



TRACES

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10

**You only see  
what you admire**

## TRACES

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Vol. 22

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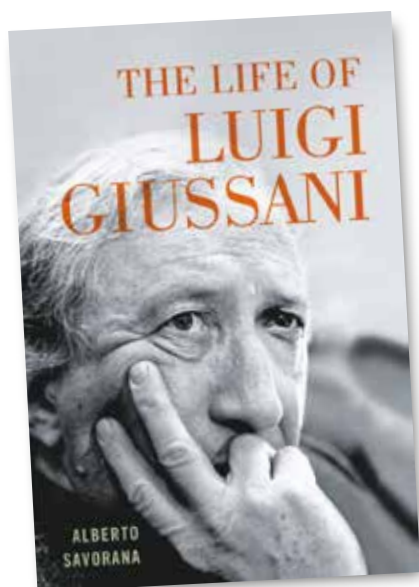
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William Congdon, *Virgo Potens*, 1985 Oil on panel, cm. 90x75  
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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*Sisters and brothers,  
because daughters and sons*



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## THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan

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

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## The crack and the dam

**H**e described today's world in six words. But he did it 150 years ago, when certain self-evident principles still held up and uncertainty had not seeped into the root of everything. Even so, Friedrich Nietzsche's line captures today's dramatic situation: "There are no facts, only interpretations." His was the perfect prophecy of the era in which we find ourselves, "tossed about by a thousand interpretations," as Julián Carrón said at the Beginning Day (the kick-off for the work proposed by the movement of CL for the new academic year), "unable to distinguish which of them sincerely grasps the facts." Nothing has the power to lift us out of a fog that is making everything confused and uncertain. "No fact 'grabs' us to the point that we emerge from the equivalence of interpretations. They all seem equal," Carrón said, adding a question that was crucial because it was not rhetorical: "Is there something that can challenge Nietzsche's assertion?" It all comes down to this: facts and how we look at them, or better, to what enables us to see them, to grasp their importance; facts that dissipate the fog and open up clear vistas *do* happen, many of them. You will find some of them recounted in these pages. They are not always striking or sensational: most often they are small ("the Lord works even through whispers," said Fr. Giussani). But they are *meaningful*; that is, literally able to indicate meaning, to open up new horizons. You just have to look at them, and in that "just" the whole game is played out because it says everything about our willingness to let ourselves be won over.

**At the Beginning Day we watched a video interview** that recounted the very powerful journey of Mikel Azurmendi, the Basque intellectual who, struck by an encounter with some CL members, pursued involvement with that "unusually special tribe" in order to study it thoroughly and understand its nature, and was won over by its origin: Christ. Carrón wanted to "share it with everyone" because "it documents how in these times of spreading nihilism, a person can recognize an experience that is different when it happens. A person can see a difference, something that is not nihilism, and can be amazed to see this nihilism defeated simply by following the initial evidence of that difference, no matter how tenuous. That little crack is enough to make the dam give way."

**So, in this issue we have taken up the same theme**, seeking out evidence of unforeseen facts in the lives of each of us, and talking about a heart that is open to accepting them and a journey of knowledge prompting us to "broaden our horizons," as the pope has asked of us in his most recent encyclical (featured in an article contained in this issue). When these things happen, they lift us up out of the fog, and the beautiful thing is that *they happen*.

# Letters

## Matteo, Gualter, Miriam, Francesco, Silvia

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

### Those small gestures

In *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, it says that what enabled Christ to live reality intensely was His relationship with the Father, that “in everything He does, Christ testifies to His relationship with the Father.” For me, this means staying attached to this companionship, not just as a parenthesis to university life, but as a possibility for all of life, in every moment and every place. This became even clearer as I thought again about what happened to me this summer, when, for the fourth year, I worked as a waiter at the TH Resorts. Toward the end of July, a little before the dining room opened, the director told me that he would have me wait on a table of Milanese lawyers, one of whom was a woman who was picky and demanding. While serving them breakfast and dinner during their stay, I noticed that the woman would ask for a small spoon which she used to dissolve her medicine in a glass of water, making it dirty. So I started placing a small spoon next to an extra glass so she could take her medicine but then still have a clean glass. When she noticed this, she turned toward me with a completely different expression than she had previously. She was happy: you would have thought I had given her a million euros. I could arrive for my dinner shift with a totally different face because in the afternoon I called my friends from CLU and my fellow first-year university students. I kept in contact with them to the point that I could share any question or difficulty that sprang from my work. I was grateful for having encountered something so great and for having friends who reminded me of this, whether they were on the phone or at work with me as fellow waiters. The whole week

continued this way with small gestures of attention that I offered this woman and all the other customers. On the last day, a little before leaving, she approached me and gave me an envelope. I thought it was a tip, but it was much more than that. It was a brief letter that said, “Goodbye, Matteo. Thank you for your attention to the smallest details that you have shown us. We’ve never felt so welcomed and loved. We hope to see you next year.” I had done absolutely nothing. I was this way because of what I have encountered. Without realizing it, I had brought something greater to this woman—I had been the means of giving her an attention that was not mine.  
**Matteo**, Bologna (Italy)

### “Did everything truly go well?”

One could ask, “Did everything truly go well?” Yes, all went well. God gave us the joy of an announcement through our six-year-old son, Pedro. At the end of May, he came up to my wife, Silvia, and said, “Did you know there’s a baby in your tummy?” It was like an angel telling us what we had desired for a year and a half. Then came the confirmation, and it was a joy for the whole family. Twelve-year-old Valentina, moved by the grace of having another sibling, wanted so much to thank God that she suggested sprinkling holy water on her mother’s belly, and said, “Mamma, everything will go well!” Everything was a sign that this little one, only four millimeters in size, was loved and desired. Our family loved each other even more because of this event, this grace. Then came the difficult part: the hemorrhage and the life of our child that was no longer; Silvia, whose life was at risk; the emergency surgery. It went well for what God wanted to give us, to be parents of a soul that He needed right away, that He couldn’t wait for. He gave us this grace, He gave us the possibility of remembering, once again, that nothing we do is done for ourselves. He gave us, yet again, the certainty that He sustains

and helps us. He gave us Silvia's life, that she could continue to be a wife and the mother of this family and to take care of Pedro and Valentina.

**Gualter**, Aracaju (Brazil)

### Continuously moved

We followed the Beginning Day together with the first-year university students of our community. Two facts emerged from a dialogue with them. The first: a great curiosity to begin college life without being blocked by the fear of a new place with many restrictions caused by the circumstances we are living in. In the second place, a young guy who bumped into the movement for the first time was struck by these words of Azurmendi: "It isn't group therapy, it's God's therapy. And what a therapy! To explain a life, the first point is that you have an identity." This guy told us that he also felt this need and that on that day, he had found the group he had been looking for. He was amazed at how people who were so diverse had all been seized by the same thing and by the same encounter, which was made evident by how we ate and played together despite social distancing. He came to the next School of Community and at the end of his contribution, he said that a meeting like that was only possible if Jesus was among us. We, who sometimes take for granted our companionship, found ourselves watching and following what was happening among the new students, recognizing the exceptionality of being together in that way. We were amazed at how it's impossible to explain completely in words the encounter we've had, but it involves being continuously moved and amazed in front of Christ who happens again.

**Miriam and Francesco**, Milan (Italy)

### "I knew to whom to be grateful"

I taught for many years in a state-recognized private school and always lived every day with excitement and enthusiasm. I retired in September, and I would never have imagined ending my teaching experience during the COVID emergency or teaching remotely. I was hoping to enjoy my students and colleagues in person. I thought I would take one last educational trip, participate in the school's activities for the last time, and take many memorable pictures. Instead, I experienced a surprise; the lack of many things didn't leave any emptiness, but a new and truer density in my relationships with students and their families, as witnessed by the many messages of

gratitude I received. They were thanking me, but I knew to Whom to be grateful; I knew that my being a teacher, in spite of my limitations, has its origins in an event, a charism I met—the charism of Father Giussani. He taught us that to educate is to introduce students to the totality of reality and that when one educates, one is being educated as well. This is the awareness that made my relationships with students I encountered in all these years special. My gratitude for this story should be concrete, and for this reason, I have decided to contribute my first retirement salary to the Fraternity Common Fund.

**Signed Letter**

### Help for looking at the children

As I was leaving Mass on Sunday, very sad because I had been disappointed yet again by the inappropriate behavior of a person dear to me, I bumped into a mother who stopped me to share her sadness about her children's behavior. She sees them distancing themselves, increasingly reluctant to participate in the Mass and the sacraments, and her efforts to address this behavior have proven to be useless, serving only to push them further away. I listened to her, but I was not in the mood to answer; I was looking for an excuse to interrupt her, but something in me kept me from leaving. I remained silent and kept her company for several minutes. Then she began to head toward the car without expecting any encouraging words from me or a magical cure for her wounds. At home, something wasn't right. I grabbed the phone and texted her, saying what might have eased my pain if I had been in her shoes. I mentioned that Christianity is not propagated through proselytism, rules, and mechanical rituals, but by attraction. It is an encounter with God the Man, as it was for the apostles; they didn't understand Him, but they knew that without His company nothing would have had meaning. I told her that as a teenager, I was far away from God, but that in the university I met people who engaged and struck a chord with me; desiring to be a Christian like them, I began my journey. I sent the message, and she answered immediately saying that she really felt valued. She went on to say that she never heard anyone, not even in church, say that Christianity begins with an encounter, and that she desired to have my faith, which would be the only help she could get for looking at her children and accompanying them without judging them. It is clear to me now how in following the event, we can be a resource for others, helping them to begin, to move forward, and to hope.

**Silvia**, Turin (Italy)



# Distinctive facts

**M**any of us have Mikel Azurmendi's path to Christianity in mind, having seen the video interview or read about it in "El Abrazo" (The embrace). This path, involving one encounter after another, is extraordinary because of the heart, motivation, and circumstances surrounding it, but what is most striking is that it reveals a dynamic that applies to all of us. What happens when, in the midst of our confused world, we see something fascinating and different emerge and decide to follow our fascination? When is it that we are willing to really look at certain facts, facts that were unlikely to happen but that actually did, and set ourselves in motion to find and acknowledge their origin, their deeper explanation? This "Close-Up" seeks to respond to this question by putting together a number of facts involving people and moments in people's lives in which an encounter happened, albeit in different ways for different people. This encounter opens wide the doors to a world totally different from the one in which we grew up (see the interview with author Elisa Fuksas). It brings us to see what we did not see before, to look at the world in a new way, as we see in the stories that follow. It is beautiful to catch glimpses of the same journey as that described in Azurmendi's book. Facts happen without us expecting them, but within our normal frameworks and gestures. Recognizing this and being able to see the facts is indispensable. (dp) ■

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On the cover and in the pages of this issue, you will find a series of paintings by William Congdon (1912–98), the great American artist who became friends with Fr. Giussani and spent the last years of his life in Bassa, just outside of Milan. Each painting is accompanied by a quote from Congdon, in which he documents what he "sees."  
(©The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milano - [www.congdonfoundation.com](http://www.congdonfoundation.com))

Here: **San Martino - Sea, 1992.**

"(...) the sea, seen that morning from Sandro's car—a curve in the road that descends from San Martino to Celle, and there in front of us were the broad bowled [sic] hills, like a chalice filled with a golden sea above which the sky hangs down like a curtain of dark silk"  
(from *Atlante dell'opera* [Atlas of work]: *In Lombardia 1979–1998*)

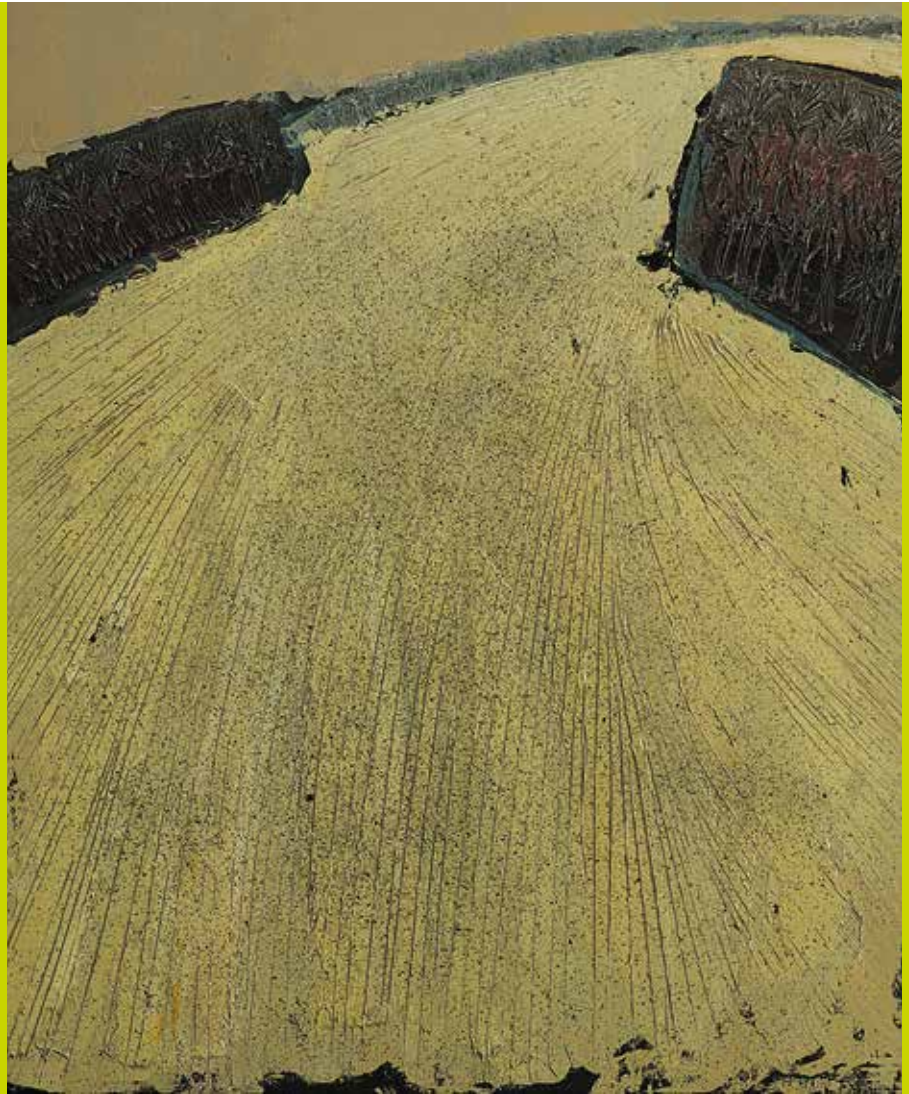






■  
**Campo lungo, 2, 1981.**

“Now, after exactly two months of sun, the slow, silent, profound and inexorable changing of seasons—(...) I paint the long, dry field I saw this morning (...). Today no longer on a “normal” canvas, but a tall one with the field stretching up so high as to almost chase away the sky”  
(from *Atlante dell’opera* [Atlas of work]: *In Lombardy 1979–1998*)



## ***I want to see***

Born and raised in a context that was distant from the church, Elisa Fuksas—filmmaker, author, and the daughter of a famous architect, describes the path that led her to faith and baptism. And, above all, what began after that step: “Simply living.”



Luca Fiore



**S**he sits at a little table in a café in the heart of Rome and takes off her mask. It matches her black pants and jacket. Her eyes are smiling, but her first comment is about the pandemic. “Man, this Covid. Aren't you afraid?”

Young and beautiful with a famous last name. Elisa Fuksas, the daughter of lauded architect Massimiliano Fuksas, met us in the throes of the release of her latest book, *Ama e fai quello che vuoi* (Love and do what you want), and of her documentary to be presented at the Venice Film Festival, *iSola*. They both recount the last three years of her life. In her book, she explains how she, a liberal, left-wing daughter of well-off Rome, was comfortably agnostic until she suddenly (but not out of the blue) started down the path to receiving the sacrament of baptism. The documentary is made up of clips she herself recorded—with her cell phone—during the lockdown, right before which she was diagnosed with a tumor in her thyroid. The world stopped, and she found herself alone at home with her diagnosis and her fears about the spread of Covid. Then more news: a dear friend of hers who lives in Milan was also ill with a tumor.

In the documentary, Elisa captures life, emotions, and her dog Stella, daily life within the enormity of the pandemic. Behind it all, she subtly suggests an experience of faith, a love story that changed the way she looks at herself and the world, despite the fact that it all started with a betrayal. While she was living with Giacomo, an older man with two children, Luca asked her to marry him. She replied, “But you already tried that and it didn't work.” He said, “I'm serious. A church wedding and everything.” And almost out of nowhere, a thought came into Elisa's

head: “But I'm not even baptized....” Our interview with Elisa starts here, at that mysterious (and apparently insignificant) moment.

**Who were you at that moment? Where did that thought come from?**

Now, I can say that it came—which only became clearer to me recently—out of a period in which I had begun to ask questions. I had just finished a documentary called *Albe – A Life Beyond Earth*, which told the story of seven people from Rome who believe that they have daily interactions with aliens. They are simple people, less fortunate people, so their capacity to have these visions becomes a kind of redemption for them. They feel like the keepers of a great secret: we are not alone in the universe. Today, I can say that, too, is a kind of religiosity. It involves the need for something beyond, and I understood the attraction. While I was working on it, I met a Sardinian priest who was a little strange. As I listened to him, I found myself in tears. I was afraid. He asked me what I was afraid of. I answered, “of dying.” He replied, “Get baptized and you will no longer be afraid.” That was quite awhile before Luca asked me to marry him.

**A thought that became a desire...**

I went searching on Google for the “meaning of baptism,” “how to become Catholic,” “what to do to be baptized,” “being baptized as an adult”... I didn't know anything. I found out that the Gospels were part of the Bible, that the *Song of Songs* was a sacred text. It was crazy, an unbelievable ignorance. Even Facebook's algorithms picked up on the change: it stopped showing me ads for contraceptives and instead began showing information about trips to Jerusalem and books by and about the pope.

**In the book, you describe several meetings with Cardinal Giuseppe Betori, the archbishop of Florence.**

He is a friend of my parents. That is one of the advantages of being the “daughter of....” And now he is my friend, too.

**He entrusted you to the care of Fr. Elia Carrai, a young priest who became an important friend for you.**

Yes, the first thing I noticed about him were his Vans shoes and hipster glasses. “A priest can't dress like a hipster.” I was full of prejudices.

**You started a faith journey with him.**

Yes, we met and wrote back and forth. We spoke and thought together. He suggested books for me to read. I told him what was happening to me, which is what I talk about in the book: my ex still camping out at my house, my relationship with Luca and his children, and the sickness and death of my grandmother, as well as my clumsy attempts to help at the soup kitchen and when I discovered all-night adoration at the churches in Rome. At a certain point, Fr. Elia wrote to me, “It is not just a question of making certain decisions, but of your freedom being more and more available to *discover and adhere* to the good design there is for your life.” I tried to do that.

**In one conversation with the cardinal, you say you are obsessed with “truly becoming aware of others.” What does that have to do with your discovery of the faith?**

My problem, which I think is fairly common, is that I use others a little bit like a screen onto which I project my own stories. I don't get to know you because I am interested in how



you are different, but so that I can invade you with my own ego and, in looking at you, fall in love with myself. Discovering that there is an Other who is calling you and truly loves you; well, to me that was an irresistible temptation. At a certain point I said to myself: “I want to see if I am also capable of that.”

**You were born and grew up in a context that was distant from the Church.**

Yes, I had to have many things stripped away. I was very closed in many ways, with a lot of preconceptions. Everyone has his own history, and I have mine. I found a place of freedom in the church, which was the last place I would've looked for it.

**Why not?**

Compared to the conformism among my friends and that whole world I come from, when I speak with Fr. Elia, it's like talking to a young “punk.” I envy him a little. He has a freedom I don't have and which I wonder whether I will ever be able to experience.

**Elisa Fuksas** (Rome, 1981) is a filmmaker and author. She has published the books *La figlia di* (Daughter of) (Rizzoli, 2014) and *Michele, Anna e la termodinamica* (Michele, Anna and thermodynamics) (Elliot, 2017). In September 2020, Marsilio released *Ama e fai quello che vuoi* (Love and do what you want). As a filmmaker she has directed movies and documentaries including *Nina* (2013), *Albe—A Life Beyond Earth* (2018), and *The App* (2019). Her latest, *iSola*, was presented at the Venice Film Festival in 2020.

**What kind of freedom do you mean?**

In the beginning, with the voyeurism typical of one who knows nothing, I wondered, “Has he ever fallen in love? How can he manage celibacy?” These were the somewhat infantile questions that I asked him, anyway. In response, he told me a story that had almost a medieval feel to it: an experience more powerful than I ever could have dreamed of. There was a girl whom he never even touched... He said that if things had gone differently, his relationship with that girl would have reduced everything to possessiveness. He described a love that, in just hearing about it, you fall in love with. I was moved.

**Why does Fr. Elia's life make you envious?**

I make a bit of a joke and say that the real “free love” is the one proposed by the church. I grew up thinking of a kind of relationship in which the premise is that it is not free. Two people are together and, in the end, they don't want anything from each other. They do not accept that everything is simply a transaction. Lord, I don't know if that transaction allows you to have a baby... But it is so extreme to live, to be here right now, to be able to think, to write, to love... And I want to live life to the max, down to the bottom. So, then, if I love you, I take all of you. I take your sickness, your fears, your children... I take you. This is delicate territory, and I don't want to judge anyone. But I can, based on what I have seen in my life, say this: that attitude seems freer to me than what a bourgeois life offers.

**How do people react when you tell them that you became a Catholic?**

I never imagined that it would amaze, shock, wound, or offend people, even disappoint them. It was odd, but sometimes also amusing—a few friends asked if I was having some kind of crisis, if I was uncovering something that happened to me as a child, maybe that I had been adopted...

**And you replied?**

I say, “No, look, it really happened,” even if it engenders scandal and envy. People say, “oh, blessed are you who

can believe,” as if it were something simple or, even worse, predetermined; in the end, in a certain sense, life is harder now. Not because I lost anything: I am more equipped to understand the world. But the point is that now everything has to have meaning. My life is much more anguished. I am not seeking answers because the questions are continuously opening wider. But I seek meaning, and the world, our society, makes it very hard to find meaning.

**But if it is more difficult, how is there an advantage?**

Oh, of course there is. Because, within the mess lies a hopeful prospect, and that gives you greater strength. I, anyway, live better because I feel alive, I really feel things. God brings you to live more deeply. I need to be connected to the mystery every day and go back to it as often as I want and can. The other day, at a book presentation, a lady asked me, “How do you think you will continue on this path? Have you thought of being a nun?” I said, “No!” I could never give up Stella, my dog [she laughs]. But I find it amusing that someone asked me that question. Because, if you ask me, continuing on this path simply means living. Even though...

**Even though?**

My friends do not believe. I do not have anyone with whom I speak about or share certain moments. I've often asked myself, “When will I be able to stick with someone? To share?” With this book, I am receiving messages from people I'd never have imagined I would: priests, believers, people who are sick, an entire world, a world that is not my own. If a girl writes to you saying that reading what you wrote prompted her to relive a very similar journey, you understand the intensity of what you wrote. Not because it was I

who did it, but because it is powerful as an undeniable fact. It is a history that connects us even if it is within a context that tends to distance us. I thought I'd have to seek out my companions in faith, but it seems to me, in the end, it is an opposite motion: others are coming to me. I am amazed by this miracle. It is an adventure, and I do not know where it will carry me. When I think I've understood, there is a kind of intelligence that pushes me further, putting me back into the game.

**In the book, you describe reading *The Religious Sense*. You write that the way Fr. Giussani explains wonder was striking for you.**

I found in him a capacity to describe in a human way something that is beyond human. He explains how one draws close to Jesus, showing how it is like a person you fall in love with. That, too, stirred a kind of envy in me. Giussani proposes a love that is continually renewed thanks to wonder. All of us, instead, have experienced the opposite: things are born, live, and then, in the end, die. It's entropy. Instead, love for Jesus is a love that overcomes the laws of nature. That is what I am looking for in relationships. I want to fall in love like that. I want nothing less. It's hard. It takes a lot of work.

**In your film, which depicts your time in lockdown, you say that it was a time of verification of your faith.**

**How so?**

It's a test I gave myself. After all, when everything is going well, it's easy to believe. You have your life, and then you add an extra level, the religious level. I asked myself: Does your faith hold up in a time of difficulty like this?

**How could you tell if you passed the test?**

Instead of hating, ranting, and ask-

ing Why me?, I said to myself, “OK, if this is happening, it means I need to learn something, to discover another dimension of myself to get through it—or not get through it.”

**What have you discovered?**

Suffering and death have always terrified me. During the period of the lockdown, death was not an abstract idea. I had to come to terms with it. And these are also central aspects of Christianity. I do not think it was by chance that I chose a religion founded on the Resurrection at Easter.

**Both the book and the film end with you saying, “I am still afraid to die. I am still afraid to live. But now, perhaps, a little less so.” What has that “a little less” meant for you?**

On the night of Easter 2019, I received the sacrament of baptism, in which, we say, the old woman in me died. Exactly 365 days later, I had to have a tumor removed. I thought, “Last year it was a symbolic death. This year? Will I really die?” When I went into the hospital room, I saw a crucifix on the wall. For the first time, I didn't see it as a decoration, a symbol, or a superstitious sign. I saw it rather as two Cartesian axes that intersect, creating a new space. And I realized that this new world order according to which I had started to see things, has changed me. It made me want to run to meet what was about to happen with a somewhat daft enthusiasm. This is the advantage we talked about earlier. In some way, however it happens, this familiarity with life places you in a different position. That “a little less” contains a marginal amount, one grain of rice, just a trifle extra that makes me say: all things considered, I did the right thing. ■

# “Let’s wait and see”

*Her scars from childhood, the suffering she experiences now, and her life in Ireland. The human contact she sought on Facebook... The witness of Maria, who identifies with the “man born blind” of the Gospel. “How can such an awful fact open my heart to something so beautiful?”*



**Snowfall, 2, 1986.**

“Everything closed, everything white, everything snow.”  
(From *Atlante dell’opera* [Atlas of Works].  
In Lombardy 1979-1998))





## Anna Leonardi

“God can do nothing without our willingness.” These words, pronounced by Julian Carrón at the Beginning Day, are the words of Maria as she relates what has happened to her in the last few months. She said that she had never understood the story of the “man born blind” in the Gospel as she does now that she has regained her “sight.” Speaking from her house in Carlow, Ireland, where she lives with her husband Paul and their two small children, she said that “there are many things in my life that are still not clear to me, but of one thing I am certain: that the darkness that overshadowed me is gone.”

**This has not always been her home.** In Italy where she was born 34 years ago, she moved frequently. When she was three years old, she was taken away from her parents, who struggled with drug addiction, and then she went through a difficult period of passing through foster homes and orphanages and of living out the consequences of court decisions. This journey seemed to come to an end when she was seven when a family from Ariccia initiated the process to adopt her. “Those were trying times for me and for them. I was a girl full of anger and they already had three children... I made it very difficult for them. But I always saw that they had an incredible tenacity that caused them not to give up on me.” For instance, on the day of her Confirmation, Maria locked herself in her room because she did not want to go. Her mother, after a few attempts, was able to get Maria to open the door. “I remember that she was sitting on my bed and I was already dressed and ready

and asked, ‘But who is God? I don’t get it...’ She didn’t explain it to me, and it was then that I began to understand Him. He must be very patient, because nobody forced me to go to my Confirmation on that that day.”

**During those turbulent years,** there are some images that stand out in her mind more than anything else. The first is the Easter and Christmas posters in the kitchen that kept getting switched out, and the other is a picture on the fridge of Fr. Giussani hugging a friend. “Those faces expressed to me a genuine, definitive encounter.” Maria found the “forever” that she had been missing, in part during her summer vacations in Calabria, where she would spend a few weeks with her family and other families in the movement. “The hikes, the games the nights of singing... It was there that I saw before my eyes the words I read hanging on the walls of my house.” When she was 18, the journey began again. Maria packed her bags and traveled to Ireland. “I wanted to learn English and find a job, but what really pushed me to go was my need to understand who I really was.” In Ireland she moved around a lot and found herself in relationships that made her unhappy. She was not able to find stability at work. She worked as a waitress, then a make-up artist, and then a teacher. The constant thread throughout this period of the discovery of her identity was her parents. Not a day went by without a phone call from Italy, and when she couldn’t go visit them in Ariccia, they would visit her. “After I met Paul and we started a family, they were essential. Even though things were starting to come together, it was not enough.”

*“God keeps making a lot of things in the world and in us. He continues to give me many gifts, the most recent one being your question.”*

12

When their first son, Michael, was born, Maria began having panic attacks. “Paradoxically, during the time of the greatest stability in my life, all of my fragility emerged. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be a good mother, I felt inadequate.” Her mother stayed with her in Carlow for a long time. One morning, not long before she had to return to Italy, she brought back a small sheet of paper from Mass, a morning prayer that she had found in the church. She said, “Maria, let’s pray this together, let’s offer each day to God even when we are not together, and let’s wait and see what He does.”

“To see” would become an important verb for Maria. “I needed to pray because the things that I saw did not satisfy me. It seemed that the meaning of my life, of the people I loved and the things that I did, would always be fleeting. This need exploded toward the end of 2019, when Matthew, Paul’s brother, passed away suddenly. “He suffered from drug addiction and after a few months of rehab, he came to stay with us so that we could help him get back on his feet.” For her, his death was like a wound that was reopened. She kept saying to herself like a broken record, “You can’t forget where you come from... It’s your curse.”

**But not even these thoughts stopped her.** Stronger than the pain that she was feeling was a desire to live without despairing. “So one morning I got up, grabbed my phone and went on the CL Facebook page to ask if anyone in the community lived in Ireland. That evening, Mauro contacted me from Dublin and invited me to a meeting.” Maria did not think twice about it in spite of the fact that she had to travel two hours by bus and the weather was dreadful. “I entered that room soaking wet and I did not know anybody. For a second, I felt very uncomfortable. Then Mauro came over to greet me. ‘Welcome! What could there be about this place that dragged you out of your house in this weather?’ I told him I was asking myself the same thing.” After that first meeting, Maria was able to attend just one more—during the pandemic, School of Community takes place over Zoom. “Yet for me there was nothing missing. I would look at the faces of these new friends and listen to what they talked about. I resonated with everything they said. I asked myself,

‘How can these circumstances open my heart to something so beautiful?’”

**Paul, who is not so happy** about these meetings, still can’t help but notice that Maria has changed—she no longer experiences panic attacks. Paul, on the other hand, was full of sadness after Matthew’s death and could no longer believe in God. Then a few weeks ago, he brought home a present for Maria. “I unwrapped it and inside there was a Bible. It was his way of telling me, ‘Keep going on this journey. At least you stay open.’” Maria feels a great sense of responsibility, but she is not alone. Even her children, whom she worries about, are now becoming companions on the journey. A few nights ago, five-year-old Michael asked her out of the blue, “Do you think that God has finished creating?” Maria took a moment to swallow her food and reflected on the last few months, on the small and big facts that have touched her so profoundly. She replied, “God never stops creating; every day he keeps making a lot of things in the world and in us. He continues to give me many gifts, the most recent one being your question.” ■



Paola Bergamini

*Desert - Egypt, 1977.*

"Tears well in my eyes and I return to earth, sitting in a car, crossing the light of the desert. I look behind the long wall that disappears in the bright reflection of the sand, a tableau of the desert seen through the windshield of the car that carried me from St. Macarius to Alexandria" (from *Quattro continenti in cinquant'anni di pittura* [Four continents in 40 years of painting])

# *Matteo and the hundredfold*

A philosophy student talks about his conversion: from the decision to fight against faith to a fascinating friendship. And a new kind of knowledge: "What I had disdained revealed itself in all its grandeur." One encounter after another.

*“His entire family sat in the pews of the church, and his father asked for a dispensation to be able to read the second reading. ‘It was a sign of the respect he has for my freedom.’ Some, however, did not share this attitude. One cousin informed him, ‘You are the first person in two generations of our family to be baptized. You still have time to change your mind.’”*

14 **“M**ilitant atheist.” Matteo thinks that that phrase perfectly defined him. An “atheist” from birth because his agnostic parents did not impart to him any kind of religious education. “Militant” because, at the age of 16, not believing was not enough; he wanted to fight against faith. He threw himself into the writings of some of the paladins of reason who struggled against the superstition of religion. He started with Voltaire and Enlightenment authors and continued with Piergiorgio Odifreddi and Margherita Hack. It wasn’t enough—to conquer his enemy, he needed inside knowledge.

**He began by reading a number of books** by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, and a wall in his reason began to crack. He was always taught that Christianity is distant from culture, but here was a learned man with a truly vast cultural patrimony. How could this be? His curiosity grew. He began to read biblical exegesis and sacred scripture and was astonished by the Sermon on the Mount. He, who was passionate about philosophy and attracted by Seneca’s stoicism, now said, “I discovered an unimaginable moral profundity in the Sermon on the Mount. It was my first encounter with Christianity, but it engendered only a moral fascination. I was still far from a conversion of the heart.”

In Rome, at a summer school program for creative writing, Matteo met Lorenzo, a striking young man who was intelligent and full of life... and a believer. “My prejudices were blown to smithereens.” They became friends and Lorenzo recommended that he read St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. In the life of the philosopher from Hippo,

especially in his early life, Matteo found an analogy to something that was happening to him, something that made him restless. At the same time, as a counterbalance, he read Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. “I found myself at a fork in the road. Whose model of life did I want to follow? Dionysus or the Crucified? If atheism was true, my existence was just a spark of being in an ocean of nothingness.” He used precisely those words: “being” and “nothingness.” “Even gaining approval from others, success... Nothing was enough to live for. All that was left was despair,” Matteo observed, but then described his response: “I chose Christ. And everything that I had ignored or disdained up to that moment because of my prejudices revealed itself in all its grandeur. I want to say it was like the blind man who regained his sight.” It was the first yes on the road to conversion.

His road was populated by encounters that showed him how human Christianity is. Just like every year, he spent his summer vacation with his family at the house of one of his parents’ friends. About this friend, Matteo said, “He had never flaunted his faith in religious ‘lectures.’ Far from it. But he understood something was tormenting me during that time.” One evening he said to Matteo, “You are not really human if you do not believe in something that transcends us, if you do not look to and admire something greater.” For the young man, those simple words were the soft wind of grace. Alone in his room, he prayed for the first time.

**Nothing was like it was before.** His outlook on reality changed. Parties with his friends and going to dance clubs no longer satisfied him—something was missing.



But he realized that he ran the risk of embracing gnosticism, an abstract faith based on intellectual study without a lived component. Lorenzo warned him when they saw each other again at the Mantua literary festival, saying, “Don’t read too many theology books; you need to love.”

Lorenzo and that family friend were witnesses to a joy that fascinated him. What could he do? His mother stepped in to help him. She suggested that he contact Abbot Bernardo at the Abbey of San Miniato in Florence, a man she deeply respected. The abbot welcomed Matteo with open arms. “I am not interested in handing on ‘notions’ or doctrine. I would like to help you see the beauty of Christianity.” That evening, when Matteo got home, he finally experienced a sense of peace; he felt overtaken by a gratuitous love.

With Abbot Bernardo, he began to prepare for baptism. “A new horizon opened for me in my encounter with him and the other monks, unexpected but long hoped for. They were living the gospels and I could do nothing but follow.” On June 2, 2018, at the age of 18, Matteo re-

ceived the sacrament. On the altar beside him as his godfather was that family friend. His entire family sat in the pews of the church, and his father asked for a dispensation to be able to read the second reading. “It was a sign of the respect he has for my freedom.” Some, however, did not share this attitude. One cousin informed him, “You are the first person in two generations of our family to be baptized. You still have time to change your mind.” Even some of his friends didn’t understand and made fun of him. “It was a challenge I had to meet.” At times he felt the heaviness of living faith alone—it was difficult, if not impossible, to speak to his peers about it. A question emerged: “Will I not find anyone?”

**After graduation, Matteo enrolled** in the university to study philosophy and published a book at his own expense called *Itinerario nel divino* (The pathway to the divine) that told the story of his conversion. He wrote it for his atheist friends and gave them a copy.

In January of this year, at a dinner with the high school classmates with whom he worked on the school

newspaper, he found himself sitting next to Filippo, who is studying ancient languages. They began to talk and Filippo spoke about his friends from the movement and their life together at the university and at the end of their conversation asked, “Do you want to come to our community Mass?” Matteo went and met Stefano, Lorenzo, and others. “I couldn’t believe it—young people like me who lived out faith in the concreteness of daily life.” He said yes to going to School of Community, but then the lockdown hit.

Months passed without seeing his new friends but Filippo sent him a few books. He was particularly struck by *The Religious Sense*. In September, he received an invitation to the Beginning Day. When he saw the title on his screen, “You Only See What You Admire,” one thought filled his head: it’s talking about me. “In those words, I saw every step of my conversion.” During the event, he looked at the faces of his new friends and realized that they are normal young men and women like him who live out their faith. “That makes them happy. It is the hundredfold from the gospel.” Finally, he feels at home. ■

*“I couldn’t believe it—young people like me who lived out faith in the concreteness of daily life.”*

# “What is happening?”

*In the midst of the pandemic and the pain of not being able to have children, she ran up against her sister's happiness. “In her beginning, I saw my own. And I missed it.” Letizia tells us how she began to “see” again.*



Alessandra Stoppa

16

“If by magic you could go back to the time before coronavirus, would you do it?” Impulsively, Letizia would say yes, perhaps with some doubt because in any case nothing much has happened over these months in Neuchâtel. Then she stops and has to admit, even to herself, that no, she would not want to erase her recent life, because something had happened to her, starting with the impact on her of the person who was asking her the question: Aurora, her younger sister. She is the same sister, but for some time now, has been different.

**They live far from each other;** both left their hometown of Padua. Aurora is 20 years old and is studying in Trento; Letizia is 30 and she and her husband have lived for five years in French-speaking Switzerland. They are very close, but the younger sister had always been “allergic” to the experience of CL, an experience that had

changed the older sister's life. Aurora had a mountain of objections that later crumbled because of something “that had nothing to do with me,” Letizia says. It involved an encounter that caught Aurora by surprise: her theater company put on a play about Marco Gallo, a teenager in GS (the group for CL high school students) who died in a car accident. Along with the other actors, Aurora went to meet the young man's parents, having prepared various questions to get to know the story better. When they got there, she found herself with two people who wanted to get to know her. She had expected anything but that. That day, saying good-bye, she asked them, “Where can I meet other people like you?” They gave her the number of a friend in Trento, and Aurora looked her up right away. It was the beginning of a story of a magnetic pull, in which one person who truly sees allows others to open their eyes and reopens the eyes of those

who have become “blind.” Looking at her sister, Letizia thinks of herself: “In her beginning, I saw my own. And I missed it: I missed that simplicity and uncontainable wonder” of how she felt when she met the movement at the end of high school through other young people. Something was immediately evident: “For the first time I saw someone who was happy. In fact, the question literally leaped from my mouth: Who are you?” I was exploding with joy, so much joy that when I heard people in the community talking about the risk of falling into thinking you ‘already know’ I didn't understand. I asked myself, ‘How could that happen? That's impossible, this is too wonderful.’” But after a while, that's exactly where her faith journey ended up. “I found myself thinking, ‘It's always the same story,’ and ‘yes, I already know, this part.’” Then she saw her sister so unarguably happy, a fact that “you can-

**Piazza Venice, 9 (Winter), 1951.**

“I lived in Venice for twelve years, and for three of them I painted nothing but Piazza San Marco, with that vertical walkway made up of the repeated, suffering footsteps of our existence that flows into the glory and explosion of Venice’s basilica” (from *Il viaggio continua* [The journey continues])



not mistake, because she doesn’t have the mildest temperament,” she laughs. Aurora starting going to charitable work and to School of Community and, in one phone call after another, she excitedly told Letizia all about it, as Letizia listened in silence. “What was happening to her prompted a question in me: ‘And what is happening in my life?’” She began to notice things in the midst of a difficult period with the pandemic, with her doctoral thesis to finish, and with the very open wound inflicted by the fact that she and her husband Matteo were still not able to have children.

One day, some married friends who have a daughter in middle school invited her to an online meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to speak with other families about starting a group of Knights, an activity for middle-schoolers. “Why us, since we don’t have kids?” Letizia and Matteo teach religious ed at the parish, but that wasn’t enough to justify the invitation, which she cannot explain, and actually wounded them for another reason. They had just finished

a novena to St. Gianna Beretta Molla, asking for the grace of having a child. “When we realized how the two things coincided, we felt a great pain,” she explained. “We said, ‘If this is the answer to our prayer, no thank you. It’s very nice, but no; it’s too little. It’s not what we asked for.’” They saw how prideful they were, disappointed by the answer they presumed would come, yet “we didn’t want to live like that. It wasn’t enough for us.” Having made an almost imperceptible decision, they left room for that same simplicity they saw in Aurora. “We started to look at this pain between the two of us, and then with a number of friends who did not try to give us answers, but instead listened to us and carried our questions with us.” As a result, they came to the meeting with an openness, and were struck by everything. It was the beginning of a decisive friendship: “People who you did not know a day ago really take your journey to heart. It’s out of this world for me. Now, we accompany one another in life. There is just one method: staying in front of what happens and helping each other to look, to really see.”

**If she looks at what is happening today**, at the way the middle-schoolers ask her to spend time with them outside religious ed class, there are no “presumed” answers, just an asking for an even fuller life. “Our desire to have a child continues to grow, but it does not stop me from living; it does not result in an anger that closes me. It is a need that has gone beyond suffering, so now I find myself asking, ‘However things go, I just want You to be there.’” ■

# Sisters and brothers, because daughters and sons

18

What is the source of sisterhood and brotherhood? What does the pope see and ask of the faithful in this time of fear and division? We offer here a look at the new encyclical that originated in the pope's meeting with the Great Imam of Al-Azhar and the Abu Dhabi declaration.



**Stefano Maria Paci**

**O**n February 4, 2019, I was about to begin a direct link with my television news station when it suddenly started raining. The city had been so long without rain that there was a great celebration. I was in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, where rain is a rare event. That day would be the only one in that month when water came down from the sky. But even more rare was the event that was happening in front of my eyes: the pope of the Catholic Church, together with the highest authority in Sunni Islam, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Great Imam of Al-Azhar, the name of a mosque and a theological university in

Cairo, were signing the rich *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, told me a year later that this document has become an absolutely fundamental building block for a shared commitment to constructing a different world. It is rare to see Christians, Muslims, and Jews united not by vague words but by a document articulating a shared reading of reality, intentions, and outlooks. It is rare that they should call each other “siblings.”

So I was not surprised on October 4, 2020 to see a Muslim authority, the judge Mohamed Mahmoud





Abdel Salam, the secretary general of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, one of the fruits of the Abu Dhabi document, together with the secretary of state of the Holy See and other Catholic cardinals, in the new Synod Hall in the Vatican for the presentation to journalists of Pope Francis's soon-to-be-published third encyclical dedicated to "fraternity," *Fratelli Tutti*. The document signed in Abu Dhabi and the name of the Great Imam of Al-Azhar recur throughout the text. In it, the pope recalls his meeting with Al-Tayyeb "with joy and gratitude." The embrace between different cultures and religions was not extraneous to the development of this encyclical; in fact, "that meeting prompted me to write it," the pope revealed. It is no coincidence that in the first lines of the encyclical he wrote of the encounter between St. Francis and the Sultan eight hundred years ago, which happened despite the "considerable hardship" endured by St. Francis to make the meeting happen; the saint later said that he was "unconcerned by the hardships and dangers involved," and above all had no intention to renounce his own Christian identity. Humanly speaking, that embrace in that difficult period of history marked by the Crusades was incredible. It can be seen as a symbol of the encounter at Abu Dhabi, which was also courageous and daring from many points of view.

The signing of the Abu Dhabi document by the Pope and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Great Imam of Al Azhar (February 4, 2019).



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Certainly, an encyclical can be intimidating and not very inviting because you expect complicated and intellectually refined reflections on the world and the systems that guide it; you know it will be quoted for years to come, but in dry speeches at conferences and conventions. The media will speak of it with enthusiasm for a day, having identified the three or four lines most closely tied to the political and social facts of the moment. With respect to *Fratelli Tutti* specifically, there will be those who dare to claim that it of Masonic origin, those who speak of the pope's submission to Islam, and those who are scandalized to see it structured like a Communist pamphlet or to read its condemnation of populism. There will even be an influential philosopher who claims that its only novel aspect is its reference to the tripartite formula "Fraternity-Liberty-Equality" that gave rise to the Enlightenment

so strongly opposed by the Church, conveniently forgetting that the Enlightenment thinkers were able to affirm those concepts only because the church had used them for centuries, even to the point that they became a part of the culture.

**Actually, *Fratelli Tutti*** is a simple and highly readable summary of the ideas Francis has previously expressed in the years of his pontificate. In it, one can re-read his thoughts and see that they are tied together by a golden thread, following the intuition that underlies the encyclical: everything is born from a gaze.

Everything is always born of a gaze because every action originates in your gaze on yourself, others, and the world. If a person's gaze changes, the person and her surrounding reality change. Francis wrote that at present, people have a solipsistic gaze; they only look to themselves and their

own satisfaction, with others seen as either obstacles or necessary accomplices. On the one hand, there is me, or us, the group, and on the other, there are the others, who become the enemy, the obstacle. In this way the world becomes a place of conflicts, clashes, and egotism. Bergoglio denounced the many shadows looming over the planet: the weakening of the dream of a united Europe, the emergence of closed and aggressive nationalism in many countries, cultural colonialism that "robs the very soul" of a people, a "throwaway" culture, the exaltation of walls, hunger, violence, human trafficking, enslavement, the marginalization of the poor, the egotism of the rich, and the exploitation of nature, our shared home. "We gorged ourselves on networking and lost the taste of fraternity," he wrote. Migrants are not accorded the dignity due to every human being.

But, Francis exhorted, the dream of a new world can begin again, and once again we can work concretely to build this dream.

Certainly, a change of gaze is necessary; people and the world must be seen in the light of the fact that we are indeed sisters and brothers. When this happens, the other becomes a "neighbor" and no longer an "associate," and things happen that now seem almost impossible. Politics becomes true charity and not an abuse of power because it strives for the good of all, not for self-enrichment or affirmation of one's group. But, the pope writes, fraternity does not come about just through the proclamation of words. "It is necessary to educate people to fraternity." He states that "the fragile will be cared for" because the inalienable dignity of others will be

recognized. He explained that this is a different logic, one that brings with it “the challenge of envisaging a different humanity,” a humanity whose heart is open to the whole world.

Fraternity inevitably leads to the birth of “social friendship,” an expression that has almost been forgotten today, one that tenaciously advocates, on every level, for “dialogue as the method of relationships.” Once again, the goal is to attain a gaze that is diametrically opposed to the view that the “freedom of the market was sufficient to keep everything secure.” Just think of “financial speculation” that is “fundamentally aimed at quick profit” and “continues to wreak havoc.”

“Charity can change things,” and “politics too must make room for a tender love of others.” The word to be rediscovered is “solidarity,” which, understood in its deepest meaning, is a way of making history. When Bergoglio was a cardinal, he sent his best and dearest priests to live in the *villas miserias*, the slums of the capital, and now as pope, he says that grassroots movements have a crucial role. Everyone must do their part “without waiting for the government to do everything.” Solidarity “also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land, and housing, the denial of social and labour rights.” This solidarity has been highlighted by the pandemic: we do not save ourselves without the help of others.

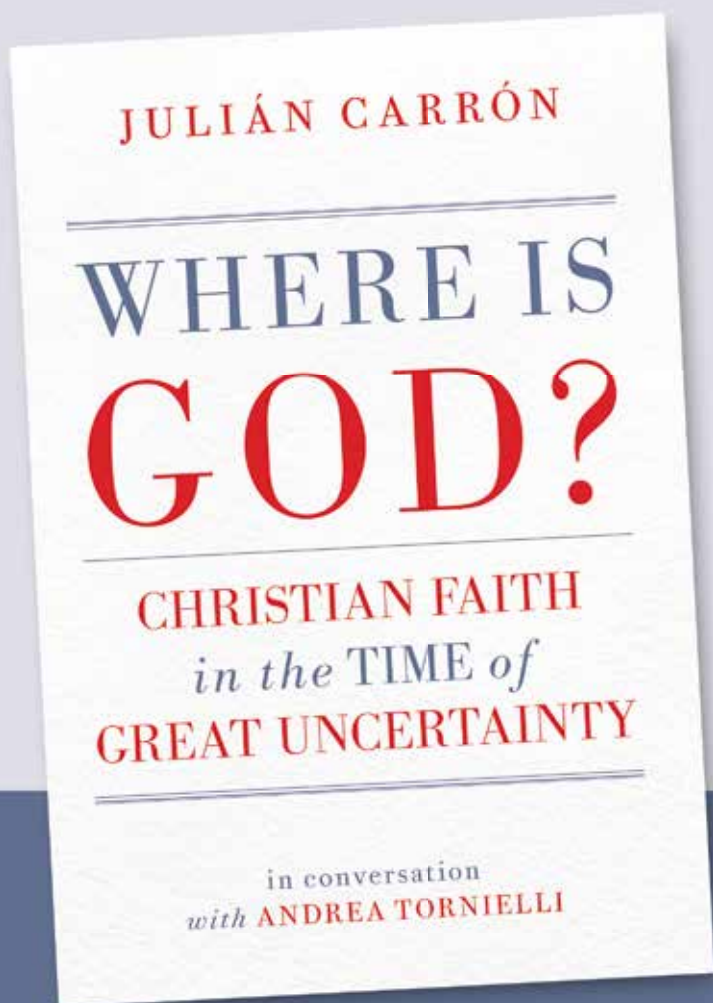
**Francis wrote forcefully about** topics that were important to the pontificate of his predecessor Pope Benedict, such as the condemnation of relativism, the emphasis on non-negotiable values, and the defense of identity. Bergoglio says no to relativism, according to which there is no absolute good or evil, no truth to be sought. Thus “relativism ultimately leaves the interpretation of moral values to those in power.” Today human rights may seem “unassailable,” but tomorrow they may “be denied by those in power.” Bergoglio explicitly and repeatedly identified values “that remain non-negotiable,” that go beyond any need for consent. “That every human being possesses an inalienable dignity is a truth that corresponds to human nature apart from all cultural change.” This is the origin of his radical no to the death penalty and to war, even wars that were once considered just, but “in recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly ‘justified.’”

Francis quoted John XXIII’s famous *Pacem in Terris* to denounce war in this time of “third world war fought piecemeal.” “Taking the side of the wounded flesh and

those who experience the horror, one understands that there is a moral and humanitarian imperative: the total elimination of armaments.” Is this a utopia? No, Bergoglio asserted. The UN can be reformed and international agreements can be revised. These things are possible. “With the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favour development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory solutions, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life.”

*Fratelli tutti*, as the title says—we are all sisters and brothers. In a time when it appears that there are no longer any fathers, some might interpret this as the search for the least common denominator among women and men. But this is not the case. We are sisters and brothers because we can recognize a shared Father. Our gaze can change because we can look at an incarnate God. After beginning the encyclical with lines from the saint of Assisi, who acted “for God’s sake,” and after dedicating an entire section to a commentary on the Good Samaritan, the pope underlined his argument forcefully in the eighth and final section titled, “Religions at the Service of Fraternity in Our World,” providing the reader with a proud reminder of their Christian identity. “As believers, we are convinced that, without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity.” He continued by stating that if there is no transcendent truth, then “there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people.” The interests of class, group, and nation will always set people in conflict. If God is excluded from society, we end up adoring idols. For Francis, “among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values.” He said that “it is wrong when the only voices to be heard in public debate are those of the powerful and ‘experts,’” and not “reflections born of religious traditions that are the repository of centuries of experience and wisdom.” The church “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines.” He emphasized that “others drink from other sources. For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and concluded by quoting Paul VI’s luminous line: “All things human are our concern.” All things concern Christians, and they have a different gaze on everything, a gaze that makes the human more human. ■





# 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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