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***What we are
learning***

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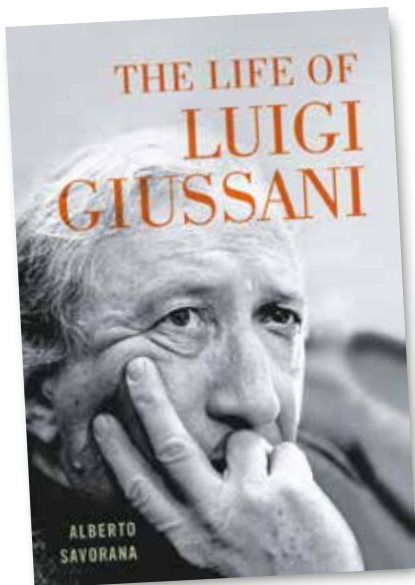
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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The touch of the Mystery



1,416 pages | December 2017

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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The time of our judgment

It was a historic moment, one that was immediately stamped into our memory and will remain fixed there forever. The darkness falling over the empty square. The rain that fell harder and harder. And a man dressed in white who, standing before the crucified, called out to God with the words of the disciples: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” Do you not care *about me, about us*? It was a scene similar to those we would see two weeks later in an equally unprecedented Holy Week: Holy Thursday Mass *in Coena Domini*, the Way of the Cross, Easter... all pared down to their bare essentials. The pope and a handful of others—and the presence of Christ.

That prayer at the end of March, with Pope Francis crying out in a square that had never been so deserted, laid out a road, an invaluable road for those trying to follow. As the pope said, this unrivaled circumstance—capable of “exposing our vulnerability,” upending our “false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules,” and giving us direct experience of how much we need the risen Christ, is not a condemnation. Instead, it is an opportunity—a great one.

This is “the time of our judgment.” Not “of *Your* judgment,” Pope Francis insisted, boldly addressing God, “but of *our* judgment: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.” It is the time of conversion, where that word no longer corresponds to any kind of moralism, as if it were just an ethical effort: what is asked of us is a particular gaze on reality. *To whom do we look? What do we seek?* What is needed is a step that occurs at the level of knowledge.

This has been the message of many people, expressed in many ways, over the last weeks, and you will find examples in the following pages. If this dramatic emergency were to simply pass by without an increase in our awareness, that would be one more misfortune on top of the insupportable weight of so much death. Even worse: it would lay another stone on the tomb of our humanity, leaving us even more lost and empty than before.

Yet this dizzying time can be very different. It can be an opportunity to “reawaken our humanity,” as indicated by the title of a booklet that has come out containing an extended interview with Fr. Julián Carrón, the president of the Fraternity of CL, which, fully accounting for the “forceful irruption of reality” that “made the full weight of that need to understand, which we call ‘reason’ emerge again,” grapples with the questions we all have, skipping over nothing and taking no shortcuts. It addresses the inevitable questions that have arisen and argues that we must choose to take them seriously. This booklet (available at clonline.org) will in some way accompany our attempts to do so.

Letters

Luisella, Gladys, Marco, Davide

edited by
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Distance learning

In these days of the health care emergency, my “front line” is that I find myself in front of my students using distance learning. It’s a “front line” because although there is no risk of losing one’s physical life, there is a risk of losing our gusto for living. Each time I log on, I am assailed by their desperate cry for meaning. This cry has a thousand faces: above all of boredom, of worrying about their grandparents, the difficulty of following lessons using inadequate means, the difficulty of being with parents and siblings for such a long time, the difficulty of not seeing their friends... I am provoked and continually challenged by this swollen river of students asking me to stay with them and not just brush everything off with a “Now I’m going to explain to you how to live.” This need intersects with my own and continually opens me anew. What a great gift their faces are—they keep me wide open to recognizing him! Christ shows himself in the young boy who doesn’t let things go, in the student who’s not satisfied with a pat answer, in the student who seems so different from when he was in class, and in the one who after the first distance learning lesson—which I thought had been a disaster due to my lack of technological know-how—sent me a text thanking me. “It’s really great to have lessons with you!” What had I done? I had offered a timid yes to the modality with which Christ calls me now, aware of the possibility of participating in the salvation of these students. On Saturday, a custodian died of a sudden illness. As a physical education teacher, I had worked in the gym with this man for fifteen years. Under normal circumstances, when someone dies we exchange quick words

of condolence as we move between classes: someone might ask about the funeral, but nothing more. I was impressed by how many colleagues called me after his death, wanting me to know that they were thinking of me. One colleague said, “Fifteen years working shoulder to shoulder, it’s as if one of your brothers died.” She then asked me to pray for a relative who was in the hospital. Another, whose mom died in this period, confided that she had obtained a plenary indulgence for her and that that made her glad. Yet another colleague saw the pope’s prayer and realized that Christ is the only hope for us all. And so, my “front line” means to be present with my fragile yes, full of limitations, and to see with amazement what the Mystery is building.

Luisella, Milan (Italy)

“My vulnerability is my strength”

I am worried by the escalation of the number of dead from Covid-19 and the growing number of people testing positive for the virus. I don’t know what will happen to my country and to the world in the near future. In moments like this, all the fragility of man emerges, and it becomes clear that his attempts to solve every problem are clearly inadequate. Not even the greatest scientist of our time nor our technological inventions can save us. It is obvious that man cannot save himself. I’m certain that this pandemic didn’t come to destroy or punish us and that God knows our weaknesses better than we do. I’m sure he wants us to understand the most essential thing in life, the one that can tear us away from the nothingness that so often swallows us. What is happening is for our good, our growth, and our maturity. God is calling our attention to himself. Don Giussani tells us that God doesn’t offer consolation; consolation simply happens. The reality in front of my eyes is a witness to all this. I want to live this reality without hiding anything; in fact, I cannot hide anything because my vulnerability always emerges. This is what I want in this moment that

has become an occasion to kneel and pray that his will might be done. From this I get my strength, which allows me to pray to him all day, so that he might stay with me and we might face everything together.

Gladys, Kampala (Uganda)

“What was I thinking?”

I am a nurse on a ward dealing with the coronavirus emergency. I have made myself available from the very start, on the one hand so that I could respond to the objective needs, and on the other because of a strong desire to say yes to the huge challenge that reality has put in front of us, in the awareness that in my life, the Lord has always used my yeses to come closer to me and to make me always more his. To avoid possibly infecting others, I decided to begin living by myself. I was able to find a house and I surrounded myself with every kind of comfort to survive isolation: a computer, a tablet, wi-fi, TV series... thinking that all of this would make more bearable the work experience that so many had described as very demanding. The impact of those first days was very hard: so many patients in critical condition, the increased pace of work, the fear of not being adequately protected and of getting infected. Every night I returned home physically exhausted with the thought, “So why did I take this on, what was I thinking?” I was suffocating. Then I reread Fr. Carrón’s article in the *Corriere della Sera* and it was like taking a first breath of air in days. I then started going to work desiring that Christ would make me more open to welcoming him, and that he would show himself to me at work and at home, and to my patients. The following days were a great grace: Christ began to show himself in the flesh in the faces of my patients, some of whom were suffering greatly, but in the end were serene. All I could do for them was to keep them company to the very end. Many were totally entrusted into our hands, completely helpless yet certain of the healing presence of us doctors and nurses. I started to need to see their faces so that I could learn to live a dependence on and total abandonment to him who alone can respond to the limitless needs of my heart. Even in the continual fatigue, I am happier than I have been in a long time. This is a gladness that carries me along and embraces everything: the patients who are the most difficult to deal with, new colleagues, the loneliness of living in isolation. Everything thus becomes an opportunity to return to the only relationship that makes me more fully myself and that keeps me from succumbing.

Marco, Milan (Italy)

Jumping from the stairs

Since the quarantine started, I have been at home all day with my wife and my son. I’ve tried to keep busy by working from home, reading, listening to music, housecleaning, and grocery shopping.

But little by little, I realized that everything I was doing, even the rigorous following of the government guidelines (on which I became an expert), was nothing more than a reorganization of other habits, habits so rigorous and inflexible so that they would protect me from fear, from the dizziness I felt gnawing inside me, which I thought I could overcome by own will. All of this became utterly evident during a discussion I had with my wife. She is a doctor specializing in physiotherapy and therefore not directly involved with the emergency room. For two weeks she managed to work from home, but recently needed to go back to the hospital. I began to raise a series of objections (just and reasonable), and to propose solutions so that she could avoid returning to the hospital—to which she simply stated her desire to return to service. After a while, I realized that I was simply afraid, just as the apostles had been on the boat with Jesus; the difference was that I was afraid to say so. All my impeccable reasons, my perfect organization, were ways of avoiding the dizziness caused by a realization that my life, and the life of those I love, is out of my hands. What can overcome this fear? The most important lessons have come from my two-and-a-half-year-old son. A few days ago, I was teaching him how to jump from the stairs in our house. After every successful jump, we set the next jump from one step above the previous one. On the third step, I encouraged him to jump, but he froze. He raised his eyes, looked at me, and said: “Daddy, I’m afraid. Hug me.” I moved closer to him and opened my arms, and he jumped without hesitation. It struck me to see how my son could manage to say he is afraid with such simplicity. He can say it because he is standing in front of a hug from his father. My son’s actions have afforded me a precious opportunity to remember, to discover, that in this period it’s like that for me as well. I can say that I’m afraid and can look at my humanity, my sin, because there is One who hugs me now, just as I am. Fear is overcome by this realization, and it generates an understanding of reality that allows me to accept every instant with a new outlook, a new passion and creativity that I’m incapable of by myself.

Davide, Ascoli Piceno (Italy)

Close-up

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■
St. Peter's Square on March 29th:
The pope's prayer.

Our silent world

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We have questions. Many questions that cut deep. We have never experienced or seen anything like this. We must face these questions so that we do not let these months of the pandemic go by without truly reawakening our humanity, without expanding it, without learning anything.

This is the common thread present throughout this issue. It starts with an interview with Maurizio Maggiani, who is not only one of the most famous Italian authors, but also a person with a profound humanity, a person who is genuine, earnest, and well-rooted, just like his country, which he loves so much.

Then there are stories and witnesses: a doctor on the front lines fighting against the virus in the US, Giorgio Vittadini, the president of the Foundation for Subsidiarity (Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà), and an interview with Fr. Sergio Massalongo, the prior of the Benedictine monastery at Cascinazza, near Milan. These contributions will help us better understand how even a moment of silence and solitude can be fruitful for everyone. (dp) ■

Life changes

Asking yourself questions is a “fundamental good” during this dramatic and unprecedented period. Now that reality has been shattered, after a period in which we thought nothing could be greater or better than the world we had built, we find ourselves at the edge of a cliff. A conversation with author Maurizio Maggiani.

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Alessandra Stoppa

“I am grateful that I have been brought to the edge of a cliff by this crisis, which has raised the biggest questions that I have ever asked myself.” This is how author Maurizio Maggiani speaks about this unprecedented moment. Reality has been shattered, sending waves through the “tranquil plain” we were living on, in the midst of which we were all saying, “We thought things would end here” and that whispered, “What more could you want? What could be better than this?” Now, in order to look at what we have learned from the shattering of certainties and illusions (if we have learned anything), and how this knowledge can last, he believes that we must first understand that we cannot stand on the edge of a cliff, “in this extraordinary, unimaginable position,” forever. He states that “we are forced to make a choice” and describes this choice below. He spoke to *Traces* from his large, secluded house in the countryside outside Faenza, where his neighbor Giorgio silently waves to him every day as he rides his tractor and worries about the beetles eating his grape vines. Maggiani is a winner of the Strega Prize and a man who is wary of literary circles. He listens to and looks at nature as it begins to come back to life. “Creation has broken free from its quarantine and has liberated itself from the many prisons in which we have placed it.” He can talk at length about the “very shy” coypu he found yesterday, the commotion the teal ducks make, and the almond tree that had bloomed early. “We are the virus that rules this planet,” he said. “Unlike the virus that is threatening our dominion, man has *consciously chosen* to destroy his host. We have exploited creation to the point of extermination. Now we are reliving the ancient story of who rules over whom.”



The gash opened by the coronavirus affects all of our being; it makes us ask who we are, faced with the immensity of the world and with ourselves, and what we want above all else. “Is it to save our bodies?” Asking questions has become his primary activity during this time, and he considers this a “fundamental good.”

Why is self-reflection—the “habit of reason” as you described it in *Repubblica*, and the “cure for carelessness” as you have also described it—so vital right now, more than ever before?

What better time is there than now to ask oneself questions, to reflect? Do you think that Christ went to the Garden of Gethsemane to look for answers or to ask questions? In his greatest and worst moment of crisis and solitude, he went there to ask questions. The answers come if we pose the right questions. We cannot compare ourselves to Christ, but this crisis is another Gethsemane. I am not saying that we must accept it, but we should reflect upon it.

How do you reflect on it?

For me, this is the greatest crisis I have experienced, and it raises the biggest questions I have ever asked myself. I am 68 years old and have lived through many crises, but this one has raised the biggest questions because I cannot escape it. You see, this a situation that seems to force us to do one thing; that is, to retreat in order to protect ourselves. We refer to a “war” with good reason, but viruses do not make war. They do not know what war is. A small living thing, by doing what it is expected to do, what comes naturally, has forced me into an unacceptable and intolerable position, a position of retreat, something that has never happened in my life. If we look carefully, however, we are the ones who have imposed the restrictions. Because of the mass mentality that so easily influences us, we are led to stay in our homes to keep from getting sick, which is the right thing to do, but this implies that we are all already sick.

Are you referring to the “pervasive idea of a general sickness,” a sickness you say you have witnessed? You were angry when you, together with other authors, were asked to read books for those who are at home. How come?

This involves a kind of “generosity” that I fear as much as I fear getting sick. Offering structures to support us and our obsession with nourishing ourselves...these are like trying to “cheer up” someone who is sick. Can’t people read books on their own? What happened? Do will-power and capability no longer exist? That, to me, is the point: whether this crisis causes an impairment of the spirit and the intelligence...

Or, whether it wakes up our selves and our reason.

A crisis is a change that requires a change. It is a moment of pause that resembles retreat from a battle, a moment that allows us to think about everything. For example, I have to consider that I am at an age at which, if I end up in the hospital, I might be overlooked. It is good that I am aware of this. It is good for me to know that I do not have a right to everything! In any case, I fear this illness, which is also a malady of the human person.

In what way?

Forgive me, I do not wish to trespass into your “house,” but what about the scandal of saints touching lepers... this is not a fairy tale or a story about something twisted. It involves the idea that evil can be cured and that it is conquered by facing it, with all the risks that that entails. Consider the risk that the doctors and nurses face today. For us it is symbolic, for them is it real, but both are equal. To touch, to face...what I am trying to say is that we will not save ourselves by running away, by protecting ourselves. If we could only save our bodies, what would we do? What would we do with just our bodies?

These numerous questions that you are asking, questions that we often silence—for example, what am I afraid of? Why did I take life for granted just yesterday?

Maurizio Maggiani (Castelnuovo Magra, La Spezia, born 1951) taught for one year in the prisons of La Spezia after completing his studies. Among his main works, published by Feltrinelli, is *Il coraggio del pettirosso* [The courage of the robin], which won the Viareggio Prize and the Campiello Prize in 1995.



© Valerio Pennicino/Getty Images

And why, tomorrow, should life be worth something?—is it possible to find answers that are reasonable?

We do not find answers on our own. We do not need to answer them ourselves! Christ did not find answers on his own, but the answers came as a result of the journey he made, carrying the cross, following it to the very end. Using an adult reason, we can get together, ask each other to come together to find answers...what we are doing now. I do not want to come out of this unique situation without discovering that we are better than we think we are or than the way it seems convenient for us to be. It is necessary that we ask ourselves questions that can free us from tight spaces, from the walls that imprison us. To ask oneself questions puts things in order. In our struggles, our chaos, we can lead ourselves to the use

of reason, to become adults. How? By asking questions. Questioning. That is how the “beast” of the virus, not meant in a negative sense, but understood as the chaotic force, can be tamed.

And how do we find answers?

The answers are already in the questions.

Please explain.

I am thinking about when I perform an action that makes me feel uncertain, an action that I do not understand, as part of an unexpected series of events, I ask myself: Why? Why did I do that? Asking myself those questions reduces, confines the action to my own space, to my soul. To question, to stop, to hold on...these do not provide us with an answer, but rather they are the beginning of a journey that leads to an answer.

Asking yourself if it is enough to be healthy, to save our bodies, has led you to write that “life is hardly the opposite of death.” The present reality places us in front of suffering and in front of death and the fear of dying; it pushes us to look for meaning; it awakens the question of the meaning of life.

Exactly. Please understand, I don’t want to die. I have a farmer’s genes—I am dedicated to living fully. The idea of life as something bad is foreign to me, because I come from a long line of people who have fought tooth and nail to survive. Let’s suppose that when I die, someone asks me to account for my life. The Old Man will open the book and will say, “Maggiani... Maurizio Maggiani. Let me see.” He will not ask me how many novels I wrote.

“It was the end of history. A vast wasteland, a flat land. Suddenly an earthquake sent a shockwave through this tranquil plain and created in its place a challenging landscape. Now you find yourself on the edge of a cliff—on one side is the past and on the other, the unknown.”

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So then what do you think is the meaning of life? What will be counted?

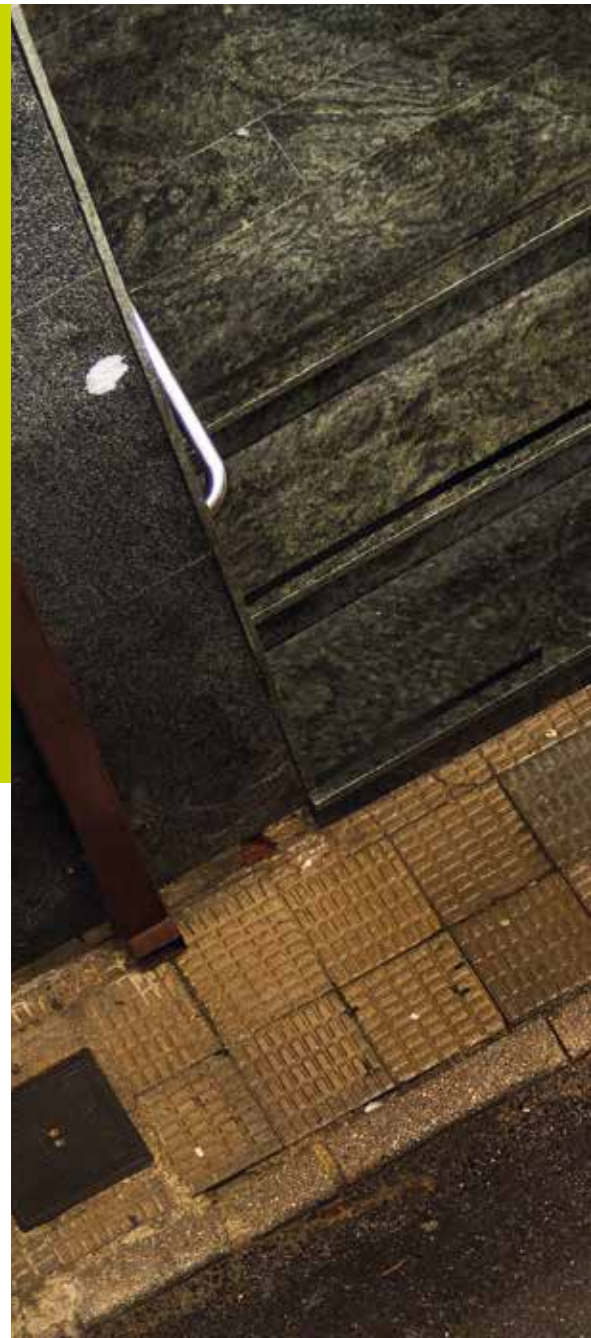
How much life I have generated in exchange for the life that I have consumed. My parents, who were illiterate farmers, not only fought to live, but they also taught me something—that what is good in life is evident. It is life itself. It generates life. You know what life is...It is certainly not getting up in the morning. Waking up does not mean you are alive. You live when you first look at something, by offering your first gesture. That gesture is either for life or for death. I think about Gehenna, the dumping ground of Jerusalem, the resting place of the “evil people,” of things to be discarded or that remain indistinguishable from other things. This expression may seem vulgar to you, but the one who *distinguishes* himself is a good man. You will never find him rummaging in indistinct, consumed, or dead material.

When you were talking about “stopping” and “holding on,” what do you hold onto from this experience?

The surprise, being surprised. I have been very fortunate in my life. I have lived through interesting times. I have had many significant experiences, both good and bad. I am grateful that now I have been brought to the edge of this cliff.

Why?

We were living in a time without a future, in which nothing else could happen. Everything had its logic that could not be challenged. The system could not be broken. We lived thinking to ourselves, “What more could you want? What could be better than this? Does something more exist? Where could you find something better?” It was the end of history, of the universal order. A vast wasteland, a flat land. Suddenly an earthquake sent a shockwave



through this tranquil plain and created in its place a challenging landscape. Now you find yourself on the edge of a cliff—on one side is the past and on the other, the unknown.

What helps us not take a step back? In particular, what can help us keep the questions open? Where do you look?



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What is helpful to me is the fact that I can't ignore anything. You cannot stand on the edge of a cliff forever. The force of gravity makes you fall to one side or the other. We cannot remain in this extraordinary and unimaginable position. Either we look at what we believe was an infinite present or at the

unknown. You can choose to let yourself slide back or to spring forward. If I survive, I can not only look out from atop the cliff, but I can decide, I can choose to head toward the unknown to help us navigate through unfamiliar waters. Ulysses arrived at this place not just by crossing a pond—he also

changed it. If there is a reason for us being here despite what you would call original sin, it is that we have a task; namely, to agitate the waters. To agitate is to live.

When you are afraid, what helps you conquer your fear?

Looking at my wife. ■

The renewal of my humanity

Giorgio Vittadini reflects on the temptation to cling to all sorts of “have to be’s,” his decision to stay in the present at this difficult moment, and his understanding of work as a form of prayer. Life “asks that I be there,” and assigns a new value to building from the bottom up, even when you think you already know everything.



Giorgio Vittadini

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These days spent at home because of the pandemic have been truly upsetting. I’ve stopped trying to suppress the anxiety, pain, and worry by clinging to all sorts of “have to be’s,” like the “obligation” to be positive, the “obligation” to seize the opportunity to change, to learn, and to improve myself, and even the “obligation” to seek the Lord. I am a son of Fr. Giussani, and for me something that is not first of all human cannot be Christian. So yes, all the suffering, fear, and overwhelming uncertainty that I see and feel every day shake me to the core. I have decided above all to simply try to keep my feet planted in the present, though it is a struggle: every day I slide into prisoner mode rather than cloistered mode.

There was a moment when I wondered whether I had become atheist because at a certain point the prayers in the breviary and at Mass began to feel constricting. One day, after the n^{th} hour spent recording lessons for

my students (even after 40 years of a career in the university, this is still a big deal for me because I have to do it in front of a camera, and every time I make a mistake I have to start all over again), I realized that my prayer was exactly the same thing as my being present to the students, my fulfillment of the work I have to do. How did I understand this? Because the work contained a new desire: a desire for something more, to be deep down the person God called me to be. At that point, my channel of communication with the Lord became burning hot.

In this moment we are living through, I have decided first of all to concentrate on my work in all its details, not to abandon the tasks to which I am called, but to seek a different and deeper awareness. Not just recording my lessons, answering student questions on the forum, talking with them on Webex, and continuing to advance the cultural projects I’m involved in, but every-

thing I do, is part of the vocation to which I was called 40 years ago. There’s not a religious part of life and a secular part: life is a whole that asks that I be there.

I am struck by the ongoing call to silence we have received because silence is an instrument for looking at yourself and the Mystery. I know many people for whom actual silence is something useful, but I’m made differently from some other people: the transformation of reality into something that is vital and contradictory is the way in which the Mystery reaches out to me. Silence is only a space, an instant in which I achieve the distance to look at everything a bit more like a man, a bit more in the company of a God who, as the pope said, is sick like me, but sick with mercy.

In these days, I’ve realized that for me, silence means listening to what is happening: the needs of people, things to do, problems I have to solve. I’ve heard some people say these days



should not be “bulimic”—filled with things to do and relationships to foster obsessively my means of endless video-calls from all over. My life is very full because I myself fill it up, but it’s not important to me to make life different. This is how I am—I’m only interested in being able to realize that life exists and is there for me. This is what I believe can change me. It is difficult to accept the need to change, and in fact, I alternate between the temptation to follow the thought of others like one of the herd and thinking that I already know everything. Nothing protects me from the need to find my own road, my own words, my own experience, and my own preferences, both regarding the history to which I belong and the history of the world.

My fundamental experience in this period involves friendship: I’ve verified that distance kills small fires and makes the big ones explode (technology has been an excellent accomplice in this verification). I’m very struck by people’s willingness to give their lives, time, and money for those in need in so many spheres, from schools to hospitals to the world of work. What kind of companionship can I live with these people? I feel like their friend, and I find myself chomping at the bit because I’d like to be there to give a hand, to help those who are suffering, to support those who are struggling and facing this tragedy as best as they can. Yes, tragedy. I have no intention of sugarcoating this: for many people, very many people, what

we are going through is a health tragedy that seriously runs the risk of becoming an economic tragedy.

For this reason, I think I’ve never understood as well as I do now the value of something I’ve been working on for many years: developing a culture of subsidiarity. As part of this often adolescent effort to counter the status quo, I’d like to see a greater drive to know, understand, and explore more deeply what is happening at the moment on the human, medical, economic, and social levels.

It has become even clearer to me that my engagement in certain undertakings, like the Foundation for Subsidiarity and *ilsussidiario.net*, as well as the Meeting of Rimini and initiatives launched by other cultural realities, gives me the opportunity to learn how to sustain a desire to build and imagine “from the bottom up”; that is, according to the principles of subsidiarity. We can collaborate in building a new common good, returning from the present to populate places where we can continually learn from each other. I hope for the renewal of a true human experience like that of the people who built the foundations of republican Italy, which involves discovering that the existential and personal meaning of the other, even when different, is a resource. The construction of the common good in a participatory and parliamentary democracy is not a moral exhortation: it is the truest of the things that these difficult days are showing us, and will be crucial for finding the best operative solutions in the days ahead. ■



In the right place

In New York, the daily Covid death toll equals the number lost on 9/11. Cardiologist Francesco Rotatori, who spends day and night with Covid patients, talks about what is happening to them and to his colleagues.



Luca Fiore

“The gratifying part of my work used to be seeing people get better: you treat them and they get better. But now, that’s not the case. Almost all of them die. Many come from retirement homes. Eighty percent of those we intubate die. We’re going through what you’ve already seen in Italy. Those who survive probably would have anyway. Tonight I saw five people go. One was a woman whom I had promised that everything would be okay.” Francesco Rotari, from Fano, Italy, married and father of four, is an interventional cardiologist at the Richmond University Medical Center in Staten Island, New York. Today the world’s attention has shifted from Lombardy to the Big Apple, where, as some have said, each daily death toll from Covid equals the total from 9/11. Before the pandemic, Rotari’s bread and butter was angioplasty procedures

and treatment of acute heart attacks. Now that his hospital has been converted to caring for Covid patients, he spends day and night in the ward dealing with the emergency. We reached him at the end of his night shift. His story ends in a question related to the current situation: “I arrived in the United States in 2005 and had a particular path. Unlike many Italian colleagues who set out for prestigious universities

Francesco Rotatori, a cardiologist at the Richmond University Medical Center in Staten Island, New York.

or hospitals, I did not have a brilliant academic career, or at least it doesn't seem like it to me. I've often asked myself what I'm doing here in America.

How do you answer this question?

In a moment like this, you understand what you are here in the world for. In 2001, I watched my mother die of lung cancer. I followed her moment by moment, and was there the night she died. Now, every day, I'm living that moment again. I see the last breaths of these people. I feel very angry, but I also perceive a call, a task.

In what sense?

In the sense that maybe I'm the right person in the right place, that I wasn't put here by chance. I don't know. Some of my colleagues have pulled back. I'm here even though I could go home at night. Last night a young resident was finishing his shift; his eyes were bleary. It's not easy for anybody to see so many people die. I told him, "I stay here at night so I can be with you when a patient dies."

What helps you?

I have a positive outlook that does not come from me. But I see that this attitude opens a crack in everyone. There are people working here from every nationality and religion. It's as if deep down everyone desires to work here, or almost everyone.

How do you know that your attitude opens people up?

The hospital had 17 intensive care beds, and the City of New York asked us to make 70 available. We only have one intensive care physi-

cian, so we had to reinvent everything. I see that when I make proposals, people follow me. I don't have the authority to give life to my proposals, but when I proposed setting up a plexiglass wall there, the administration made it happen.

Where do you see the positive in this situation?

I think of my wife. I think of the fact that I'm loved. It's not self-persuasion, because that wouldn't hold up in the face of what I'm seeing.

If medicine can do little or nothing, what can a physician do?

There was a Covid patient who also had Parkinson's. He said he wanted to drink a glass of water. He had set his mind on drinking it by himself, but his hand trembled so much that he couldn't. He refused to be helped. I thought to myself, "There's so much else I should be doing," but then I thought, "but I might be the last person he sees." So I stood to the side and without his noticing, moved the glass with my finger in the right direction. It took him ten minutes. From a medical point of view, those were ten wasted minutes...

Are there people in the hospital who help you maintain this attitude?

Staten Island is a place where the society is similar to what you see on *Desperate Housewives*. There are some difficult situations. It has a very high rate of opioid abuse. Yet a lot of the hospital's staff come from here. In particular, I was struck by a few employees in my office who,

hearing me talk about the first days of the emergency, volunteered, and now work with me to help the Covid patients. They are young people who let themselves be fascinated by my enthusiasm. But now I'm looking at them with amazement.

What amazes you about them?

There was a young patient who was delirious because of lack of oxygen, as often happens, and kept trying to take off his mask. If you get distracted and the patient takes off his mask, he could die in a few minutes. Two of these young people spent an entire hour holding, caressing, and massaging that boy's hands. The fact that I am not alone is fundamental, both in my relationships with patients and colleagues. It's increasingly evident to me that the need for human connection is not a question of cultural or religious origin: it's a basic human fact.

What makes you say this?

The other day, the hospital chaplain went on the ward's public address system and said, "Let us unite in prayer in this difficult moment. Each of us, ask your own God to help us and accompany us." I had a Chinese and an Iranian colleague next to me. Total silence descended throughout the ward. It was clear that all of us needed to look at something greater than death. The fact that this level of need touches everyone makes me understand that the answer given by Jesus is not just something good for me and my friends, but is a response to the hearts of everyone. ■

A continuous “Here I am”

The value of the moment and of collaborating for the good of the world no matter the situation. Fr. Sergio Massalongo, the prior of the Cascinazza monastery, explains how in his experience “our yes to Christ is, before all else, our contribution to the salvation of every man and woman today.”



Paola Ronconi

“*P*rodesse omnibus cupientes”. This is how St. Stephen Harding described to his fellow monks that very human need to contribute to the good of all people 900 years ago in the *Carta Caritatis* (the governing document of the Cistercian Order). The coronavirus—with all the drama it has brought with it—has powerfully highlighted that need.

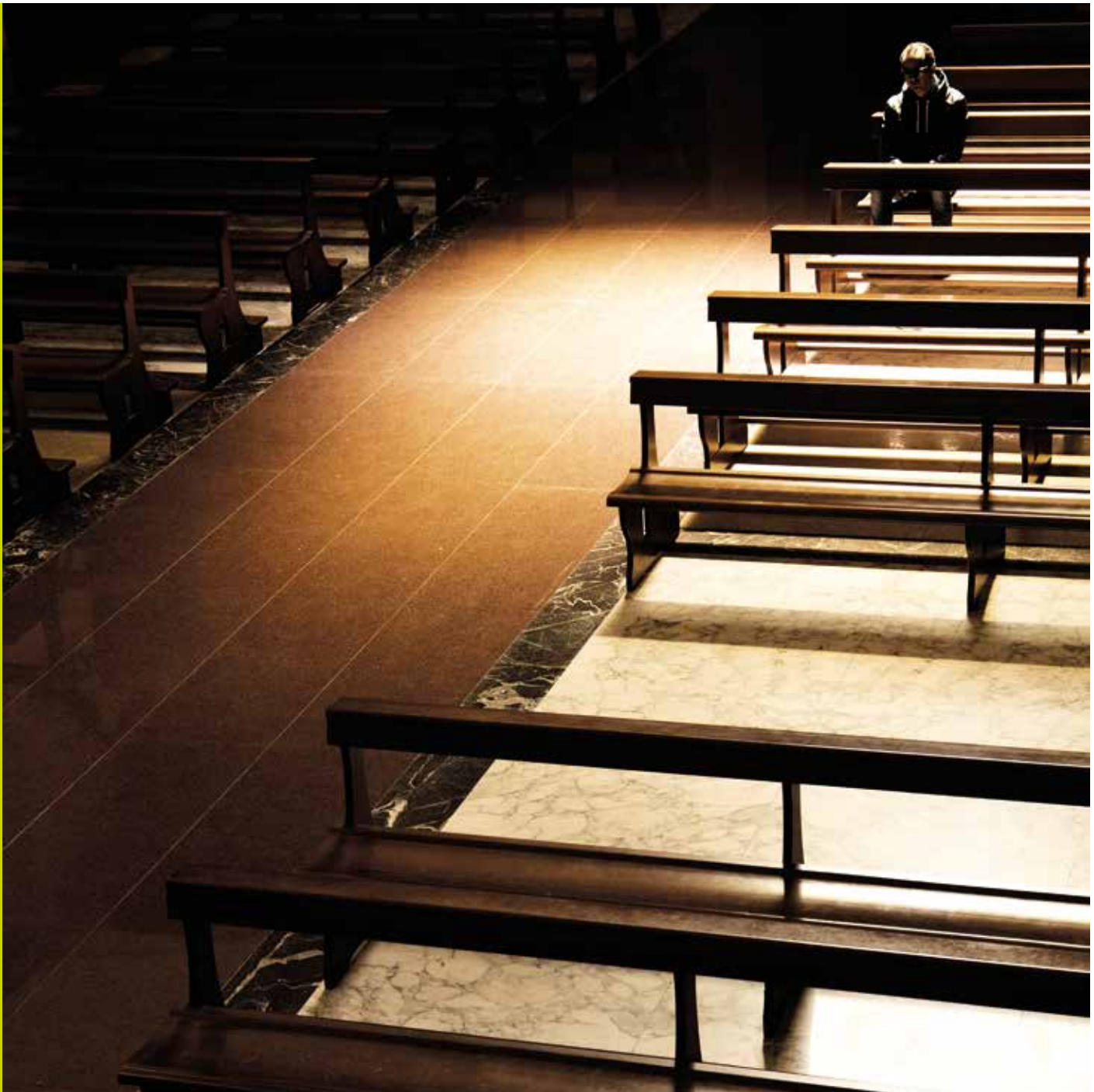
Just contributing, however, is not enough. Those three Latin words, in fact, go much deeper: how can one benefit mankind from within the four walls to which almost all of us are now relegated? How can shared life in close quarters, our children’s homework, “smart working,” and the inability to see and touch loved ones suffering in hospital beds all be tools useful for the good of all people? In his March 12th letter to Communion and Liberation, Fr. Julián

Carrón pointed out the way: “Our yes to Christ, including in the isolation each of us may be forced to maintain, is, before all else, our contribution to the salvation of every man and woman today.”

We spoke over the phone at the door of Cascinazza, a Benedictine monastery just outside of Milan, with people who live their whole lives between four walls and, in their apparent hiddenness, “bear witness that the Lord is victorious by their very existence,” as Fr. Giussani wrote about the place in 1996. “For me, being in a monastery is not the working out of some idea I have of perfecting myself, but rather my response to His call. It is a continuous, ‘Here I am,’” said Fr. Sergio Massalongo, the monastery’s prior.

Fr. Sergio, how can a person who is now forced to stay at home, sometimes alone, contribute to the good of the world in this concrete situation, in the mundanity of doing everyday things?

First and foremost it must be remembered that the nature of one’s vocation is not being a monk, or an employee, or a housewife, etc., but is, rather, following Christ in the form of life he chooses for me: “Let me be what you want me to be.” That response to his call summarizes the purpose of our life, our personal contribution toward helping every person truly find him or herself, and if it is true for me, it is true for everyone. There is a story from the Desert Fathers (4th century) in which a young monk, after a time of particular trial, goes to the elder and tells him he does not think he can continue and would like to go home. The elder replied, “Remember that, when you came here, the Lord carried you. If you leave now, you go alone.” That is, the Lord



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may lead us into the desert or nail us to the four walls of our house, he may bring us through the most bitter trials, but he is always with us and never abandons us. His presence is our strength. If instead I want to manage life myself, I am at my own mercy and no longer know how I will end up. I feel imprisoned, exhausted, and dissatisfied despite having what I want. In a nutshell, what

most defines my identity are not all the choices I make, but the fact that Jesus chose me, that he loves me and I am his. This is powerful—not even the evil I do or the sins I commit are an objection for God. I can deny or refuse him, but I cannot erase the fact that he has chosen me, that he loves me. This is what gives me certainty and an indomitable hope that I can begin again.



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What does it mean for you monks to say yes to your circumstances in every moment?

It means being open to the Mystery and to the ways he is knocking at my door, on his own terms, this very instant. Saying yes to him means allowing him to enter my present situation through the poverty of my flesh, that he might transform reality and make it more true. We have been called to be instruments of his glory in the world. Just as Our Lady's yes brought Christ into the world, so our poor but daily yes to what is asked of us contributes to the salvation of the world.

What helps you to live in this way?

Three things: first, following the objective word spoken by the church and those who live by that word. Second, accepting the conditions of the sacrifice the Lord allows us to experience: the sacrifice of being nailed to the four walls of our house just as he was nailed to

the four poles of the cross. And third, seeing the example of my brothers who live with me in the monastery.

Silence and prayer. The church suggests that these become dimensions of life for everyone. Why should a person desire silence, though? It seems to be merely a lack of noise...

What I desire is not silence; I desire Christ, and Christ is someone who is present and imposes himself. This generates wonder and silence in me; he is a presence I look to and follow. Christ can be present in the noise and chaos of a big city, in a hospital full of sick people (as we see now), or as we muck the stables. The point is that when you catch him in action, you feel how your own actions are loved, liberated, and constructive because they are taken in collaboration with his design. It is easier to recognize his voice in a silence that is full of the memory of him. But this is not the memory of Christ that I imagine, the fruit of my good intentions. Silence is true to the degree that its content is the word Christ speaks to me so that I may change; it therefore involves a dynamic obedience, a continuous position of listening and adapting my will to his. It is identifying myself with him. His word makes an all-encompassing demand on my life, and the real work is in following what was said to me to the letter. Do we understand the point of what he says, the only place worth a commitment of our whole life? What authoritative word has been spoken to you, what has a supreme value that can direct your life? If we don't know, or if we are confused about this, our silence is a deafening emptiness, and we feel the need to distract ourselves with useless appearances. The truth of the content of our silence, then, brings up the questions: Who is the authority for you? Yourself, or an Other? Who are you following? To what are you responding?

The Benedictine monastery of Sts. Peter and Paul amidst the fields of Gudo Gambaredo, Buccinasco (Milan).

The Cistercian abbot general Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, in a letter dated March 15th, cites Psalm 45: “Be still and know that I am God.” These words have a different ring these days, now that the whole world has been stopped in its tracks. But what does it mean to “be still” before His presence? And what can help teach us to do so?

Where do I recognize how he is present to me? In the place the Lord has put me, in the monastery and in the movement. It’s inside these things that you need to “be still” and watch where and how he is present; these are the only places to truly find direction amidst an infinite network of voices and opinions. During this time of the pandemic, having to close our gates turns our gaze inward to the life of the house in order to rediscover its value and how we have already been given everything. In a meeting of the community, one of my confreres said, “This circumstance challenges us to verify the kind of companionship we really need. We do not even have the mailman’s face as a pretext for turning our focus outside the monastery walls. Either it’s true that I can meet Christ here, in the 21 faces given to me, or my being is founded on something that is ultimately a lie... Is Christ enough or not? Because if He is not enough for us, even if you don’t get the virus, you might as well be dead.” This time of trial, then, can be approached as a favorable opportunity rather than an objection, as a resource for allow-

ing ourselves catch the “contagion” of the communion of Christ among us, which transforms our small space into a house of God; this is the way in which he wants to build up our monastery right now. Paradoxically, the time of exile we are living through is the means by which all things, reclaimed from distraction, regain their true significance; they go back to their origin, the place where the other next to me assumes his true face.

Many people have been touched by pain. How can they “embrace the hardships so as to embrace the cross of Christ,” as the pope suggested in St. Peter’s Square on March 27th?

In describing the fourth step of humility in his *Rule*, St. Benedict advises monks going through any kind of trial or suffering to begin by silently embracing patient suffering in their hearts as if that patience were a person one could embrace. Ultimately it is Christ whom we embrace in our trials so that he may sustain us. Only those who have personally experienced suffering are capable of com-*passion*, “suffering with” one’s brothers and sisters, which is the greatest form of love. Another saying from the Desert Fathers provides that “Each must make his own anything that happens to his neighbor; must suffer with him in every trial, weep with him, and feel as if they are one and the same body; he must experience the same amount of tribulation as his brother who has been struck by trials, as it is written:

‘We are one body in Christ’ (Rm 12:5), and ‘the community of believers was of one heart and mind,’ (Acts 4:32).” Only that which is converted into our own suffering can be converted into love. It is only possible to embrace the hardships and pain of humanity by looking to the sufferings of Christ; it is there that our own sufferings find meaning. During this period, we cannot be left indifferent to the cries of our suffering brothers and sisters; God is calling many people to offer a sacrifice so that we may become more true. If we do not respond to this call, all that is happening will be fruitless, seeming like mere chance. The suffering of others calls us to be ourselves.

Your life, at least as far as we can tell, has not undergone substantial change. What has your life been like during this time?

It’s true: except for being entirely cloistered, our common life inside the monastery continues as regularly as it did before. We are preparing the fields to be planted, and we are getting ready for other tasks as we usually do. Even the celebration of the liturgy remains the same. Everything is more dramatic, however. We are less distracted during our days and are helping each other listen to what the Lord wants to say to us through this circumstance. We are praying to him for all the intentions that come to us in various ways from near and far, so that the Lord might take pity on us and bring this plague to an end. ■

The touch of the Mystery

*“The Rosary is a kind of synthesis of all that the Christian people can think about Christ and say to him.”
A gift to our readers for this Marian month: a meditation by **Fr. Luigi Giussani**, published in 2000.*

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“**Q**uos redemisti, tu conserva, Christe”: those you have redeemed—those you wanted, planned to be your own—you save and keep from harm, O Christ. You save them in whatever circumstances you have them live. With this assurance, we cry out to acknowledge and thank God. “Those whom you have redeemed, you keep safe, O Christ.” Those whom you have called. Every one of us has been called, touched by the finger of the Lord, his flame kindled in our hearts. Our response to this election lies wholly in our capacity for prayer. Our response is a prayer; it is not some special ability, but simply the impetus of prayer. We are about to begin the month of May. For centuries, one thing has particularly blessed the Christian people and confirmed it in its reaching out for salvation, I believe: the Holy Rosary. The Rosary is a kind of synthesis of all that the Christian people can think about Christ and say to him.

It is the synthesis of the whole design of the world’s redemption, of the dignity to be acknowledged, of a charity to be lived in the victory over death in the crucifixion; no, not in the crucifixion, but in the Resurrection, because we are saved by the Resurrection.

Praying the Holy Rosary, meditating on what it proposes and on the Mystery that reveals itself through it are the assurance of what Jesus’s mother can do and is doing in our lives. Jesus did not bother himself on our behalf just to waste time.

Thus, the Joyful Mysteries, which come before the sorrowful ones, the Joyful Mysteries—gaudium means joy—both bring us back and recall us to the mystery of newness: the angel’s announcement, Mary’s charity toward her cousin Elizabeth, the birth of Jesus, the purification of Our Lady and the offering of Christ to the Father, and the apparently insignificant life of Jesus at Nazareth. These are memories through which the hold that Jesus has on us conforms itself to us and takes on flesh.

The Sorrowful Mysteries are the precondition—which is, humanly speaking, absurd; though sorrow is an inevitable condition... now that I am old, I understand these things as never before—the precondition to become part of Jesus, to belong to Him.

In this way, the final joy, the final glory found in the Glorious Mysteries, can acquire a foundation within the experience of our flesh; otherwise the experience of our flesh cannot reach the Resurrection.

Just as Jesus’s mother was the beginning of His being amongst us, so now she continues, as history continues, to save what was foretold, predestined.

“Those whom you have redeemed, keep safe, O Christ.” Our Lady is the one we can think of without any possibility of being deceived—Our Lady is our mother. So, it is through abandonment to Our Lady, prayer to Our Lady, entreaty to Our Lady that we can be assured of what Jesus desires that we do, assured of what we are. It is in this abandonment to Our Lady that the certainty of our life is grandiosely affirmed; so that, looking at each other within this Christian companionship, we see how that companionship is

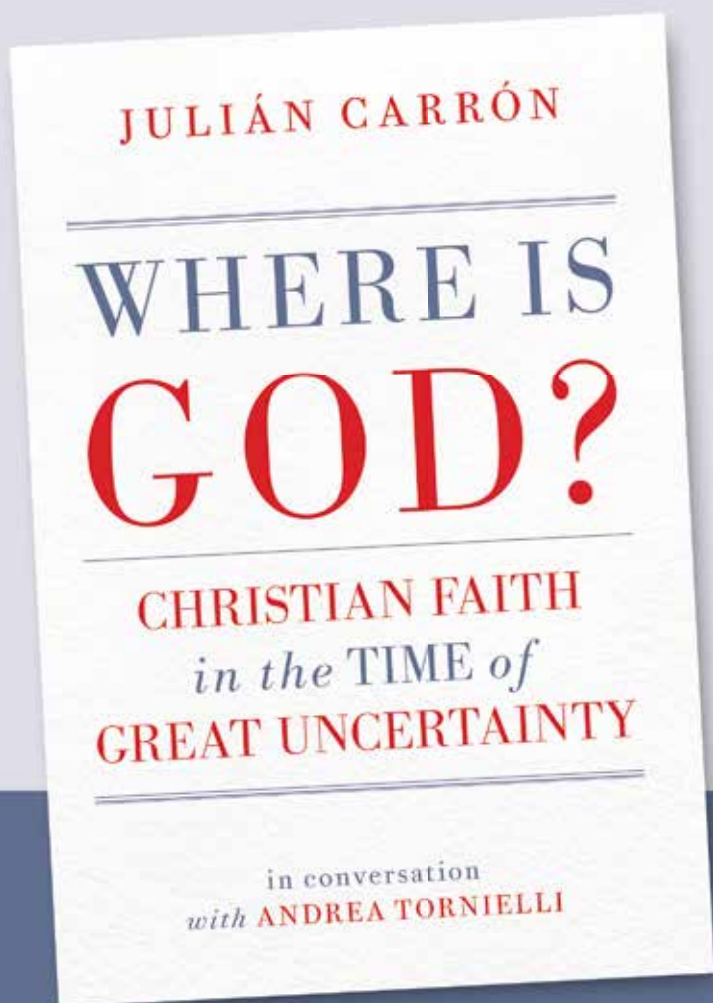
Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà Rondanini*,
1552-64, Sforzesco Castle, Milan.

really the first echo of salvation, of a new human condition.

Every day, regardless of our mood, let us ask Our Lady for the grace that what Christ promised through her maternity for us, which is expressed in the truth of our vocation, may become a concrete reality that changes us. Let every one of us, then, looking at the others—as we look at each other—weep with joy before the evidence that, through her Son, Our Lady who is the blossoming of a redemptive newness, will fully save the existence to which we have been called. We are nothing, but this nothing does not get lost. An insignificant thing, that seems nothing and could be lost; instead, no! It is saved!

“Quos redemisti, tu conserva Christe”: keep us safe, Lord, in the salvation for which you deigned to enter into our life. This is the supreme reason for our joy, yes, for the certainty of our joy, and therefore also for the certainty of glory. Glory is our joy. Joy is the certainty that comes into the world because we have been touched by the Mystery—we are Christ’s possession. (*From Avvenire, April 30, 2000*) ■





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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