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Back to the future

A journey to the school we expect

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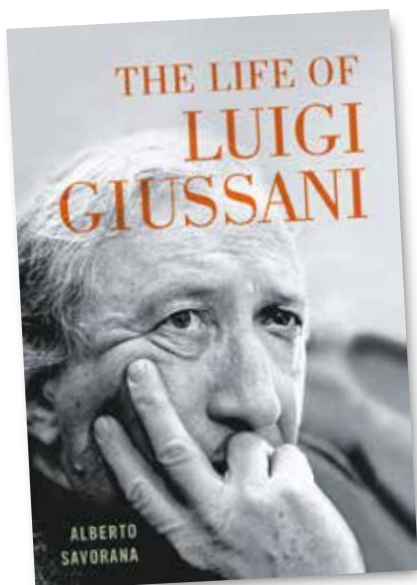
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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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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Hope and certainty

If one says “school,” other words immediately come to mind. For example, “future,” because the “tomorrow” of any society, at every time in its history, is shaped there, in the classrooms. Or we might think of “hope,” a close cousin of the expectation for happiness that dwells in the hearts of young people and those who care about them, including their parents and teachers. Deep down, school exists for this reason: guarding that hope and cultivating that expectation is in the very nature of its mission.

Yet, if there is one environment that was sent into crisis more than any other by the pandemic, it is the academic one. It was deeply shaken, split between the need to protect young people (and their families) from the virus and the importance of not snatching them away from their world, which is based on their fundamental ties to their classmates and teachers. The pandemic threatened to take them away from an institution that exists for the purpose of helping them grow into men and women capable of confronting reality, even when it wears the unpredictable face of a global crisis.

This is why the challenge of these weeks is so decisive. As we write, the reopening of school is still hanging in the balance, and not just in Italy. Students are going back, but the pandemic could threaten their return to their desks at any moment. Schedules, spaces, and teachers remain unknowns for many. We decided to go ahead and talk about the school as it may happen for one simple reason. Whatever it looks like—in person, distance, or *blended learning*, as they now say—the new academic year carries with it very precious cargo: the experience of the previous months. Taking a look at its content and understanding what we are learning *today* is critical if we do not want to miss the opportunity to face *tomorrow*, the future, with greater awareness. And it is critical to rekindling our hope.

It is no coincidence that “hope” was one of the key words for a turning point that came in this strange summer shaped by Covid: the event of the Rimini Meeting. It was not at all to be taken for granted that it would happen this year, but it was a superabundant grace to see the wealth of content, encounters, and judgments flowing forth from the decision to take the risk of holding it anyway. The method was new, and offered a contribution that truly reached the entire world, thanks in part to its virtual components. We covered the Meeting online at *clonline.org*, and our next issue will offer additional coverage. On the website, though, we have posted what was at the heart of those days: Fr. Julián Carrón’s talk on “where hope originates.” In this conversation, a line from Fr. Giussani emerged that summarizes what is at play right now: “Hope is a certainty in the future based on something real in the present.” This is what we need to grow and to live.

Letters

Graziella, Elena, Albert

edited by
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The beauty of the educative adventure

The official notification came of my being placed in “quiescence,” otherwise known as retirement. I never imagined that my career in education would end in such an unusual and anomalous way. I would have wanted to say my good-byes to my students and to everyone else in person. Oh, well! The fact of my retirement, like all the important things in my life, in a certain way, was not decided by me. All the decisive turning points that each phase of my life proposed to me were never the result of one of my projects. I found them in front of me as discrete signs along the road, suggestions of the Holy Spirit above all, and of my heart, my friends, and my family, signs to adhere to or not. And adhering has always been determined by a correspondence strongly felt by my deepest “I.” Also at this latest crossroad, I only obeyed reality: the reality that my body requires more care, the reality facing my family members, the reality of my various obligations in the social arena, and the reality of my sharing in the needs of the most downtrodden. Of course, in schools in the past few years, there has been a growing emphasis on performance, success, and a flattening of awareness. But what I have always felt was most essential in school was something else: the awakening of the students’ “I” through an educative relationship. In the two schools where I have worked (but also outside of school), within a wider network of other teachers in the trenches, I have always found allies in living the beauty of the educative adventure. For this I am

grateful and take comfort, just as I am grateful to have always found a great ally in the hearts of my students. Over the course of the years, I have developed a very particular vision of my students and my relationship with them. About each of the thousands of kids I’ve worked with in my thirty-eight years of teaching, I would say to myself, “If they’re here in front of me, it’s no accident. God has sent them to me.” I have considered every single one of them to be a gift from God and therefore part of me in a definitive way. And it doesn’t matter if I’ve treated them well or badly, if they’ve been marked or not by their encounter with me; it doesn’t matter if I’ve lost track of some of them or that after thirty years I’m still in touch with some of them. What is clear to me is that God has used me as a conduit of His life, of the novelty and truth that we all need. He didn’t stop when faced with all my limitations, my resistance, and the hardness with which I opposed Him, and He didn’t stop even when He could see my failures. I owe the fecundity that has characterized these years to the experience of faith encountered in the movement: a fecundity that is an absolutely unmerited and gratuitous gift. And now, truly, my reflections, my thoughts, do not have much to do with whether I was a good teacher or not. My only cause for regret really relates to whether or not I have welcomed the loving gaze of God that through me could reflect on those around me. It’s up to Him to give me a final grade.

Graziella, Catania (Italy)

Defending her thesis in Moscow

Moscow, end of the 2020 academic year: it was the moment to discuss her graduate thesis, through Zoom of course. Elena, a student in the Faculty of Theology at the Orthodox Institute of Saint Philaret, was presenting her thesis. The photograph

of the “Raggio alla Torre” appeared on the screen, followed by photos of Fr. Giussani with his first students at the Portofino lighthouse, the conference room of the Rimini Meeting, the presentation of *The Religious Sense* at Moscow State University, and scenes from the Fraternity vacation. “The Movement of Communion and Liberation as a Form of Ecclesial Life in the Catholic Church” is the title of her work. It runs through a brief history of the movement and its diffusion in Italy and abroad. It analyzes its structure, describes the works born from within it and its cultural and charitable activities, and it reflects on the position of movements generally and of CL in the life of the Catholic Church. The discussion that followed was lively, followed by questions. “How do you explain the rapid and wide diffusion of this movement in a time that was certainly not favorable for the Church?” Elena’s answer played on two points: the friendship lived within the communities and the simplicity of the proposal of CL; that is, having passion for the Christian event as such in all its original elements. This last point also introduced the answer to another question, “What differentiates CL from other ecclesial movements?” Communion and Liberation is essentially a proposal of education to the Christian faith that does not finish at a certain age, but always continues because the proposal continues to be renewed and deepened. And here Elena underlined the importance of the School of Community as a permanent catechesis in the life of the movement, differing from the Orthodox Church’s tradition of catechesis for, above all, catechumens. The final word traditionally reserved for the candidate was made up of words of gratitude, first for the Orthodox Institute, which allowed her to study and develop this theme, to the professors who had followed and advised her in her work, and to her friends in the Movement who had helped her. But it also became a clear witness of faith: Elena declared that the subject of her thesis and above all her relationship with her friends from CL had helped her to deepen her own faith and her continued belonging to an Orthodox ecclesial movement, the Transfiguration Brotherhood. The following day, we received a thank you message from her that ended with these words: “My prayer and my hope are these: that my work might serve for the unity of the church and for the continued communion between our two movements.”

Elena, Moscow (Russia)

Discarding the cloak

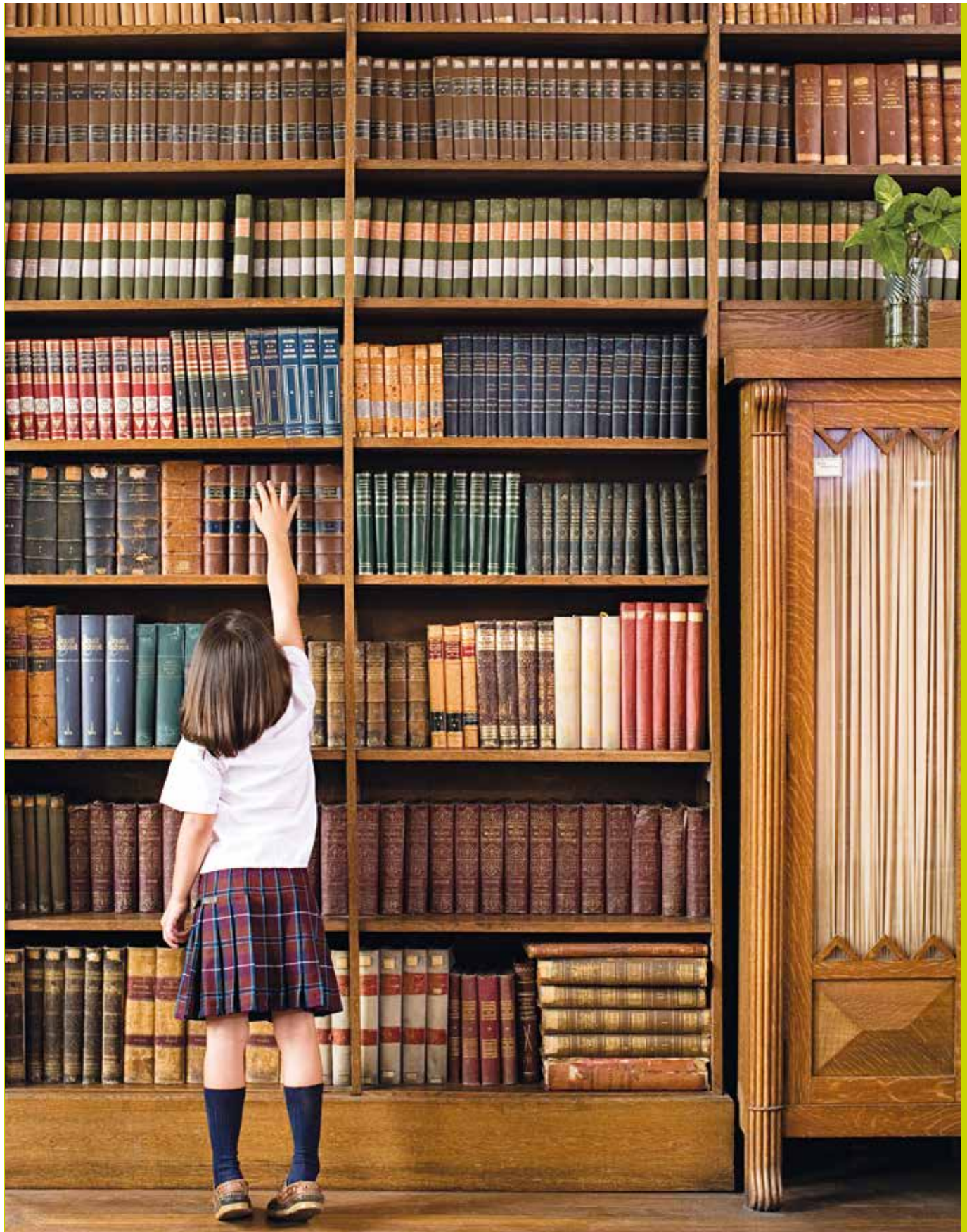
Thinking about what Fr. Carrón proposes to us in the first chapter of *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, I realized a few things. I made a comparison with the biography of Borges, which states, “He no longer considered happiness out of reach, as he once believed. He knew that it could happen at any moment, but it wasn’t something to be sought after. And regarding failure and fame, he maintained that they were completely irrelevant and that they no longer pertained to him. What he was looking for was peace, the pleasure of thinking and of friendship. And even if it seemed perhaps out of reach, the feeling of loving and being loved.” I found this very fitting to my own situation.

I was struggling with solitude, seeing it as a very heavy obligation, trying to give some meaning to this time of solitude. Despite the isolation that reality had imposed, I was not deprived of, for example, peace, thought, and friendship, the latter of which I consider essential and for which I am grateful. I asked myself how I could shed what was not necessary, and how to make that leap of faith that the text talks about, or rather how to discard the cloak, as the blind man Bartimaeus did.

And what is that leap of faith that’s necessary to purify the heart and to regain that healthy, childlike innocence, authentic peace, sound thought, and warm friendship.... that can sustain, as Fr. Giussani said, a companionship to destiny? At that point, I became aware of this peace that comes, that is presaged, that approaches like a question that already contains the terms of the answer, like wine that is foretold in the grapes or the seed that does not know which tree it will become. I’ve come to the conclusion that there are some things that we must necessarily face, and this perception has given me peace and tranquility. I no longer see nothingness in front of me because something has been unblocked. I recognize this willingness to live life thanks to the company I have found in the movement.

Albert, Florianopolis (Brazil)

Close-up



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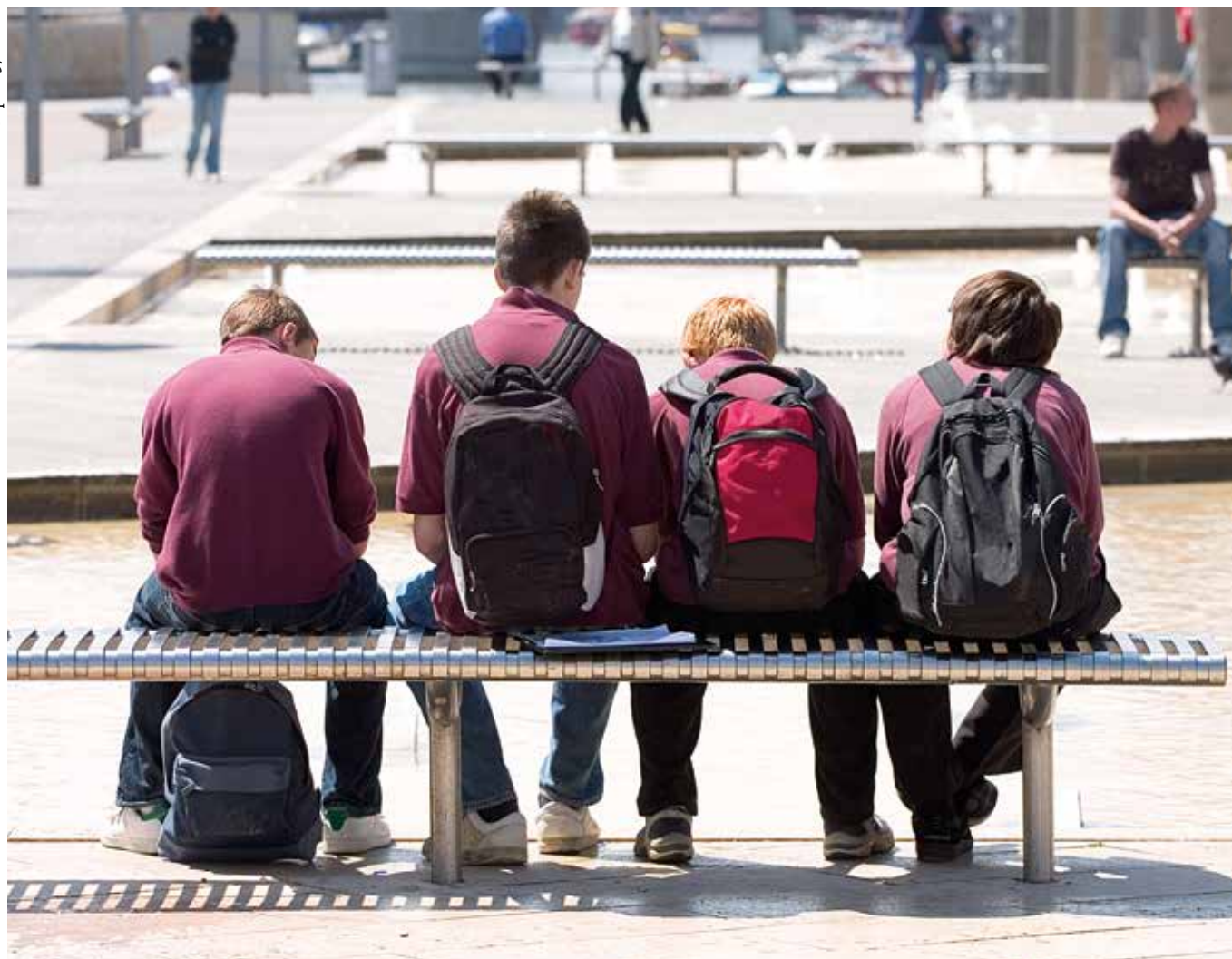
The school we need

School is reopening. With unknowns, doubts, and uncertainties—and not everywhere in the world—but it is reopening. It is about time because we missed it. Sorely. Deeply. Enough to elicit controversy and debates that, setting aside the political delays, made one fact clear: we are now more aware of how critical what happens in classrooms is for everyone, not just for those attending.

It is there that so much of the present and future of society unfolds. Because of this, it is worth taking a careful look at our experience of the recent months: in its highs and lows, we find a treasure trove of hints to better understand what school is and what it could be, what it means to educate, and what is essential in that which happens—or does not happen—in the relationship between teachers and students.

This is the theme of the first conversation, with Anna Frigerio, a principal at a large high school in Milan, who has kept these questions—and many others that came up in the difficult months of lockdown—before her, so that she can learn from them when her work returns to some kind of “normalcy,” even though things cannot be as they were before.

After that are some stories featuring teachers who had to rethink their work—how they teach, but above all what is most valuable in their teaching, a question that cannot at all be taken for granted. Just as one could not take for granted that kids would miss school, that at the end of such a strange summer they could not wait to get back to work. Yet that is what comes out in the stories about a few of them we relate here, offering us one more opportunity to go deeper into the central question of this month’s “Close Up”: What is it we really need at school? (dp) ■



Starting again



Alessandra Stoppa

Going back to school and learning from what happened: “The essentials are what mark the road to follow.” Anna Frigerio, the headmaster at the Sacred Heart School in Milan, speaks about returning to the adventure of education.

It's back to the classroom, to the in-person school desired by everyone. Over these fraught and difficult months, there were more and more calls for it from political and cultural leaders, even amidst the guidelines, controversy, logistical questions, and efforts to adapt teaching. Everyone agreed: we need to go back. But to what? Back to before? For Anna Frigerio, September is not a "return to the past," not even to a past as recent as that of the world before Covid. "What we experienced was not an accident. It calls for a change of some kind."

Frigerio has worked for seven years at the Sacred Heart Foundation in Milan, where she is the headmaster of the classical and scientific schools and the educational coordinator for all levels of the institute (spanning from preschool through high school, with over 1,200 students and 100 teachers). Before taking on this role, she spent many years teaching in public high schools, where she loved to challenge students by discussing Thucydides' saying "κτῆμα ἐς αἰεῖ," "an eternal possession." Without mincing words she told her students, "All the things you are studying, you will not remember. The pits in the *Divine Comedy*, the Persian wars, the theorems... So what will remain forever?" Today that question takes on a new weight as her school is preparing to reopen and she stops to do the painstaking work of reflecting and discussing with all the teachers. "It's not a matter of summarizing what happened during the storm; it's that the things we learned opened us up to something different. They illuminate the ordinary and mobilize us toward what is new." It's more a matter of taking off again than taking stock.

A new academic year is starting. We could think of it as a "final exam" for the institution of school after the unprecedented "test" of the pandemic. Some see this as finally reaching a goal, others as just a beginning: are we going back to normal, to the past, or taking a step forward?

We are taking a step forward, paying attention to two risks: on the one hand, thinking of the experience we have had as just a reaction to the emergency, and now that it has passed we can go back to "real" school; and on the other hand, an excessive reliance on distance learning. School is *always* about being present, whatever form that takes. The point is, what is at play in that presence? What does it mean to relate to students? Does it mean having them close to us? And what does it mean to say that the other person is significant? ... Clearly, in living out these questions, you use the tools you have: a computer screen cannot render the subtleties of a relationship, but having "live" classes also cannot guarantee that you are really reaching the other person. Everything depends on your attitude coming in, so the question to hold onto is this: What does it mean to be profoundly *present* in a relationship?

You speak of a "question to hold onto." Now everyone is saying we have to learn from everything that happened. How can we make sure we do that?

First of all, we need to recognize that everything we discovered during the lockdown is not, as I mentioned before, just an alternate format or phase. Those discoveries touch on substantial, fundamental questions. Making sure we learn, holding onto what is of value, requires a human attitude of openness.

What do you mean by that?

The time we are living poses many questions, including those regarding well-established frameworks. I'll offer an example: there are students who, at school, seemed to be "in retreat," but who showed their face more in distance learning. So is the group dynamic of a class the better context for learning? There is no doubt that learning takes place together, but we also saw how one-on-one relationships are essential.

That has been another mantra repeated recently: we are going back to what is essential. The entire Italian school system had a chance to reflect on the essentials. But what does that mean?

For me, the essentials are those things that mark the road to follow, what helps us understand how to proceed. Not novelty for its own sake, but a newness that you can recognize. As I said, the theme of being present is essential. I do not mean an act of the will by means of which I am in the classroom and can say, "Now I am present." It is working on oneself in an ongoing relationship with the other, with the students and your colleagues.

Could you give an example?

During the pandemic, we entrusted a great deal to the students. And not because we thought, "Now we have confidence in them." We were forced to do so. We had to proceed in a way that required them to personally take on part of the work. At a technical level, it is similar to the Anglo-Saxon method, in which the student prepares the content and presents it to the professor, who begins on the basis of that material, which deepens the dynamic of



Anna Frigerio.

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a class as “dialogue.” Above all, having confidence in them—giving them tools and a scheme to work with—allowed for them taking a step toward autonomy that led to beautiful relationships. That really surprised me.

Why?

The sudden closing of school brought out that great question of freedom. Over those months, the story of each teen or boy or girl was different, and what made the difference was this: how he or she was helped and encouraged to use his or her freedom. I saw some students flourish and others regress. Percentage-wise, the first group was bigger, but the damage to the others is still there. The surprising thing is that the students who accepted the challenge to become more autonomous were the same ones who sought out more of a relationship with their teachers. For me, that is one of the most important facts to come out of this period. And if we had to have confidence in our students, we also had to have it in the content.

Have confidence in the content?

Yes, by which I mean selecting topics, authors, and texts that have the power to bring out the person, the subject. School does not create the subject; it is there already and emerges. This means centering everything on the *formative value* of the content: What material con-

stitutes a challenge for the students’ personal search? What can point the way to finding meaning amidst the various disciplines? It is not a matter of compiling a list of things a person should not *not* know. For a teacher, it means an extraordinary effort and being audacious in their choices.

Let’s go back to Thucydides and his “eternal possession.”

They will forget Dante, but all that they tasted in the relationships Dante experienced will remain: the way they will look at life, how they will let themselves be pierced by other people’s pain, how they will surrender themselves, moved by the fact that reason comes to a halt and leaps to something beyond it... And the same goes for the sciences. What kind of arguments make up mathematical thought? There are math problems that may be humdrum in terms of the real interest of the discipline, but they teach an ordered way of proceeding and critical thought. So this means saying to students, “I am giving you work, I will guide you; I am confident that the content can intersect with your intelligence and sensibility and that what you give back will be much more than a repetition of what I have told you.” The question of confidence is really a broad one...

What guides educators in their work?

Distance learning is a very powerful “stress test.” It took an immense amount of effort and also offered incredible richness. I would say, above all, that it brought out what was there before: we realized we had the capacity for work, for initiative, and for creativity that was drawing on a history, a history that must always be looked at critically.

Are you referring to the tradition at your school?

Sacred Heart flows from Fr. Giussani’s passion for education, and we have worked here from the beginning to go deeper into that origin, to understand it in experience, with twists and turns along the way.

What does that origin look like today?

It is a continual reflection on the nature of reason. What reason is and how to educate someone to exercise it are questions that involve the whole human person, allowing us to question reality, not filled with doubt but with a confident hypothesis, with an authentic openness to the world. I find that the insistence on reason—not as a sterile mechanism, but involving the whole person—is at the origin of this school. The most beautiful thing is that this comes to light through study “in the field,” by teaching.

How does the centrality of the subject become the vision, and therefore the structure, of the school?

If all of the sudden you have to change everything—as we did—you cannot come up with a model in four days. But you have to provide structure: make choices, take risks; you can’t go on improvising. We, for example, decided not to simply transfer our entire schedule online. We had to work a great deal to come up with a clear program, complementing class time with other tools: recorded videos, individual and group (virtual) meetings, correcting homework, and reviewing exams... and giving students the schedule for the next week in advance, including the assignments they would need to turn in. It was an insane amount of work that involved an impressive collaboration among the teachers. This, too, is a point that marks the way forward.

Working together?

The lockdown shined a light on shared responsibility. I repeat, we witnessed the enormous potential of things we had observed every day, but never dared to really look at it; for example, the way students worked together in the lessons or on the student council. It is crucial to have a unified outlook on the students, a coordinated path of cultural growth, because academic subjects speak to one another, and not only obviously related ones. We always look at organizational efforts with suspicion for fear that things could become rigid. But a structure can communicate a breadth of vision if you consider what emerges from life, from history, from what has happened, and from what we have come to see as an ally. Remaining flexible is a question of maintaining the realism that has guided us in recent months.

Over the last few months, school has been at the forefront of a public debate and has been reaffirmed by every side as a priority for all of society. What does that mean for the future of the country?

Schooling can help nurture—or, in contrast, discourage—the development of

openness in young people. For our graduation exams, I waited to greet them one by one, and I was surprised to see young people chomping at the bit to go out into the world. I think the decisive contribution for the country is bringing up people who want to learn, who are open to what is new and are capable of building a vision, of risking... Who are not afraid of newness in a world that is constantly changing; to summarize, young people who are not ideological. The future of the country hangs on this. Everything hangs on this.

You said the challenge is being met not with doubt, but with a confident hypothesis. What is that hypothesis?

Trusting your own humanity. The most moving outcome of education is a person who can make a comparison with all of his or her humanity. Among young people, there is a great risk of wanting to be externally directed: “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” What is the antidote? Being entirely oneself. Humanity takes work; it is continually developing in a person. School needs to nurture that, respecting the various moments of adolescent life; if it doesn’t, it becomes ideology. There are so many factors within this historical event we are living... but they all lead us back to the question of humanity—perhaps the question we faced before we flattened our perception of what we are. ■

It won't be a "dead" year

In Uganda, the pandemic has totally interrupted relationships between students and teachers because of the fact that very few families have internet. However, some people have found new ways to go on. We spoke with Matteo Severgnini, the director of the Luigi Giussani High School in Kampala, many of whose students live in the city's slums.



Anna Leonardi



For schools in Uganda, this year will probably be considered a “dead” one because just a few weeks after the beginning of the academic year in March, the first cases of coronavirus were recorded and schools had to close immediately. It seems unrealistic to hope that schools will reopen just a few weeks before the usual end of the academic year in November and the three long months of vacation that follow.

“The school closings caught us by surprise, especially because here the number of cases was always very low,” recounts 39-year-old Matteo Severgnini, the director of the Luigi Giussani High School in Kampala, a private school that is able to educate many young people from the slums because of the help provided by AVSI distance adoptions. “We had 48 hours to close the school and then everyone had to stay home from seven in the evening until six in the morning. Public and private buses were not allowed to run.”

In Uganda, where very few can afford internet, the lockdown made it practically impossible for students and teachers to stay in contact. After some initial weeks of adjusting to the new reality, Severgnini and the management of the Luigi Giussani School met to decide what to do. “Before discussing any initiatives, the school’s principal Micheal Kawuki reviewed the four foundational beliefs of the school: every person is of infinite value; reality is the true teacher; we are made for happiness;

and only love reveals our true ‘I.’ We asked ourselves whether these four pillars of the school, which we often take for granted, offered suggestions about what we should do in such an unprecedented circumstance.”

The first thing that reality told them is that the students returned home with no materials for school; here there are no textbooks, only the classroom lesson. “So then the first initiative was to contact our teachers and ask them to put their notes in a digital format. This was an ambitious work of synthesis that we’d never had reason to do before,” recounts Severgnini.

Then for a few days the school became an enormous printing office where the staff labored overtime with the only photocopier to produce material for every student. The principal became a deliveryman, riding his scooter, the only authorized means of transport, to the neighborhoods and homes of the students. Every morning, backpack on his back, he set out for a new zone of the city. In some cases there was a place where he could leave material for the students to pick up, but in many others he went knocking on doors or seeking out the students on the dusty streets of the slums. All the students expressed their surprise. Some were enthusiastic: “Thank you, you came all the way here for me.” Others were less than delighted: “How did you track me down even here?” Severgnini explains, “The reaction wasn’t important. For us, it was evident that people’s hearts are made for being

knocked on, sought out. This awareness helped us imagine how to move forward, how to keep being a school.” In the following months the situation in Uganda became increasingly dire, not so much because of the number of cases of coronavirus, which never reached a thousand, and with no mortalities, but because the economic emergency left 20 million minors (50 percent of the population) without the possibility of going to school and often unable to reach their family homes far away in various villages, which meant that they had to get by on their wits. Kampala teems with young people who have taken off their school uniforms and taken up selling onions and tomatoes on the streets. This is the best-case scenario, though, and unfortunately there has been an exponential increase in thefts and violence committed by young people, as well as pregnancies among young girls.

In an attempt to limit these problems, the government not only gives each family unit eight pounds of flour and three pounds of beans, but also a radio, so that students can continue to follow lessons prepared by the Education Ministry.

“The radio is certainly useful, but the attention of the students is not captured if there is no educational relationship, which for us is fundamental,” explains Severgnini. So after the materials were delivered to the five hundred students, once again it was up to the teachers. “As soon as there was a partial reopening of activities, we gathered



Matteo Severgnini.

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the teachers for a meeting to discuss our profession and the discoveries we made during lockdown.” Almost all 40 teachers were able to reach the school, some walking for hours or improvising ways to get transport. “I was struck by their contributions because they weren’t dominated by complaints or fear, but rather by gratitude for the fundamental questions everyone felt emerging while everything else was tottering, and for the sense of being generated anew by starting to work together again. One teacher said, ‘the school and my students all return to being mine if I start from a sense of belonging to this place and to all of you.’”

At the end of the meeting, Principal Kawuki proposed teacher formation on the practice of critical thought and its techniques. He said, “The teachers were enthusiastic because this topic is totally new here. It is a golden opportunity for all of us. In addition, ours is one of the few private schools that has been able to continue paying teachers during these months, and so they want the school to bear fruit for everyone.”

During the final announcements, the meeting was interrupted by the arrival of eight soldiers. Someone had called the authorities to report a gathering at the school. “What are you doing here?” the soldier in command asked. In the silence that followed, the secretary jumped up and said, “We’re loving our children, the children of Uganda.” The tense faces of the soldiers relaxed and the senior officer said, “I see that you are respecting safe distances between people and are wearing masks. I saw at the entrance you have even sterilized your boots. But next time, gather in smaller groups.” As the principal accompanied them to the exit, one of them asked, “What school is this? Can I bring my children here when you reopen?”

His question epitomized what they had been talking about during the meeting. “Reality bursts through, overturns our plans, and calls us to new roads,” says Severgnini. “We can’t face such an unstable situation just by trying to prevent problems. Responding to what happens to us is what makes us truly intelligent. In fact, after the soldiers’ visit, we reorganized into groups of ten divided by academic subject. This quadruples the work, but we can go more in depth.”

The Luigi Giussani School did testing in July even though the Education Ministry has exempted schools from any kind of evaluation. When sixteen-year-old Bernadette opened the sheet metal door of her shack, she found her principal once again in front of her with the test papers in hand. She thanked him, saying, “Every time I see you, you make me hopeful again.” No, this year will not be a “dead” year. ■

Close-up



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Change of plans

After years of teaching in which she planned every detail thoroughly, Luísa Costa Cabral found her work shaken up by the coronavirus pandemic. Now it is time to return to school in Lisbon, and she reflects on what has happened to her and what she does not want to lose.



Paolo Perego

“Pedro, where are you? I can’t hear you. Antonio, are you there?” She calls on them one by one. “I had no other concern than being with them,” recounts Luísa Costa Cabral, who teaches students in what for Portugal is the fifth year of elementary school and the first year of middle school. Giving up “other concerns” may seem banal but not for her. “I am methodical and precise. Usually in July I already have the coming year’s program of study defined and ready. I need to. In twelve years of teaching, it’s something that has always made me feel calm.” Even unexpected things were always planned for to the extent possible, or “at least taken into consideration as possibilities that could be controlled.”

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The emergency was proclaimed on a Monday in March. On that Wednesday, some students of the big Colégio de São Tomás in Lisbon were diagnosed with Covid, and on Friday the school was closed. “All the teachers met to organize distance learning, and in the meantime we began right away to send work material to the students.” This was an unforeseen event, and this time there was no controlling it. “In the past, if there was a class trip, for example, I always knew how I wanted to resume our work; I had everything planned. Instead, with this situation, something had to change in me,” she says on the eve of the new academic year, speaking of what she discovered and what she no longer wants to do without. In Lisbon the number of new cases does not seem to be lessening and even though school is set to reopen soon, its future is uncertain. But her experience in the past months enables her to look ahead optimistically.

Few schools adopted distance learning. “The government organized lessons on television, but we chose to stay with the students during distance learning.” The school launched a campaign—iPede [which means “I ask”], which in Portuguese sounds like iPad, the famous tablet—to ensure that all of its students would have the devices needed, since “about 20 percent of our 1,000 students come from families with modest incomes and are here on scholarships.” The distance learning began one step at a time and now involves four hours a day plus some afternoon sessions.

“I was strangely peaceful during the video lessons. I wasn’t really confident in the programs but I was only really concerned about my relationship with them. I was amazed at myself.” Where did this serenity come from? “I discovered that a preplanned program of study is not what forms a bond with the students, a bond that motivates all the work you do during the hours with them in the classroom and drives you to give your all, and you cannot be with the students when they are at home. This bond emerges only to the extent that I am in a relationship with something else.”

The key for starting again now is this discovery, which happened over time and was only understood after months of lockdown. “Analyzing the situation or looking at the number of Covid cases does not provide serenity.” As she was preparing for the new academic year, she reflected on Julián Carrón’s letter to the movement of CL and his invitation to look at those who lived the experience in a more interesting way. “In the past few months I have begun to keep in mind the stories of people who faced circumstances in a different way. I also thought about the pope and his gestures and about some friends. Then in June when I saw the students about their report cards, I understood that my relationship with them had been saved. I had looked at them in the way I had been looked upon and accompanied as I followed the church and the Movement.”

“I discovered that a bond with the students, a bond that motivates all the work you do in the classroom and drives you to give your all, emerges only to the extent that I am in a relationship with something else.”



Luísa Costa Cabral

This helps her now in starting again with the new academic year. “The relationship I have with them in class can, like a submarine, remain below the surface but not disappear. It can be reduced to the essential without being eliminated; it merely takes on a different quality or form.” Clearly, lessons in person are another thing. “We have to return to the classroom, and it can’t happen soon enough for us. But in whatever form it may take, it will be part of the same journey we are called to make, one that concerns opportunities for growth and relationship.” It was not easy, she explains, thinking back over the past months. During the online lessons, many of the students got distracted and did other things like watching vid-

eos, disrupting classmates, even petting cats or cuddling younger siblings. “But nobody was lost.” She says that she called all the parents early on, and one was worried that her son was not following the lessons. “I told her that he had spoken up during a lesson to share with his classmates his pain about his uncle’s death from Covid. She was moved.” With another boy, she had to take disciplinary action because of a series of things he had done. “He would have preferred to transfer to another school, but I explained to him that I had made some choices because I wanted the best from him. He accepted that. His mother called me and said that he had cried, but then became more peaceful. He felt that I was looking

at him, paying attention to him. At ten years old, how is that possible? Many other students felt this, too: they saw and recognized something about this relationship.” This has been the case with her colleagues as well. “It’s been hard not having a teacher’s room where we can compare ideas and experiences. Often this happens by accident. Instead, I sought them out by phone with a new freedom to discuss how to live to the full what was happening.” She found that she was more herself. She adds, “The new academic year coming up is an unknown. We reopen soon, and are working on all the possible scenarios. I’m still preparing my program of studies but it’s not the same as before. As I heard once, the gift of history always changes our plans. It’s an exciting challenge.”

She says she saw this same enthusiasm in a student who is about to start high school, “an adventure that students generally look forward to,” Luísa continues. “But while she was home during lockdown, she wrote me to say ‘I don’t want to just wait for things to change. I want to enjoy what I am living.’” The opportunity is now. “‘Not having lived,’ as happened to me in some way before isn’t a problem. You can begin now; you can always begin now.” ■

The biggest lesson

What horizons did those days of “virtual classes” open for students? Four of them tell their stories and what they discovered during the lockdown.



Paola Bergamini

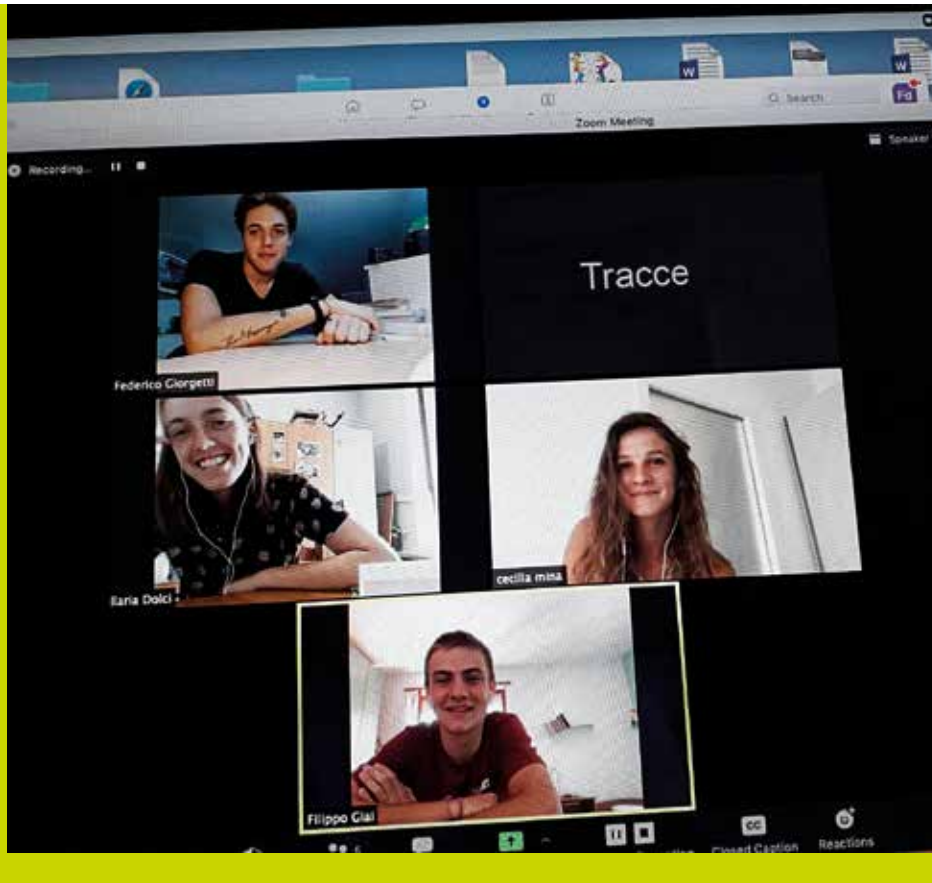
“Who could ever forget those three months!” exclaims Federico as we begin our Zoom conversation. He is referring to the three months spent in front of the computer following lessons. Was this a time to be archived away or a treasure to put in your backpack and draw upon for facing the coming academic year? We asked four students—Federico, Ilaria, Filippo, and Cecilia—to tell us about their experience of those 90 days and what they discovered.

For Federico, a 2020 graduate from a high school in Rome, the beginning of the quarantine period was an uphill climb. It was not because he was unhappy at home; actually, he was pleased. It was not the fault of his teachers. But how was it possible to follow lessons with each day’s tragic news about the pandemic? He often kept his webcam off to hide his disinterest in math and other subjects. But this was no way to live. “I wanted to return to living fully but I didn’t know how.” After two weeks, a friend called and read him these lines from the book by Marco Gallo, a GS kid who died in a car crash when he was 17: “You would never think to say it, but desire in and of itself is useless. It is in the instant in which it is kindled, in the instant in which its presence first comes forth, that we must follow it with our freedom: we must make it into act, action, and gesture.” Those words were a turning point for Federico. He began following his courses with passion and discovered that even math could be interesting. “In years of school, I never did so well, not just with the grades, because I only care about them to some extent, but because of the fact that study had value for me personally. This is something I really don’t want to lose.” Even his teachers were amazed at how active he was during the online lessons. The television news remained tragic. “Certainly, I couldn’t save human lives. I made a few donations, within my limits, but my way to participate in that moment of history was to study literature, geometry, and English well. That was my circumstance.” During that period he read the story of the Vietnamese cardinal Van Thuân, who spent nine years in solitary confinement. “You really, really, really should read it. It made me cry, and that’s not something I ever do,” continues Federico. “He accepted and lived his condition fully and was happy. There was a good that did not depend on him. This also happened to me—every day it happened to me afresh.”

Ilaria, like Federico, graduated from a language high school, but in Bergamo. “For me, instead, the four walls of our home seemed really restrictive,” she says. For her as well, a friend’s phone call changed her outlook. “What did she tell you?”

Filippo asks. “Actually, I don’t remember precisely, I just dumped all my troubles on her, but when I hung up, I said to myself, ‘I want to see what good there is in all this for me.’” During her Italian lesson, her teacher had posted some texts on the platform, and Ilaria asked if she could print them out so that she could continue with the lesson. Her teacher said, “OK, we’ll wait for you.” “I thought, ‘what attention!’” Her philosophy teacher began a lesson by playing a piece of classical music “that I adore, it was a gift.”

Every day, you have to choose whether to *really be there* in front of the webcam. “This was decisive for me in that period. Not just having it on, but really being there,” recounts Cecilia, who is going into her last year at a Milan high school. What makes you get out of bed and turn on the computer? “The hope I saw in my parents and in some friends who phoned me. The hope of discovering something beautiful. Every day was a little step forward to see what was happening and an opportunity for knowledge.” Federico asks, “Didn’t you ever have off days?” “More than one.” One cold morning with bad weather, she had no desire to follow her lessons, but out of curiosity turned on her webcam for the second hour. The physical education teacher was talking about his children, what he was doing, and then asked each stu-



The interview with Federico, Ilaria, Cecilia, and Filippo.

dent how things were going. “He was happy with his life. I thought, ‘he’s treating us like adults. He’s interested in us.’ This gave me a new start. During the lockdown, it was typical for me to understand something, which got me excited, but then the next day everything would go badly. But the little step had been taken. I didn’t go backwards.”

This also happened when she was studying, either alone or with classmates. “Preparing a project for Greek class, I realized that as I got deeper into the subject, the field of possible knowledge became increasingly bigger. I liked this, but how far could I reach? I discovered that this fear of vastness can’t be an excuse to stop.”

For Filippo too, the lockdown happened during his final year at a high school specialized in the sciences. He didn’t miss one lesson, to the amazement of his teachers, especially his math teacher, who in a short time went from zero knowledge about online learning platforms to the ability to run online lessons. “It was not a given.” His Italian teacher decided to change the program of studies and present Ungaretti earlier in the semester, given the author’s experience during the First World War. “She compared his situation to ours with Covid. War and the virus aren’t only negative—there’s also something good. This was a help for me in that confused and tragic time.”

Ilaria had the same experience during the explanation of “The Lemon Trees” by Eugenio Montale. “That poem was a provocation. For me, one of the ‘unexpected lemons’ that the poet glimpsed ‘through an open gate’ was a phone call to a friend, in which I told her about all my impatience and the high expectations I have of myself to be there, always and in every situation, out of sheer willpower.

I began to look at myself with a little tenderness and this even changed my way of being with my classmates.” So when someone asked how she was, Ilaria no longer gave a generic answer or hid her feelings. “We started having a sincere dialogue, an accent of new humanity that I don’t want to lose even if we go our separate ways.”

For the immediate future, the Covid emergency will have to be dealt with through social distancing, safety measures, and other efforts, but the lives of our students will continue. Ilaria has chosen to go to university in Milan to study modern literature. “My initial idea was to move there, but if the lessons are all online I don’t know if it’ll be possible. It doesn’t matter though, because my experiences in these past months have made me certain that there’s something good in every circumstance. Let’s just say that if I remain in Bergamo, it’ll be a nice challenge.” Cecilia will be starting her last year of high school. “I’ll have to choose what to study and this scares me a bit. But like Filippo, I’ve learned to look at my limitations without fear. It’s no problem for me if I don’t know everything and make mistakes. I’m setting aside anxiety.” Federico wants to move to the center of Rome to be close to La Sapienza University. “I’ve fallen in love with this university! But I don’t know what may happen. In two months the world may be completely changed. One thing is certain: I want to live fully, the way I did in those three months. If I have to follow lessons on video for three years, OK, I’ll do it!” ■

Daryl Davis



Daryl's encounters

*“How can you hate me if you don't even know me?”
The question that was born in him as a kid has stayed with him throughout his life. Today he continues to grapple with racism. The story of Daryl Davis, the African American musician who has befriended members of the Ku Klux Klan.*



Luca Fiore

Daryl Davis's agile fingers dance rapidly on the keyboard—he is playing the boogie-woogie, which is both cheerful and frenetic. Davis has had an enviable career. In photo albums, he keeps pictures of himself playing with the greats of American music, including Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and B.B. King. His passion is music, but his name is more associated with his life as an activist who used unconventional methods to fight for the rights of African Americans than with blues progression. In 1998, he wrote the book *Klan-des-tine Relationships: A Black Man's Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan*. In response to the fury and intolerance of many who protest against discrimination, Davis says that pushback does not lead anywhere. The only solution is through encounter and dialogue, and this is what he has dedicated his life to. For him, conferences, meetings, and debates have all but replaced concerts. This past February, he spoke about his work at the New York Encounter. More recently, fol-

lowing the large Black Lives Matter demonstrations that have taken place in American cities in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, he answered questions from a group of students in Communion and Liberation. Today, Davis is even more convinced about the correctness of his approach. He says, “Never in American history have we seen a movement so widespread and heterogeneous. Never have the authorities responded so quickly to condemn the violent behavior of police. We are at a turning point.” However, his argument and his story show that peaceful demonstrations are not enough and that violent demonstrations are even less effective in fighting against the phenomenon of racism in the US.

For Davis, everything began in 1983 at the Silver Dollar Lounge, a local country music bar in Frederick, Maryland. He was the pianist in the main act and was the only black man in the bar. At the end of the show, he was approached by a man who complimented him on his performance, but then added, “I have never seen a black man play better than Jerry Lee Lewis.” Davis replied that Lewis, whom he knew personally, had been influenced by the same black musicians that he had learned from. The man was skeptical, but was intrigued, and invited him to have a drink. They spoke at length, and toward the end, the man admitted that this was the first time in his life that he had sat at a table with a black man. Later, Davis discovered that the man was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, the historical front line of white supremacy. Both realized that their conversation had planted a seed in their lives. This was the first of Davis's many encounters with members of the KKK, some of whom, after becoming his friends, decided to distance themselves from the organization. The most significant example is Robert Kelly, the Klan leader in Maryland. Davis first approached him with the excuse of doing an interview for a book, which was coordinated through Kelly's secretary. He did not expect to meet a black man. There was a series of conversations, and



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■
Daryl Davis with a member
of the Ku Klux Klan.

Davis was invited to Klan meetings and night rituals. He listened, took notes, asked questions, and engaged in discussion. Little by little, the stereotypes began to break down.

Davis is not afraid to ask questions, to ask others to give reasons for their positions. This characteristic first manifested itself when he was ten years old. He lived in a white neighborhood and was part of the local Boy Scout troop. One day, during a parade in the city, he realized that someone was directing slurs at him and then throwing rocks at him. This was 1968. At first, he did not believe his parents when they explained to him that the reason he was attacked was his skin color. As a boy, he asked, “How can

you hate me if you don’t even know me?” The question became a refrain during his life. “The only answer I got was ‘Some people are just like that.’ That wasn’t good enough. What does that mean? Since then, I have been curious to know the reasons behind racism. But my question still remains unanswered.”

The most recent event, which was covered by CNN and recounted by Davis at the New York Encounter, was the friendship he struck up with Richard Preston, the Imperial Wizard of the KKK in Maryland, who had been arrested in 2017 for shooting a black man during a white supremacy march in Charlottesville, Virginia. Davis decided to pay his bail to free him from jail.

“If you cure the ignorance, there is no fear. If there is no fear, then there is nothing to hate. If there is nothing to hate, then there is nothing to destroy.”

They met at Preston’s house, where Preston explained his justifications for racism, retracing the history of the US from his perspective. “I listened to him and when he was done, I corrected him on a few things that he got wrong. At the end of that conversation, I invited him to my house and we agreed that afterwards we would go together to the African American History Museum in Washington, DC.” Preston came with his fiancé, Stacy Bell, who is also a member of the Klan. Davis showed the picture from that day at the NYE—the two of them are laughing as if they had been friends all their lives.

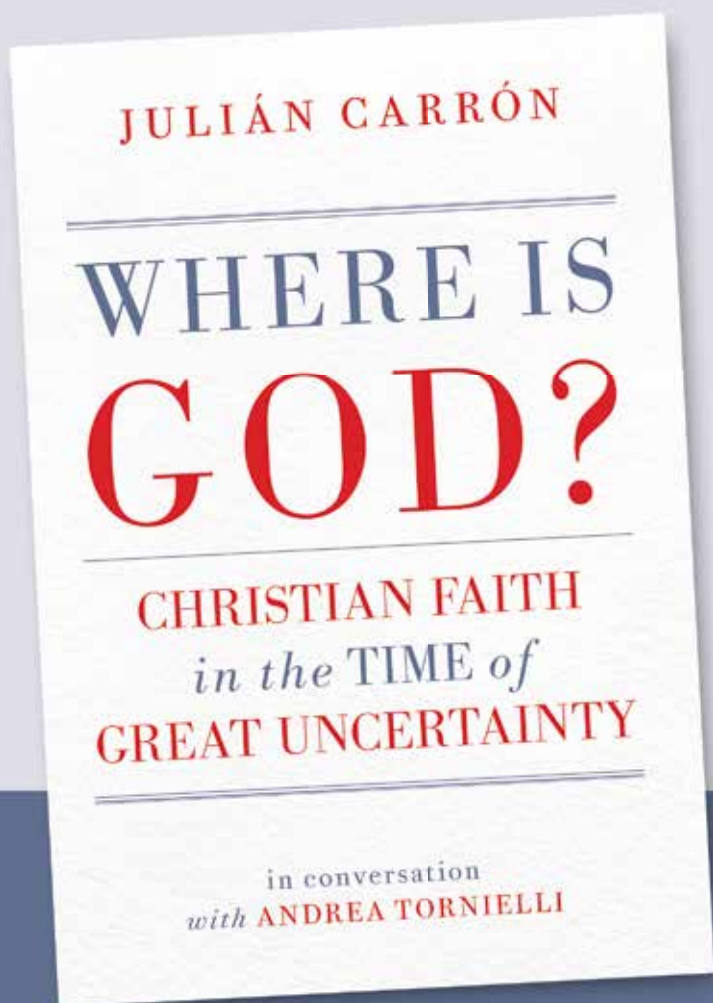
A few weeks later, Davis was invited to Richard and Stacy’s wedding and he decided to go. The ceremony was in full white supremacist style, with many Confederate flags. The day before the wedding, he received the most surprising request. Stacy’s father was ill and could not come to the wedding. It would be their African American friend who would walk her down the aisle. To those who ask him why he accepted, Daryl says, “Because we are friends.” What makes it a friendship is that he does not ask Preston to leave the Klan. For him, he is happy that they share this bond and that it is real. It is a seed that will grow in God’s time.

When the students asked Davis how they can have a dialogue with someone who has contrary views, he answered that first of all you must let the other person be himself or herself. “I don’t respect what they are saying, but I respect their right to say it... If you want to be heard, then you’ve got to let somebody else be heard.” But this is not enough. In the case of controversial topics like racism, attacking the position of the other person is not worth it, explains Davis. “As soon as you begin attacking somebody, the walls come up. I prefer to talk about my position and give my reasons for it. This is the only way that the other person can begin to consider it and reflect on it.”

Being aggressive reveals a fundamental weakness—fear of the other. There is always common ground on which you can begin a dialogue. Davis asked the students, “Do you believe we need better education for kids? Do you believe we need to do more to get drugs off the street? You’re agreeing with a neo-Nazi. You’re agreeing with a Klansperson. And it has nothing to do with race. When you discover that you share common ground, it is easier to see him or her as a person and not as an enemy... You started this far apart but when you find commonalities, you’re beginning to close the gap. By the time you get here [to a friendship], the trivial differences between you such as skin color... begin to matter less and less.”

Davis is not fooling himself about the state of his country. Tensions are growing and far-right groups will keep multiplying. The cause behind this, according to the musician, is that the face of this country has already been transformed and will continue to change. “In a few years, 50 percent of Americans will be non-white. In the following generation, whites will become the minority. This is a threat to the power structure that has existed for four hundred years. This is disconcerting for many people. They are frightened.” It is by preying on this fear that neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups get recruits.

“People have to stop focusing on the symptoms of hate,” concluded Davis. “It is like putting a band-aid on a tumor. To treat the illness, you must go to the root of all of this, which is ignorance... There is a cure for ignorance. The cure is called education... Provide more education and exposure to these people... If you cure the ignorance, there is no fear. If there is no fear, then there is nothing to hate. If there is nothing to hate, then there is nothing to destroy.” ■



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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