. "My need is not the abyss in which everything ends. It

is the beginning point. Now I find myself in the midst of something I never would have imagined."

**The flyer of the community says,** "A peaceful transition requires seeds of a reconciliation that unites all Venezuelans as a people on a journey of national unity [...]. Always starting from the encounter with the person, with the particular story, desires and sufferings, joys, and hopes of the individual, it is possible to understand what changes the person and the whole of society." The flyer proposes to everyone, anywhere in the world, some simple and concrete gestures of an "operative friendship"; namely, inviting a family of Venezuelan migrants to your home for a meal and supporting in various ways those who have remained in Venezuela. Anyone who wants to support the work of our friends in Venezuela can contact the group by email ([amistadconvenezuela@gmail.com](mailto:amistadconvenezuela@gmail.com)). The group has received letters from Europe to Venezuelans who are unemployed or having various difficulties, but who nonetheless want to thank the letter writers for their human position. One of the letters said, "Thinking of you makes me aware of what truly interests me in life." Alejandro smiled and said, "Our needs will continue for quite a while, so you need to manage your charity and your desire to help well. And be patient. If we don't answer right away, it may just be because there's no electricity or internet..." ■

# THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan



*A detailed account of the life and legacy of the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement.*

1,416 Pages, December 2017

Monsignor Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy, which has hundreds of thousands of adherents around the globe.

In *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, Alberto Savorana, who spent an important part of his life working and studying with Giussani, draws on many unpublished documents to recount who the priest was and how he lived. Giussani's life story is particularly significant because it shares many of the same challenges, risks, and paths toward enlightenment that are described in his numerous and influential publications.

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

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