



TRACES

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02

***Solitude  
as a friend***

## TRACES

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**Editor (Direttore responsabile)**  
Davide Perillo

**Editorial Assistant**  
Anna Leonardi

**Art director**  
Dario Curatolo

**Layout**  
Maria Cristina Mazzù

**Editorial office**  
Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano  
Tel. 02.92945400 - Fax 02.92945401

**E-mail:** traces@traces-cl.com  
**Web:** english.clonline.org

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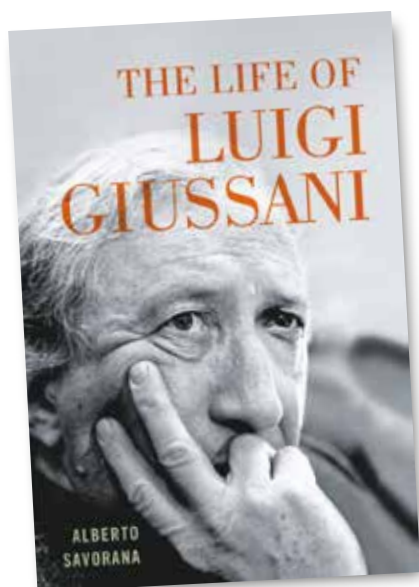
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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## THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan

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

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## At the roots of me

**I**t is difficult to find a theme more urgent, one that concerns everyone at every latitude, touching each person, from the elderly, who are increasingly isolated, to youth, described as being “alone together,” to use the expression of Sherry Turkle, a famous American sociologist. Solitude is a given, and it touches the life of each of us. It does not depend on how many bonds we have, our network of relationships, however rich they may or may not be. It is common to feel alone even in moments when we are surrounded by friends. “True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others,” observed Fr. Giussani. “We can well say that the sense of solitude is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity.” There is an ultimate point in the depths of our “I” where we are inexorably alone, because nothing we have in front of us and in which we place our expectations for fulfillment, can satisfy our heart.

Thus solitude is an inevitable, structural condition. But are we condemned to solitude? Is there no escape from the dramatic experience we all have of a feeling so acute as to be unbearable at times? How much time, energy, and money is spent to elude moments when we are alone with ourselves? Must we resign ourselves to the fact that our own humanity is our enemy? Or is there another possibility?

**This is the road we explore in this issue.** The opportunity to confront this topic was provided by a conference held in Florence some time ago entitled, “The Enemy Solitude,” which involved a series of talks examining from a medical, psychological, economic, and other points of view this enormous problem facing our society, so widespread that in Great Britain there is even an ad hoc minister to address it. Fr. Julián Carrón’s talk at the gathering, which is published in these pages, opens up a new outlook. Solitude is not necessarily something we must flee. It can be a friend. In fact, it is “the place where we can discover the original companionship” that constitutes us because this is the way human beings are structured: we exist, now, and therefore we are created, wanted, and loved now, regardless of the circumstances in which we live or the problems we have to face. In *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, Fr. Giussani noted that the Christian encounter, “which is all-encompassing by its very nature, in time becomes the true shape of every relationship, the true form by which I look at nature, at myself, at others, and at things.” He continues: “When an encounter is all-embracing, it becomes the shape, not only the sphere, of relationships. It not only establishes a companionship as the place where relationships exist but it is the form by which they are conceived of and lived out.” Christ can begin to “give shape” to life, and shape our awareness of ourselves, only when He sets roots in the depths of our “I”; that is, when He responds to this ultimate solitude. In doing so, He causes us to discover, with a jolt of wonder, that no matter what happens, we are never truly alone, because He exists.

# Letters

**Jill, Michele,  
Giuseppe, Roberto**

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

## The unexpected within my story

Dear Fr. Carrón, my natural tendency is to please others, to think too much, and to give everything my all, whether it's in my work as a nurse, or in my friendships, or in my spiritual and prayer life. But deep down, what sensation am I left with? Often, it's a sense of emptiness, disappointment, insecurity, and uneasiness. When I met the movement in 2013, I met Fr. Pepe. He listened to my questions and he understood the present situation in my life in a way I had never experienced before. I began to ask myself how he could have this capacity to relate with others without feeling weighed down and exhausted. I also asked myself why I felt so different, so at ease, so much surer of myself, not just when I was present at the gestures he invited me to. The friends I met in the Movement were totally different: they asked me who I was and they discussed things at a deep level but they also had fun; they had their habits and their interests. I hungered for this. Then I was transferred to London for my work. Also there, I felt the need for something that could help me live, because without this dimension, I am alone, insecure; I cannot love myself nor freely love others. I read *Tracce* and there I found a different perspective, like a light bulb that glows again. So I looked for and began to attend a School of Community [Editor's note: the work of catechesis proposed by CL] in London. This place, the people, the questions that are proposed, and those who approached me to get to know me give me an enthusiasm for life and the freedom to continue living my

story. Returning home after School of Community, I see its effects in the way I look at my housemates, my patients the next day, my colleagues, and myself. I detect a glimmer of liberation and freedom in all of this: perhaps it might just be enough to simply be myself, to savor something new, liberating, alive. Because of these insights and the friendships I have developed with people from the movement, I have become involved in projects related to the London Encounter and the Rimini Meeting, an involvement that has helped me to see different ways of facing work, my studies, dinners, hikes, and friendship, and so I continue to follow. I feel like I've lived many years without being able to face or show my true "I" and share it on my spiritual journey, in my work and free time, and at times with my family. The School of Community, the people I have met through CL, help me to come out of my shell a little. This doesn't happen through an acquisition of knowledge, but by recognizing something different, something that reawakens me and that helps me talk about my story in the day-to-day. I am accompanied toward the recognition that He is a reality that I can meet, not something I must attain through my own personal efforts. This verification is so specific to my story and so unexpected; it's an antidote to my natural inclinations because it's very real, and also very much beyond myself.

**Jill**, London (England)

## Which party to choose

After returning from the GS winter vacation, we got together on December 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> to organize a New Year's party. I was in charge of organizing the evening and the various games. At first, I thought it would be something kind of lame. That same evening, I was supposed to go to a different, "cooler," and apparently more fun party. After the

frizzi and the midnight toasts, I left with five others to go to that other party. Once there, all we saw was a bunch of drunks bouncing around from here to there. I can't say I dislike this kind of party, that would not be honest, but after the GS New Year's lived with my best and truest friends, I asked myself, "But how can I be in this place where the gaze of GS is not here?" After twenty minutes, three friends and I asked a GS friend to come and get us and bring us back to the GS party. I was so excited—the emotion I felt when I got out of the car was indescribable. I ran to open the door and within two minutes, everyone who had stayed at the party came to greet me, shouting, "Wow! You came back!" I burst into tears, but happy tears, dedicated to those who were there, but I was also sad for my friends who had remained at the other party. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. And it was in that moment that I understood the importance of GS, and inevitably, the living presence of someone who is greater. We make mistakes, but the greatness of a man is in recognizing them. If GS is a place where I can say "I" with certainty, then I shout it, because I am part of this and experience beauty through it; it fills me completely, giving everything in order to see everything.

**Michele**, Imola (Italy)

### Gazing upon my wife

Dearest Fr. Carrón, since my wife Paola started frequenting the Fraternity group, she has untiringly tried to convince me to join it, but has been met by my radical refusal. I have, however, experienced the School of Community with her group and have developed close friendships and shared important moments during the summer vacation. The example of their life has always attracted and fascinated me, even though it hasn't convinced me to draw closer to the Fraternity in a decisive way. It was instead Paola's recent illness that caused me to reflect. Throughout her illness, which undermined our hope for life, my wife has shown me how great our faith in the Lord can be and how much He can brighten the road even when it enters a dark tunnel. Her example and her way of facing difficulties have helped me to find a peaceful relationship with people I have difficulty with. This has convinced me to request membership in the Fraternity.

**Giuseppe**, Italy

### The strike and the joy of the beginning

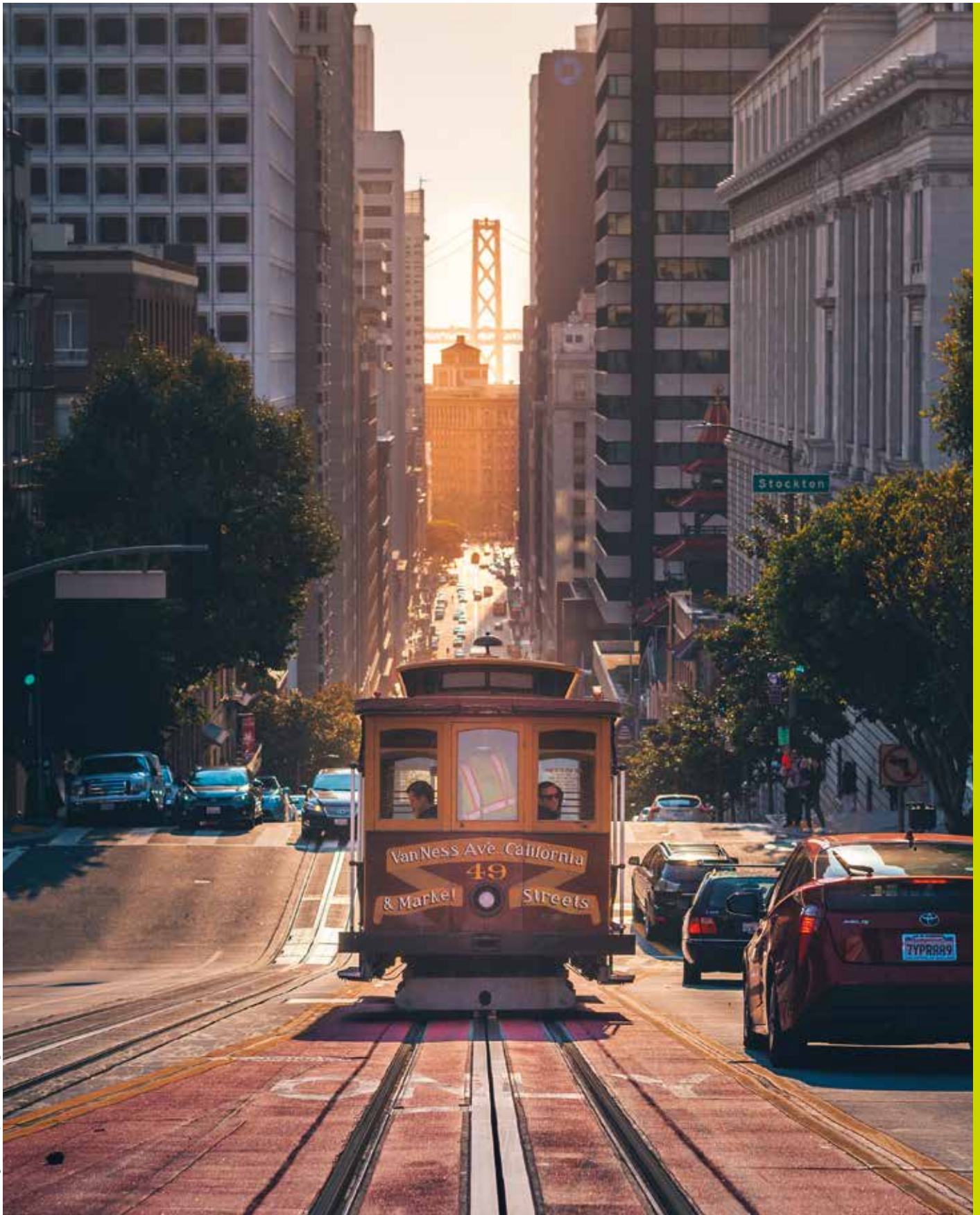
Four months ago, I was transferred to France for my job. My family will not arrive until the beginning of the school year. So that I would not be alone and run the risk of working all the time, as soon as I arrived, I sought out Isabelle from the movement, whom I had met at the Rimini Meeting. She invited me to a dinner where I knew no one. The guests were of various nationalities and we spoke French the whole evening. But the thing that surprised me was that after only five minutes, I felt the same familiarity, the same friendship, the same warmth that I feel every time I get together with my friends from the Fraternity in Milan. After that dinner, I began to attend the School of Community, which is held in a room in the parish of the Immaculate Conception. Of course, it's not like in Milan where it only takes me five to ten minutes to get there. Here it takes almost an hour and I have to take three different subway lines. You really have to want to go after a long day of work, and what's more it's in French so I have to study the texts really well and prepare what I want to say. In this apparent struggle, I've rediscovered the joy and beauty of the School of Community: it's not that in Milan it had become just a habit, but it's true that I no longer put my whole heart into it. What a surprise to feel again the enthusiasm of those first encounters with the movement and to find again a great freedom and openness of heart that the work of and my friends in the School of Community have given me. This openness and freedom are leading me to develop new relationships at work. One example is what happened because of a strike that was crippling Paris. With a few colleagues, we organized a carpool for five of us to travel back and forth to work. During our trips, we gradually began to know each other a little better. We are from different countries and not used to speaking amongst ourselves except about work. Little by little, it became natural to talk about how every Tuesday I go to School of Community; I explained what it is and what I find there. A little surprised, they asked me lots of questions and opened up and talked about their own families and the things that they feel. I don't know what will happen, but even now this freedom to relate my experience to people who seem far removed from me and to create a new climate is already a great joy.

**Roberto**, Neuilly-sur-Seine (France)

# Close-up

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# Faith and solitude

*What does it really mean to be “alone”? And how can we live that “finite infinity” that all of us are? An exploration of the deepest needs of each of us and the response given by Christianity. A talk from the president of CL at the “Solitude, the Enemy,” conference for the National Day Against Solitude. (Florence, November 16, 2019)*



**Julián Carrón**

**S**olitude is a phenomenon with many facets, something which I am sure will be expertly addressed during the course of this conference. The very definition of solitude that appears in the program attests to the large range of meanings the word may take on: solitude is “defined as the subjective sensation of a lack of support in one’s moment of need. [...] Solitude [...] has a negative influence on one’s health” (from the website [nemicasolitudine2019.com](http://nemicasolitudine2019.com)). Yet, as well as these statements capture the phenomenon, the question of the nature of the need and the lack that cause solitude remains open.

This brings to mind some verses from the poet Mario Luzi:

*“What is this lack a lack of  
o heart,  
of which all of a sudden you are full?  
Of what? Once the dam is broken  
it floods and submerges you  
the inundation of your poverty...  
It comes,  
perhaps it comes,  
from beyond you  
a recall  
which you now do not listen to because you are in agony.  
But it exists, fostered by strength and music  
the perpetual music will return.  
Be calm.”*

*(Under Human Species, Green Integer, Los Angeles, 2010).*

The question posed by the poet only magnifies the urgency of fully comprehending the nature of solitude. In the context of this conference, which seeks to offer, as you can read in the program, “a comprehensive view of the principal causes behind the solitude of people of all ages, in particular those of advanced years,” I was asked to speak about “faith and solitude.” To



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highlight the contribution that faith can make, however, we first need to more precisely identify that which constitutes human solitude, a phenomenon that is most dramatic for the aging.

### 1. Solitude: at the heart of every serious commitment to our humanity

Solitude is one of the elementary experiences of being human. The poetic genius of Giacomo Leopardi documents this in an incomparable manner in his “Night Song of a Nomadic Shepherd in Asia”:

*“And when I gaze upon you,  
Who mutely stand above the desert plains  
Which heaven with its far circle but confines, [...] Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky,  
Musing, I say within me:  
Wherefore those many lights,  
That boundless atmosphere,  
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning  
Of this vast solitude? And what am I?”*

(“Night Song of a Nomadic Shepherd in Asia,” vv. 79-89, in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 275).

Gazing at the moon and everything in the heavens that points to the vast expanse of the cosmos, the wandering shepherd cannot help but ask the question that burns inside us: “I say within me: [...] what [is] the meaning of this vast solitude?” And immediately the question about the meaning of that cosmic, vast solitude brings the poet to ask himself about human nature: “And what am I?” Leopardi intuits that the immense solitude of the moon, the stars, the sky, and the heavens has to do with his humanity, his solitude. The first implicates the second, becoming an image in nature of the human solitude that gives it meaning. Only humans can be aware of solitude. In that sense, the “I” is the self-awareness of the cosmos.

Emily Dickinson clearly captures the difference between the solitude experienced by the human person and that of the natural world, which lacks consciousness:

*“There is a solitude of space  
A solitude of sea  
A solitude of death, but these  
Society shall be  
Compared with that profounder site  
That polar privacy  
A soul admitted to itself—  
Finite infinity.”*



(*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1924, p. 27).

No solitude can compare to that felt by the soul when faced with itself. That experience reveals something we find inside our very structure: finite infinity. It seems like a contradiction in terms, but that is precisely the paradox of humanity.

Consequently, the more a man becomes aware of himself, the more he comes to see the nature of the solitude he experiences. “The more we discover our needs, the more we become aware that we cannot resolve them on our own. Nor can others, people like us. A sense of powerlessness accompanies every serious experience in our lives. This sense of *powerlessness* generates *solitude*. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others. We can well say that the sense of solitude is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity. Those who believe they have found the solution to a great need of theirs in something or someone, only to have this something or someone disappear or prove incapable of resolving this need, can understand this. We are alone in our needs, in our need to be and to live intensely” (L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 55). The more a man is aware of the boundless dimensions of his desire, and his equally boundless powerlessness to answer it, the more he feels this solitude: the central problem of life cannot find its solution in

us or in others. It is a solitude we often try to escape because it is hard to live with: “Gradually I have come to see daylight,” Nietzsche writes, “in the general deficiency of our culture and education: nobody learns, nobody strives after, nobody teaches—*how to endure solitude*” (F. Nietzsche, [443] “On Education,” Fifth Book, in *The Dawn of Day*, Macmillan, New York, 1903, p. 313).

## 2. Solitude: enemy or friend?

The title of this conference seems to suggest that, to the question about the nature of solitude, an answer can be given at the outset: “Solitude, the Enemy.” But the fact that there was a desire to propose the theme hints that there is still space to conceive of it in another way. Let us, then, ask: Is it possible not to suffer solitude as an enemy?

Finding oneself alone is a powerful provocation for all of us—it puts our backs to the wall, forcing us to come to terms with ourselves by posing a radical challenge to our reason and freedom. Depending on the way we live, solitude can be either a condemnation or a victory. This means it is a fork in the road, an open drama.

For the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, rejecting solitude may involve a grave loss: “Running away from *loneliness*, you drop your chance of *solitude* on the way: of that sublime condition in which one can ‘gather thoughts’, ponder, reflect, create—and so, in the last account, give meaning and substance to communication” (44 *Letters From the Liquid Modern World*, Polity, Cambridge, 2010, p. 8). In that light, solitude

appears to be anything but an enemy. “Solitude is not at all a fool’s errand, it is indispensable if you want to be good company,” say the lyrics of a song by Giorgio Gaber (“Solitude - 1976,” from the album *Libertà Obbligatoria* [Obligatory freedom], Carosello, 1976).

Others, in contrast, perceive the opposite. One of the most touching literary expressions of this negative experience of solitude is that offered by Giovanni Pascoli in his poem “Two Orphans,” in which he poignantly describes a dialogue between two brothers after the death of their mother, in the evening while they are in bed:

“Now nothing comforts us,  
and we are alone in the dark night.’  
‘She was once there, behind that door;  
And you heard a passing whisper  
Every so often.’ ‘And now Momma  
is dead.’  
‘Remember? Then we weren’t in peace  
so much, between us...’ ‘Now we are  
better...’  
‘Now that there is no one to be pleased  
with us...’  
‘and no one who forgives us’”  
(*Poesie*, Garzanti, Milan, 1994, pp. 354–55).

Victory or condemnation: they are two different, contrasting ways of living solitude. Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who died at Auschwitz, testifies to this in a brilliant way: “I know two sorts of loneliness. One makes me feel dreadfully unhappy, lost and forlorn, the other makes me feel strong and happy. The first always appears when I feel out of touch with my fellow men, with everything, when I am com-

pletely cut off from others and from myself and can see no purpose in life or any connection between things, nor have the slightest idea where I fit in. With the other kinds of loneliness, by contrast, I feel very strong and certain and connected with everyone and everything and with God, and realize that I can manage on my own and that I am not dependent on others. Then I know that I am part of a meaningful whole and that I can impart a great deal of strength to others" (*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 82). What makes the difference, therefore, between the two different kinds of loneliness is not whether one is alone or in a crowd, but whether one lives a life full of meaning or not.

**The psychiatrist Eugenio Borgna, who for his entire life faced** the drama of the kind of solitude caused by mental illness, helps us to identify what is at stake in the difference between the two forms of solitude: "Solitude and isolation are two radically different ways of life, despite the fact they are often equated. Being alone does not mean feeling alone, but rather temporarily separating oneself from the world of persons and things, from daily concerns, to enter into one's own interiority and imagination—without losing the desire and longing for relationships with others: with loved ones and with the tasks life has entrusted to us. We are isolated, instead, when we close in on ourselves, either because other people reject us or, more often, dragged by our own indifference, by a gloomy selfishness that is the effect of an arid or withered heart" ("La solitudine come rifugio ai tempi del social network" [Solitude, a refuge in the age of social networks], interview by Luciana Sica, *la Repubblica*, January 18, 2011).

That is to say, these two mind-sets are not automatically imposed in human life, as if a person could do nothing. In every human act, freedom is always at play. Consequently, a person chooses to either "be alone," in other words to temporarily separate from people and things in order to discover the meaning of himself, or to "isolate oneself," closing in on oneself because there is nothing outside of oneself to discover.

A person, then, is not condemned to live solitude in an enclosure, without ties to anything or anyone, no matter the situation in which one finds oneself, with all one's wounds and "cracks," as a well-known author attests in her article entitled, in English, "The Crack Inside Me": "Since my adolescence, and maybe even before that, I always had the sense that I was born with something wrong with me. Something that didn't work like it should, as if I were a house and that defect was a deep crack in a weight-bearing wall. [...] It was that malaise described by one of Montale's poems: 'It was the strangled rivulet gurgling, it was the shriveling of parched leaves, it was the horse falling heavily.' We studied it at school, but no one in the class asked if it might be talking about us. As a girl, I'd look at myself in the mirror in the morning, smile, think of that crack inside and say to myself, 'go on, what are you worried about? You're young, you're beautiful.' However, as I grew older, the crack seemed to get deeper, a black mark on the white wall inside me. It grew wider, into a melancholy that became a disease: severe depression. I

would go to doctors, they'd treat me, and I'd feel better, but then intermittently that crack would show up again, painfully, whispering, 'You're not healed' [...]. I read Mounier, who wrote, 'God enters through our wounds.' I thought about it: was that crack a hole in an otherwise impermeable wall, a necessary wound? [...] Why this wound? Without it, I who am physically healthy, well-off, and quite fortunate would not need anything. My salvation is that broken wall, that fissure in the dam: through it, a gush of uninhibited grace can enter, making fertile what was dry and hardened" (M. Corradi, "La mia crepa" [The crack inside me], *Tempi*, October 19, 2017, p. 46). This is the dramatic tension, the struggle Etty Hillesum describes: "Yes, we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. And we have to take everything that comes: the bad with the good, which does not mean we cannot devote our life to curing the bad. But we must know what motives inspire our struggle, and we must begin with ourselves, every day anew" (*Letters and Diaries*, p. 463).

What could motivate us to take on this struggle? Only a love for ourselves. In fact, even the deepest suffering can bring us to discover horizons that were absolutely unknown before that suffering; but to be open to that possibility, you have to look at suffering with that positive openness that defines the nature of human freedom at its depths: "Suffering at the level of one's soul," Borgna writes, "is an experience that is part



of life, and one that cannot be considered as merely the result of a pathology.” Suffering at the level of the soul is rooted in human experience and cannot be reduced to any pathology. “Even in depression and anxiety, [...] suffering loses none of its dignity. [...] It drastically broadens our inclinations toward introspection, toward the search for deeper interior experiences” (E. Borgna, *La solitudine dell’anima* [The solitude of the soul], Feltrinelli, Milan, 2013, p. 51). We return to Hillesum, who confirms this: “If all this suffering does not help us to broaden our horizon, to attain a greater humanity by shedding all trifling and irrelevant issues, then it will all have been for nothing” (*Letters and Diaries*, p. 502).

**This, then, is the true nature** of the loneliness that isolates us: “Solitude, in fact, does not signify to be alone, but the absence of meaning” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queens, Montreal, 1997, p. 85). A person does not feel alone because he is alone, but because the meaning that gives perspective and substance to every instant, that binds us to others and to things, is missing.

And it seems to me that this lack of meaning is the most widespread marker of life today, as Umberto Galimberti recognizes: “In 1979 when I began working as a psychoanalyst, the problems were grounded in emotions, feelings, and sexuality. Now they concern the void of meaning.” This does not just apply to a particular age group. You can already live “old age at twenty years old”; and, in fact, “Young people today are not well, but they do not even understand why. They lack purpose” (U. Galimberti, “A 18 anni via da casa: ci vuole un servizio civile di 12 mesi” [Out of the house at 18: what’s needed is 12 months of civil service], interview by S. Lorenzetto, *Corriere della Sera*, September 15, 2019).

Teilhard de Chardin predicted this over 60 years ago: “The greatest danger which today’s humanity need fear is not a catastrophe which comes from out there somewhere, a stellar catastrophe, neither is it famine, nor even disease; rather it is spiritual malady, which is the most terrible malady because the most directly human among the scourges is to remain ‘without the taste for life’” (*The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Row, New York,

1959, pp. 230–31). This loss makes a person increasingly fragile within the context of society, and the bitter fruit of that vulnerability is living alienated from oneself and from others; in other words, isolated despite being surrounded by people.

### 3. Solitude, the place to discover our original companionship

There is yet another kind of solitude, the one that prompted the Latin expression that is attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “*O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*” [O happy solitude, O sole happiness]. This is the opposite of isolation. If we do not stifle the need for meaning that, in any case, always remains inside the human heart, and instead look at it in its entirety, it will lead us to discover deep within ourselves a “companionship more original to us than our solitude.” The need for a reason to live is, in fact, “not generated by my own will; it is given to me.” That need is an essential part of our “I” but we do not produce it; it comes from outside. Therefore, “before solitude there is companionship, which embraces my solitude. Because of this, solitude is no longer true solitude, but a crying out to that hidden companionship” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 56).

What is this “hidden companionship?” How can we discover it? “To be conscious of oneself right to the core is to perceive, at the depths of the self, an Other. [...] The ‘I,’ the human being, is that level of nature in which nature becomes aware of not being made by itself. In this way, the entire cosmos is like the continuation of my body. [...] I am because I am made. [...] So I do not conscious-

“If we do not stifle the need for meaning that, in any case, always remains inside the human heart, and instead look at it in its entirety, it will lead us to discover deep within ourselves a ‘companionship more original to us than our solitude.’”

ly say ‘I am,’ in a sense that captures my entire stature as a human being if I do not mean ‘I am made’” (ibid., p. 106).

Etty Hillesum testifies to this in a powerful way in her *Diaries*: “There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again” (*Letters and Diary*, p. 91). She later adds, “If, after a long and arduous process, day in, day out, you manage to come to grips with your inner sources, with God, in short, and if only you make certain that your path to God is unblocked—which you can do by ‘working on yourself—then you can keep renewing yourself at these inner sources and never again be afraid of wasting your strength” (ibid., p. 535).

It is a matter, then, of acknowledging and living one’s relationship with the Other—with God, the infinite—a relationship that is within the reach of everyone, no matter his or her circumstances. Borgna affirms this: “Even when we are alone [...] it is possible for us to listen to the infinite inside of us. [...] The infinite, that secret dimension of life, is inside us: alive and throbbing; and cannot be erased except to the degree we let ourselves be enticed and devoured by the noise and tumult outside” (*La solitudine dell’anima*, p. 24). This Other, this infinite, can only be reached by those who fully engage with the depths of themselves, without letting themselves be devoured by distraction.

“Life, then, expresses itself, first of all, as consciousness of the relationship with he who made it [...]. Only in the discovery of Being as love which gives of Itself continually [making me right now] is solitude eliminated.” There is an Other who wants me to exist, for whom my existence is precious, and thanks to whom I am never alone. Therefore, “Existence is realized, in substance, as dialogue with the Great Presence which constitutes it—it is an in-

separable companion. The company is *in* our 'I.' There is nothing we do by ourselves [because we are generated in every instant by an Other]. Every human friendship [every attempt to find an answer to that solitude] is the reverberation of the original structure of being [in other words, of the original companionship an Other offers by giving us life right now], and if this is denied, its truth is in jeopardy" (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queens, Montreal, 1998, p. 90). To explain this, Fr. Giussani uses an analogy: "True self-consciousness is well portrayed by the baby in the arms of his mother and father—supported like this, he can enter any situation whatsoever, profoundly tranquil, with a promise of peace and joy. No curative system can claim this, without mutilating the person. Often, in order to excise the censure of certain wounds we end up censoring our humanity" (*The Religious Sense*, p. 106–7), with the result of making life even more painfully dramatic. Despite the possibility of discovering this companionship within us, which is open to everyone, man is so fragile that he often remains a prisoner to circumstances and asks himself, "Who will deliver me from this mortal situation?" In fact, even "in today's world, so devoid of presence, in which man is so solitary, [...] so alone and therefore so likely to yield (he is as fragile as a child, but it is repugnant because he is no longer a child, he is an 'adult child,' prey to whomever gets to him first, grabs him first; incapable of cultivating critical judgment, of using the categories of 'better' or

'not as good'); in a world in which man is so enslaved to those who, by whatever means, appear stronger than he; in this world, deep down, the expectation and waiting for salvation is still intact" (L. Giussani, *In cammino* [On the journey]: 1992–1998, BUR, Milan, 2014, p. 43).

That expectation and waiting finds the widest variety of expressions and persists despite today's widespread nihilism. One emblematic case is that of the French novelist Michel Houellebecq, who identifies the need for salvation with the desire to be loved; in other words, to not be alone. It is an ineradicable desire deeply woven into every human being, even an ardent nonbeliever like Houellebecq. In a public letter to Bernard-Henri Lévy, he describes that indestructible expectation, saying, "More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be loved. On each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream. Life is limited and forgiveness, impossible. But thought was powerless, the desire persisted—and, I have to admit, persists to this day" (F. Sinisi, "Michel Houellebecq: 'La vita è rara,'" book review, *Tracce*, n. 6/2019, p. 65). You see how irreducible humanity is: the desire to be loved persists, and our experience continually attests to this.

#### **4. Solitude can only be overcome by a presence**

With that, we return to Leopardi and the "vast solitude" of the nomadic shepherd in Asia, the metaphor for the person walking a jour-

ney. For two thousand years, that person—who is each one of us—has been reached by an announcement: that God, the origin of all that exists, became man. What that "infinite calm" and "boundless atmosphere" point to is "God made man." And "when you discover that the value of all things is the Word incarnate [...] the calm and deep black of the sky [...] become rich and beautiful. You look at them more with greater peace, for example, because you know where you will end up with them; you know they will not be taken away, that you will enjoy them forever" (L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* [Affection and place], BUR, Milan, 2001, pp. 413–14).

This is an experience Fr. Giussani had firsthand, so he is a trustworthy witness for anyone who finds him- or herself experiencing solitude. In his last interview with *Corriere della Sera*, on the day of his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday (October 15, 2004), just a few months before he died, he summarized, in a way, the trajectory of his long life, saying, "Today, man is living a sort of existential dyspepsia, an alteration of his elementary functions, which divides him. [...] To the brutal loneliness to which man calls himself, as if to save himself from an earthquake, Christianity is offered as an answer. The Christian finds a positive answer [to this existential situation] in the fact that God has become man; this is the event that surprises and comforts what would otherwise be a misfortune. And God cannot conceive of his own actions toward man if not as a 'generous challenge' to his freedom." God does not impose



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upon men and women, but rather waits to be freely welcomed. Therefore, “the modern objection that Christianity and the Church reduce man’s freedom is nullified by the adventure of God’s relationship with man. Whereas, because of a limited idea of freedom, it is inconceivable for man today that God should involve himself in such a narrow relationship as that with man, almost denying Himself. This is the tragedy: man seems increasingly more concerned with affirming his own freedom than with acknowledging God’s magnanimity, the one thing that determines the measure of man’s participation in reality and thus truly frees him” (“God’s Commitment with Man’s Brutal Loneliness,” interview by Gian Guido Vecchi, published in *Traces*, November 2004).

**A presence. That is the greatest challenge** to human reason and freedom, and the answer to the search for meaning—a presence that offers true companionship to the person aware of the powerlessness that constitutes him. “I have loved you with an everlasting love, because I have drawn you to me, having pity on your nothingness” (cf. *Jer* 31:3). God was so moved by the nothingness we are, by the solitude we do not know how to conquer through our own efforts, that He sent His Son into the world. And, like the Father, Jesus, too had infinite pity on those who ran

into Him in the course of their lives. There is an episode in the Gospel that describes that living compassion: Jesus is walking through the fields with His disciples when he sees a procession. It is the funeral for the only son of a widow. He draws near to her and says, “Do not weep” (*Lk* 7:11–17). Who knows how she must have felt in that embrace that exceeded every human emotion and restored her hope! That death was not the end of everything; that widowed mother was not condemned to be left alone because the seed of the resurrection was present in that man who spoke those unimaginable words to her and immediately afterward gave her back her son, alive. So then, suffering—which often isolates us and pulls apart relationships, even the closest ones—is no longer a roadblock but a “problem,” as C.S. Lewis writes: “In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving” (*The Problem of Pain*, Harper Collins, New York, 2015, p. 14). That great expert of the human drama, Paul Claudel, observes, “One question constantly presents itself in the soul of one who is sick [it also applies to a person feeling solitude]: ‘Why? Why me? Why do I have to suffer?’ [...]”

The only one capable of responding to that terrible question, the oldest question of Humanity, which Job provided the almost official and liturgical form of, was God, who was directly addressed and called upon. The question was so immense that only the Word could address it, providing not an explanation, but a presence, according to those words of the Gospel: ‘I have not come to explain, to disperse doubts with an explanation, but to fill, or better, to replace the very need for an explanation with my presence.’ The Son of God did not come to destroy suffering, but rather to suffer with us” (*Toi, qui es-tu?* Gallimard, Paris, 1936, pp. 112–13; translation ours). In other words, He came into the world to accompany us as we suffer; He came to keep man company in all the situations in which he finds himself.

In that sense, faith offers this contribution to resolving the human problem: placing the person in the optimal conditions to seek an answer to that solitude that, as we recalled at the beginning, “is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity.” To the question of the nomadic shepherd, Christianity responds with a presence that accompanies man within the concreteness of his existence. Is not a presence what we need to be able to face our daily toil without fear? Is this not what people who are aging and alone need? “Getting older [...] you become more solitary, but with solitude you are increasingly aware of what dominates all that surrounds us, the heavens and the earth. It is what my poor mother said to me, going to Mass

early in the morning, at 5:30, one day at the end of winter when spring was already coming. I was five years old and was trailing behind her; she was walking at a brisk pace. In the total serenity of morning, with a single star left in the sky, [...] she said to me [...]: ‘How beautiful the world is and how great God is.’ [...] It is irrational to think of contingent realities, in which nothing makes itself, without bringing in that mysterious thing from which everything flows, from which everything draws its being. ‘How beautiful the world is and, therefore, how great the One who is making it!’” (L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà* [Event of freedom], Marietti 1820, Genoa, 2002, p. 14).

**For a person who is self-aware**, solitude can be a daily companion, a friend, because it is full of that uninterrupted dialogue with the mystery that makes all things and that became man, remaining present in history through a human reality made up of men and women who are the sign of that presence. This is the contribution faith offers—not to tolerate suffering, but to accept it and live it, as challenging and painful as that is, in the awareness that someone is present who has forged an unbreakable alliance with our heart, and for whom we are precious, just as we are. Pope Francis described solitude as “the drama [...] experienced by countless men and women. I think of the elderly, abandoned even by their loved ones and children; widows and widowers; the many men and women left by their spouses; all those who feel alone, misunderstood and un-

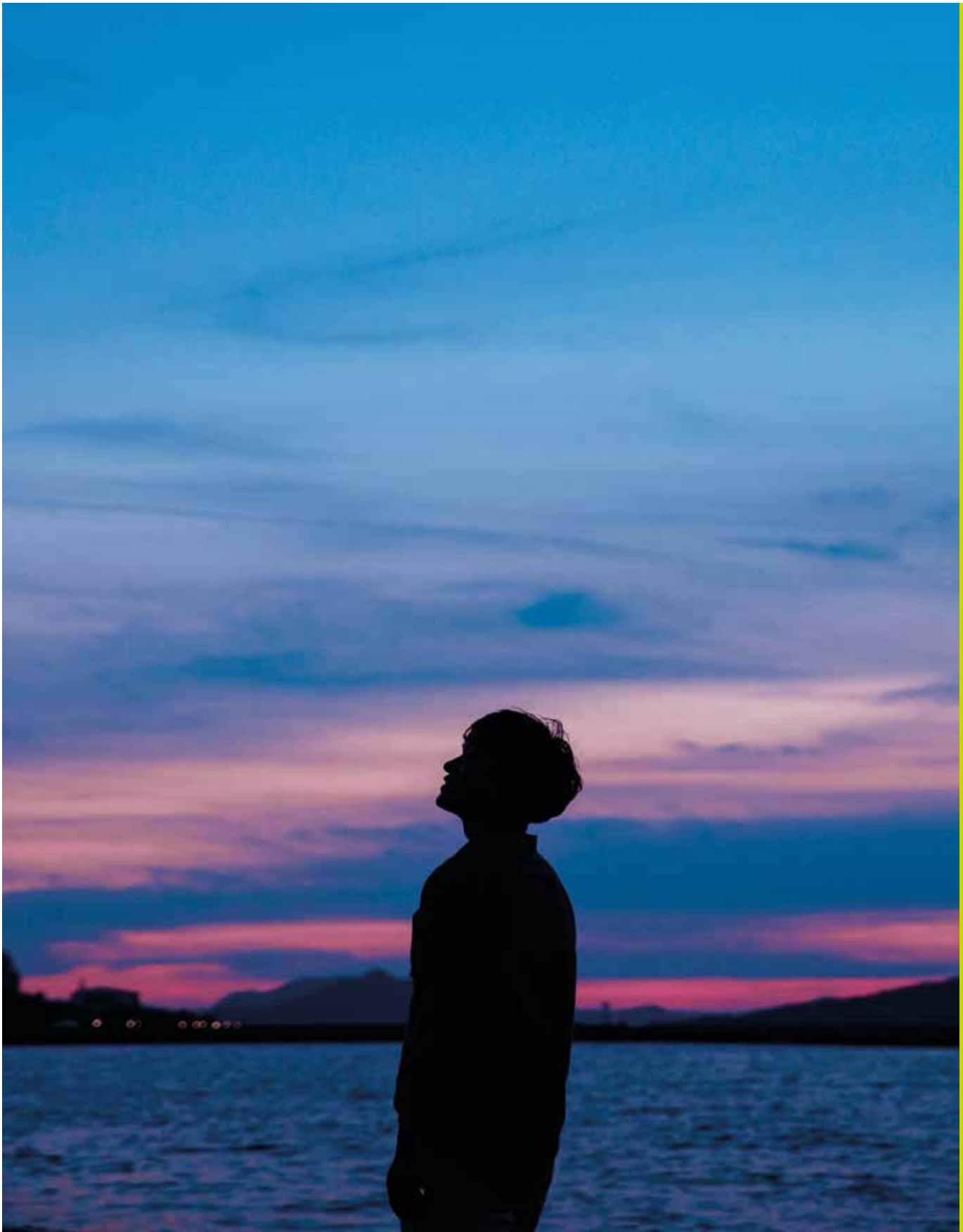
heard; migrants and refugees fleeing from war and persecution; and those many young people who are victims of the culture of consumerism, the culture of waste, the throwaway culture” (“Homily for the Holy Mass for the Opening of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 4, 2015).

A cry rises up from all of this wounded humanity, calling each of us to a responsibility. Think how many people are alone because no one gazes upon them, no one says to them, “You have a value. Just as you are, you are worth more than the entire universe!” That is the witness of the many people who dedicate their lives to the aging through a myriad of initiatives—and all of you are a striking example—fighting against what the pope calls the “throwaway culture.” People with an outlook that knows how to highlight the rich legacy of life offered by the aging and keep them company on the last leg of their journey offer a crucial contribution in responding to the lack of meaning at the origin of that solitude—the form that is an enemy—to which more and more men and women, young and old, are condemned today: those cast aside because they are considered useless. No one is useless. Every person has an immeasurable value, as the Gospel reminds us: “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?” (*Mt* 16:26). Can you imagine a fuller affirmation of the absolute dignity of every single person, or a more ennobling gaze upon humanity? ■

# Close-up

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# “I am not alone”

A desire to have children that was not granted and the experience of feeling lost, unworthy, unhappy... The story of Monica and the tiny crack that opened up a new horizon.



Luca Fiore

“I got married two years ago and I hoped to have children right away. After one year had passed, we thought that they would have arrived, but it did not happen.” Monica has been living in the Netherlands for five years; she came from Italy after winning a grant to conduct research in neuroscience. Today she is an assistant professor and teaches classes on neural networks to bioengineering students. She is part of the brain-drain phenomenon, giving her best far away from home. Looking beyond her academic success, Monica is a young woman marked by the convergence of energy and fragility that characterizes many people of her generation. Before she moved to the Netherlands, even though she was far from the large Italian communities, she participated in the life of Communion and Liberation, and she has had to rediscover its value in dealing with the adversities of life. She again saw this value when she was wounded at a delicate, intimate level. Her story from the last few months takes us to the depths of solitude and then back up again, where the life of those who have emerged from rock bottom finds strength in a mature certainty.

“As time went by, the desire to have a child grew stronger and more persistent. After a few months had passed, I became unhappy and angry.” Her husband stayed by her side patiently. She felt ever more consumed by this desire that had not been fulfilled. “My life had become a burden. I couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Last summer, Monica spoke with her friend Paul, who said that he and his wife Sari had also struggled to conceive children. This was very painful for them but

did not keep him from being at peace. Monica, who was struck to the heart, was full of questions and almost irritated, more by Paul’s smile than by his words. He and Sari were always smiling, which provoked Monica. She went to see Paul one day and asked, “How can you smile like that?” With simplicity he confided, “Perhaps we will never have children. Sari began to work in a school and maybe she can be more useful in the world by staying with those kids instead of remaining at home with a child of our own.” Monica realized that their outlook was more open than hers, and she thought to herself that she wanted to be like that.

**The end of her vacation was marked by work.** Monica had to turn in an application to finance a research project. She dove into it headlong, with the hope of being able to forget the thoughts that nagged at her. She spent a month doing nothing else, even working on weekends. “I was suffocating my desire, and even my work, which I had always loved, had become unbearable. After I turned in the application, everything fell apart.” The crisis started in a conversation with colleagues that began with innocent questions such as, “How are things at home? How is your husband doing?” Then came the fatal question: “When are you going to have kids? Or do you not want them?” Monica burst into tears and tried to explain her situation. Then she apologized and said, “I know that my happiness does not depend upon having children,” but even as she was saying those words, she thought to herself, “Monica, that is not true. Those words may have been true in the past, but now you don’t believe them....”

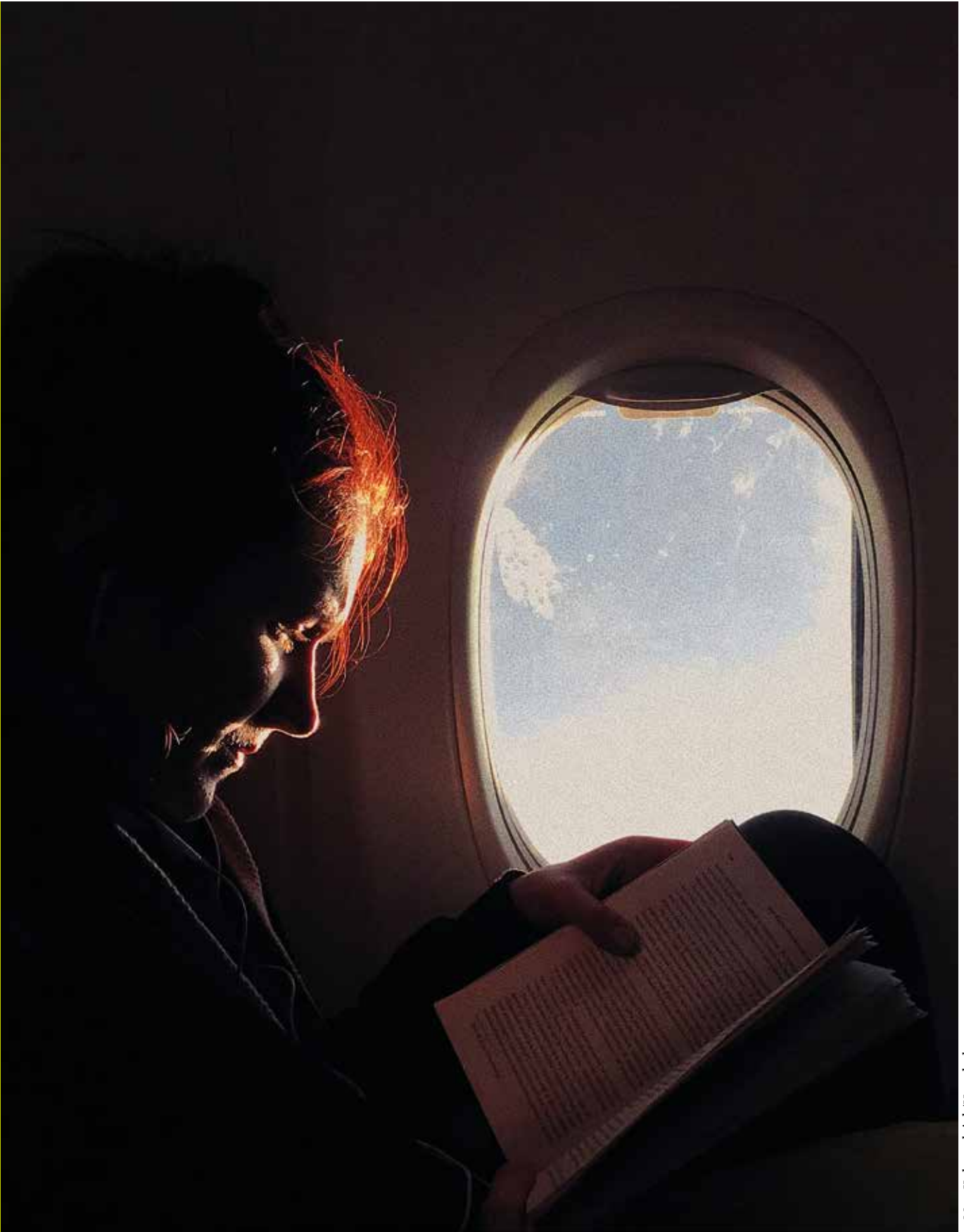
*“The desire for children has not diminished, but I no longer saw it as an enemy. Now it is a friend that helps me discover who I am and what makes me happy.”*

This conversation caused a shock that opened a little crack in the fortress she had built around her unhappiness. During the subsequent days, she thought about the smile on Sari’s and Paul’s faces. “My desire for happiness in the present, at that moment, became stronger than my desire to have the child that was apparently not coming. The pain that had caused my unhappiness and loneliness became bigger than the assumption that my happiness would come about in the way I wanted it to. I understood that I wanted to experience the peace that Sari and Paul had. If they could be happy even though they could not have children, it meant that I could also experience this happiness. But how? The only solution I saw was to follow what they were following. I began to feel the need to find friends to do School of Community with [editor’s note: the weekly catechesis proposed by CL].” While Paul and Sari lived in the southern part of the Netherlands where the movement is more widespread, Monica lives in the northern part of the country. Her friends live an hour or more away, and for a long time it was difficult to see each other very often. Still, the desire to accompany each other grew stronger in Monica, in her husband, and in some of their friends, so much so that in spite of the distance, a new group of School of Community was born.

**Monica came upon this sentence in the text of the Beginning Day:** “If we are not attracted like this [to Christ], we are like a loose cannon, at the mercy of the tides of our thoughts, reactions, way of thinking, and way of facing things. In other words, abandoned to nothingness. The difference is crystal clear when we happen upon a person who is entirely seized, to the core of her being. This is faith.” She gathered all of the courage and honesty she was able to muster and broke the silence, telling her friends that she was a “loose cannon” haunted by her thoughts. She asked them how it was possible to find peace, and for the first time in months, she realized that she was open to an answer. In the face of a situation so radically important, friends cannot cheat, so they tried to describe to her how life could come back together. “All of these testimonies pointed to one thing—that life begins again when we abandon ourselves to the mystery.” She recalled the moment when she finally surrendered and began to trust once and for all after a battle that had lasted too long. Her days no longer began with an expectation, but with a curiosity that led her to ask herself, “How will life surprise me today?” As the weeks went by, she cherished the meeting of the School of Community more and more. “It is the place where my mind reopens. It helps me

look at things in a different way. It did not happen overnight, but today I find myself totally changed. I am no longer crushed by that desire. The answer I had given to my colleagues, well, has now taken on a new meaning. Yes, it is possible to be happy even when you cannot have children. What Giusani writes in *Generating Traces in the History of the World* is true: the encounter does not just create a place for relationships, but it becomes the way to face everything you come up against.”

**The desire for children** has not diminished, and sometimes it is still hard to bear. Nevertheless, she feels a note of peace in her life that was not there before. “What should I do about this desire?” she asked Fr. Julián Carrón during his visit last December. He answered, “You can use it to look more intensely for the One who can fill your heart completely.” Monica took this hypothesis seriously and her way of looking at things changed. “I no longer saw my desire as an enemy or a curse. Now it is a friend that helps me discover who I am and what makes me happy. Today I may still cry—we don’t turn into superheroes—but I don’t feel despair anymore. My desire is embraced and all of my life, beginning with my relationships at work, has been regenerated.” ■



# The *secret* *companionship* of Parker



Guadalupe Arbona Abascal

Through “an extravagant encounter,” a young man who suffers a sense of abandonment discovers a “second solitude” that drives him to set out on a new journey and to pronounce his true name. This is why it is so worthwhile to re-read the extraordinary story of the last of Flannery O’Connor’s characters.

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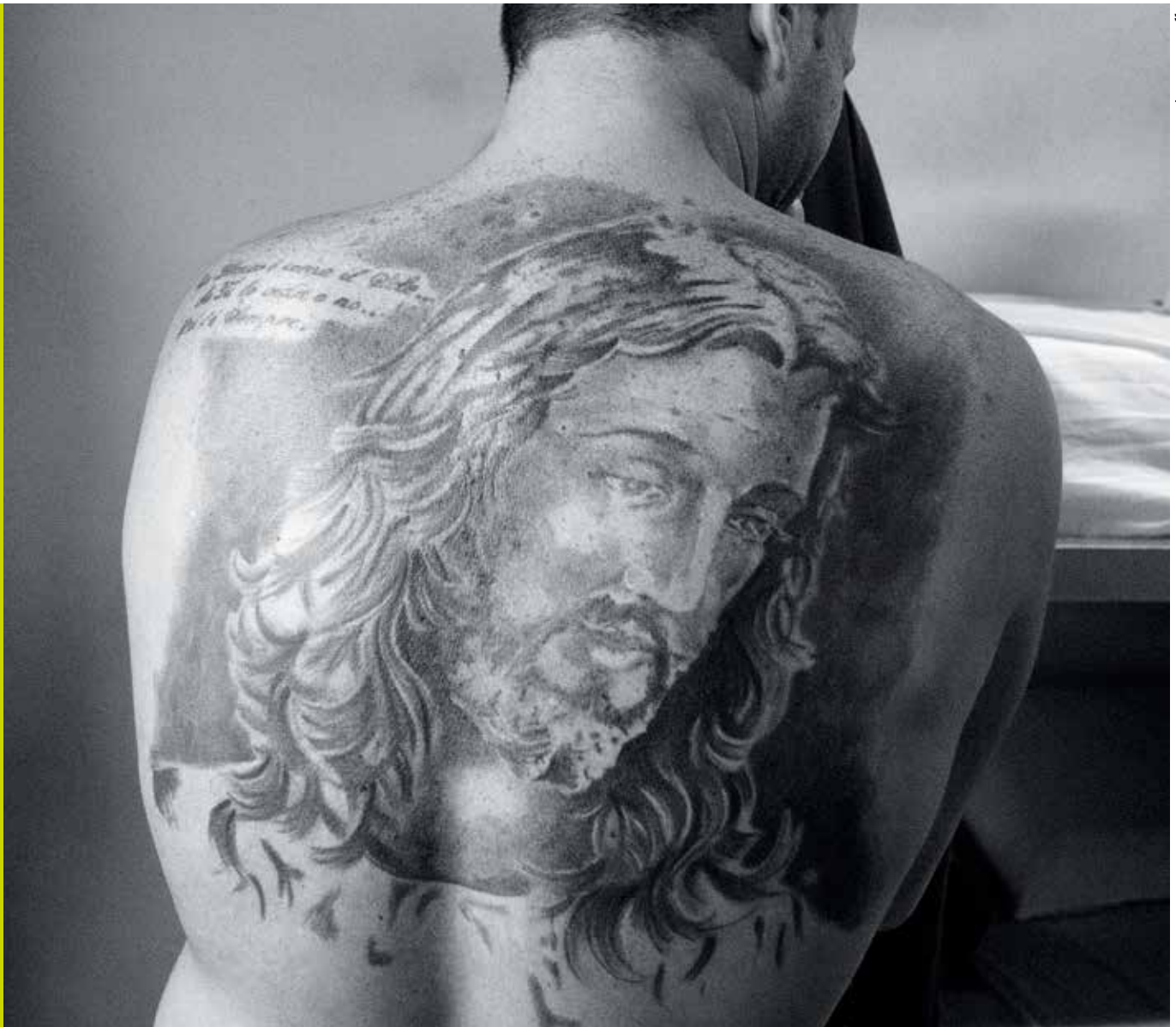
“Parker’s Back,” one of the most famous short stories of the great American writer Flannery O’Connor, tells the story of O.E. Parker, a poor devil born in the American South. It is the story of a child burdened by solitude, whose mother works in a laundry and provides for him but has little time to dedicate to him. He drops out of school at 16 and attends trade school for a while, but ends up leaving this too, and drifts aimlessly. Imagine his solitude, a source of fear and trembling, born of the feeling of being abandoned. Parker is “as ordinary as a loaf of bread,” says the narrator. As a child, always with his mouth open, he had never felt wonder at anything, and “it did not enter into his head that there was

anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed.” He felt the weariness of an old man, the sensation that everything he saw or found could be abandoned without harm or sense of loss, like everything in his life. After his childhood, Parker’s life could have continued in this way, accumulating junk that would have left him sadder and more alone, in a continuing process of collecting rejections and abandonments. Contemporary literature has accustomed us to these vagabond lives that go from one place to another with a growing feeling of bitterness, avoiding commitment to people and things, in order not to have to separate from them. It is no wonder. It is well-known that when life is oppressive and disappointments

follow one upon the other, we may seek to survive by avoiding new things in order to suffer less. The consequences are that the space around us closes in and we reject relationships and bonds, ending up by embracing a bitter solitude that grips our hearts.

**But this is not the journey** that Flannery O’Connor wanted for her last character. The Southern writer penned this story behind her doctors’ backs, as she was being treated for an illness that would kill her at the age of 39, a few days after she finished it.

When Parker was 14 years old, something happened to him, a truly extravagant event that brought restlessness into his life. “He saw a man



in a fair, tattooed from head to foot. Except for his loins [...], the man's skin was patterned in [...] a single intricate design of brilliant color." In that moment, "a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed."

His fascination with the figures and decorations on the man at the fair generated such an attraction in him that he decided to leave school, his mother who would "drag him off to a revival," his drinking and fighting. He dedicated all his efforts to earning enough money to get himself tattooed with hearts, animals, kings, names, anchors, and famous people. Such was the passion evoked by the tattoos that he joined the Navy and traveled the world. His interest in the tattooed life on his body led him to the ends of the earth. He desired colors and to live not outside himself, but inside, inscribed on

his flesh, drawn on his skin. The driving force of solitude pushed him to seek life in the pictures that became his companions.

**He became an expert in tattoos** and covered his body with them. He felt strong emotion when he thought of a new image, and he pursued it impatiently until he could see it incarnated. He sought out the best artists and tried various tattooing techniques during his travels. But soon

after each tattoo, he would become deeply disappointed—"a huge dissatisfaction would come over him." None of his pictures seemed sufficient to quell his desire. Then he would feel another solitude, different from that of abandonment. It was a solitude that crept in subtly in the form of a question: his life was full of color, but the solitude under each new picture persisted. Was there perhaps a force that drove him toward something absent, something that could give meaning to the various pictures? This second solitude was silent and seemed to be rooted in his being, and unleashed a strong emotion in him, a sort of vibration that would lead him to a new journey in three stages.

In the first stage, he returned weary to his hometown and, guided by a strange instinct, decided to marry a poor woman, the rigid daughter of a Baptist preacher. From the moment they met, she rejected his tattoos, could not stand them, and saw them as "vanity of vanities." Yet Parker felt bound to her by an indomitable force. Could it be because she was the one girl who told him openly that she did not approve of his tattoos? Was it possible that he wanted to understand the meaning of this rejection?

Mysteriously, the unpleasant and small-minded woman

transmitted her crude perception of an angry God who only forbids. Life with her was so unrewarding that "dissatisfaction began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo." After years of keeping his back free of tattoos, he decided to have one done to demonstrate to his wife that his desire to be tattooed was not mere vanity. He decided to have one done that would please her.

**The paradox of this woman is** that even though she was unpleasant and small-minded, she introduced into Parker's life a sense of the divine, however distorted. Thus Parker's restlessness and enthusiasm to find the right picture grew. As he was driving a tractor for his employer, he was so distracted by the thought of what he should have tattooed on his back that he crashed into a tree, and the tractor burst into flames with a devouring fire that reminds us of the first revelation of God on Sinai to Moses. Parker was thrown into the air, and as he fell, yelled "GOD ABOVE!"

In this second stage of his journey, he felt "the hot breath of the burning tree," and his desire to cry to God and to set himself in motion reinforced his in-



*“Life was full of color, but the solitude persisted. Was there a force that drove him toward something absent, something that could give meaning to the various pictures?”*

tention to have a tattoo of God done on his back, an image that would give meaning to his life, among the arabesque of other tattooed lives. The companionship that he was seeking pursued him in an extravagant way, with the intent of never leaving him alone.

Parker rushed in a daze to get the best tattoo in the city. He wanted a tattoo of God. This was what he needed on his back! Driven by an unnatural and urgent fervor, he hurriedly flipped through the pages of the catalogue of divine figures offered by the artist, and when he reached that of a Byzantine Christ he felt attracted and ecstatic. He recognized in the Christ “with all-demanding eyes” what he wanted tattooed on his back, the part of his body he had preserved untattooed for years. Parker had been *pursued* and taken from behind: he had been the one to choose the previous figures, but this new image imposed itself on him like a restless need. It was not a whim. The image in the catalogue assumed the dynamic of an unexpected event that demanded to be accepted. And thus, drawn forcefully by Christ, he invested his money in this detailed and expensive tattoo and insisted the artist do it immediately as he was impatient to see the results.

But in the third stage of his journey, when he returned home after

being humiliated by the regulars in the pool hall over such an image, he realized that he could never be free of the eyes tattooed on his back. He had been fascinated with the man at the fair, had pursued the woman who would become his wife, and had cried to God in front of the burning tree. Now, that figure on his back enabled him to begin a process of self-recognition. At the beginning of the story, Parker’s tattoos were described as something poorly done, whose “effect was not one of an intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched,” but the last tattoo corresponded to what he had been searching for, and it commanded him. “All at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spiderweb soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.”

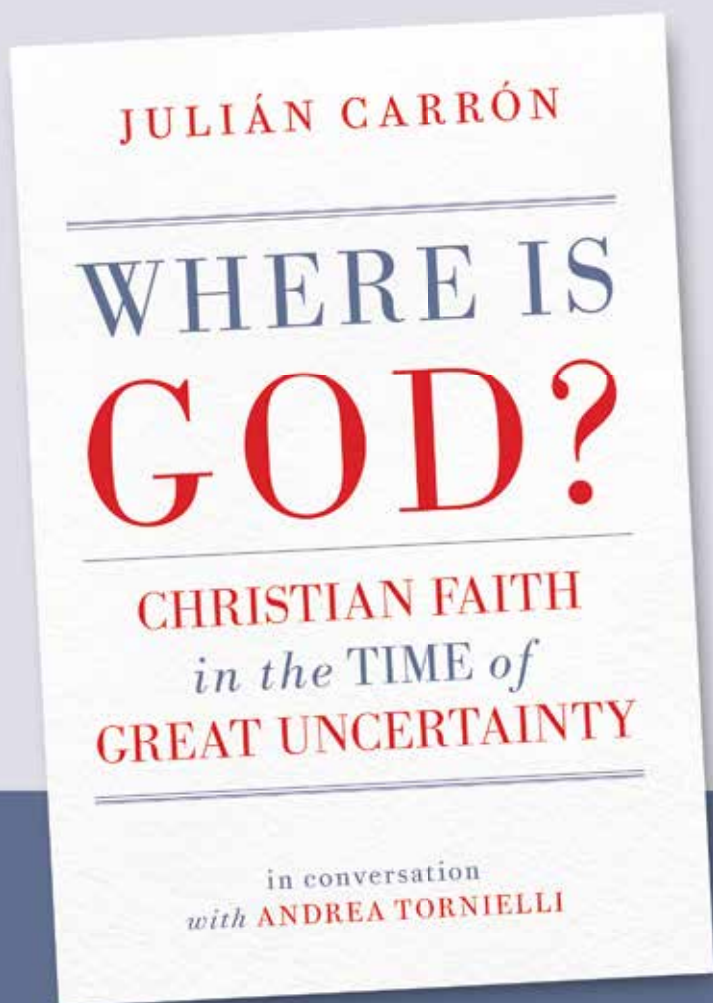
**The discovery of this new harmony,** this joyful personality, was followed by a dramatic event—when he returned home after the destruction of his employer’s tractor and a night away, he found that his wife had locked him out. She demanded that he say who he was, and he finally whispered through the keyhole the name he had hidden from everyone but her, all his life: he had been baptized Obadiah Elihue. (*Abdia* means “Servant of Yahweh” and *elia* means

“Yahweh is God” or “He is God”.)

O’Connor’s closing line recounted with tenderness: “There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.” He recognized himself, said his name, and cried like a baby because he felt reborn. Parker’s solitude led him to discover a secret companionship that preceded him, finally reached him, fascinated him, and became flesh of his flesh.

I have always prized this story because it speaks of the companionship that I, too, have sought, often groping around like Parker, driven by the desire to bear it inscribed under my skin as a part of myself. Fortuitous and unforeseen circumstances that might easily not have happened suddenly revealed that this companionship was seeking me and pursuing me, though I had not realized it. This companionship became a whisper or a cry in my words and a verse in my jottings, and suddenly called and entered gratuitously, even to the point of arriving in the flesh. I have discovered it as the supreme presence, one that at times is recognized as the ultimate objective of the impulse and movement of solitude.

Therefore I cry with Parker and discover that in my solitude there dwells a desire for His companionship that says more about me than I can say about myself. ■



# WHERE IS GOD?

CHRISTIAN FAITH  
*in the TIME of*  
GREAT UNCERTAINTY

Julián Carrón  
*in conversation with*  
Andrea Torielli

Should we battle a plural and relativistic society by raising barriers and walls, or should we accept the opportunity to announce the Gospel in a new way? This is the challenge Christians are facing today.

In an extended interview with Vatican expert Andrea Torielli, Julián Carrón examines the historical moment we are living through in order to revive the essential core of Christian faith. Starting from the realization that the world is experiencing an evolution in which the difficulty of finding shared values and natural morality makes sincere dialogue between believers and non-believers challenging, Carrón reflects on the possibility of communicating the essence of the Christian faith in a form that can inspire interest in modern times.

Addressing the central questions concerning the announcement of Christian faith in today's less regimented society, *Where Is God?* discovers and rediscovers the contents of Christianity and asks how they can be witnessed again in a society that is not yet post-Christian, but potentially headed in that direction.

Julián Carrón is President of the Fraternity of the lay Movement of Communion and Liberation and Professor of Theology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

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