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The miracle

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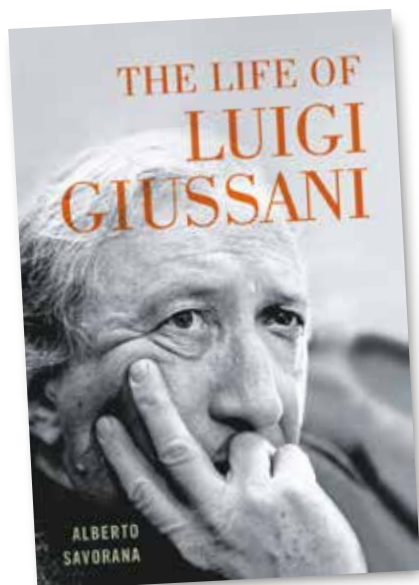
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

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THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan

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

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Brothers because we are sons

“**T**he miracle that floors the world is when people who are strangers treat one another as brothers.” The title on the cover of this issue refers to these words, spoken by Fr. Luigi Giussani (the anniversary of whose death sixteen years ago is this month, on February 22nd) at a gathering in 1983. He said that there is nothing more impossible or more desirable than this new way of relating to others. It is the essence of the “shared human course” Pope Francis proposes in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*. But how is this possible when the problems are so complex that they stifle both our personal and collective lives? The pandemic has revealed preexisting inconsistencies, and as politics crumbles, the crises affecting the lives of millions of people seem to cover more and more of the globe, to the point of seeming unreal. The Balkans, Tigray, Syria, Guatemala. The list goes on and on.

The encyclical makes us uneasy about even the most ordinary conflicts and opens up many questions, with one question at the foundation of them all: How can being “saved together” go beyond a mere intention, a utopic dream, or a voluntaristic effort that would merely result in skepticism? In a world divided, where we have lost the ability to engage in “focused attention to penetrate to the heart of matters and to recognize what is essential to give meaning to our lives,” Francis writes that there can be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity “without an openness to the Father of all. Only with this awareness that we are not orphans, but children, can we live in peace with one another. For reason, by itself, is capable of grasping the equality between men and of giving stability to their civic coexistence, but it cannot establish fraternity.” The text of the encyclical is very rich, as is its outlook on the world. Beyond any specific consideration, it requests participation in the great provocation that the church offers each of us.

In this issue, we wanted to look at how this discovery and recognition of each other as brothers and sisters takes place. We do so first of all through the witness of the small community in Taiwan, where every difference or distance among them is bridged by the overflowing treasure they have received: a living encounter with the Christian fact. Having an experience of being a son or daughter of God through a concrete companionship breaks open a new attitude. We captured the resulting gratitude, which pierces man’s heart to the point of changing him and his relationships with others in situations and countries all over the world. Because fraternity is a universal phenomenon, not an abstract one, the best way to see the encyclical incarnated will be through small facts happening in the lives of individual persons. “This is the miracle,” Giussani reiterated during the 1983 gathering, “and this is the reason for which we have been called.”

Letters

Rosario, Anna, Giordano, Stella

edited by
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Nothing is the same anymore

“Another day like all the others.” This is how one of our daughters greeted us one morning soon after she got up. Who knows what she had in mind: perhaps the umpteenth day in front of the computer for her online classes, perhaps not being able to see friends or not being able to go out. I don’t know exactly. I wanted to do something for her so that the day would not be like the others: a special dinner, a different evening, buy panzerotti, which she loves.... At one point I asked myself, “But what lifts me up during my days?” I cannot deny that on many days, I could make the same statement: “Another day like all the others.” An episode with my oldest son came to my mind. Before starting college, he gave us the opportunity to “be introduced” to almost all of the directors and principals of his high school, and not because he was doing well. Many times, my wife and I said to each other, “We have to do something, we need to change schools, and to explain to him that he has to change his attitude.” Not bad things, not wrong things to think or say, but none of them got at the root of the problem, for which, I thought, I could find a solution. A few days ago, while we were in the car, he started telling me about what was happening: the relationships he has formed in college that have become more intentional and important, the experience of and the astonishment at being loved. Then he told me: “You know, Dad, in life I always tried to make things go well, even those that would not make me happy. That’s how I kept on going. My friends tell me that I’m changing. I don’t see it. Not everything is clear, and there are things I don’t understand. But now it’s different, I’m living something that I don’t know how to explain.” He was talking about his wonder in front of

something that was happening, not fully understood, but that even he could not resist. This is exactly what allows me to say yes in my life, what allows me to begin my days anew. I need events that fill me with awe so that I can decide to say my yes. My decision wasn’t born from my willpower, neither years ago nor today. My decision was born, and is born again today, out of the wonder I experience in front of a few people who make me say, “Wow! I, too, would like to face reality in that way.” Only thanks to this astonishment can I have hope that my days are not “like all the other days.” This certainly does not exclude doing things; perhaps I still organize a special dinner, but what changes is the origin of my position, the origin of my approach to reality, and in this way, everything becomes more interesting. Nothing is the same anymore.

Rosario, Milano (Italy)

Distant learning and Azurmendi

I’m a high school teacher and for me, like for many others, the government decision to go back to distanced learning was painful. All I did was complain about not being able to change the situation; I couldn’t wait to get away from the monitor, from the plagiarism of my students, and from the pressure from their parents. I couldn’t take it any longer. But then I received an email from one of my students, who, among other things, wrote, “It has been a very difficult period for many people, and yet you managed to stay close to us even from a distance, and for this I thank you.” These words opened my heart. I started reading Mikel Azurmendi’s book, *The Embrace*, and leaving behind the heaviness of these recent days. How astonishing it was to read the chapter on education, where I found these words, which were speaking about me: “I wanted to be a teacher so that my life could serve others. I could see with surprise what Christ could do with a poor man like me. I learned to see the students as a gift, as one more opportunity to love, to give of oneself. Faith allows us to live with hope, with the certainty that any situation is a possibility of good.”

I returned to school recharged, full of gratitude, with a strong desire for the good for my students, and to fully live my experience at school in the way reality presents it to me, and not how I would like it to be. The students noticed. After a class assembly, a moment usually used by the students to disgorge all kinds of complaints about every class, the class representatives told me, “As far as your class is concerned, we wanted to let you know that we have seen that you are always available for us, you always try to meet us where we are and to give us a hand.” A mother whose son has some learning disabilities wrote me: “Yesterday he spoke all day of how warmly you greeted him when you saw each other.” Azurmendi is right when he reminds us that life is made to be given, because you cannot “store it.” And I add that if you decide to give it, you will be given a hundredfold in return here on earth.

Anna, Verona (Italy)

Am I as certain as my daughter is?

During the last part of 2020, my family was overwhelmed by COVID. Except for my oldest son and myself, everyone contracted the virus. My parents were admitted to the hospital and I couldn't even hug them. So, with my wife in isolation, I was left alone with Marta, my young daughter. Her unconditional certainty about me provoked me to ask myself, “Am I equally certain of God's love for me now? Am I certain that what is happening is what I really need now?” To my oldest son, who was stuck in Milan at college, alone in his apartment for fear of also being infected, and to myself, I kept repeating that God had never abandoned us, and He would not do so now. I repeated these things as a sedative to improve the situation, but nothing changed, so I simply started doing what needed to be done: cooking lunch and dinner, cleaning the house, doing laundry, ironing, and in this way, I began to experience the “hundredfold here and now.” I had heard this thousands of times, but I was never able to experience it because I was so full of an idea of myself: I had to be a particular way, I had to have a particular job, I had to, I had to... When my mother, still positive, was released from the hospital, I, the only one not infected, couldn't get near her, couldn't greet her, couldn't attend to her. I found myself in isolation, unable to help, so my wife, with unconditional gratuity, took care of all her needs. Then the news arrived of the death of my father, whom I had not seen since he left. I told a friend of mine how I was taken by the fact that just as a baby is born naked, and the mother takes him in her arms, so had my father died naked, embraced by his real Father. This experience has changed everything in me, in

us: our way of being a family, of going to work, the way we look at our friends, and the way we look at reality. It is not in a heroic act, a struggle, but rather in a yes to Him, that He decides unexpectedly to come and visit you. It is by standing in front of reality the way it is that one discovers who one is and to Whom one belongs.

Giordano, Perugia (Italy)

Working in a long-term facility

I'm a very precise person with a tendency to keep everything under control. I feel lost and afraid when something escapes my control, but in those cases, usually, it becomes clearer that there are two ways to live any situation: in beauty or in tragedy, with God or alone. Last year, I worked as a healthcare worker in a long-term care facility. I'm a doctor and I had never done anything like that. All of the patients were suffering from advanced dementia and most of them seemed to enjoy punching me or biting me while I was trying to clean them.... What a challenge! Waking up at 5:30 a.m. and the twelve hours shifts made me very tired, to the point that I started to recite Lauds on the bus, asking the Lord to help me understand the profound meaning of all this, and especially to understand His will. Every time I shouted at God to show me a different version of reality, I began to see a more colorful version, more enjoyable, where I'm no longer at the center with my victim complex, my limits, and my need for justice, but where the other is the center, with his needs and requests. I started waking up with a different question: no longer “Why?” but “For Whom?” I had to face that day. I recognized that I was an instrument in God's hands, and He wanted to use my hands, my words, my smile, and my time to reach those people, and through my obedience, humility, and service, He wanted to save me. I started to experience a gusto for my work and for my patients. I started spending more time sitting and talking with them, even if most of them could only mumble a few disconnected sentences, and playing with them during the breaks without constantly checking the clock, waiting for the time to go home. I felt real, happy, and satisfied. I was looking for God's justice, which is based only on my filial relationship and has nothing to do with human rewards. I even felt less tired and was able to find the energy to study for the English exam, which I eventually passed, so that I could become a doctor in the National Health System. Today I have a new job, new patients, and new challenges, but the same morning question, the same curiosity, and the same gusto.

Stella, Edinburgh (Great Britain)

For the life of everyone

We offer here some long extracts from the meeting of the CL community in Taiwan with Julián Carrón, which took place last November 22nd by video link.

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Fr. Donato Contuzzi. In preparation for this meeting, each of us has looked at our own experience and our own encounter with the Movement. I was struck that at times we risk taking for granted a beauty that is absolutely exceptional.

Zheng Zhong. Before 2008 I didn't know God. In 2000, I began working in Taiwan for an airline company and I met the priests of the Fraternity of San Carlo. When Fr. Paolo invited me to teach a lesson at a university, I discovered that he was also a teacher, and this interested me greatly. I asked him what the doctrine of the church was and he invited me to a friend's home to participate in the School of Community. That friend later became my godfather at my baptism. In fact, more than a year after that meeting, I decided to be baptized and become Christian. I have no idea how I became so courageous since my family has always

been Buddhist. So on March 22, 2008, I received baptism. That year the priests involved me in the work of translating *The Religious Sense into Chinese*. In 2010, I went on a trip to Italy with them, and during those days I experienced in a deep way the charism of the Movement in a faraway land; in that world, there are brothers and sisters of the Movement who are like a family whose members love each other and take care of each other. Today I participate in the School of Community regularly, and through our reciprocal testimony, I am learning a great deal. Now when I read the question, "What saves us from nothingness?" I can respond with certainty: faith. During my first fifty years I was an individualist. I didn't know God and I lived a worldly life. In my second fifty years I've learned to enjoy the charism of *Another* by participating in the life of the community. It is my experience that the Movement is not just a movement of faith, but even



more it is putting into practice the love of God for women and men to the point of offering yourself. This is my mission.

Julián Carrón. Thank you so much. All of us can identify with your story because it is the story of each of us. Most of us were believers, but like you, we were amazed by the beauty to which we were introduced in living Christianity as Fr. Giussani pro-



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posed it to us. Listening to you confirms for us that what we have encountered, is also yours and for everyone. And we are amazed that Christ can so generously fill the heart of a man whom we did not know before and whom we now feel to be such a friend and brother. This is what Christ brought: responding to the fundamental needs of the heart for truth, beauty, and justice, to all of our need to be happy. In doing so, He makes us friends, sisters, and brothers who are grateful for the gift we have received and share. We hold this treasure, as you called it, which is for everyone. It is truly stunning that God chose such a human and simple way to communicate this gift to us: you, amazed by some people, desired to participate in the life that they were living among themselves. You said that you were far from God, but it doesn't matter

Taipei, Taiwan.

what situation we find ourselves in because when Christ reaches us through a person, He sets such a great beauty in front of us that we are attracted to Him. This is what makes Christianity so compelling, and it is the reason Pope Benedict told us and Pope Francis repeats that “it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 14). Christ gives us a grace so that it will reach others. It is always stunning to look at the way God chose to save women and men. It is always astounding because nobody would have begun to change the world by choosing one person, first Abraham, then Moses, and then by sending His Son, and then the apostles, and on and on up to Fr. Donato and the other priests. He chose them in order to reach you. Thank you.

Xiao Rou. *I encountered the Movement in 2010. That year Fr. Paolo and Fr. Emmanuele organized a trip to Italy with some students. I was studying Italian at the time and one day I saw the photos of that trip on Facebook. They seemed very happy and I felt a bit jealous, above all of the friendship that shone in them. I looked for the CL website and decided to go and see. The first time I participated in a meeting I was very impressed. They talked about serious things like, What is solitude? What is the meaning of studying? I remember that I looked forward to the School of Community all week the way the Little Prince looked forward to seeing the fox, and also that this time of expectancy was one of fullness. Ten years have passed since then. When I graduated, I joined the Fraternity of CL and continued to participate in the life of the community, which was like a friend who led me to be closer to God. After graduation, work slowly took over most of my time and this affected my participation in the School of Community. I began to wonder, What’s the sense of speaking about such difficult things? and so I began attending less frequently, but then I discovered that my heart felt a great loss and that work could not give me even a small part of the fullness I felt in sharing life with friends during*

the School of Community. Now I participate every chance I get. In the beginning I also dragged along my husband, but now he has begun going without me, and this moves me greatly. I have a question. I am very committed to and involved in work and also in the Movement. I would like to be like the Memores Domini, who help God and Jesus during their work and activities. At times, even in the activities of the Movement, it seems I am simply a person who helps and that I don’t truly participate in what is happening. I feel emptied. How can I improve?

Carrón. Thank you. Christianity is simple—only two things are needed: the heart, your heart, which desires to be happy and contented, and meeting someone in whom you see the fulfillment of that desire. It is easy to recognize this because it is not an everyday occurrence to come upon people who are so happy that you desire to participate in their happiness. After graduation you thought you could distance yourself but found that you were missing something. Christianity is not a prison: the Christian community has always been a free place. Your friends respected your decisions because Christ wants friends, not slaves or servants. This is why someone can leave and then take time to understand why she should participate in a place like this. When you leave you discover that your heart feels a great lack, and in this lack you understand who Christ is. When you miss Christ, you understand more clearly who



A School of Community in Taipei.

Fr. Emanuele Angiola
with Wan Ru (left)
and Ya Han (right).



He is, whom you have encountered, and this experience teaches you far more than any lesson on Christianity. This is the way Christ attracts us and accepts the risk of our freedom. He does not need any forcing or rules: He fascinates us, period. People cling to Christ out of an honest and sincere acknowledgment of the fullness they are living. When people begin to participate in the Christian community and listen to the Gospel, they understand that Jesus talks about Christianity as a treasure, for which a man sells everything he has to buy the field where that treasure is hidden. These words would be incomprehensible (what is this treasure?) if you had not experienced them through an encounter. The experience that has come down all the way to us began at a precise point in history, a beginning called “Jesus.” When people encounter Him—as happened to you—they want Him to fill every moment of their lives. This is why, having seen those who live the vocation of the *Memores Domini*, you feel the desire for your life to be filled with His presence like theirs is. This is the great gift God has given all of us who belong to the movement: the *Memores Domini*. Through their vocation, you can see a person like you, who lives immersed in the world like everyone, but is determined by the memory of Christ. It is very significant that the *Memores Domini* come to your mind and not us priests; you need to see someone who, in your same circumstances, lives Christ the

way you desire to live Him in every moment. The mystery has given us someone in whom we can see the fulfillment of what the heart desires, we who do not know how to reach this. How can Christ increasingly fill every moment of your life, even in your work? This happens if you live a relationship with your friends, in which you seek Christ with them. Being with them, the desire that He become ever more present in your life emerged and grew. Just as you saw it begin, so you can see it develop by following the same method: participating with all your friends you have encountered in the new life that the mystery gives you in this place. Over time you will see how Christ will become ever more familiar to you.

Yi Han. *I am in the third year of the university. When I was a freshman, I got involved with CL because a friend of ours invited me to the School of Community. This gathering begins with at least two songs, usually one in Chinese and one in Italian. I really like this way of beginning because I think singing together helps to put us in the right frame of mind and enter into communion with others.*

If someone asked me what we do in our gathering, I would say that it's a bit like “chicken soup for the soul.” We focus on questions about and events in our lives that we normally can't talk about with others. We don't share just problems, but also beautiful experiences, and so it seems to me that our friends who participate in the meeting share a bond that is different from that shared with others. It's like a mysterious power, a great circle of invisible light that envelops our meeting. Once I related this to the friend who had invited me, and he said that this thing is called “friendship.”

I participated with Fr. Paolo and other students in a trip to Italy. The thing I liked most was that every evening we sat in a circle to share what had happened during the day. Usually we live frenetically and rarely stop to think about what has happened during the day, as if everything that happened didn't happen.

I remember that for the first two months of the School of Community I never spoke; I didn't dare. Every time Fr. Paolo asked me, “Do you want to say something?” I shook my head and said, “Next time.” But once I got to know these friends better, I began to share my own experiences too, and I am often moved to the point of

tears. For this reason I think that CL and the experience I had in Italy are the “maestros” of life. These “maestros” have made me less timid and better able to listen to others and to share what I feel and experience. I was very lucky to enter into the Italian department because I have succeeded in coming out of myself and have met this company of friends.

Carrón. If Fr. Giussani had heard you he would have jumped up from his seat because you grasped the reason he had us sing at the beginning of every gathering: to put us in the right state of mind for listening and seeing what would happen. Instead of expending many words to prepare us to be attentive, he had us sing. The fact that you understood this without anyone explaining it to you speaks volumes about Giussani’s sensitivity and capacity to perceive the most intimate aspects of each person’s heart, and how, with his educational genius, he then transformed that into a gesture. This is the Christian method: God makes something happen to enable us to understand. In order to make us understand what love is, He has us fall in love. In order to make us understand what friendship is, He causes us to become friends; in this way we can understand truly what we are talking about when we use the word “friendship.” When you saw the realization of a true friendship, you compared it right away to other types of friendships. You noted that

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there is a different bond among the friends who participate in the School of Community because here “we don’t share just problems, but also beautiful experiences,” that is, everything. In this way, we begin to experience that this friendship is totalizing and embraces everything in life. It is interesting that even before using the word “Christ,” you were already experiencing Him through the difference you encountered in your new friends. The same thing happened to the disciples. Like you, they were drawn by a certain type of friendship, the one that grew among them around Jesus, and so, in being with Him, they began to ask themselves, Who is this man? This is the “maestro” you ask for. Who generates a friendship like this? “It has made me less timid”; that is, it has caused your humanity to blossom, it has caused you to emerge as an “I” and has opened you, made you “better able to listen to others and to share what I feel and experience.” This friendship that reaches everything grows closer and closer, and you expressed the outcome in one word: you are “lucky.” This is what we Christians are. We are lucky to have encountered this different experience of living the life that everyone lives. This is why we desire Him to dominate more and more our waking each morning. Just imagine how it would be if instead of waking up already worried about the things you have to do, you let yourself be suffused with the awareness of how fortunate you are. How different the whole day would be! This is why our affection for Christ and for the place where He generates us constantly continue to grow more and more. We thank Fr. Giussani, that “maestro” who generated this place with the grace that God gave him for all of us.

Xiao Ping. My father was ill and bedridden for fifteen years before he died. In those years he lived in a nursing home near a church, and a group of the faithful regularly went to visit him. Even though I didn’t know them, I was very grateful because in this way my father was not abandoned to the darkness of illness. I told myself that in the future I would like to help those in need, too. Then at the Spiritual Exercises I heard about charitable work with the elderly and I wanted to go. I began this school with other friends in order to learn to love and be loved. Today



Fr. Donato Contuzzi with Xue Ning.

I can no longer participate because of my own illness, and I told Father, "Even if I can't go with you, I'm not sad, but glad," because every day I go to physical therapy and there are many ill people there with me. I've begun spending time with them and many encounters have happened. (Her testimony is in the January issue of Traces and on clonline.org.)

Carrón. Thank you. The method is always the same. She came upon the Christian experience when she saw some people who went to visit her father; she perceived that it was a grace to see that he was not abandoned. Even though she didn't know it, this experience was the summary of why God sent His Son into the world: so that we would not feel abandoned. But first He made it happen in front of your eyes with your father, and only later did you come to learn that their gesture, their charitable work, had begun in a nearby parish where they lived the memory of Christ present. Who would have thought that the mystery was preparing you for when you would fall ill, so you would not feel abandoned and could testify to all those there with you doing physical therapy that you were not sad, but glad? In this way you understood that for which we have been chosen: to bring the presence of Christ to all those who feel abandoned. Christ called us precisely for this, to be able to bring Him to all those who have our same problem: the fear of abandonment. When Fr. Donato told me about you last summer, I was so struck that during the Beginning Day I told everyone what you had understood. You understood it for all of us, and this is the most beautiful gift you have given us: you have made us aware of why this grace has been given to us. And

so you have become the "beating heart" not only of the Taipei community, as Fr. Donato said, but of the whole Movement. We will always carry this gift in our hearts and it will be linked to your name: Xiao Ping. Thank you.

Qi Fang. *For two or three years I was absorbed in caring for my husband, grandmother, and mother, all of whom have since died. In that period I asked the Lord to be a true support for me. The people close to me thought that I was strong, while actually I know I'm very weak and have to entrust myself totally to the Lord. The bond with the presence of Jesus in my life is a very mysterious experience of companionship. When this whole period ended, I felt an emptiness because I freely and knowingly decided to distance myself a bit from the Lord, not to be such a friend, so intimate with God. My attitude, what I felt, was defined by nothingness. So here is my question: the people I love have all gone to heaven and now I don't know what road to take. What is the objective of my life, beyond eating and the rest? What is the strength of my life? How can desire be a medicine against nothingness?*

Carrón. These are very beautiful questions. As you saw, when life presses us, we live in tension. During the period when your family members were ill, life pushed you and did not allow you to step aside; you felt all of your need and this made you cling to Christ. Even if people thought you were strong, you knew you were weak and that He provided mysterious companionship. After the deaths of your loved ones, you saw that tension lessen, and so you ask what is the meaning of life for you now. You should allow yourself the time to grasp the signs through which the Mystery will reveal your goal. In any case, you do have a goal, the one that Xiao Ping mentioned: sharing with others what you received for living when you were facing the illness of your family members. You have added a key piece to the drama of living—when loved ones die, our desire appears to fade away. You make a beautiful connection: a lack of desire is what draws us closer to nothingness, causing us to become increasingly less ourselves. And so you wonder what or who rekindles desire. I have often met people who have lived or are living moments of stress like the illness of a loved one, but then, when the situation changes, the tension lessens too; then they remember those moments almost with nostalgia because they felt alive and full of tension. But as you can see, this thought is not enough to keep desire burning permanently. So who frees us from nothingness? At this point, Christ appears again. Christ is the one who can constantly rekindle our desire; we do not need things to go badly to live this tension. Christ came so that we would never feel abandoned to our degradation. There is a fascination for a presence that is so attractive that it continually rekindles our desire. What would life be without Christ? We are truly fortunate because Christ came to keep us from being sucked into nothingness, and this makes us full of the hope that your loved ones who are gone, who are already in front of Him who rekindles desire, will perhaps tell you what your purpose is. What is more interesting in your life than crying out to everyone that only Christ rekindles desire and keeps us from falling into nothingness? The one true goal of living is that for which we were born and for which Christ had us encounter Him: to cry out to everyone what we pray in the Psalm, "Your grace is worth more than life." Who knows how you will discover Christ filling you with Himself for all of us! ■

United States Opening up in a closed world

Carolina Brito, the principal of a K-8 school in a poor Boston neighborhood, talks about maintaining close contact with families during the school's closure in the wake of COVID and recounts the story of an initiative that drew in many others.



Anna Leonardi



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The Rafael Hernández K-8 School of Boston has been closed since March 17th when the state of Massachusetts imposed a general lockdown to slow the spread of COVID-19. But even during this closure, the school has continued to be the beating heart of Roxbury, the densely populated African American and Hispanic neighborhood of the city, where it was founded in 1973 by a group of Puerto Rican families who wanted an education for their children that was in harmony with their needs as immigrants. Today, the Rafael Hernández School is one of the few bilingual public schools on the East Coast. Over time it has succeeded in stanching a hemorrhage of school dropouts, which in this neighborhood involves even elementary school students. “The pandemic has intensified the dropout risk for the entire Hispanic community,” says Carolina Brito, the school’s principal. “Of our four hundred students from nursery school to the third year of middle

school, 75 percent live below the poverty threshold. The start of distance learning has brought to the fore the grave need of our families.”

Often their homes lack everything, not just technology. Carolina and her staff began to distribute all the things that are necessary to ensure continuity: pens, paper, colored pencils, computers, and Wi-Fi. But soon they understood that the needs were much greater, and in quite a number of cases even extended to the problem of hunger. “Many families have



In these pages, some moments from the distribution of food and school supplies at the Rafael Hernández K-8 School in Boston. Below, the principal, Carolina Brito.

lost their incomes and don't know what they're going to put on the table every day," she states. "For us it was normal to mobilize for food as well. Solidarity comes naturally to our community. We have always helped each other because we have always had to face the challenges related to our families' integration into this country."

The first contributions came from neighborhood restaurants that decided to give away all the food left unsold when they had to close. Then assistance also arrived from the city government, and Carolina had to find a way to distribute everything. She called her teachers, but they refused to participate for reasons of safety. While she understood and respected their decision, she was deeply disappointed. She knew that it was fundamental for her students to stay in close contact with the school, if only to receive a quart of milk and a box of rice every now and then. Carolina talked about it with her School of Community.



“Without this encounter, the other will always be abstract. Instead, when you have the other right in front of you, you feel that the other overflows...”

Usually she does not willingly talk about her kids and the school because they are on another planet from the easy and comfortable one where her friends live, in the neighborhoods of the city center. They are two closed worlds that never interact, and often she has not felt understood. However, that evening shortly before ending their Zoom meeting, Monica said, “Carolina, wait, don’t disconnect. I want to help you. Tell me what you need.” Carolina had not expected such an offer. “Normally we help each other by talking, comparing our experiences, and seeing how

they relate to the text we are reading,” explains Carolina. “Seeing Monica open herself up to what I see and feel to the point of wanting to do something with me was the beginning of a new journey for everyone.” It started the following Thursday when Monica loaded her husband, five children, and boxes with all kinds of foodstuffs into her van and headed for Roxbury to deliver packages to individual homes. The school has assigned her ten families. Some of them live in homeless shelters. Their meetings involved few words, as many of families do not even speak English. However, the names of the children stayed in the minds of those who knocked on the doors, and the next time they already felt like friends with these families.

In September the situation in the neighborhood became even more dire because the Afro-Hispanic population, with less access to health care coverage, was suffering the most deaths from COVID. “In the fall we had to get back into contact with many of our families, who in the meantime had been evicted or had fallen ill. We saw the needs multiply,” recounts Carolina. “We began distributing not only school supplies but also masks and disinfectants. Also, Monica involved Tony, a salesman of Italian products, and he began donating all the food that was close to its expiration date. We were grateful, but had no idea how to sort and package it quickly.” Carolina called Monica, who showed up in Roxbury the next day with twenty-five mothers and forty-five children. They created an enormous assembly line and prepared packages for over six hours. They were a perfect logistics machine, but at the same time were so happy that it seemed like a party. “It was the first true moment of joy in the community after wearisome months shut up in our homes. I invited all my friends. Even pregnant women and women with nursing babies showed up.” That afternoon none of the children complained about the masks or social distancing. As they prepared the packages, they asked many questions about the children who would receive them and what they might most like to receive. “Many mothers wrote me afterwards, asking me to explain in more detail what had happened,”





says Monica, who responded by sending them all *The Meaning of Charitable Work* by Fr. Giussani. Now they are beginning to read it together. But that day marked a reversal of course for Carolina and her staff as well. “My secretaries were shocked when they saw this platoon of mothers and children. One of them asked me, ‘Where did you find these people?’ At the end of the day another wrote me, ‘I’m full of gratitude because I saw that people can be together even though they are so different from each other. It’s the first hopeful thing I’ve seen in this extreme situation with the election.’” In front of that event, so unusual for a city like Boston, still deeply marked by divisions, Carolina asked herself a crucial question: What makes it possible to recognize others as sisters and brothers? She had no doubts

about the answer. “Encountering him. Without this encounter, the other will always be abstract. Instead, when you have the other right in front of you, all your mental constructs crumble to dust, like the one that says ‘I think this and you think that.’ The other overflows, making you experience the needs of the other in the same way you experience your own needs, and this makes you feel the desire to serve the other, to do all you can so that the other can exist.” Carolina doesn’t just think of the poor families in her neighborhood—she has adopted a different gaze on her CL friends too. “I always harbored a little bitterness because I never thought they could understand my world. But the segregation was first of all in my own heart. Now I’ve discovered that we live something so great that we needn’t come

to an agreement first. We are more together than if we had a perfectly mutual cultural understanding.”

A few weeks ago she received a phone call from a neighborhood girl, desperate because she had just found out she was pregnant. Carolina asked her to come to school because she wanted to see her, but had no idea how to help her. First, she called Monica and together they came up with some ideas: they knew a doctor willing to examine her for free and had a contact with some sisters dedicated to mothers in her situation. Once again, Monica totally surprised her. “Carolina, tell her that if she doesn’t feel able to keep the baby, I’ll take it. I know I’m crazy. Now I’ll hang up and talk to my husband. But you tell her. What can we offer her if not this total embrace?” ■

Uganda

How Br. Elio responded

“He taught me to forgive and to love.” In the midst of feuds and massacres, Br. Elio Croce unified a people simply by serving them. These are the stories of his life through the eyes of those who knew him.



Maurizio Vitali

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The story is told by the red dust that covers the old Toyota Land Cruiser, which has been left parked under the carport of St. Mary's Hospital Lacor in Gulu, a city in northern Uganda inhabited by the Acholi. Countless miles were driven on the dusty roads in the savanna. This SUV has been used as an ambulance to carry those suffering from Ebola and those wounded in battle and in internal feuds; it has been used as a school bus to transport orphans of the St. Jude Children's Home; it has also served as a hearse when families did not have the means to bring their deceased loved one home, as well as a taxi for women carrying heavy loads on their backs. The story is told by the lumbar pillow left on the car seat, the black cap forgotten on the other seat, the rosary hung on the rear-view mirror—because every trip began with a prayer.

The pillow, cap, and rosary all belonged to Br. Elio Croce, a Combonian friar, an incredible man of God and a child at heart who welcomed everyone and could do anything. He drove an old SUV instead of an Aston Martin, but if you look at pictures of him, you will agree that he resembles Sean Connery. He was a Good Samaritan and builder of cathedrals. As a Good Samaritan, Br. Elio was always ready to help anyone he met who was

desperate, orphaned, wounded, mutilated, disabled, or sick. Not once did he hold back from an opportunity to assist someone, not even when he was asked to bury those killed in battle by merciless soldiers and left to rot in the streets, putting his own life on the line. As a builder, he helped build hospital wings, warehouses, schools, orphanages, irrigation systems, an oil mill, and most recently, a beautiful church. In the process, he provided jobs and taught people how to work. For him, no initiative or action was his own; they belonged to Providence. The standard by which he measured everything was very simple: if the work is blessed by Providence, then it will prosper. If not, it will fail.

Br. Elio, who survived massacres and the Ebola outbreak, left for his heavenly abode on November 11, 2020. He died of COVID at 74 years of age, fifty of which he had spent in Uganda.

Br. Elio was born in the mountains (Moena, Italy) and had the soul of a mountaineer (a man of few words, with a gruff demeanor but also a kind heart). Stories of missionaries were the spark for his vocation. He got a degree in surveying and he studied English in England in preparation for becoming a missionary. His first assignment was in 1971 in Kitgum, a run-down suburb in Acholi ter-



© Mauro Ferrarriello

Br. Elio Croce (1946-2020).

ritory, as a hospital administrator. In the late 70s, volunteers who were members of CL began to come, especially doctors from Varese, who sparked the movement in Uganda. In 1986, Br. Elio was sent to Gulu, a bigger city with 150,000 inhabitants about sixty miles from Kitgum. Here, he became the administrator at St. Mary's Hospital Lacor, which was established by Piero and Lucille Corti. Thanks to his efforts, it became the most important and advanced hospital in northern Uganda.

The significant moments in his life were marked by a yes to the provocations of reality, to the circumstances that arose. Around the time that he arrived in Gulu, the civil war erupted. One day, he received news that rebels had killed many people at a refugee camp and had kidnapped women and children to use as sex slaves and soldiers. He departed for the camp, and on the way he passed a vast clearing where he found something horrific. There he saw the massacred bodies of sixty women and their children, who had been beaten up. Sixteen of the women were still alive. He transported them to the hospital and eight survived. This world-class hospital became a sanctuary for those who had been displaced, or who had escaped from being captured or raped. Toward evening, thousands of children arrived, traveling as far as six miles to seek refuge for the night in this safer place. They left the next morning and they became referred to as "night commuters." "The most we ever hosted in one



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night was 32,000,” recalled Br. Elio in an interview. “They formed a human carpet that covered every space, porch, portico, lawn, and awning.” And every evening he invited everyone to pray the Rosary: no matter what religion or ethnic group, together they pray to Our Lady for peace. Another provocation from reality happened when he met Bernadette, an Acholi widow, who in 1982, began taking care of orphans. This work garnered her considerable respect. Bernadette asked Br. Elio to help her build shelters where the children could live. Br. Elio accepted and built an orphanage called the St. Jude Children’s Home—because a home is where a family lives.

Bernadette passed away in 1992, and Br. Elio was given the huge task—which he did not want, but to which, as was his wont, he said yes—of running the orphanage. Today, St. Jude Children’s Home hosts ninety children, about twenty to thirty of whom have special needs. They live in small houses and residences constructed by Br. Elio, on average eight in each, with a caregiver who is not their biological mother, but is a mother in every other sense.

Later a school was established for the children in the Home, as well as the children from nearby villages. In the elementary school alone, there are 450 children. There is also a farm that boasts acres of rich soil for growing food, which does not generate much profit, but contributes to meeting the costs of the Home and provides jobs and professional training.

To retell the legend of charity that was Br. Elio’s life, an encyclopedia would not suffice. We will let those who knew him tell his story. Josephine Ogweda, the codirector of the St. Jude’s Children Home, said, “We grew up looking up to this man who was always on the go, who never tired, and whose heart was always eager to welcome everyone he met. He was fatherly to all.”

Anna Rita Corciulo, the program manager of the orphanage, said, “Everyone will tell you that Br. Elio was a witness of God’s love. Those who met him would all ask themselves, ‘What makes him this way? How can he be so hopeful and so charitable toward others?’”

Alfred is a 35-year-old engineer who manages a hardware store in Gulu. He said, “My father was killed when I was five years old. One day, some people told me about a Combonian friar who helped orphans, as long as they were good students. I decided I would go meet him. I was fourteen years old at the time. On Monday, December 13, 1999, I was standing outside of his house and there were many people there who wanted to speak with him. He listened to everyone and gave each person either advice or some form of assistance. I can still remember what he said to me—he said, ‘Your life is like an egg resting in your hands. You are the

Left, the St. Jude Children's Home, the orphanage founded by Bernadette Akwero.

one who has to take care of it. There is no reward for laziness.”

Martin Oyat, a former resident at St. Jude's, is now the manager of the warehouse and milling department for the farm. He said, “There were times when we disagreed and almost got into arguments. Br. Elio never held a grudge; he was always ready to embrace me. He has taught me to be who I am today. I have become a catechist, and, in the midst of the pandemic, I decided to get married.” Another friend, Patrick, suffers from severe rheumatoid arthritis that has confined him to a bed for years. Patrick said, “Br. Elio used to help me purchase medication and bandages to treat the pain, and he would also

help me buy groceries. In exchange, he asked me to offer up my suffering for the conversion to Christianity of the entire world. Since he knew I have a devotion to St. Pio of Pietrelcina, he bought me a television so I could watch and participate in prayers. He taught me to forgive and to love.” Vito Schimera, a surgeon at Lacor Hospital and a father of two children born in Kitgum, said, “Elio exemplified what it means to be ‘like a child’ as it is described in the Gospel. Everything filled him with awe. His child-like spirit is what made him such a great builder. He was fascinated by Fr. Carrón’s book *The Radiance in Your Eyes* and wanted to get copies of it so that he could hand them out.” Samuele “Sasa” Rizzo, who was born

in 1978 in Kitgum, is married to a Ugandan woman; they have two children who were born in Gulu. “I was privileged to have a friendship with Br. Elio over the course of ten years. I would go and have coffee with him on Sundays after Mass; I watched the way he acted around children when we went to do charitable work at the orphanage. When I began, everything was new to me, and he served as a mentor and helped me with both my personal and professional vocation. Through him, I saw a charity in action—an inexplicable love made possible because of his love for Christ—that I wanted to imitate.”

Then the pandemic hit. Br. Elio did not get infected with COVID in the spring. In the fall, Seve (Matteo Severgnini, the principal of the Luigi Giussani High School in Kampala), received a text from him that read, “I went to get tested for COVID. I tested positive. Thanks be to God,” and thought to himself, What do you mean, thanks be to God? Seve understood later after he overcame the shock: “Elio’s strength was not his ability to build, but his willingness to obey.” In November, Br. Elio was in his final days. His last two messages were, “I abandon myself to God’s holy will,” and “Totus tuus.” In this way, everything was fulfilled; everything became clear. An Acholi man expressed it well at the funeral Mass when he said, “If someone were to ask me how to follow Jesus today, the answer for me is simple. By following a man like Elio.” ■



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Fr. Luigi Giussani

© Emanuele Orroleva



Fr. Luigi Giussani in 1973, in Riccione.
This February 22nd will mark sixteen years
since his death.

Confessions of a headteacher

Hans van Mourik Broekman has dedicated his life to education. But since last year, when he “met” Fr. Luigi Giussani, he has reconsidered his way of working and living his faith.



Luca Fiore

“**A**lmost twenty years had passed and I still remembered his name. On September 11th, I saw him on CNN, commenting on the attacks, and I never forgot the impression his words made on me. The day of the attacks my family and I were on a flight to the US, and it was redirected to Canada, where we spent several days as refugees watching television. And that priest—so particular. Then I never tried to find out more about him, who knows why. But in the middle of the lockdown I wanted to know what he had to say today about the pandemic. I googled his name: ‘Lorenzo Albacete.’”

Hans van Mourik Broekman was born 54 years ago in Syracuse, New York, of Dutch parents. He attended high school in the US, graduated in classics from St. Andrew’s University in Scotland, and began his career in education, first as a teacher and principal in a number of Catholic schools in America and then in Liverpool, where today he directs Liverpool College, one of the oldest institutes in the city. In 2015, he succeeded in converting the status of the college from an “independent school” to an “academy” financed with government funds. The result? It made it possible for everyone to obtain an excellent education, which in the UK is possible only for the children of the upper classes. This operation was described by Andrew Adonis, the Labor Party parliamentarian and minister under the both the Blair and Brown governments as “perhaps the greatest breach in the Berlin Wall that separates the private and public sectors of instruction that we have seen in the last decades.”

Liverpool College, like other schools in the UK, was closed last year because of the COVID emergency, with lessons continuing online. Cooped up at home in front of his laptop screen, Hans discovered that he could not learn what Fr. Albacete thought about the drama of the global pandemic because the Puerto Rican priest had died in October of 2014. But in his internet research he came upon a long television interview Albacete had given, which had a strange title: “The Meaning of Life.” “It was a dialogue on his book *God at the Ritz*. He spoke in such a fascinating and convincing way. He looked a bit scruffy, but his theology was profound. At a certain point he referred to Fr. Luigi Giussani and the Movement of Communion and Liberation, without explaining who the first or what the latter were.”



Today, Hans tries to look at what was happening to him in those months. The world around him was in upheaval because of the virus, but in the microcosm of his home, things seemed calm. And yet, far from work and his young people of the school, he felt a strange need. “It was the need to feel alive, a desire for hope, an ability to depend on my faith and on Jesus, an almost desperate need for faith to return to having a meaning. I was looking for something to reactivate me in a situation that seemed inexorably flat. I hadn’t lost my faith; I was always Catholic. But in that moment, I was looking for something that would make it vital again.”

The principal went back to researching on Google. Luigi Giussani. Communion and Liberation. He bought *God at the Ritz* on Amazon, and then *The Risk of Education*. He read them straight through, and they had an explosive effect on him, a man who teaches Introduction to Christianity (as part of the government curriculum for British schools). “At best, the students grasp its historical and cultural interest, but Christianity is of no importance to their life.” Right away, he sensed that Giussani was “a genius of education, a star of pedagogy.” He says that some of his concepts literally opened his mind: “reality,” “experience,” “verification,” “desire.” “The idea that reality is something greater than what can be demonstrated is absolutely extraneous to the Anglo-Saxon pedagogical

culture, which wants to teach only that which can be demonstrated. Giussani, instead, says something that sounded revolutionary to my ears: “Reality becomes evident in experience.” And then desire: our educational system seems custom-made for squelching the desire of students. And verification: what you are taught should be taken as a working hypothesis to be verified in experience. Giussani didn’t invent these ideas, but in him they take on a methodological value that gives a person instruments for teaching and learning anything.”

But when Hans finished reading the books, he still thirsted for more. And once again, he used the one instrument available to him, the internet. “The official CL sites only increased my curiosity, but I couldn’t find any contacts for someone here in Liverpool.” He asked priest friends, but though one had heard about a group in Cambridge, he was unable to make contact with anyone. Finally, “on the sixteenth page of Google, I found an article on a group in my city, with the name of a priest I know. When I called him, he said that he knew them and said a Mass for them every now and then.” Overhearing his phone conversation, Eleanor, Hans’s wife, realized that she knew Loredana, an Italian who sometimes posted on a WhatsApp chat some links from the CL site. What he was looking for was closer than he thought. Hans contacted Peter, the local leader of the Move-

Hans van Mourik Broekman.

ment, and began attending School of Community via Zoom. “I’ve been participating in these meetings every week for a few months now, and recently when I met them in person I unexpectedly felt like they were already my friends. How can you be friends with someone you’ve never met personally? It’s a bit like the question that Giussani asks us: How can you follow Jesus if you can’t be with Him physically?”

Eleanor also began participating in the meetings. A couple of friends, curious, asked to join in too. At the beginning of January, Hans also participated in the assembly of the English-speaking communities of northern Europe with Julián Carón. “Everything seemed so simple and clear, no reference to strange philosophical or psychological theories. The point was: Are we interested in living with God or without God? Do we want to be children or do we settle for remaining orphans? I heard truly powerful testimonies and so many reminders about what is essential in life.”

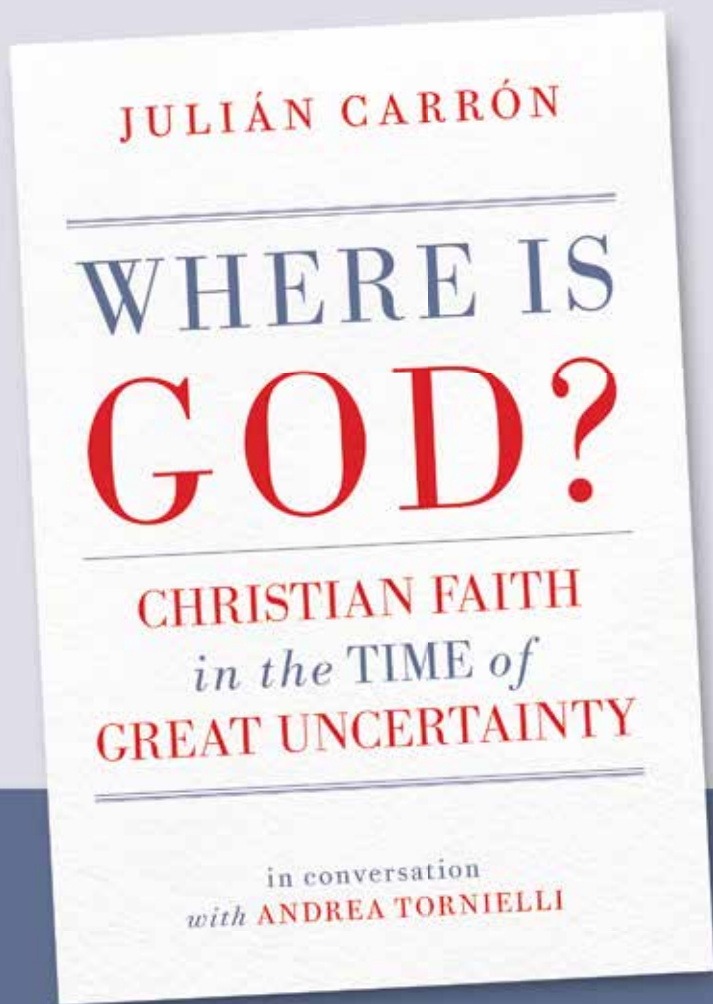
In recent months, taking advantage of the time freed up by the lockdown, and driven by the gnosological shock produced by Giussani’s thought, Hans began writing not one but three books. “The first is entitled *Confessions of a Headteacher* and is the critical rereading of my professional itinerary in the light of *The Risk of Education*. This

work has forced me to return to the reasons I began teaching and to reflect on the challenges facing me today as the director of a school that is not Catholic, one in which all the visions of life are considered.” The second book is *Full Life – Letters to My Students*: “It collects all the advice I’ve given students and teachers over the years before coming upon the thought of Giussani, and explains when and why I was wrong, and when, instead, I said the right thing without realizing it.” The third, still being written, is *The Experience of Christianity*. His intention is to try to explain Christianity to those who have no experience of it. “It seems to me that Giussani was in front of young people who knew all the Christian forms, but for whom faith had no relevance to life and nothing to do with their desires. I have in front of me students who have no idea what Christianity is, and I’d like to explain what it is, to describe what it feels like to be Christian, and something about the kind of experience you have in living your faith.”

One of Albacete’s affirmations on CNN on September 11th that most stayed in his mind was something along the lines of, “When I saw the images of the airplane hitting the first tower I recognized an ancient flame in myself. I knew that religion could do something of the kind, because I knew what it was capable

of doing in me.” Hans says that he was struck by the sincerity of those words and their radical nature. “It was the same type of impression that made me read Fr. Giussani. I thought, ‘It’s true, and *it makes sense*. It makes sense *for me*.’ The things I read in the pages of this Italian priest who died in 2005 are an analytical, educational description of my experience of Jesus. Christ enables me to give meaning to myself. But the method indicated by Giussani shows you a way in which this can happen. Every spirituality has an educational dimension.”

Hans reflects on the recent months lived in “virtual” contact with his new friends of CL. He thinks about the times he was in the US and the years he attended the English church. “Before welcoming me to School of Community, they didn’t check out who I was. I didn’t have to fill out any forms or provide my home address. Nobody asked me to buy anything. We also talked about politics, but after months I still don’t know what side these people are on. You can’t fit this group into any ecclesiastical stereotype. We never got mired in debates on issues related to controversies within the church. Nobody competed to be the most pious or to appear to be the best or most serious Catholic. All this is truly a great consolation for me. It is totally the exercise of freedom: a free association of free people.” ■



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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