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The audacity of the family



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Editor (Direttore responsabile)
Alessandra Stoppa

Editorial Assistant
Anna Leonardi

Art director
Dario Curatolo

Layout
Maria Cristina Mazzù

Editorial office
Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano
Tel. 02.92945400 - Fax 02.92945401

E-mail: traces@traces-cl.com
Web: english.clonline.org

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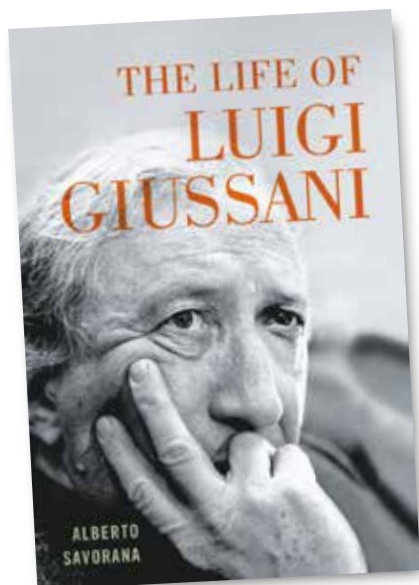
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A family at table,
seen from outside a window.

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Sons of all



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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Human affairs

We do not want to look at the family and its inner workings under a microscope, but rather to open a window onto the horizon that allows it to breathe. The family, fragile and irreplaceable. Today, the attempt to “protect human affairs from their frailty” denounced by Hannah Arendt has become unthinkably stifling because of the long wake of the pandemic. In this period, the four walls of our houses have seen everything: work, school, and a shared life to which no one was accustomed. They housed suffering and joy, and relationships were left raw, burned up in reciprocal presumption, or were given anew. The brightest images are those of fathers and mothers on work calls or standing over the stove with a child in arms. The darkest struggles, however, are not always seen or discussed—we found ourselves “exposed,” “reduced to bare bones,” as described by the witnesses in this issue, which is dedicated to the family—that place in life that is, by nature, extraordinary in its ordinariness.

Today, to see a joyful family is a real event. Why? Because now, more than ever, we see the two alternatives we are always choosing between: “From nature, the terror of death; and from grace, audacity”, as St. Thomas Aquinas put it, and as Charles Péguy echoed six hundred years later: “To hope, you would have to be quite fortunate, to have obtained, received a great grace.”

A grace that has nothing magic about it. When it comes to family life, there is either very concrete grace, brazen and patient, or it doesn't exist. The stories you will read inside are not of heroic families, but of families who would not exist if they had been alone, families who are generated by that horizon of a greater love experienced within the Christian community. We see the effects: a person who grows enough in trust to “have a family”—to marry, bring children into the world, and even welcome others' children—who has the audacity not only to begin, but above all to continue, to carry on, even when money or health is lacking, or when the routine becomes suffocating. The stories you will find in the following pages help us to grasp what is at the heart of even the largest family: “The encounter between man and woman cannot be defined exclusively by the aim of having children,” Giussani writes, “but first and foremost by being a companionship to destiny.”

It is only with this intense outlook, that of a person walking toward his or her fulfillment, that everything tirelessly starts over again for the family. So that this can happen, you seek a companionship outside your home that makes it possible to love, and although wounds do not heal, they open you to live more authentically and to not close in on yourselves. “Is taking a risk reasonable? It depends on who you have encountered,” said Fr. Julián Carrón during the recent CL Fraternity Exercises, communicating a fullness of life that grows if it enters into everything.

Letters

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

Juan Sebastian, Chiara

The family business

The most tiring aspect of the past few years of my life has been my work. I've had lots of problems at work with no clear way out, which has caused me pain and a sense of powerlessness. I have often asked myself if my work was the correct place for me, judging from a professional point of view, but also in light of my sense of responsibility toward my parents, given that I work in the family business. It's as if I thought Christ had nothing to do with my work: I was alone there, relying only on my own strength. I had tried to ask for help but with no results. The thought of having to witness to Christ in my work filled me with an even greater sense of failure. Thinking again about the journey of this period, the first thing that struck me was an awareness that in this aspect of my life, I was living a solitude: a nihilism of the heart. When I read in *The Radiance in Your Eyes* the words, "In the very moment in which, because of the difficulty that I find, I deny the possibility that someone hears my cry, I suppress my cry, and my reason becomes clouded," I suddenly understood the reason for the loneliness I was living. It's because my reason has become obscured. I often thought that the cause of my problems were the people around me, but that wasn't it. Many times, I couldn't work with people because I saw them as enemies. During the pandemic, I began to recognize the Movement as a place where my cry is heard. I expected a place where I would find a "user's manual," but instead, it's a place where I am looked upon and where I begin to recognize that I am not alone. It is only thanks to this that my attitude toward the people I work with is no

Dear readers, as part of a renewal process of the communications tools of the Movement, Tracce will become a bi-monthly magazine. The next issue will go out in July. Remember to keep following us at clonline.org

longer so limited. When someone makes a mistake, whereas before I would treat him very harshly (like I would do with myself),

I now see the error as a possibility for dialogue and the sign of a path we should travel together. This dialogue with the other is possible only if I am in dialogue with the mystery in the place that has been given to me. Otherwise, I would be incapable. I am so grateful, and I can say that now I live a hope that, before the pandemic, wasn't there.

Juan Sebastian, Colombia

A final question

Up until last year, I always believed that the Christian religion was a total invention: I thought the Evangelists had decided to invent a nice little story about this famous Jesus. I also thought that all Christians had swallowed this story whole and that they worshipped a nonexistent God. The GS Triduum has proven this belief of mine wrong. It's in fact impossible that so many people would gather together over a computer to pray with this happiness and desire to discover something new, or that after two thousand years, thousands of people go to Mass wrongly convinced that this God is truly present. It is impossible that all of it is founded on nothing. But I also ask myself how this God of whom everyone speaks has anything to do with me—it's really difficult for me to understand. Another thing that really struck me is the fact that there was a choir director directing us from home as if it were a given that we would all sing together. It felt to me as if we were really all together in person, like in pre-COVID times. In light of all this, I am ever more aware of the fact that this experience doesn't come from me, but from someone much greater. The Triduum made me want to go to the Easter Masses. I went in such a good mood, and never in my life have I listened so closely to the story of the Passion of Christ. So, I am aware that there is something, but the question remains: Where is this something within my life?
Chiara, Trento (Italy)

Where you would never have gone

I was looking forward to the Fraternity Exercises this time and I also prayed to the Lord to tear that catalog of temptations out of my hands, which can be summed up in one sentence: “I agree and I would like to be there, but I do not have the time, it would be too complicated with work, home, children, I cannot.” This year, however, something was burning inside. Strong, increasingly stronger, like a fireplace that begins to burn again. How strange, I said to myself as I looked in the rearview mirror of my life—the more the years go by, the more my affection grows. In the morning you long to go to Mass, to meet the Lord. Three years ago, this thought honestly did not even cross my mind. I had squandered treasured friendships and neglected many relationships, until one day I reappeared at a small School of Community. I still remember the way my friend Alberto hugged me, as if seeing a ghost reappear. From then on, almost without my realizing it, other things began to happen and, in the end, Cesare and Paola, with whom a relationship has begun to flourish during the last year, invited us to their house, at least for the Saturday of the Exercises. The result: my wife Manila and I went. It was her first time, with her questions and doubts. For me, it was the “first time” in ten years, and I gave thanks not only for this proposal, but also for this exceptional situation that wiped out my usual objection to traveling, now reduced to a few steps and a click. I do not know how we will go on and what will happen, but I do know that I again felt that deep vibration of the beginning, of those distant times at the Berchet, following my brother Marco, and then at university. There is no other experience capable of defeating time and giving us back the novelty of that time, which is possibly now even more overwhelming. It is something that you wait for and that reaches into the depths, where you cannot cheat and where nostalgia and bitterness disappear. Throughout the Exercises, many words touch you. Some slip past my obtuseness, but I know that one day they will come back to knock on the door of my mind and heart; others instead pierce me like arrows. But the greatest evidence for me during these days has been the explosion of humanity and hope—which was the theme of the Exercises—that Fr. Julián Carrón transmitted and described to us. The story of the two women who were ill and hospitalized in the same room, for example, in an instant takes you to a place that you would never have reached on your own. A lifetime would not have

been enough to understand, indeed even to only vaguely imagine, that it is possible to live like that—with that strength, with that impetus, with that certainty, even in the face of evil, in the face of suffering, in the face of death. I saw Manila’s eyes, and indeed those of some of our friends, glued to the screen, misted over with tears, as Carrón spoke of the mother with her disabled son. It is really true: Christianity opens up paths you would never have traveled, makes you perceive tones that you would never have focused upon, and makes you grasp reality with a force that goes beyond your strength, beyond your thoughts, beyond your abilities. We, like Andrew and John, do not directly see Christ’s divinity. But we do cross paths with signs of that Presence within our lives: the change that overcomes skepticism, the ever-so-slightly lifting of the handbrake, and the truth of those who have taken this path seriously, even in the most difficult circumstances. Truly, that something else that they have witnessed to me cannot be diluted under the banner of sentimentality or redirected toward the bubble of suggestions. Certain accents make it clear that you are further along, you do not really know where, but you are further along. Where you would never have gone. Peter’s affection was stronger than his remorse, but what about mine? Will my affection go beyond regrets, mistakes, indecisions, and everything else? The work to strengthen the human muscle is not at the beginning, but lies behind the urgencies and sharp edges that life poses. Even though I had already begun many years ago. I dismissed that continuous comparison somewhat to the fringes of life, to the periphery of my personal sphere, dominated by my egocentrism. Me and me again. Not my self, but my ambitions—albeit legitimate—the bare minimum of traditional Christian life, many good intentions, many presumptions and a pinch of vainglory, even if tinged with self-irony. I am going home with a challenge in mind: Lord, give me the strength to risk that comparison more, and not to be afraid to take up the challenge in all spheres and in all situations. It is better to play this game without wanting to know all the rules in advance. Before, I was more aware of my objections, obstacles; in truth, I still perceive them, and they are not small. But right in the previous instant, I see those testimonies, those faces, that humanity and that Mystery—which is still a Mystery but is a little less alien—knocking at the door of my life. I feel less alone. Some things have changed inside me, others have not, and at a certain age they begin to weigh like a burden upon my shoulders, but I know that I want to go on. At fifty-eight years old, I feel an almost frantic surge of happiness inside, like never before.

Stefano Zurlo, Italy

The risk of a *home*

The family, irreplaceable and fragile. The place of freedom and of generation that puts us before a radical alternative: safety or fecundity? An interview with philosopher Silvano Petrosino.



Giuseppe Frangi

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“God liked this human ‘invention’ that is the family so much that He decided to use it for Himself. And He became man and grew up and lived within a family.” Silvano Petrosino is a philosopher, a teacher of Theory of Communication and of Religious Anthropology at Catholic University, beloved of his students because of his capacity to ground the great categories of thought in the experiences of everyone. Since we have asked him to develop a reflection on the family, we’ll add, for the sake of coherence and completeness, that he is married to Loredana, and has two children and a grandchild.

His statement on God and the family came at a certain point in the interview and caused us to understand the added value that God, by becoming incarnate in that periphery of the world that was Nazareth, introduced into the world. But to begin, we cannot evade certain more difficult topics: the crises, the difficulties, and the fragility that many families must deal with today.

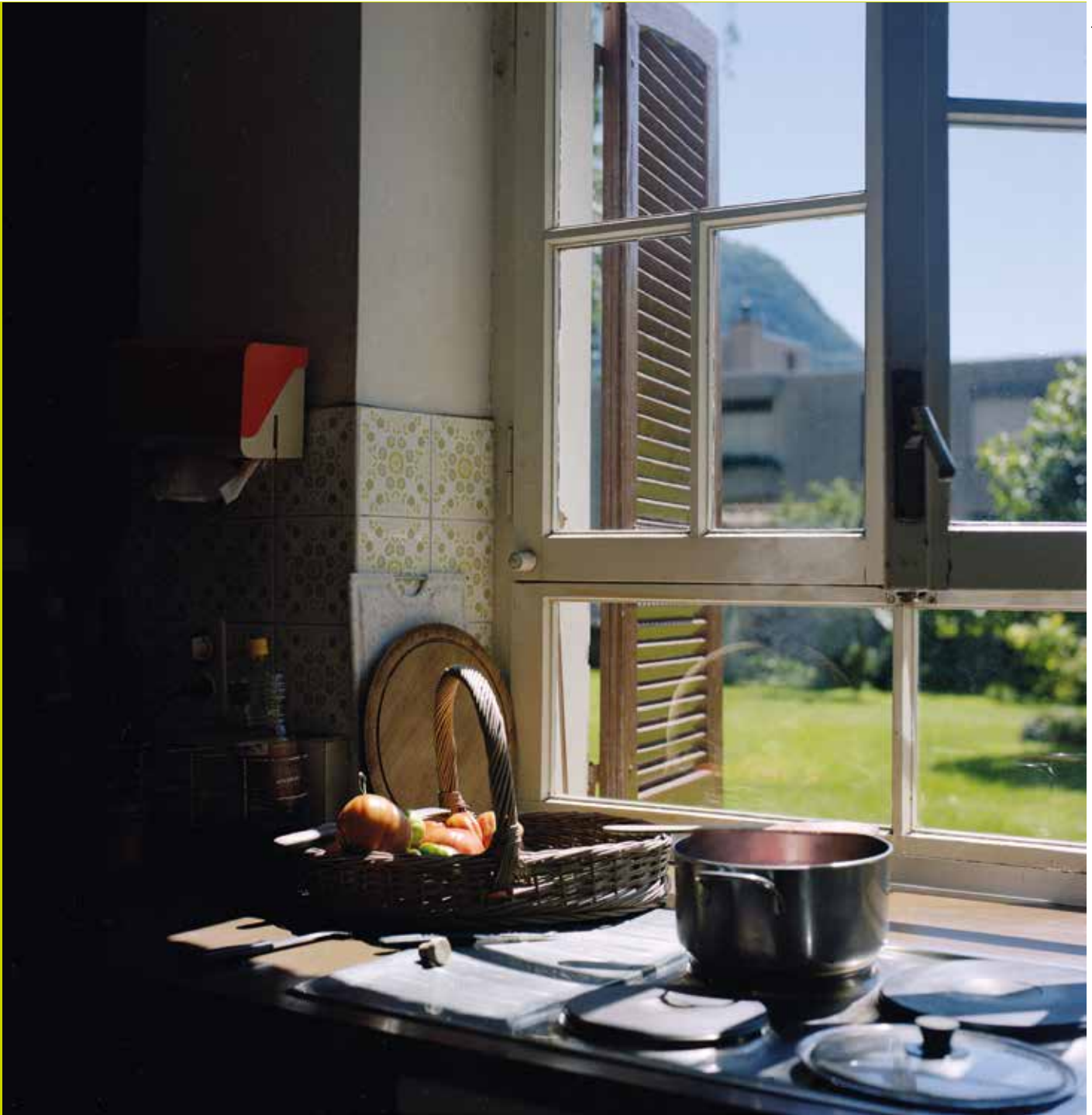
As you often say, it is good to begin with history. And today, history is showing us that the family has become quite fragile. Why?

Let us immediately clarify something: the family is an institution crafted in order to respond to certain fundamental needs. For example, we cannot ignore its biological function: man is an “animal” who is born before he is ready, inasmuch as before the age of four we do not have a sufficient level of autonomy. A newborn gazelle can already run, but instead, humans need a great deal of care. The family is the sphere that guarantees this care. We must also remember that in the past infant mortality was extremely high and that the family has acted as an irreplaceable container protecting new life and allowing the human race to grow and spread. From this fundamental function, the family then developed other essential functions: it is the place where relationships are cultivated, beginning from those between a

man and a woman, then moving to generational relationships between fathers and sons and to those among clans. In fact, the family is not a closed organism, but, through marriage, is always open to alliances, sometimes even with an enemy. For many centuries, you didn’t get married for love... In a word, there would be no human society without the family, this instrument for the containment of destructive tendencies, unrivaled in its efficiency.

And today, what has changed?

For the first time in history, man can reproduce outside a relationship between a man and a woman. The child has become a “right,” so that whoever desires to have one can do so by themselves. And so the family can easily be substituted for by agencies that guarantee the fulfillment of your desire and that support you in what follows. A dominant narrative at the mediatic and cultural level insists on the fact that today there are too many human beings and that



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there ought to be fewer of us. Therefore, even the function of securing the continuity of the human race is losing its symbolic importance. What comes to mind is the biblical episode of Hagar, the Egyptian slave who had a child with Abraham in order to guarantee the continuation of his line, since his wife, Sarah, had been consid-

ered sterile. When instead the elderly Sarah has Isaac, Hagar is left to die with her son Ishmael in the desert. At that point, God intervenes, saves them, and secures the fulfillment of the prophecy according to which Abraham would become “the father of many nations.” God is not rigid; he can move laterally and open new perspectives...



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■
Silvano Petrosino is professor of Theory of Communication and Religious Anthropology at Catholic University in Milan.

You introduced the theme of God, the God who hears the cry of Hagar. The God who makes Himself man does not choose special effects, but places Himself in a family from Nazareth...

Yes, because while it is true that the family is a human “invention”, it is even more true that this invention was well-liked by God. There was no way for him to express his approval of this invention other than His saying, “I will enter into the world by this means.” But God’s choice of the family introduces a new factor: the idea of love, that which finds its quintessential expression in the relationship between Joseph and Mary. There was the precedent of Jacob, who for love asked Laban that he be allowed to marry Rachel, even though she was sterile and not even the firstborn, who was, instead, Leah. Biblically, the perfect symbol of the relationship between man and God is that of a man and a woman.

Love, however, also means eros...

Certainly. I love to underline the fact that God created the hormone that is at the basis of attraction. But it is necessary to recognize that it contains a prophecy that goes beyond attraction and that allows us to give love other forms. I find the example of the play *Filomena Marturano* by Eduardo De Filippo marvelous: in order to win his love, she employs cunning and deceit, and, in the end, is successful in the goal of forcing Domenico Soriano to marry her without even revealing to him who among the children is his true son. “And children are children... They are all equal,” she tells him. He is the father of them all.

In this time, the unforeseeable has broken into our lives. Can we say that the family is truly itself when it is able to accept the unforeseeable?

It is so. Instead, today, what prevails is the metaphysics of safety. To explain myself, I'd like to speak of the difference between a "house" and a "home." A "house" is a building and must provide certain standards of safety because it is right to expect to live with some amount of order. And so, we must make sure that the house is built safely. But we cannot pretend to do the same with the "home," which is the place of connection. The pretension of order and safety can, in fact, be an impediment to human development. For example, falling in love cannot be safeguarded through technical apparatuses, but, instead, depends on your freedom because every relationship has within itself a component of drama. And we must accept the risk. What do we truly desire? To be loved freely, even at the cost of running a risk. If you make a proposal to another, you have to know that the other might say no. There is no magic spell...

Fr. Giussani suggests a topic a bit "upstream": Why for a man and woman to become a father and mother must there be "a different gaze between them"? Do you agree with this statement?

Certainly. I will try to reformulate it as follows. In the horizon of a "home," I must accept that the other is truly other; I must recognize his mystery, in the sense that he has his dreams, his wounds, and his unconscious. Often in daily life, in the life of a home, we call disorder that which is, in reality, the order of the other. We cannot make any claims on the other: accepting that we cannot "calculate" the other is the singular condition for an authentic relationship. Instead, often what happens is that when I realize that the other has betrayed my expectations, I seek to eliminate him. But in these cases, it is not the other who has failed. It is I who have made my expectations into a pretension, and by doing so, I privilege safety over fecundity.

What do you mean?

Man continuously goes searching for something stable, secure, fundamental. There is the idea of truth as

certainty; for example, the truths of science: something that is absolutely certain, secure, incontestable, on which we can build. In reality, man is called to experience something else, something more profound: fecundity. In the Bible, the promise that God always makes to man is not that of certainty but of fecundity: "I will make you fertile." The characteristic of fecundity is that you are not the lord; you participate in the process but the outcome does not depend only on you and, above all, you cannot possess the outcome. What's more, returning to our theme, if within a relationship we ask ourselves what is the truth of our love, we can respond only by pointing to the fecundity that has marked it, in the many forms in which it has become manifest.

At times, one makes an appeal to "values" as a stronghold to keep the family together. What do you think of this?

"Values" risks becoming a magic word. Values, in fact, are not actually present at the beginning of a relationship, but are imposed when the relationship is real and lived. The Catholic world has missed this, because it has not fully understood the notion of freedom; instead, it privileged an obedience that, at times, became mere servitude. There are two ways to betray laws: by disobeying them or by limiting oneself to obeying mechanically, according to the logic of doing whatever one is told. As Jesus repeatedly said to the Pharisees with regard to the sacred texts: you read but you do not understand; you limit yourselves to applying the law mechanically but without setting thought into motion, without reaching the level of meaning. If you do not begin to think, you cannot have an attitude of respect, in the etymological meaning of the word: you do not know how to "look back," and you therefore do not understand the meaning of certain values. To return to the recent experience of the pandemic and of its unforeseeable nature that interrupted our lives: if the virus strikes you and it is only you being destroyed, it becomes terrible. But if it strikes you within a relationship, it is terrible but you are able to absorb the shock. And so, the family is that relationship that is credible precisely because it is a "history" even before it is a collection of values. ■



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Grace in my house

Paola and Alberto and their family have flourished thanks to the presence of a daughter with a disability. Her gentleness has edified the family without her saying a word. "She was our permanent pass to get directly to what is essential."



Anna Leonardi



Alberto and Paola Mina with their five children. In the middle is Grazia Maria.

There was a moment near the beginning of their life together when it seemed that things were going to go another way. Instead, it was at that moment, while standing on the sidewalk in front of the Obstetric Gynecological Hospital Sant'Anna in Turin, that Paola and Alberto Mina decided to let their story grow and to embrace what was to come. "They had just told us that it would be unlikely that we would be able to have children, and were already talking about in vitro fertilization," said Alberto, recalling that afternoon in 1995. Alberto and Paola had been married two

years at the time. "I remember we were on the sidewalk and I said to Paola, 'Look, we do not need to have children in order to be happy, but we do need God. Let's entrust our lives to Him. If God wants to give us children, He will make it happen.'" A few months later, they met with Fr. Giussani and talked to him about their situation. He broadened their horizon even more. He said, "Don't worry, this happens to many couples and then later they have children. Why not go on a mission? I know that in Argentina there is a need... in any case, what is important in life is not catching that 'flight'; rather, it is to love God. Therefore, ask to love God in the way that He calls you." In the end, they did not end up going to Argentina, but Giussani's words became the thread running through their daily lives, through their relationship, and through relationships with friends and work. It is what sustained them even when their children were born. Francesco was born in 1997 and Guglielmo in 1999. "When Francesco was born, I remember thinking, 'I will never complain about my son,' because that's how strong the sense was that he was a gift for me. He was so small, but I understood that he was a mystery that I would always continue to discover," recalled Paola.

In 2000, Grazia Maria was born, and that same mystery overwhelmed them. When Grazia Maria was

around three months old, they realized that something was wrong. She slept all the time and was hypotonic. After consulting multiple doctors, Grazia Maria was finally diagnosed with congenital encephalopathy. Grazia Maria would never be able to walk or speak and would be totally dependent on others. "We looked for the best treatments and even considered going abroad, but very soon we became aware of the risk of getting caught up in wanting to find a solution," said Alberto. Grazia Maria's condition remained stable and did not get worse. Paola and Alberto were open to trying anything that would help her, but they also realized that they could not focus all of their energy solely on her. They needed to take care of each other, and most importantly, of their other children.

It is reality in all its detail that dictates the steps they take as a family, and they find their peace by embracing what happens. This is the approach they took in 2002 when Cecilia was born. Both Cecilia and Grazia Maria had to be fed, washed, changed, and pushed in the stroller at the same time. In spite of the great effort spent in caring for their children, Grazia Maria's presence was the factor that catalyzed the growth of all the members of the family. "She was our permanent pass to get directly to what is essential. When there was a problem, when we were sad, all we had to do was look at Gra-

Grazia Maria with Cecilia.

zia Maria, who was so patient and innocent, in order to keep going,” said Alberto. Around that time, Alberto came up with a phrase that he recited often as a prayer: “Grazia Maria, the Mystery in my house.” The children took it literally. Francesco always had a special bond with Grazia Maria, and when he could not sleep at night and felt scared, he used to go to her and cuddle with her in her bed. He recounted, “In her extreme fragility, Grazia Maria was my greatest comfort; she was my rock. Even when I got older, seeing her openness and happily surrendering to others always turned my hostility on its head.”

Guglielmo remembers that when he and his siblings played together when they were little, they tried to include their sister. The reason for this, Guglielmo said, “is that I perceived her quiet presence as something precious. I did not understand how, but I looked at her in the same way our parents did. My father would kneel down before her every night before bedtime. I perceived that this gesture is what allowed our family to be beautiful. My mother, through countless acts every day that were often humiliating, was the engine of Grazia Maria’s life. Because of this, it was natural for me to greet her affectionately in the morning with a caress or a kiss. I may have been rough with others, but I couldn’t be that way toward her.”



In 2007, the Mina family moved to Milan. Their new home was on a farm on the outskirts of the city. Grazia Maria entered elementary school. At this time, Paola discovered that she was pregnant once again, and in the following year, Carlo was born. Their life in Milan was similar to that of other families. They went to school, played sports, went on vacations, and had dinner with friends. Getting around with Grazia Maria was often complicated, but every challenge was also very rewarding. “For us, she has always been our banner. When we took her with us, it was easy to engage with people, because everyone responded to her presence. No one ignored her. She would dissolve that protective barrier that makes you feel like nothing can touch you. Her presence would draw your attention and you became a protagonist of unexpected conversations and encounters.”

“In her extreme fragility, my sister was my rock. Even when I got older, seeing her happily surrendering to others always turned my hostility on its head.”

This is exactly what Cecilia, the Mina family’s second daughter, sought to experience with Grazia Maria, but she tried to escape from it at the same time. “It has always been difficult for me to stay with her. I would try to avoid her and I was afraid to invite my classmates to come to my house. I didn’t feel adequate. I measured myself constantly. Her innocent suffering was too much for me to bear.”

However, when Cecilia went shopping, she would always buy something for Grazia Maria. After taking a shower, she would paint Grazia Maria’s nails and apply a face mask on her. “Even though I kept my distance, my relationship with my sister molded me, because when I reflected on the contradiction that defined her life, it always made me ask many questions, said Cecilia. “She never judged me. Every time I returned, she welcomed me and would light up, which was her way of communicating that she was happy to see me.”

During the latter part of her life, Grazia Maria’s condition worsened. She had convulsions on almost a daily basis. During her episodes, her mother and Francesco would hold her. “It was natural for me to respond in this way,” explained Francesco, who earned his degree in physical therapy one year ago. “It is my job, but often I would close myself off because of the pain, so I would lose sight of the myriad questions that seeing her suffer provoked in me. It was by looking at my siblings, who would help from a distance and who were sometimes scared, that I was able to reaffirm the truth about Grazia Maria. In their hearts, the question about the meaning of what we were living burned brightly.”

Last July, in honor of Grazia Maria’s twentieth birthday, Alberto wrote a letter. “For the past twenty years, you have been the Grace in our family. Your beauty always amazes us. This is in no way contradicted by your disability. Your gaze, above all, never fails to provoke. It is as if you always say ‘fiat,’ let your will be done.” That was her last birthday. On the night of March 14th, Grazia

Maria passed away. She had been constantly suffering from seizures for a few days. “That night, I told my siblings ‘This is a relief for us, for mom, and for her,’” said Carlo, who is now twelve years old. “Staying with my sister was hard for me. I would get easily annoyed because it could take her five minutes to answer me. But now I regret treating her the way I did and I feel as if I lost something important. Without saying a word, without being able to do anything, she was loved by us and that was enough for her.”

At the end of the rosary in which four hundred friends from all over the world participated virtually, Javier Prades, a Spanish priest, said, “Grazia Maria gave herself completely to you, the way only someone who is needy can, and you gave yourself completely to her, giving life to a unity that also includes those who meet you. Up until now, you have had an incredible life, but as the Gospel of St. John says, ‘We will see greater things than this; the best is yet to come.’”

Guglielmo witnessed the first manifestations of this as friends flooded their home in the following weeks. There were many who entered in order to console the Mina family and left feeling consoled. All of them were touched, even for a moment, by the gratuitousness that can emerge only from the tough times that this family has experienced. “I am struck by the fact that our unity awakened in many people a desire for a more radical commitment to their studies, their girlfriends, and their own wounds,” said Guglielmo. “It is something that has always been part of us. When we were little, dad was rarely home, but we did not perceive that he was absent, because our dad was there in our mom. They were so closely bound that even if one of them was not there, it is as if he was still present.” This unity was constantly nourished by what Paola and Alberto said to each other on the sidewalk in Turin twenty-six years earlier. “I am always out and about doing a million things,” said Guglielmo, “but once in a while I need to come home, to return to where everything began.” ■

Close-up

The road and forgiveness

“What was missing was not the search for perfection, but living a relationship.” Guadalupe and Mariano from Argentina describe their journey. And a turning point during a fight.



Daide Perillo

12



The day of Mariano's baptism, December 3, 2020.

“I don’t want a perfect man. I want a relationship, a bond.” Two simple sentences that slipped out in the middle of a serious argument, the kind that can easily drive a deep wedge between a couple. For Mariano and Guadalupe, however, the words she uttered in a fight between the engaged couple marked the turning point for their life together. “Everything stopped for a moment,” he explains, “just long enough for us to realize something had happened. The argument suddenly ended, and we found ourselves looking at each other in silence.”

It was one of those moments in which you understand how forgiveness is inseparable from the road you walk, and that you are truly together to be a “companionship to destiny” for one another, as Fr. Giussani writes in *Generating Traces in the History of the World*. “I don’t know how those words came out of my mouth, but it was like a discovery that I could not sustain the relationship with my own goodwill,” she adds. “They could’ve just been nice words, I know, but in that moment, they were an experience, an experience so powerful that, when I have problems today, I look back at that moment.”

Mariano Abram is 40 years old, teaches computers and electronics at a high school, and is passionate about music. Guadalupe Ferrero is ten ye-

ars younger, is also a teacher (of visual arts), and loves dance. They live in Santa Fe, Argentina. They met in 2014 at the wedding of her sister, who married one of his friends. She, who grew up in a Catholic family, was filled with a restlessness that sometimes became anxiety. He, who knew nothing of the faith except an aversion to it he breathed in at home, was full of questions, as he had been since childhood. “I must’ve been seven or eight; I was sitting in a church and I watched the people who were so strange and distant: I didn’t understand. And I remember many occasions like that: me, alone, searching for something without knowing what it was.” He had said something similar to a friend the week before he met Guadalupe. The friend asked, “What do you want out of life right now?” He answered, “To meet someone with whom I could share everything.” “Three days later, she appears. Out of nowhere. A sign, you see? That was just the first of a series of signs,” the beginning of a journey made up of “many beautiful and complicated parts.” A world opened up for Mariano. “I saw how she and her friends and family lived, and tons of questions came to me. There was a rare beauty, the kind that makes things so correspondent that it sweeps away any prejudices.” For Guada, it opened “a challenge: I had to tell him so many things about my faith, explaining

them in simple terms. He asked a lot of questions, serious questions. He was truly surprised that I could live the way I do. From the start, that was a great help.”

A certainty grew, leading up to the watershed moment of the fight. “I was surprised to hear myself say those things. For me, it was like an encounter: our relationship took on a greater force,” Guada says. “What she said could not have been truer, for me,” Mariano adds. “It’s hard to explain, but if I look at my own story, I realize that it was exactly what was missing: not the search for perfection, but a relationship. It’s not me being perfect that makes the relationship perfect.”

Before they were married, other difficulties came up. She had a crisis and suffered from panic attacks. “Our standard meeting was this: I got there, found her crying, we spoke, she stopped crying and fell asleep,” he jokes. Then, in a serious tone: “I felt hurt. But the fact that she was doing poorly, and that when she was with me she calmed down, was another sign.” “I spoke with him, and it was like opening my eyes anew,” she explains. Therefore, “even those months were crucial: they helped me to come to see how this journey is truly for me.” And they also helped her bring him even closer to her life, which was so different for him.



Mariano with Guadalupe and their children.

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“One of the first times I went to School of Community I heard a ton of things,” Mariano remembers. “I was not struck by the stories; they were speaking about things that, in the end, happen to everyone. What was new were the conclusions they drew, what they learned. I realized I was missing something for understanding that next step: being Christian.” He came out of one of those meetings asking himself what it would mean to believe. What would it be like? “I imagined myself as a Christian. It was a kind of simulation, an intellectual attempt to look and think through the lens of faith. It didn’t work, of course. But the curiosity in me was real.”

In 2016, they decided to get married. “Fr. Miguel, the priest who prepared us, told us that a Christian marriage is sustained in Christ. It sounded strange but interesting to me. I was fascinated. What would it mean to lean on something else in order to live?” How would he answer that question? “First and foremost, I ask for this. We are how we are: I have a strong personality and so does she. We clash; we argue... But these are merely circumstances: our relationship is not made up of that.” In other relationships he’d had, he says, it was not the same. “In the end, we based everything on what we could receive from the other, on how happy we were to be together. That’s important, but it’s not everything. There’s something more between Guada and me. Family is a place where you can come to see that everything is a good. Even a fight because it is the road for you. But this only happens if your gaze is fixed on an Other.” This is why he concludes that, “it is really true that there is a third component in marriage. Before I was baptized, I intuited it, but now it has become very concrete.”

This, too, came as part of Guada and Mariano’s story: conversion. “In 2019, I invited him to the Fraternity Exercises,” she recounts. “He had never been to a retreat. When we got home, he asked me, ‘What do you do to get baptized?’

I had never presumed he would convert. I presumed many other things, but not that... It was clear he was seeking, but his desire surprised me.” Mariano was baptized on December 3, 2020. “Not being alone is important,” Guada says. “It is a huge help seeing our friends, seeing other marriages, doing School of Community. But I grew up in the Movement. For me, living this was normal, almost something taken for granted. Our relationship has shown me that there is something different in living with faith, a difference that is for us and for the world. It means a glorious openness.”

Soon after they were married, Margarita came along, quickly followed by Pedro. What changed with the arrival of children? “When Margarita was born, I looked at her and I couldn’t believe it,” Guada says. “I hadn’t really done anything, yet there she was. Lately, I suffer in being a mother: I am stubborn and have many ideas in my head I’d like to see come about. But this relationship continuously puts me back in front of something new.” For Mariano? “What dominates in me is gratitude. The love you feel for them seems incredible to me, extraordinary. What has changed is I have realized that there is something other at the center of all my relationships. It’s evident with your children: the heart of a relationship is the good, it’s love. Seeing that changes your other relationships, too.” ■

It is simpler to love



Paola Bergamini

They saw other families living something interesting and a light went on. Two couples discuss their experience welcoming foster children (and welcoming everyone in life).



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Tiziana and Dario's family.

“**W**ith three nearly grown kids and reasonable financial security, we could have been happy with a peaceful, comfortable life. But I thought, ‘What if there is *something more* than being well off?’” Valentina said. Tiziana echoed the sentiment: “One day, looking at my kids around the table, I had the intuition that because of *something more*, because of a love we received, we might think of welcoming other children.”

That *something more* that was the basis of our conversation is the origin of the experience of fostering, which these two families have done for a few years. For anything less, it’s not worth it. Another experience they shared was that both had encountered Cometa (a network of families who foster children in Como, Italy). “The people there live something interesting and it sparked a light in me, causing me to ask if that could be the answer for us,” Valentina continued. “We started to go to the meetings for those considering the path of fostering. We progressed slowly.” Dario recounts, “Then, one morning as I was loading our suitcases to go on vacation, they called us... The adventure had begun.”

Below are the full stories of these families: of Tiziana (nicknamed Titti) and Dario and of Valentina and Liano. These stories describe that *something more*.

Tiziana and Dario

“With seven children, is it crazy to think about fostering?” It was 2006 when Tiziana and Dario posed this question to Grazia Figini, the director of the Cometa association. “Maybe, or maybe it is a vocation. You need to verify the answer, and not by yourselves,” she replied. Over the fifteen years since then, the number of their biological children increased to ten, and they now have had thirteen foster children, all young, and all accompanied until they were adopted. But the numbers are not what’s important. This is not a story about “heroes.”

Stefania (*Editor’s Note: the names of the family’s foster children have been changed*), the first of the foster kids to arrive, triggered a slide into chaos not long after she came. Fights among the kids and arguments between the parents became routine. Titti, usually very patient, developed a short fuse. “It brought out the worst in me,” she remembers. She was no longer a calm, “all-star” mom. “That was my salvation, because I had to ask for help.” In the meetings with Cometa, they vented their challenges and struggles. “They helped us not to




stop at the problems, but to look beyond them,” Dario explains. “You can forgive a child’s mistake when you accept that you, too, make errors every day and, like him, you are forgiven.”

They will never forget the first transition to adoption. It tore Titti apart. “You are like Simon the Cyrene; you carry the cross a little way,” Fr. Giussani told the Figini brothers. It’s not easy, though; for Titti, it took walking a path with the help of those who were accompanying her “to understand that my task was to accompany these children for as long as the Lord wants. For a few months or a year; I was not the one to decide. We give them all our love, but their good is not in our hands. Otherwise, you can’t do it, because the separation is always painful.”

The same is true for their biological children. Giovanni was with them for two years. After he died, Titti found this text message from her daughter Chiara, a ninth-grader: “Thank you, Mom. Thanks to your yes, I experienced being able to love a person as I never could have imagined. I know it was difficult, but I want to thank you.”

Another of their foster children, Silvia, had a blank look, and would stop breathing to the point of passing out; she didn’t want to be embraced or kissed. Slowly, she



Valentina with one of her daughters.

blossomed again. As the day of separation approached, Titti was afraid. What if this second “abandonment” caused a regression? What if she started hurting herself? If, if... but Grazia turned the question upside down. “You are not the one to decide. Do you think you are the only ‘good’ for that little girl? Our job is simply to accompany her the best we can.” When the time came to say goodbye, Silvia curled up in a corner of the room. Titti came up to her, helped her put on her sweater, and said, “Something beautiful is happening, trust me!” And she kissed her. The girl picked up her little suitcase and went toward her new parents without turning back.

It involves learning to let go, as with your own children as they grow. “Fostering taught me that, too. I was anxious, trying to control everything. They tell you they’re going to the GS meeting and then you find out they’re in the piazza of the Duomo doing their own thing. They tell you whatever they want. The truth is, I was afraid of loving their freedom. It takes time. Once again, it takes a change of attitude. It is *simpler* to love them that way.”

Valentina and Liano

In 2011, Salvatore came along, just a few months old and suffering from a rare disease. He had to be constantly watched, even when he was asleep. The children fawned over him; he was like their mascot. But for Giovanni, the oldest, it was a stormy period. Life was a continual battle; he was always pushing the limits. The parents kept vigil every night for both him and Salvatore. “In foster care, you hand over your positive hypothesis about life to a person who would have every reason to say being born was the greatest curse. Without words or explanations, you bring them up by helping them perceive that good, despite everything, prevails over evil. It is your life that speaks, and your biological children see the reflection of that,” Liano said. When Salvatore was adopted and left the family, Giovanni went and had “*Fiat voluntas tua*” tattooed on his arm—those eighteen months had left their mark.

Over the next year, they were called upon to welcome Cristina, a newborn, and then a brother and sister in grade school, Anna and Giacomo, who had a sad his-

tory. “Those two already have so many problems. I’m angry. I’m leaving,” their second son Mattia told them. That was one of their most difficult moments, because what they were living was not supported by their biological children; in fact, they opposed it. Why continue? “It’s like when your children go against something that you’re sure is right. It brings suffering but doesn’t change your mind. He could not stand seeing the suffering of those two kids,” Valentina said. “Your children’s struggles will rest on your certainties,” Fr. Giussani had told the Figini brothers when Cometa began. Mattia came back after two months.

During the first lockdown, with all eight of them locked in the house under immense tension, Giovanni kneaded several pounds of flour to make gnocchi and noodles with Giacomo. “Without Giovanni, I don’t know how we would have done it. He was the only one who could manage it all; he perceived the tumult,” Liano said.

Some mornings are uphill climbs. Once, Cristina was in bed when Anna and Giacomo woke up and started shouting, spewing out all the anguish that torments them. From their rooms, the older kids yelled, “Make them be quiet; I want to sleep!” Their mother, from the kitchen, yelled, “Who can make me do it?” There was no answer. She added another whispered request: “Jesus, what do you want from me?” Valentina faced exhaustion and ever-present discomfort. “Ultimately, a little light came on for me—I am no longer worried about being perfect, about imposing my ‘correct’ measure on myself and the children because there is a positive fixed point: that they exist. That’s enough.”

With foster children, you cannot travel abroad. “They were the antidote to the worst thing that can happen to a bourgeois person like me: that we no longer live according to the concept of self-determination,” Liano continued. “They give us a daily experience that enables us to see that what keeps the relationship between me and Vale alive is the Lord. Struggles make it easier to ask for Him to be present. You need His presence, and the people who help you remember it. The words of Giussani come to mind: ‘Children are the ultimate opportunity for conversion.’” Whether biological or foster, it makes no difference. ■



Giovanna Parravicini

Sons of all

Here we tell the story of the choice of the Muslim community in Russia to translate and publish the latest encyclical of Francis, including both their reasons for doing so and the criticisms they faced. From this choice was born a common path, one that continues. “What we need are living witnesses.” The story of Imam Damir Muhetdinov.



Imam Damir Muhetdinov, the vice president of spiritual direction for Muslims in Russia.

“**P**recisely in the moment of crisis when entire peoples and countries find themselves without leaders and disoriented, it is necessary to seek out witnesses.” Imam Damir Muhetdinov, the vice president of spiritual direction for Muslims in Russia, spoke to *Traces* about the provocation of the pope and, in particular, of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which was translated and published by Russia's Muslim community. The promoter of this initiative was the International Muslim Forum, supported by the publishing house Medina.

Intrigued by the initiative, we proposed a presentation of the volume to the “Pokrovskie vorota” Cultural Center in Moscow. Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Jews participated in the evening. This encounter opened up an entire world, testifying to a great attention to and esteem for “the hand of friendship and of peace that Pope Francis has extended to the Islamic world,” as the Grand Mufti Ravil Gainutdin wrote in his message to participants. From this starting point, a desire came about to dive deeper into the reasons that led to the publication of the encyclical, and, above all, to the common path being tread by believers of different religions, through a dialogue with Imam Muhetdinov, who wrote the introduction to the volume in Russian.

What led you to this decision to publish a Catholic document? In the introduction to the encyclical, you speak of a “culture of encounter,” even reaching the point of asserting that the primary motive of the project was that it “helps us to better understand our own religion.” What do you mean?

For us, it has always been fundamental to maintain relationships with other religions; it is a necessity that comes from our religion itself—the Most High in the scriptures invites all men to live in peace and harmony and to know one another. And so for years now in Russia

we have been working on interreligious dialogue. We understand well that dialogue must be rooted in a true foundation; if not, the call to dialogue will be limited to common social projects, or else to exchanges of courtesies at the official and diplomatic level, in which beautiful words are pronounced that remain without substance and make no difference among believers. For us, it is important to understand the message regarding interreligious dialogue contained in both the Koran and in the Sacred Scriptures of Christians and Jews.

And how can dialogue find a true foundation?

We cannot hide that there have been epochs of cordial collaboration and shared life between our religions, and others, in contrast, in which there was unheard-of violence and bloodshed (I think of Iraq, of Syria, of Palestine, and of Libya). We realize that these conflictual processes are becoming stronger all the time but, on the other hand, it has greatly struck me to see how, in the two thousand years of its existence, the Christian church has made enormous steps forward in its comprehension of the foundation of dialogue. We have passed from the period of the Crusades to the declaration *Nostra aetate* (1965), in which we read that even the faithful of other religions who sincerely believe in God and perform good

The imam with Msgr. Paolo Pezzi, the archbishop of the Mother of God in Moscow and president of the Russian Catholic Episcopal Conference.



© Olga Khroul

works can reach salvation. Perhaps, for a secular man of the 21st century, these words sound normal, but for believers, they are beyond any habitual logic: if we were to ask a common Muslim what the place of Christians will be in the afterlife, we would hear them respond without pause: “Hell.” And, probably, we would receive an analogous response about Muslims if we were to ask a Catholic or a Protestant the same question. In other words, between believers, the idea of election, the idea of salvation as an exclusive possession of one's own religious confession, is very rooted. What dialogue can we begin, of what encounter can we speak if, sitting down together, each of us, to the eyes of the other, is just a sinner destined to burn in eternal fire, and in our dialogue the goal of each person is exclusively to lead the other to embrace one's own positions so as to save a soul that had strayed from the true path? This is how Christians and Muslims of the Middle Ages thought, and many still think so today. But going to the roots of our religion, I discovered in them an analogous vision to that offered to us by the Catholic Church in the principle that the Koran calls *taqwa*, which Mohammed explained in the following way: “There is no supremacy of black or white, of Arab or non-Arab. Between you, there exists but one supremacy: that of religious piety (*taqwa*).” It is pre-

cisely this capacity to do good works, to understand and help our neighbor independently of his ethnic or religious identity that defines man in his authentic nature and distinguishes him from all of the other beings in the animal kingdom.

Would it be right to say that this is the challenge that modernity has issued to Islam?

Certainly, and it has greatly helped us to see how the Catholic Church has set out on a path of searching for a common foundation, of a vast platform for all who live in the contemporary world in this moment in which—in particular, in European countries—the religious element is no longer dominant from the point of view of law, morals, and values. This has become equally relevant for the Islamic world; as we see, a series of historically Muslim countries are distancing themselves from religious traditions. I will say more: the problem of an authentic dialogue, of dialogue that goes beyond an exchange of courtesies and that does not implicate a reduction of one's own identity—this problem will not be resolved without a truly deep reform of thought within Islam. Without this reform, we cannot even pose the problem of dialogue because we are inevitably brought to progressively restrict the scope of salvation even within Islam itself, e.g., between Shiites and Sunni, and so forth. In the end, by this logic, I am the only one who is saved and you, the person before me, are inevitably a heretic.

What is the path toward this reform?

It is to return to the fonts of Islam, to the most ancient documents of the first caliphs, who were also closer to the spirit of Christianity. It is precisely returning to our roots that allows us, paradoxically, to find new responses to the challenges of modernity. This implies a great deal of work because the majority of our faithful are not open in this way. (Even in our own community, for example, there were quite a few who criticized the publication of the encyclical with the photo of Pope Francis on the cover.) What is necessary is an education, as well as instruments that foster reflection and living witnesses. Another element to keep in mind is the pandemic, which has repeatedly shown the impotence of religious institutions. These institutions have retreated and left their own faithful in the clutches of this new idol, COVID, which has begun to determine the law and dictate it to all. In this void, the words spoken by Pope Francis to countries who are hostile to immigrants and hold them responsible for the entire phenomena of unemployment and criminality, resounded impressively. He told them to open their doors, to offer help, food, medicine... Precisely in these dramatic circumstances, I understood yet again that it is not by chance that the pope chose the name of the saint of Assisi, who with his life testified to the victory of faith and of the spirit. And a third element: I think of the bloody contrast between the positions of, say, a *Charlie Hebdo*, who, waving the flag of freedom of speech, strikes at religious tradition, not only of Muslims, but also of Jews and Christians, and the tremendous barbarity inherent in a "response" like the decapitation of Samuel Paty...

What do these facts say to us?

They would seem to show that the religious preaching of brotherhood is pure utopia. And yet, I believe that precisely in this moment of crisis, in which entire peoples and countries find themselves without guidance and without an orientation, it is necessary to go looking for examples, for witnesses. The same Pope Francis, then, says openly that he was "inspired to write the encyclical by the great imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb," with whom he remembered that God "created all human beings equal in their rights, their duties, and their dignity, and he called them to live together as brothers." And we said to ourselves: But if it is this way for Pope Francis, how can we also not feel inspired? And, beginning from its content, we began to see the encyclical as a document so

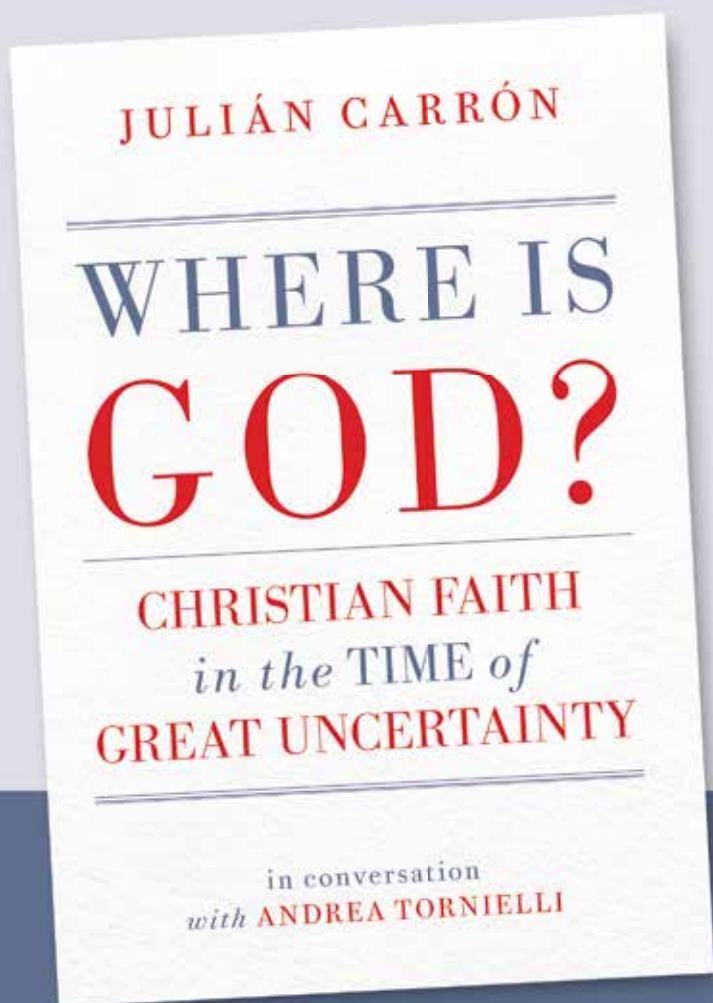
important that it merited to be shared and made known to as many people as possible. In any case, I repeat, this attention is not something new; for example, in 2015, we published long stretches of *Nostra aetate*.

From "dialogue" to "encounter," you might say, or, in other words, from reciprocal knowledge to an experience of fraternity. Is this, if I have understood well, the journey upon which you have seen the church embark, and would like to accompany your community in making as well?

Yes, that's exactly right. And I will tell you that, for me, it was very important that I began to work on the encyclical while I was taking care of my mother, who was very sick, in her final days. Precisely for this reason, I was not able to read the encyclical in an abstract way; its words were part of an intense human experience that I was living in that moment. And I couldn't but think of the gesture of Pope Francis when, on Holy Thursday, he washed the feet of a group of persons that included immigrants and refugees. I do not even wash the feet of my children and this man washed—and even kissed—the feet of these derelicts, the last of the last. In his sincerity, the pope knew how to get us to look at the church, at faith, not as so many institutions and rules, but as an experience of brotherhood, of love, as a place where God is alive and present. And it is precisely this that allows each one of us to regenerate his own faith.

In your experience, unity and belonging are not contradictory, then?

I must say that I knew the Bible before I even studied the Koran. I belong to a Tartar family, traditionally Muslim, but, as often happened in the Soviet Union, practically agnostic. It was an old Orthodox woman, *baba Masa*, who introduced me for the first time to religion; she would read Bible stories to me but without any pretension of "getting me on her side." I remember that she would say to me, "Always say a prayer before eating, and do not forget that God is One, even if the faiths are different." In this way, you might say that I grew up having in my blood this idea of a unity founded in recognizing oneself and others as children of the same Father, and that this comes before any division. I made my choice of a conscious belonging only later, after studying the Koran, but I did so without ever negating this ultimate unity. ■



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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