

## **In this way God makes Himself visible**

*“Christmas, a real fact that confronts our retreat from life.” Julián Carrón’s contribution on Christmas, published in Corriere della Sera on December 24.*

by Julián Carrón\*

Dear Editor,

Reading the newspapers in these days, I have inevitably come upon many indicators of the human situation in which we find ourselves. In one *Corriere della Sera* article, our friend Mauro Magatti drew attention to what he defines as “the ‘retreat syndrome’,” in which increasing numbers of young people struggle to stay in reality and “decide to leave a good job because they no longer find the motivation for going on” (December 22, 2021). But this retreat begins at a younger age, at school. According to the IPSOS survey conducted for *Save the Children*, 2020 saw 30,000 more dropouts than the 120,000 who already abandon school every year. “Marked growth in the number of adolescents who have ‘retreated’ to their homes” said the title of an article by Elisabetta Andreis, again, in the *Corriere* (December 12, 2021). And this phenomenon does not only concern youth. In the United States, “between July and August last year, over 8 million workers abandoned their jobs, and 28% of them had no alternative position lined up. (...) The major newspapers use striking titles, like *Great Resignation*” (*ilfattoquotidiano.it*, October 22, 2021).

There is the impression of a growing defenselessness in the face of life, and thus for many the flight from reality seems to be the only way to find calm. And yet, not even in this “retreat from the world” do people manage to find peace. While their situations may differ greatly, in each one the irreducible nature of the “I” and of its demand for meaning emerges in all its power. People continue feeling their way about and searching, everywhere, even in places we would not expect in our era of full “modernity,” dominated by scientific reason. In a November 29 article in the online magazine *Persuasion*, Professor Mark Alan Smith of the University of Washington reported that the recourse to astrology, karma, tarot cards and the ‘market of mystic services’ (a sector worth 2.1 billion US dollars) is increasing among the most varied of people, and noted that there is no great difference between atheists, Christians, Muslims or Jews.

These are synonyms of an increasingly pervasive bewilderment and the difficulty in finding pertinent and adequate answers. Regarding the knowledge of truth, Saint Thomas said that “the truth concerning God that reason is able to attain,” that is, about the ultimate meaning of life, “is accomplished only by a very few, and this only after much time and not without the inclusion of error” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, art. 1). This seems to be a good summary of the many human attempts to reach some certainty about meaning, demanded by our days and the daily effort and hardness of living.

Into this situation Christmas comes, and as happens every year, it enters our history meekly, without clamor or fanfare, disarmed, as in the beginning, when it passed unobserved by everyone except a few shepherds.

Christmas happens again today, as then, challenging our way of facing life and its challenges. How? God does not retreat into the “spiritual” world, but enters into history like a child, like a carnal, real presence.

The decision to enter into history as a man exposes God to the objections we know well, the first among them the risk of being reduced. “Is he not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother named Mary?” (Matt. 13:55), asked Jesus’ fellow townspeople. There is always the possibility of reducing, of failing to grasp the exceptional nature hidden in a humanity like that of everyone.

But today, like two thousand years ago, nothing can keep us from being reached, precisely through the human, by something irreducible that challenges our measure, our way of thinking. “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:12) they said, astounded by Jesus’ gestures.

In order to say such a thing, what must the people who encountered Him have seen?

He came and continues to come, here, now, to seek the lost person of today who suffers the “syndrome of retreat” from life. He comes in His witnesses, through an irresistible attraction, the fascination of an exceptional humanity that reawakens desire. As Pope Francis often repeats, “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, 14). This is the way Christianity is communicated: by attraction.

Certainly, the method God uses to reach the real human being of every time cannot help but clash with the limitations of the people who bring the announcement of His presence in the world. But no limitation can block the initiative of the Mystery. Joseph Ratzinger reminded us of this with liberating words: “Just as the history of a man’s life and the relationships he has formed reveal what kind of person he is, God shows himself in a history, in men through whom his own character can be seen. This is so true that he can be ‘named’ through them and identified in them, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. Through his relation with men, through the faces of men, God has made himself accessible and has shown his face.” For this reason, Ratzinger continued, “We cannot try to bypass these human faces in order to get to God alone, in his ‘pure form,’ as it were. This would lead us to a God of our own invention in place of the real God; it would be an arrogant purism that regards its own ideas as more important than God’s deeds” (*Mary: The Church at the Source*, transl. Adrian Walker, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2005, p. 63).

This is the provocation that every Christmas presents. A human, real fact challenges our thoughts, our confusion, our flight to mysterious worlds, our retreat from life, and “grabs” us with the attraction of an exceptional human presence. “Christ in His beauty draws me to Him,” as the great Jacopone da Todi said.

This is Christmas: Christ, God made man, who comes to us through people who are presences so affectively attractive that they free us from the cages in which we enclose ourselves to wield off the blows of life. A friend told me recently that a person noted the different humanity in him and said, “Look, today for me is Christmas!”

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