

TRACES

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11



Christmas 2020

Another world within this world

TRACES

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Vol. 22

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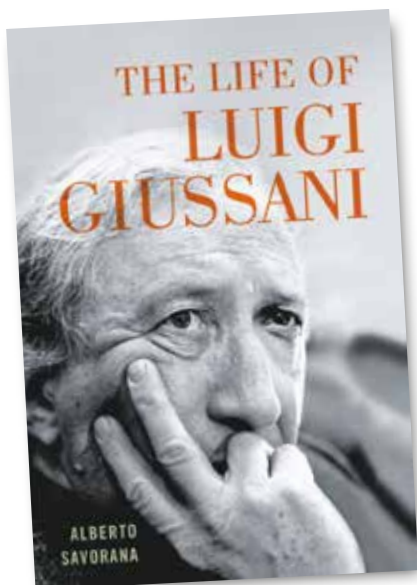
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The image used for the Communion and Liberation poster
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The everyday and the eternal



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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 whisper of God

A line of Fr. Giussani's has been recurring often in our conversations and work together in recent weeks, a sign of how much it struck those who heard it at the CL Beginning Day (see the most recent issue of *Traces*), and also a sign of how we recognize it as familiar, of how *we see it happen* in our lives. "The Lord works even through whispers." He does not impose His presence through spectacular gestures, but instead suggests, invites, and elicits. He proposes Himself to our freedom and to our openness to following the things that He brings forth. If you think about it, Christmas is this way, too. A helpless infant came into the world in a remote and insignificant part of that world, in a marginal and unknown province of the Roman Empire. That birth was less than a whisper in history, and yet changed it forever because it makes living history possible.

Without the Incarnation, if God were not present in reality, life would simply be impossible. Perhaps you could bear certain blows for a while, but only if you are one of those with a very strong temperament. Even then, our freedom could never flourish under those blows, nor could the fullness of our humanity ever blossom *deep down* because it would be impossible to live *deep down* that of which we are made: a relationship with the mystery, with the Father. Without the Son, who lives in and for that relationship, who came to become flesh and show everyone that crucial bond with the Father, we could never on our own conceive of ourselves as children. Maybe in theory we could recognize (in some extraordinary leap of reason, even as reason seems to be growing ever feebler) the evident fact that I do not make myself, that in this instant I am generated by someone else who wants me. But a theory would not suffice for living this recognition, for facing reality on the basis of this evident fact, making it part of one's gaze on reality.

"Caro cardo salutis": the salvation of our very flesh is in the Incarnation, says this much more ancient expression, often heard in recent times. But what is needed is a present Incarnation that reaches us now, facts and testimonies that encourage us today to have the same docile and wonderstruck openness of the first ones, of those shepherds who put their faith in that mysterious "whisper of God."

Life is full of such testimonies, and a few of them are featured in the following pages. They are His flesh, God among us. Merry Christmas!

Matteo, Laura and Enzo, Monica

edited by
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The cathedral of Brother Elio

On Thursday morning when I read the messages about the death of brother Elio, a great sadness invaded my heart. I immediately recalled the message that he had sent us a few weeks ago: “Today I was tested for Covid. I’m positive. Thanks be to God.” I remember that when I read the message, I had thought he had written it incorrectly: I thought he meant “I’m *negative*. Thanks be to God.”

After calling Sasa for clarification, however, I understood that he meant exactly what he had written. I thought he was crazy, but his madness raised questions in me. The thought of Brother Elio did not leave me all day on Thursday. I thought of all the good he did, of all the people who loved him, of everything he went through—the war, the rebels, the Ebola emergency—and of everything he helped build during his exciting life: the Gulu hospital, the Saint Jude house, the farm, and the cathedral. I thought to myself that it would be wonderful to be remembered for building a cathedral, a thought that caused me to ask myself: “And what about me? What have I built in my 39 years of life? What cathedral am I building?” I found myself trapped by this thought.

A great measuring stick was entering my heart, a measuring stick that is the opposite of virginity. I felt trapped in the cage of my thoughts: “What am I capable of doing? What are my talents? What have I really achieved so far?” and so on, thoughts that were not connected to destiny, my destiny that makes me in the present moment. And then like a flash I remembered Brother Elio’s message from a few weeks ago: “I’m positive. Thanks be to God.” I have discovered the true meaning, the true greatness, of that message: Your will

be done. The greatness of Elio was not in his ability to build, but in his willingness to obey: “Thanks be to God.” I found myself longing for this total obedience and dependence that Elio lived with the Father. This made him fascinating in my eyes and made Elio my friend. I have discovered that my only responsibility is to obey the Mystery. This is my cathedral. It seems to me that I have no other alternative in life—there is obeying or there is nothing, total emptiness, my empty project of building something. Fr. Carrón quotes Anna Vercors at the end of chapter 5 of *The Radiance in Your Eyes* when she says, “Why torment ourselves when it is so easy to obey?” and his words in the same paragraph have become flesh for me: “The signs of this true way of treating everything are freedom, peace, imperturbable certainty, trust, and abandonment.” I desire this abandonment to the Father just as Brother Elio lived it.

Matteo, Kampala (Uganda)

Teaching in the master’s program

I work for a multinational corporation, and we have continued to work through the Covid emergency. We’ve experienced many different ways of working: remote working, Zoom meetings, in-person moments, and individual work. A few weeks ago, Human Resources called to inform me that I had been selected to teach in the company’s master’s training program. Faced with my surprise, the person in charge told me that the company was impressed with my availability, flexibility, and positivity in this difficult moment, which had thrown many of my colleagues into crisis. It was for this reason that they wanted me to contribute to the formation of the company’s employees. The fact is that the pandemic has pushed me to deepen my belonging to the movement by being faithful to certain moments proposed by the CL priest in our parish. At the beginning of the pandemic, he began an online recitation of Lauds in the morning and the Rosary in the evening. I have

been faithful to these simple gestures, as well as to the School of Community. The other day, I had a three-hour interview with the person responsible for the master's program. Toward the end of the interview, he told me how impressed he was by my solidity and stability. At that point, I decided to open up to him, and I explained that my solidity depends on the fact that my center of gravity does not lie in my being good, but is outside of myself. I told him that I'm Christian and that I belong to the movement. I talked about the School of Community, and about prayer, my friends, my family, and how I conceived of life. To my surprise, he revealed to me that, although he does not share my ideas, he felt that my story reinforced the company's decision to have me teach in the master's program, explaining that the company needs motivated people with strong values in life.

Name withheld

The message from the lawyer

About two years ago, my husband and I met Salious, a young boy from Senegal, while we were doing charitable work. Moved by a premonition of good, we welcomed him into our home as a foster child. In December, 2019, we turned to a lawyer to begin the adoption process. We met a few times, almost exclusively over the telephone due to the Covid emergency, and in September, the lawyer notified us of the positive outcome of the adoption proceeding. On October 12th, my husband and I met the lawyer to thank her for her work. Upon greeting us, she asked, "Forgive me, but are you part of some group? Are you on a journey of faith? Because I would like to take my life back." That very evening, she connected to the School of Community, and after reading the Beginning Day, she sent me a message. "Everything starts from something that strikes you and that you begin to admire, even to the point of saying, 'I want to be like that, I want this to be part of my life.'" In the end, that's what happened to me when I met you—an admiration that brought me to decide to restart something that had already changed my life, but that in fact, given the thousands of things that there are to do every day, I had stopped admiring. Certain words I read brought me back to the time when, for the first time, I began my faith journey by listening to a Combonian priest's homilies that nailed me to the pew, which caused me, like the disciples at Emmaus, to say to myself, 'Were not our hearts burning within us?' And it's just like that: we are made for the eternal, and our heart is quick to respond when it recognizes this 'whisper.' But what is this whisper if not God, so humble

that He whispers, knocks, waits, and watches us? I am still amazed when I remember the words of another Combonian who said, 'You are here because God has desired it and you accepted; you are here because you are unique, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable, a recipient of a gift, of a project. God would have come to earth and died even if you were the only one on Earth.' This provocative love has grabbed me and transformed my life into something extraordinary. But then, over time, I ceased admiring these things, everything became bland, and I found myself exhausted and lost in a sea of interpretations. Until I met you. And so, it begins again. Stopping is prohibited!"

Laura and Enzo, Messina (Italy)

A gift for my students

We are once again teaching remotely. I won't tell you what I felt during the last days of school, before the partial closing, because we all know the situation, and our ideas about it are sometimes confused. I didn't offer any real resistance to the general disorientation and worries caused by teaching my last face-to-face classes, a process that was a little clumsy, due more to the uncertainties, practical and otherwise, than anything else. I wanted to get through those last days without too much chit-chat and to see what would happen and when. And then, there we were on the first morning online. While I was starting my webcam, I could see Fr. Carrón's face during School of Community, his gaze and enthusiasm. He had only one preoccupation—it wasn't about offering the right judgment about the government or about the restrictions we are once again subjected to. His only preoccupation was how to live and to see how Christ will come to us, because He will come to us, like a small boat on the horizon, on whatever shoreline or on whatever screen that might imprison us. I felt a shockwave when I turned on the webcam and thought: Who can prevent my heart from being? Who can put the brakes on my race toward destiny? Who can prevent me from loving now, without limits or measures, these frightened young faces? So, I dropped the lesson I had prepared and gave them a gift, the gift of telling them that reality exists and is good. We listened to Giorgio Gaber's *Illogica Allegria* and Elisa's *Qualcosa che non c'è*, and for tomorrow, they will read Pablo Neruda's *Ode to the Happy Day*. We do this work together, they and I, because the challenge is the same for both of us.

Monica, Reggio Emilia (Italy)



The expectant awaiting



Alessandra Buzzetti

With the world immersed in the pandemic, everyone's Christmas will be different this year. The new patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, speaks of "the great question of the encounter with Jesus."



A visit to Bethlehem.

he was asked by Pope Francis to remain to lead the small Catholic community scattered throughout Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, and Cyprus.

This Advent begins for you in an unexpected way. What are you waiting for in the depths of your heart?

There is expectant awaiting both in the singular and in the plural. I have given my life to the Lord, and so the fact that I am here and remain here should be viewed from this perspective: seeking the Lord you want to encounter, but whom you never encounter definitively. With its invitation to vigilance and conversion, every Advent places us, places *me*, in front of the great question of the encounter with Jesus. How can I have this experience now? The great expectant awaiting of Advent happens through many small instances of waiting. Some distract you from the great one, while others place you in the proper horizon. It's a matter of evaluating each thing as it comes up. This new service that I am beginning as patriarch does not really change my service; it changes my title and maybe its timeline. I think the first thing I should do is listen to the flock that has been entrusted to me, listen critically, and then try to place the various things they are awaiting expectantly in the perspective of our deep relationship with Jesus, in order to understand how to orient them and orient myself toward an encounter with Him, the foundational criterion of our life.

“My faith continues to intrigue and disturb me. What most amazes me, in the positive sense, is seeing this in others as well, not just Christians. People are having encounters that are changing their lives.” Monsignor Pierbattista Pizzaballa smiles as he looks back on his thirty years in the Holy Land and forward to the new mission awaiting him as the patriarch of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. This smile expresses the unromanticized realism of one who knows well the experience of a faith that demands flesh, blood, struggle, listening, and patience, all the more if you live it in the land where Jesus was born. “Even though this land has experienced many wounds, it is engaged in a certain expectant awaiting for someone who will come to give life flavor and gusto.” The city where everything began, where the salvation of the world became flesh—“*Caro cardo salutis*,” Tertullian reminded us—is preparing for an unusual Christmas. Not even in the worst years of conflict did Bethlehem have no pilgrims. “It will certainly be an intimate Christmas, but maybe this will make it beautiful because we will be gathering as a community. It will be the year when we start again, beginning with ourselves.” The midnight Mass on December 24th will also mark Monsignor Pizzaballa’s solemn entry into Bethlehem as the patriarch of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Just when he thought his mission in the Holy Land had ended,



Pierbattista Pizzaballa, 55, originally from the Bergamo area in northern Italy, has lived in Jerusalem for 30 years. A Franciscan, biblical scholar, and polyglot, he was the Custodian of the Holy Land for 12 years. In 2016, Pope Francis nominated him the apostolic administrator of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. On October 24th, the Pope appointed him as the patriarch of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the small Catholic community in the Holy Land.

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In the message you wrote to your diocese on the day you were nominated as patriarch, you said that “remaining is the verb of true love, learned in the Cenacle and at Gethsemane.” What does this mean for the many people forced by the pandemic to stay inside their homes, isolated, without knowing how long it will last?

We live in a society that is always running, that is always in a rush, that wants everything, and right

away; immediate results are required, perhaps because we fear investing our time in something. I wanted to read this verb “remain” by drawing attention to the Cenacle and Gethsemane, but also the concerns and fears of the disciples after the Resurrection and before Pentecost. I read the verb “remain” as referring to a time of patience, not dominated by a demand to possess everything. We need to let time help us comprehend bit by bit what we

are living and how we are living it. Circumstances like the pandemic, living without knowing what will happen from week to week, disorient us because we cannot give depth to the circumstances of our life.

In these times, when you enter the Basilica of the Nativity, you are struck by the silence that envelops you. There is an emptiness that we are not used to, but maybe it helps us understand the expectant awaiting for Christmas, how this awaiting happens again in every moment, which is something profoundly different from the concept of “suspended time” often used to describe this time of the pandemic.

Expectant awaiting is not empty; it is full. It is a way of being in reality. Living without any expectant awaiting or hope means not giving any content to life. We have to understand what we put into this expectant awaiting: For whom are

we waiting, and how? The Christian response is clear: we are waiting for Jesus. Christians translate this into their ordinary lives, in which the object of this expectant awaiting is already a certainty and gives gusto and flavor to life. God became flesh and I already experience it, even if not fully, and even in the midst of many wounds. Everything depends on how my heart disposes itself to seek Him and wait for Him. When you are waiting for something or someone you are vigilant, with all your senses heightened. As soon as there is a sign of its arrival, you notice right away. Instead, if you live without this alertness, you do not see what happens around you.

It arrives like a “whisper,” almost imperceptibly...

Yes. This is why it is always necessary to be attentive while waiting for someone we truly want to encounter.

In the experience of Advent we are accompanied by the prophecy of Isaiah, but when reading those scriptures here in Jerusalem, their fulfillment seems even further off...

We read Isaiah during Advent because he is the prophet of hope. Isaiah had a desolate scenario in front of him—Jerusalem had been destroyed. When he says, “on this mountain, death will be no more,” in reality he saw in front of his eyes a mountain full of dead bodies. Everything depends on the eyes with which you look at reality. Always. If you look at this city only in its present condition, with all its cruelty, and are not capable of going beyond this scene, of dreaming, of giving yourself a positive outlook and a hope, you stop rebuilding the city. Hope allows you to plan and look ahead, starting from what you already experience in your heart.

You know the Jewish world very well, and from close up. What have you learned from their way of waiting?

If there is a people that lives an expectant awaiting, it is the Jewish people. This waiting for the Messiah, naturally, is understood in many different ways, according to various currents and thinkers. They are a people who have filled this expectant awaiting with prayer and study—their waiting is not devoid of life, but full of life. They have taught me a great deal—being constantly in

a state of expectant awaiting evokes many questions about every aspect of existence. Their questions have helped me a great deal in rethinking my reading of Jesus, the Gospels, and also my own expectations.

Interreligious dialogue is one of the themes of Pope Francis’s new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. What does it mean to live this brotherhood of which the pope speaks in the Holy Land? In recent times, you have repeatedly stressed that this is not a time of great gestures.

It is true that I stress this. It is not a moment of great gestures. In our media-centered world, we’re always expecting great gestures that change the course of events. This is not the moment because great gestures require vision, charisma, and leadership, all of which now seem to be lacking. It is the moment of sowing and waiting for the fruits. Sowing means working with people, with those who wish to meet, speak, and listen, and working with institutions. We will not have immediate results, but it is our way of living what Pope Francis says when he speaks of brotherhood and fraternity. We are different—very often we have neither the same opinions nor the same political orientations, but we share the need to do something together for the community in which we live.

Is the Abu Dhabi meeting, which the pope mentions a number of times in the encyclical, a help for shared living with the Muslim world? If so, how?

Here too, once again, we must allow the passage of time. Both Christians and Muslims labor under a heavy burden of stereotypes, prejudices, and reciprocal difficulties. History has bequeathed us an inheritance that is not simple. These situations do not change from one day to the next. Meetings like the one in Abu Dhabi are important gestures because they help create a mindset. Over the course of time, they will help this message of reciprocal hospitality and fraternity seep into both Christian and Muslim schools, but we cannot presume that all this will change over the course of a few years. What we need to do is live that message in our reality in this land a bit at a time, as the generations succeed each other.

Could you give us a few examples of fruits that have come to maturity through long and patient sowing?

I have met a great number of people who are able to work together despite holding completely different opinions. For example, I am part of the Jerusalem Cultural Center, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims—Israelis and Palestinians, religious and secular, with different political orientations—collaborate, such as in teaching Arabic to Israeli employees so that they can better interact with the Arab public, or in updating scholastic manuals, or in helping people obtain passes. These are very practical things that create common ground, based on the fact that we all belong to Jerusalem and want to do things together. We also have gatherings in Jerusalem between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious to read and discuss together some passages from the Bible or from one of the religious traditions. These are simple gestures, but not to be taken for granted in a context in which religion is often used as an excuse to look for a fight. There are many other associations that promote similar initiatives not having a political goal—and in this moment maybe it's better to leave politics aside—but with an awareness of belonging to each other.

You said that in thirty years “the Holy Land has changed a great deal, and so have I. My faith is more realistic.” What still strikes you with wonder today?

My faith continues to intrigue and disturb me (*laughing*). I recently met

a religious Jewish friend with whom I used to read the Gospels when I was at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, but after that lost contact with. Our meetings changed me a lot and now I have discovered that they changed her, too. She has remained an observant Jew, but since then has spent a lot of her time in interreligious meetings, and now goes to Arab villages to better understand their situation. I'm amazed to see how such encounters change people. They give you a restlessness that you would prefer not to have, but you have it anyway. This restlessness intrigues you and at the same time makes you uncomfortable, but maybe this is the truest way of being for people living in Jerusalem.

You will travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on December 24 to celebrate the Christmas Eve Mass. Going there physically means crossing the separation wall, coming up against the Palestinians' legitimate expectations of peace and freedom. Is it possible to be free on the other side of the wall?

I fear that my answer may sound theoretical because the Palestinians have to live this waiting for peace and freedom amongst the daily humiliations at the checkpoint, with an awareness of the rights they should have as persons, rights that have continuously been postponed. And I'm Italian. I don't live this reality personally. I have to try to identify with their experience as much as possible, knowing that I'll never be either Palestinian or Israeli. I have

to listen a lot and become the voice of this population. I feel I must encourage my community not to live in a state of putting things off, but even in these conditions to live fully our joy and our right to life. With the healthcare and economic crises worsened by the pandemic, it is still difficult to talk to Christians about hope, especially those in Bethlehem, whose livelihood comes from tourism and pilgrimages. Since last March everything has stopped and the families don't have bread. But I am comforted by seeing the simple faith of many people who, in spite of everything, want to find a way to celebrate, to be together while helping each other. For example, I was struck by what happened in August when the explosion ripped through the port of Beirut and generated an emergency situation in a country already in a state of collapse. As the church, we wanted to give a sign of solidarity to the Lebanese, and the poorest parishes were the most generous. The young Palestinians of the West Bank alone, most of them unemployed and often without money to pay for school, collected over thirty thousand dollars. That is an enormous sum for them, and a beautiful sign that they are not focused only on their own problems: in front of the need of their Lebanese brothers, they responded with charity.

For the small community of Bethlehem, this will also be the first Christmas without pilgrims.

It will be an intimate Christmas for the Christians of Bethlehem and the



© Dave Primov/Shutterstock

nearby villages. There's just us, so let's gather together. Christmas in Bethlehem often distracts you a bit—there are so many needs and events and people from all over the world. This year will be the year when we begin afresh, starting from ourselves.

What is your Christmas wish for a world once again plunged into the pandemic?

This situation is teaching us that we must return to what is essential. We have dedicated ourselves to many, many things and maybe we should stop and ask ourselves what is truly essential for our lives. I think I can say to everyone that we are celebrating a certainty, a reality that is already in our midst: Jesus, who entered our flesh. We have to learn to take the long view and ground our lives on what lasts.

Does this overcome fear?

Because we are made of flesh, we'll always be a bit afraid. But if we listen to the Holy Spirit and to the eternal life that is already within us, the fear will at least be diminished. ■



Basilica of the Nativity,
Bethlehem



Nigeria

“To whom do I belong?”



Paolo Perego

In this African nation experiencing widespread protests calling for freedom, even the pandemic has taken second place. Nothing is taken for granted anymore. “We see the hope in the eyes of the people, but what do we put our hope in?”



A house in the capital city of Lagos that was destroyed during the unrest.

“I was in the car, stuck in crazy traffic. But I was excited about what was happening. It was a historic moment, and I felt happy.” The person speaking is Vivian, from the CL community in Lagos, Nigeria. She is 41 years old and has her own business importing cars from the US. As the pandemic rages around the world, here it is, for the moment, in the background, in part because there are few confirmed cases, and in part because people’s attention has been caught by something else.

It was October 8th when images of a young man being killed by a special unit of the police began to circulate on social media. “Immediately, crowds of young people went out into the streets, calling for this unit

to be disbanded,” said Barbara, an Italian in *Memoires Domini* who has lived and worked at an NGO in Nigeria for years. “It went on for weeks, and the protests got bigger, rallying more and more young people to the cry ‘end police brutality.’” The government responded with a curfew, hired thugs to disturb peaceful demonstrations, and fired on protesters who were confined to the central square of the city and didn’t want to go home. Now around 70 people have died. Some are unaccounted for and bodies have been found in a lagoon. The special anti-robbery squad has been disbanded, but out of spite the government removed all police presence in the district of Lagos that is the epicenter of all the protests. Consequently, “when it once took two hours to get home from work, now it takes five,” Barbara explained.

And it is not over: new restrictive measures are expected, including the censoring of social media and blocking internet access. “No one has ever seen anything like it in this country,” Vivian said, referring to this peaceful manifestation of freedom in a country where everyone usually looks out for himself. Even

to fix a pothole, people take matters into their own hands. “But now, for the first time, we saw a people drawing together in the name of a common good,” transcending divisions among factions, tribes, and religions, in a Nigeria still wounded by tragedies linked to Boko Haram terrorists. “Even those who were not in the streets supported the protest, bringing food and offering money to the demonstrators,” Vivian said. “Still, when the army attacked the crowd, which was singing our national anthem, I was crushed. Was everything falling apart? We were all hoping in this wind of change. But now... To what was I shifting my hope?”

John, who goes by Willy, is a 50-year old teacher. During the protests, he went into the streets to see what was happening. “There was a buzz of excitement among us in the CL community, too. We were all affected. In those people in the square, whether 15-year-old teenagers or 40-year-olds, I perceived a cry of the heart that I share. A need for justice, for freedom... Something they were not able to describe, but I saw it in them.” Willy spoke about what they

are reading in School of Community, a provocation to see that Christ is present in all of reality, and said that, "I saw that in those young people whose hearts are burning." He is thinking of a precise moment, seeing "their faces as Mass was celebrated in the square. The Eucharist, right there... Christ was present. I found myself asking, "To whom do I belong?" I have encountered the answer to that desire. Two thousand years ago, it became flesh, and I encountered it."

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He talked about his students, and how when he looks at them, "my desire is that they may discover Jesus, that they may be touched by Christ, who becomes flesh in my flesh, and that they will enjoy the relationship I already enjoy. Because of Christ's presence, I live a new kind of expectation. It is slowly becoming clearer that He is the answer to and the meaning of what fills the hearts of the people in the square."

This presence also implies a responsibility, as we learn from Nyemike, a 35-year-old software developer. "I did not go to the protests, but I followed what was happening, full of expectation." He had the fifth chapter of Julián Carrón's *The Radiance in Your Eyes* open in front of him. "Every event can bring Christ's newness, he writes. You see, I was called to give my yes to this. I pray, 'Come, O Christ, make us recognize You present here and now' for me,

"I was thinking about the ones outside our gate... They, too, have hearts full of desire. Who kindled it? And who can embrace and respond to it? Some young people, the day after the shootings, went back to clean up their city, even trying to talk to those who disturbed the peace."

but also for the people in the square. Even if they don't know, I know what all of reality bears within it." This is not something we already know, or can discover all at once. "The discussion in the community was intense," Barbara says. "Some people went out in the square, others didn't. Even those who live outside the city had strong opinions." It was a dramatic time, especially because of the evidence of many people being reawakened. "Amazed at what was being generated, we had to work together to go to the heart of our relationship: Who are we? We see the hope in the eyes of the people, but what do we put our hope in? It means working on oneself and on understanding the experience we are living."

This is the only way to see reality more clearly, even when it means that, at a time when people are opening fire in the streets and occasionally even trying to break into your house, it is still worth it, "contrary to what you might think," to participate in an online event taking place in Italy on the topic of education. Barbara continued: "While we talked about school, a place where we have to reawaken the desire of young people, I was thinking about the ones outside our gate... They, too, have hearts full of desire. Who kindled it? And who can embrace and respond to it? Some young people, the day after the shootings, went back to clean up their city, even trying to talk to those who disturbed the peace." They did so to discover something worth living for, and even dying for, so that their hearts could be alive. "Only Christ can reawaken and embrace their desire. Christmas reminds us of that, of the fact that Christ has already won in Nigeria too." ■

Belarus

The greatest new thing

For months, a popular uprising has been taking place in Belarus, something never before seen in the country. There have been arrests and violence. Fr. Aliaksei Ason speaks about waiting for Christmas when “you are only what those in power allow you to be. But each of us is much more.”



Luca Fiore

“**T**he calendar says Christmas is coming, but the events happening around us are leading us to think of other things. Since August 9th, the day of the presidential elections, almost fifty people I know, including dear friends, have been arrested for participating in peaceful demonstrations. Some of them have been beaten and others have ended up in prison. This year’s Advent is very different from previous years—*this* time of waiting is full of new and deep worries for me.” Thirty-three-year-old Fr. Aliaksei Ason is the parish priest of Nowy Pahost and Baradzenichy, small rural towns in the Vitebsk region of northern Belarus.

His vantage point is particular. He is far from the big cities, where for months now there have been protests against electoral fraud and police violence. But even in the outlying areas people discuss what they have seen on social media on their smartphones. In Minsk, the capital, every Sunday tens of thousands of people fill the streets in violation of President Alexander Lukashenko’s prohibition on gatherings. Such a popular uprising has never been seen in the history of independent Belarus, which, since 1991, has continued to be governed according to the practices of the Soviet Union. Those who raise their voices against the use of violence are silenced, even the Catholic archbishop of Minsk, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, who on August 31 was denied entry to the country on his return home from Poland.

Minsk, a protest against President Alexander Lukashenko.

And yet the arrival of Christmas does not wait for things to improve. Perhaps this is the main reason for hope. “Not a day passes without worrisome news about friends who disappear and then reappear in prison, or people who fall ill and die of Covid, even though the government basically denies the existence of the pandemic.” The young parish priest struggles with a sense of injustice. “The authorities do everything to make you feel worthless, to convince you that you have no rights except those the state gives you. You are only what those in power allow you to be. But each of us is much more.” Fr. Aliaksei continues to do his work, traveling to his parishes, saying Mass, hearing confessions, and visiting the sick. During the course of his work, he finds himself discussing what is going on. “For many people, what is happening is entirely normal. They go so far as to justify almost everything, and this angers me. It’s as if they’re unable to judge what they see. I know it’s the inheritance of the education they received in Soviet times, but it’s hard to accept.”

The temptation is to give up, to think that it is useless to discuss things. “And yet Christmas arrives not only for me but for them, and the God who becomes flesh is the greatest new thing to be proposed once again for our lives. It can’t just be an annual celebration, a simple birthday. It’s something completely new that changes our way of seeing things and makes us discover the true value of our lives. I want them to experience this as I have.”

Last year he discovered that something had changed. It was December 26th, and “I was having lunch at the home of some parishioners. I realized that a totally unexpected friendship had begun. Before then, I had been careful to avoid getting too involved with the faithful because I feared displeasing some of them, or creating useless jealousy, or not keeping the right distance to be able to correct people when it was needed. Instead, that day I realized that something new had been given to me.” Don Aliaksei defines it as “a new thing whose face you don’t know beforehand, and you have no idea where it will take you,” something you can only experience if you desire it. “It is an expectant awaiting that lives inside the things you are called to do.



Doing my tasks attentively, remembering their authentic meaning—for me, this is the way of waiting for Christmas.” Without this awareness, we are prey to disappointment, as happened in Fr. Aliaksei’s first year as a parish priest. “I had spent Advent making all the preparations for the celebrations. Everything had to be ready and in place. But even though everything went well, I felt empty. I even argued with my mother and walked out on our Christmas lunch. If you do things automatically, nothing new can happen.”

Thus, talking about current events, acknowledging injustice where it exists, and the need to reject violence also are challenges he faces in his conversations with parishioners. “For me, it would be easy to talk about Christmas by just commenting on the liturgy, pretending that the world outside the walls of our little church does not



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exist. Instead, I try to communicate how Christ's coming invites us to a conversion in the way we look at things and how the Gospel provokes our freedom and responsibility and reveals the value and dignity of each person's life. I don't set out to be political. No. But I do try to show how Jesus's words set us on a different road." Fr. Aliaksei does not want his relationship with his parishioners to end with the words he speaks from the pulpit. "I want to dialogue with the parishioners. I want to be involved with them because if I limited myself to giving sermons,

I wouldn't be very credible." In the weeks preceding Advent the liturgy has spoken a lot about what Jesus calls "the Kingdom of Heaven." "Christmas is the beginning of this new way of conceiving of life. Jesus was born so that we all can think of ourselves in terms of this kingdom. Do we want to enter it or not? Are we content with the world just as it is?" During this period, he is involved in getting the church cleaned and preparing the crèche and Christmas tree. These are moments when he will have the opportunity to engage with who he is, with his worries and

the expectancy he holds in his heart. Fr. Aliaksei jokes and says that Belarus is lucky because it can celebrate Christmas twice, on December 25th with the Catholics and on January 7th with the Orthodox. "The new thing will not be a change in the minds of those who govern the nation, but the miracle for the destiny of our country will be a change in the hearts of the people. It will not be something that falls from the sky. The hope that Christ brings is the possibility for each person to change. Renewal, if it comes—and it is already coming—will come from this." ■

“I will be this heart”

The Los Angeles Habilitation House is a place where people learn to start over every day. What has been happening during the pandemic at the nonprofit that gives work to people with disabilities and veterans? Guido Piccarolo and Nancy Albin talk about the lives of their “guys.”



Paola Bergamini



While waiting at the bus stop, Anthony looked at his watch and then at the piece of paper he was holding. “Nancy told me I need to take the one that comes at 11:05. It’s two minutes late. I won’t make it in time!” A few seconds later, the bus pulled up. He and another woman got on the bus at the same time and she looked at him and yelled, “Are you crazy? Do you want to get all of us sick?” Anthony was confused. He looked at the piece of paper again. It said, “Keep your face mask on.” Then it clicked. He pulled out his protective equipment. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had to cross Los Angeles, and there were limited spaces on the bus because of the lockdown, but he found a window seat and could look out on the strange sight of a city slowed down as a result of the pandemic. An hour later, he arrived at his destination, the Harbor Regional Center. As soon as he entered the lobby on the ground floor, Guido greeted him with a smile and said, “Here you are! Right on time. Let’s begin.”

“This is the new detergent you need to use to clean the desks. Wipe the desks twice. Nancy will show you how it’s done.” It’s training time for the janitors at Los Angeles Habilitation House (LAHH), a nonprofit organization. How many times have they repeated those same simple instructions to their twenty employees? “Our ‘guys’ have autism, Down Syndrome, cognitive disabilities, and other learning disabilities,” said Guido. “Any change in the work routine is a problem that makes them anxious. Every time it happens we have to start again, patiently. Since March, we have been training them for two hours once a week and we work side by side with them every day.” Guido Piccarolo, who is Italian, arrived in the US in 1993. In 2008, he and Nancy Albin (both are *Memores Domini*) started the organization, which creates and oversees job opportunities for veterans and people with disabilities.

When the US also went into lockdown, most offices closed, which meant cleaning services were suspended. Only the institutions considered essential stayed open, like the Coast Guard and family services offices. “The offices of essential businesses are where we offer services. This is how we have managed to keep working while other agencies have lost everything,” explained Nancy. Disinfectants and new cleaning procedures are necessary to keep the virus from spreading. For the first time, Anthony, Stephen, and the others, who fall into a marginalized category, working in the lowliest jobs, have become fundamental. “We are essential. Can you believe it? Our work is essential to keep things running,” said Guido during the training. He said “we,” and little by little, as this story unfolds, it becomes clear what these “guys” mean to him and Nancy.

Offices that have remained open have had to reduce their hours of operation, and as a result, the demand for LAHH’s services has also declined. Fewer hours means less revenue. The logical thing to do in response would be to cut salaries. In America, there is no Redundancy Fund like Italy’s, but for these men, these jobs are their only way to make a living. They decided there would be no cut, that they would continue to receive 100 percent of their salary. “When the pandemic began, we thought we would be out of work,” said Nancy. “But the

The award ceremony of the “guys” from the Los Angeles Habilitation House, with the leaders of the organization, Guido Piccarolo (first from the right, second row) and Nancy Albin (first from the left).

situation turned out better than we could have ever imagined. We have had new job opportunities. For this reason, our work is motivated by the understanding that because we have received a lot, we also give a lot.”

In April, four employees, due to either family reasons or illness, were forced to stay home for a short time. So what could Guido and Nancy do? They decided to put on a uniform, grab a rag and cleaning spray, and take their place. “In front of this unforeseen circumstance, either you panic or you look at it as a sign from God of his presence. When you look at it in this way, you are not alone, you feel freer in front of the circumstances, and you are perhaps also more creative. I am certain that if God has put us here, He will show us how to respond. Without being fatalistic, if we were forced to close, it would be because something better awaits. You just need to have your eyes open to see.” In 2018, John Walker, an entrepreneur and innovator of more effective cleaning methods, asked Guido and Nancy to come one day early to the yearly event he organizes for cleaning companies. It’s not a business conference, just an evening gala with prizes for those who have done an outstanding job cleaning. Walker tells them, “You are the only ones who understand the words that I will repeat to each medal recipient, ‘We appreciate you because every day when you clean, you help us do our jobs.’ You have the humblest personnel, but you have grasped what this initiative is really about. For this reason, I would like you to help my wife

from now on with this event.” Nancy and Guido did not know that he was ill. A few months later, they received the news of his passing. Instead of flowers, he requested that donations be made to LAHH.

This year, because of the Covid epidemic, the event cannot be held, but Guido and Nancy still want to honor their team, all of them, now more than ever. Nothing can stop them.

At mid-morning on September 9th, the parking lot of the Harbor Regional Center was strangely full. Over one hundred people came in the middle of the work day and were waiting for the start of the appreciation ceremony for LAHH employees, which was being held to acknowledge their work achievements. It was Nancy’s idea, and since it was not possible to hold the ceremony at the headquarters due to a lack of space, they opted to have it in the parking lot and invite all the employees. The LAHH workers stood in a row, excited. They had not expected anything and they were surprised by how many people showed up. This act of taking time off to celebrate the cleaning staff is foreign to the American mentality.

When everyone had arrived, Guido explained, “We are here to say thank you for the work that you have done. The Italian word for thank you, ‘*grazie*,’ comes from the word ‘grace,’ which can also mean blessing. When we say ‘grazie,’ we are telling you that you are a good for me, for Nancy, and for everyone. Now it’s time for the awards. Let’s start with David. Come on up!” Each award recipient received a plaque, a small booklet with all of the workers’ biographies

and then... a standing ovation from the crowd. You would think this was their children’s graduation. After the ceremony, everyone got an ice cream from the ice cream truck that came for the celebration, another creative idea. A director of one of the offices where the cleaners work walked over to Nancy with ice cream in hand and asked, “Who *are* you guys?” They replied, “Nancy and Guido. We are the same people you have always seen, but this time we have done something special. We have the grace to stay with these people who are present in our lives. This is the source of our happiness.”

They went to greet each of the workers, most of whom are African American. The racial protests were raging across America at the time, but they were just a group of men who are happy, brought together not because of their race or because they are “different,” but because they have experienced something good in their work. “I am glad that we couldn’t do this in the office because people were able to get a glimpse of a reality that appreciates life for what it is. They saw hope in action. If it hadn’t been for the managing director’s question, it wouldn’t have dawned on me to do this. It gave me hope,” said Nancy. “We are amazed by everything happening in us and around us,” added Guido. “How is it possible to have a new outlook on things? First, because of Fr. Carrón, who looks at us in this way and directs our gaze toward Another. Carrón’s gaze is what allows us to see and embrace how God presents Himself in daily life, in every detail.”



Steven, Brandon, Michael, and the others, as soon as they are ready, will move on. After all, the idea is to teach them skills and how to work. They mentor them until they find another job. One hundred twenty men have completed this process at LAHH. “But we never lose sight of them. We’re still in touch,” said Guido. The same goes for the veterans. Today, five veterans are employed in San Diego in administrative positions at the Naval Medical Center. Because of what they have seen or done, they carry wounds in their hearts that will never heal. “By teaching them to work, we are also helping them learn to live with their suffering, with the fear and pain that they feel,” explained Nancy.

Elizabeth, who was a Marine in Iraq, was at LAHH from 2013 to 2015. Over these three years, she regained her self-esteem and her faith in her abilities. Finally she got a new job. After six months, she invited Guido and Nancy over for dinner. “I have been told that you are indispensable and that you work well,” remarked Guido. “It’s true, but I miss you two. Lately, I have asked myself why I miss you. In fact, you are my friends and we still see each other. Then it hit me—I miss your heart. No one looks at me in the way you both did, but now I have the same heart. I will be this heart at my job.”

In the fall, Nancy and Guido spent one month in Italy developing some projects they want to implement with their team. “A year ago, we began thinking about a place to make fresh pasta. These plans came to a halt as a result of Covid. Now we hope to get them back on track. In addition to making pasta, we want to produce Italian olive oil... in Los Angeles. We’ll see. We have to look at what reality shows us and follow it.” ■

Janitors in training.

Christmas poster



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The everyday and the *eternal*

The nativity relived in the intimacy of a peasant home.
The gaze of Jean-François Millet as expressed in this
year's Christmas poster of the Movement.



Giuseppe Frangi



Jean-François Millet, *Winter Evening*, 1867.

Barbizon is a small town about 40 miles south of Paris, but in the mid-1800s, traveling that distance was like leaving one world and entering another. Even more so for an artist, for whom the city offered the chance to encounter all the fascinating and tumultuous innovations that led up to the Impressionist revolution in 1874.

For Jean-François Millet, that distance was not a problem. In fact, he considered it a protective barrier that allowed him to concentrate on and immerse himself in what he cared about most. Beginning in 1849, he chose to live in Barbizon with his wife, with whom he had nine children. He stayed there the rest of his life. He was not the only artist to make such a choice, but whereas others made it based above all on an interest in “uncontaminated nature,” Millet was most concerned with the human factor. “They [Parisian art critics] wanted to force me to enter their world of parlor art, to break my spirit. No, no! I was born a farmer and I will die a farmer. I say what I feel. I paint things as I see them,” he said by way of explaining his choice. And further, he said, “The human dimension is what most grabs me in art.” The work chosen for this year’s Christmas poster is emblematic of

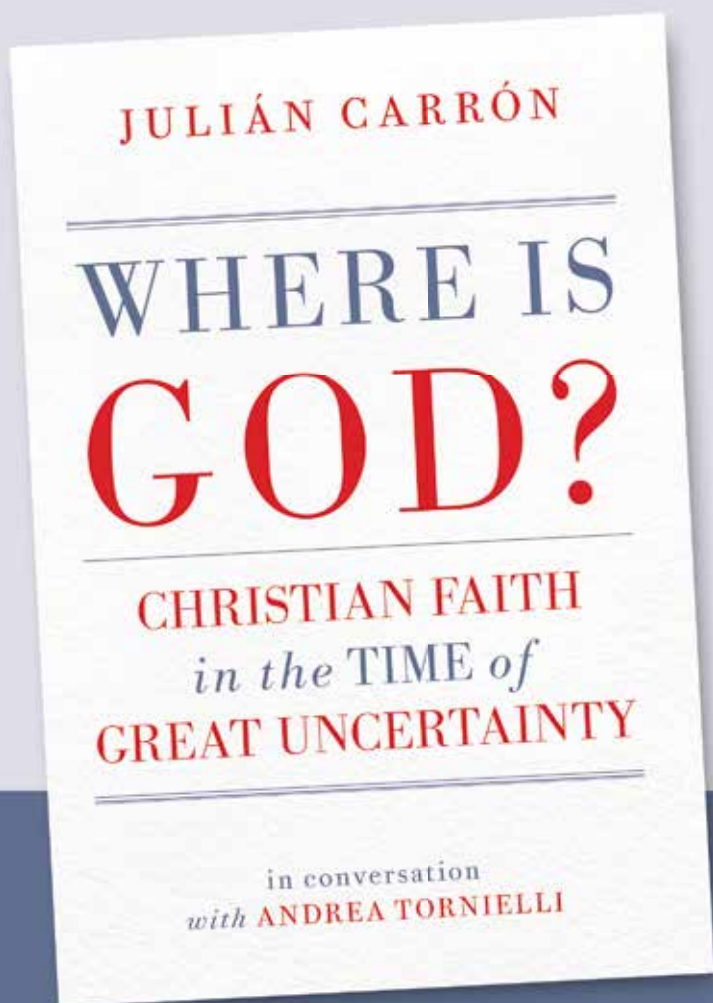
this approach. It is a pastel created in 1867 entitled *Winter Evening*.

Millet is not simply an observer of a reality he admires—he is not interested in documenting that agricultural world, but rather in capturing its deepest spirit and making that the very substance of his paintings. He is both a realist and a devout man, devoted to the humanity of the farmers who remain faithful to the land and to their own history. He is attentive to every gesture; for example, that of the father absorbed in weaving a basket, but does not pursue minute details out of a need to document the social conditions of his subjects. His gaze, in fact, does not fix on poverty as what defines the status of this family, but rather an awareness of a destiny. The work is overflowing with that awareness, which is exuded in the essentiality of its composition, so simple yet at the same time elevated and perfectly balanced.

Millet’s is an art of proximity: he enters the intimacy of the peasant home, establishing familiarity and examining it in its bare simplicity. It is a real scene, but one that takes on a metaphorical weight. It is not the Holy Family, but is pervaded by that clear link between the everyday and the eternal that the family of Nazareth experienced and

brought into the world. The light from the oil lamp, a radiating point placed at the center of the composition, directly above the baby’s cradle, echoes the iconography of nativity scenes. It is a nativity relived in a peasant home deep in France in 1867.

Millet’s world was an ancient one that still fascinated modern men and women. This pastel was, in fact, purchased by an American collector, Quincy Adams Shaw, a billionaire who owned copper mines in Michigan. Adams Shaw gave it to the museum of the city where he lived, Boston, together with 53 other paintings by Millet that he purchased when the artist was still alive. Another modern won over by Millet’s style was, naturally, Van Gogh. He discovered the French artist in 1875 at a Paris auction of many of his works that had belonged to a patron and collector who ended in ruin. “Millet is Millet, a father,” he would write years later to his brother Theo. “With him, you learn to see better and find ‘a faith.’” Van Gogh was entrusted with the risky task of catapulting Millet’s love for truth into the unsettled horizon of modernity. He did so with a mastery we all know, which came in part because of his experience of being a son. ■



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.

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