

TRACES

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A life shared

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A photo from the charitable work in the outskirts south of Milan in the late sixties.

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GIUSSANI

100

1922 - 2022
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The law of existence

“**T**o those who suffer, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, His response is that of an accompanying presence.” In the CL Easter poster, the pope tells us that “God Himself wishes to share this path with us,” in the scandalously simple fact of a story of goodness that “opens up a ray of light” in every story of suffering. Fr. Giussani defined charity as *a gift of self, moved*. He wrote, “God’s charity for man is being moved, a gift of self that vibrates, agitates, moves, is fulfilled in emotion, in the reality of being moved: it is moved. God who is moved!” In order for life to be dominated by this love in a world where the idea of charity is reduced, Giussani proposed from the very beginning a gesture that would educate people to the awareness of our need: charitable work. Since then, thousands of people at every latitude have faithfully gone together to nursing homes, low-income housing projects, prisons, the streets, and many other places.

If we have something beautiful, we want to communicate it to others; if we see people who are worse off than ourselves, we want to help them. This is such a natural drive that Fr. Giussani called it a “law of existence.” In the booklet, [The Meaning of Charitable Work](#), he took this need, so original that we are almost unaware of it, and described all of its dignity and power, opening it wide so that we could see its purpose, what gives this aspiration its meaning and fulfillment: “The supreme law of our being is to share in the being of others, to live in communion. Only Jesus Christ reveals this to us, because He knows what everything truly is, who God, from whom we are born, truly is, what Being truly is. I am able to understand the word ‘charity’ when I remember that the Son of God, loving us did not send us His riches (as He was able to do) and revolutionize our situation; instead, He became poor like one

of us: He ‘shared’ our nothingness. We do charitable work in order to live like Christ.” This “being moved” makes us feel the full extent of the desire of each person for his or her destiny.

Giussani freed the gesture of charitable work from any idea of social justice and sentimentalism, as one reads in his biography. “There may be no, so to speak, ‘concrete’ result. We are tired of people who say ‘concrete’ about something other than the person, other than the pure and simple value of the ‘self.’” For Fr. Giussani, it is even ambiguous to start out from the need of others. “I do not know what they need. I cannot gauge it. I do not have it. I do not have the means to gauge it. Not even the most perfect society, the most legally well-founded organism, the most colossal amount of wealth, the most unassailable good health, the purest beauty, the most highly ‘educated’ civilization could ever make them happy. Christ makes them happy. He is the reason for everything, the One who made everything: God.” Thus, through the helplessness of one’s own love, one learns *gratuitousness*. “Exactly because we share ourselves with them, *we do not* make them happy.” The testimonies in this issue talk about charitable work in a few corners of the world. It is often unclear who is helping whom, because we all need gratuitous love, as Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, the president of the Italian Episcopal Conference, reminded listeners in a recent assembly with the Solidarity Food Banks, in which he stressed the difference between doing volunteer work and living this school of charity, where “there is no accounting” and “a personal relationship,” never mechanical, is involved. “It is easier to work on solutions to problems or bring food, like Amazon,” he said, than to bring one’s self and to be in front of the other’s cry for life without dampening it, even to the point of our asking, “And me, what do I hope in?” ■

Letters

Carla, Claudio, Silvana, Marta, Marco

edited by
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The triduum and gratitude

I am a teacher. When they made the announcement about the GS Easter Triduum at the *raggio*, an indelible memory came to mind. When my sister and I were at the university and we would go to the CLU Exercises, one of our mother's friends would show up with money to pay the registration for one of us. She said that since her daughter no longer followed the Movement, she wanted to help us go. You see, I grew up surrounded by people like this, who looked at what is essential, following the movement through its proposed gestures: first the GS Triduum, then the CLU Exercises and now, the Fraternity Exercises. All of these are important opportunities for growing in our faith. This year, I will not be able to attend the Triduum because I will be on a trip with my students, so I thought to make a contribution to help some young person attend. This is a small gesture, but for me, it is an opportunity to give thanks for what I have received from the Movement.

Carla, Italy

New eyes

On February 10th, while my brother, Norberto, a Carmelite, was traveling to a village in the Central African Republic, a mine blew up as he drove over it in his pickup truck. He suffered a broken leg, lacerations, and contusions. He would have died if a motorcyclist, hearing the explosion, hadn't turned around and gone back. He extracted my brother who was unconscious and bleeding and placed him on the motorcycle seat; then he had a young man

who had been slightly wounded hold on to my brother. He then drove twenty-two kilometers on an unpaved road to the small hospital in Bozoum. There, a doctor bandaged his wounds and gave him a transfusion with the only available bags of blood, which just happened to be his blood type, and thereby managed to save his life. After a few hours, he was transported in a UN helicopter to the hospital in Bangui, and from there to Kampala. From the very start, I had the certainty that what was happening was the Lord at work. He intervened even before we had all started to pray to ask for His intervention. He had anticipated our request, appealing to the heart of the motorcyclist, and making available two bags of blood that matched my brother's. I am also sure that our friends in Kampala who kept him company and those who are now close to him at the Rizzoli Hospital in Bologna are caresses from the Lord. He is present in these circumstances and asks only to be recognized. With amazement, I become aware that this gaze on reality isn't the fruit of my intellectual effort, but rather a change in my eyes that has been given to me by the Lord. So many times I've said to myself that the years spent in the Movement haven't produced any changes in me. But now I realize that forty years of faithfulness to this companionship have been the instrument the Lord has used to change my gaze today and to allow me to recognize Him at work.

Claudio, Lecco (Italy)

The moment when to stop

I've always tried to carve out a moment to do School of Community, and then I'd say to myself, "There, I've done my duty." But I'm realizing that I need to carve out all the rest of my time in order to give more time to Him. At the middle school where I teach technical education, there is a troubled young boy. One day, within a period of five minutes, I had to write two demerit notes in order to calm him down. Internally, I

was struggling with all three reductions of reason that Fr. Giussani speaks about in *To Give One's Life for the Work of Another*: feelings (my anger), preconceptions (I'll never be able to work with him), and appearances (this is a senseless obstacle). The School of Community was vaguely buzzing around in my head. I couldn't just turn the page, even though I really didn't know what to do. I went to the boy and with all the affection I was capable of in that moment, I said, "You just have to understand one thing: when is the moment you just have to stop." With tears in his eyes, he said he was sorry. During the next lesson, we were back at the starting point as if nothing had happened. I took him aside for a moment. I told him that I also have certain impulses that I can't control. But when I use my reason (maybe starting from little things that are easier for me), little by little, things change. It's a training. "You aren't doomed to be a slave forever to your 'alter ego' as you call him." We went back to class. He took out his tools and began to draw. He drew for twenty minutes without swearing—something unheard of. He finished and asked me what he should do next. I invited him to help the classmate he always fights with, and he did so to perfection. Again, the unheard-of was repeated. In the end, I wrote a note of merit in the gradebook to give him the satisfaction of receiving a positive evaluation and to let his parents know what had happened. All of this happened before my eyes without me having done anything except allowing Fr. Giussani's words and the gaze of my loving friends from the community to work within me.

Silvana, Ravenna (Italy)

My son, the violin and the orchestra

My son, Paolo, is in second grade at a school run by people who live the experience of the Movement. Each year, at all grade levels, they give lessons on how to listen to classical music. One morning, in the car, Paolo, with his characteristic enthusiasm, said, "Mamma, yesterday we listened to Beethoven's Opus 61. Let me tell you about it! At the beginning it's very beautiful, the orchestra and violin play together, and then at a certain point, the violin decides to go away and play alone. He plays and plays and the orchestra says to him, 'Come with us!' He answers no. He continues to play, but he's sad, and he seems to be crying. The orchestra repeats, 'Come play with us.' And he says again, 'No!'" He described this scene to me four times and then said, "In the end, he decides to go and

play with them. And it's so beautiful!" It moved me to see Paolo's experience in listening to this piece of classical music, an experience he'll never forget and that he wants to relive. In fact, that same afternoon, returning from school, he wanted to hear the piece again. "Here, the orchestra and the violin are talking, here the violin says to the orchestra that he's sorry he disappointed them. The orchestra answers and the violin again says he's very sorry. Listen, at a certain point, the orchestra doesn't answer him anymore because it doesn't matter.... They're friends! And they start playing again. Here's the place where I just want to cry, because it's too beautiful!"

Marta, Perugia (Italy)

The fullness of community

With some friends from our School of Community, we spent a day together at the Portofino lighthouse. At the end of the day, as we were leaving, we came across the bust and plaque of Fr. Giussani at the base of the lighthouse, and my wife approached me and said, "Anyway, I don't feel that he is far away, in the past. I can see the intensity that I saw today among us who did not know him when he was alive, and yet, here we are, now, like this, with this impetus for life, exactly like those young people who were with him years ago in that famous photo." During the day, we had a brief moment of song. It struck me that even though there weren't many children, everyone wanted to sing some songs to involve them and to have them participate in that intensity. The next day, my four-year-old daughter kept on singing the last part of the *Ararat* symphony when it says, "and then we will find the fullness of community." And so I noticed again with surprise how that intensity and familiarity, that fullness, that occurred among people who are so diverse (and who have known each other for such a short time) is, as Fr. Giussani says in *To Give One's Life for the Work of Another*, the happening again of that "suggestive Presence, a striking Presence, an astonishing Presence: 'How can He be like this?' (...) The experience of gladness that our life gives is an absolute positivity, which works in us in the relationship with other men: 'I will make known the power of my name by the gladness on their faces.'"

Marco, Milan (Italy)

“We do charitable work so we may learn to live like Christ”

The supreme law of life, the discovery of why we do things, and touching the need of others to touch ours. A dialogue with **Giorgio Vittadini** about the original and always fresh nature of one of the pillars of Fr. Giussani's educative proposal.

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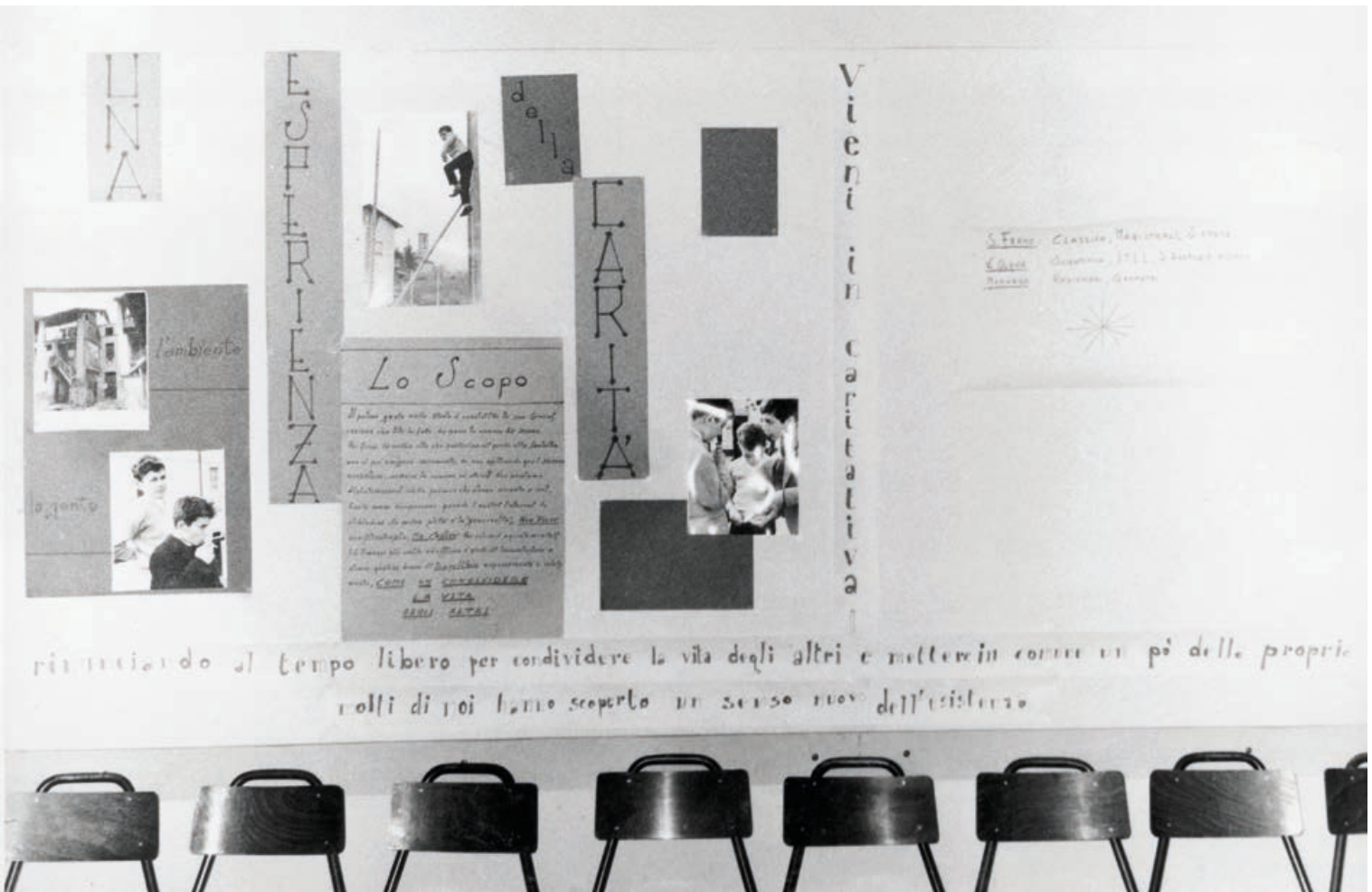


Paola Bergamini

In the courtyard of Catholic University, Fr. Giussani stopped Giorgio and said, “I have a proposal for you and your friend Bobo—to go to Borgo Lombardo to help the parish priest. What do you say?” “Fine,” Giorgio responded immediately. “I trusted him and accepted without asking for much explanation,” recounts Giorgio Vittadini, now the president of the Foundation for Subsidiarity and a professor of statistics at the Bicocca University. “It was my first experience of charitable work. In that gesture I began to perceive the meaning of the absolute gratuitousness whose deep reason is explained in that little page titled, [The Meaning of Charitable Work](#), where Fr. Giussani wrote, ‘The supreme law of our being is to share in the being of others, to live in communion. Only Jesus Christ reveals this to us, because He knows what everything truly is, who God, from whom we are born, truly is, what Being truly is. We do charitable work in order to live like Christ.’”

Let's start from Borgo Lombardo. What exactly did you do in your charitable work?

Every Saturday morning for four years we went to this little village lost in the countryside to help the parish priest. Each time there was a different request, to play with the children, open and close the parish youth center, bring food to poor families, clean the church, blow up balloons... We were practically the priest's factotums. There was little thanks, just pure service. Bobo Torchiana and I became good friends through that gesture, one we hadn't sought out, but that Fr. Giussani had proposed to us. At



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the end of the morning, as Giussani had suggested, we stopped by to see Fr. Mario in San Donato Milanese and told him what had happened in those four hours. It was an opportunity to become friends with Fr. Mario. Above all, in that half hour together a fundamental dimension of charitable work was expressed: judgment.

In what sense?

I think this is one of the most original features of Fr. Giussani's thought on charitable work. I'll give you an example. At the beginning of Student Youth, some young people got angry because a very poor woman bought herself lipstick with the money she had been given. "We won't help her anymore!" they had grumbled. Giussani blew them away when he said, "You haven't understood anything about sharing. In that moment, that woman might have felt a real need to take care of herself, to feel more beautiful." He made them understand what a detail has to do with the whole; in that case the theme was the dignity of the human person, even in that extreme poverty. There's the risk of seeing the value of the gesture only in terms of service or need, while the point is to judge an action. Here is the original aspect of his understanding: a judgment born of experience. This overturns the way you do this gesture, but in order for



The poster on charitable work from the early 1960s in the Student Youth center in Milan.

Charitable work in the
Bassa Milanese area at the parish
youth center of Merlate.



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this to happen, there must be someone who helps you to understand the reasons for the gesture itself. What we did with Fr. Mario, I see anew in the School of Community with the young people who talk about Portofranco, in the delivery of food from the Food Bank, in keeping elderly people company. Another factor emerges strongly in their stories: the discovery of the human, at times a painful humanity. As a friend wrote, “In this period the boy I’ve been following for charitable work has become increasingly isolated and angry. I don’t know how to deal with him. Sometimes he cries and yells at me, ‘You don’t understand.’ And so I cry too, and today I said, ‘Jesus, you need to move at least one little grain of sand for him.’”

So what is the first benefit for us of doing charitable work?

In this gratuitous gesture, I understand what it means when we say that Christianity is simply love for the human person. Or better, you realize that you are structurally made for the other and at the same time you are made by an Other. The talents I have received, faith, and an awareness of life, are gifts. The other day on the tram I saw an old man who was all bent over and teetering, with a little shopping bag he had trouble holding. When he got

off, I thought, how can a man end his life this way, without anyone to care for him? In front of the need you understand what you have been given, the gift of faith, and in the evening you give thanks with the prayer “I adore You, my God.” The experience of charitable work teaches us not to take anything for granted, and above all, the reason for which you do things.

Could you try to explain more?

You understand because in the compassion you feel in front of the need you encounter, the questions arise: Who is man? Who am I? What is the substance of my I? This may not happen the first time you do charitable work, or even the second, but at a certain point the questions emerge. This is why it is so important to be faithful to doing charitable work regularly.

This is one of the constitutive elements of charitable work described in the pages of *The Meaning of Charitable Work*.

Yes. Repeating the gesture of charitable work, which does not produce an immediate outcome, strips everything to the bare essentials, so that you say either I’m crazy or there’s something deeper here. This is

“In this gratuitous gesture, I understand that Christianity is simply love for the human person. You realize that you are structurally made for the other and at the same time you are made by an Other.”

the difference between charitable work and volunteer work (which is of great value). However, normally you begin to lose energy when there is no response, not even a minimal response, when you see no change. And there’s another factor—charitable work is for everyone, in the sense that no special aptitude or ability is required. It’s something compatible with normal life, but it is lived in friendship. When you bring a package to a prisoner you can be there only physically, but it is within a friendship that you can share the experience and come to a judgment. It is communal because it generates a friendship that may be unexpected, like mine with Bobo, formed in those four years. Only in this way does it become an educative gesture in the sense that it opens you up to the other. After the massacre of Italian peacekeepers in Nassirya, Iraq, Fr. Giussani said that the education of a people is needed. There is need for gestures that lead people to perceive the value of the other. Charitable work is one of these.

Why?

The human person is struck by two things: the other person’s need and affection. The impact with need softens even the hardest of hearts. For a while, I did charitable work in the Padua prison, visiting some prisoners, spending some hours listening to them. That experience took away my certainty that life is defined in terms of “this is good and this is bad; this is right and this is wrong.” I began to doubt, in a good sense, my ideas and sometimes my preconceptions.

I began to understand that reality was greater than the perception I’d had of it. A young friend wrote me some time ago that a collection for the Food Bank had been organized at his place of work. “It was surprising to see how my colleagues got involved. They responded to my insistent invitation to sign up and donate money and food, curious about what I was doing and why. In the three days of the drive, they even gave up their lunch hours to come with me and give me a hand. I was surprised by the dynamic of the way this drive happened, since I’d been used to doing it in the sphere of high school and university with people from the Movement. I proposed doing charitable work at the Food Bank to some of my closer colleagues, and it’ll be quite a challenge to explain the difference between charitable and volunteer work. Maybe ‘the potential of your charism,’ as the pope said last October 15th, can be discovered from and in these dynamics as well.”

What struck you?

Ours is an era in which reason has been separated from experience. One lives in a world of thoughts and sensations; I see this above all in young people. Well, charitable work makes you touch a piece of reality, actually “touching” the need of the other. It reconnects you with real life, where you can be made to realize that you’d understood nothing and need to begin again.

Did this happen to you?

Yes. When I met Enzo Jannacci, who made me see in an instant what it means to fall in love with human beings. ■

We spent an evening with friends making dinner for the young people hosted by **Fr. Claudio Burgio** in the Kayrós community, where the only “concrete” attitude is attention to the person. And where it’s clear that “it is not we who make them happy.”



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Is this truly enough?



Paola Ronconi

Photos by **Giovanni Dinatolo**



An unusual characteristic marks the Kayrós homes: there are no knives. If you decide to make risotto with pumpkin for the ten or so residents of the Yellow House, you have to peel and cut the pumpkin with a knife loaned to you by the neighboring house, the kind with a rounded blade. It's hard going, but safety is the top priority for the young people hosted here and those who come to cook. We are in the outskirts of Milan in the Vimodrone area. Fr. Claudio Burgio founded Kayrós, a residence for minors in difficulty, sent there by the juvenile court, social services, or law enforcement. Today it hosts young people in the midst of ongoing criminal proceedings, in collaboration with Milan's Center for Juvenile Justice. The Yellow House hosts new arrivals, so it is the facility with the youngest and often the most rebellious residents. The interior bears the signs of the residents' moods: a few kitchen cabinets are missing their doors and an educator walks by with a new toilet seat. Stefano and Agnese are at home here. He is doing his doctorate in physics, and she teaches math. Every two weeks they come to fix dinner for the residents. For some years now, various groups have been taking turns doing charitable work at Kayrós. It's 7:00 p.m. Before they start cooking, they stand at the kitchen counter and read from *The Meaning of Charitable Work*. "Charity is the law of being and comes before natural likes and dislikes and feelings." Some residents poke their heads in; there's a quick exchange of handshakes and hellos, and they disappear. "We can 'do for others' while lacking any enthusiasm. There may very well be no so-called

In these pages, images of the charitable work at the Yellow House, the residence for young people in difficulty run by Fr. Claudio Burgio's Kayrós association in the outskirts of Milan.



‘concrete’ result. For us, the only ‘concrete’ attitude is attention to the person; that is, love for him,” they read.

“**Charity, attention to the person,**” Stefano repeats, and then comments: “But is this truly enough? No, the way I see it, in loving there needs to be some recognition; you need the other in some way to perceive what you’re doing and to give back in return. If I pay attention to you and you don’t even realize it, I have to wonder if I’m doing something wrong. Here, we constantly feel transparent; it’s rare for any of them to enter into a relationship with us.” He’s got a point: it’s a provocation to be dealt with. Stefano continues: “I wonder what these evenings at Kayrós have to do with my life and my fiancé.” They relate to his life because they teach him another way to love: gratuitously. Once Fr. Burgio told those who come to do charitable work that his kids need “normality,” people they can treat “normally,” because they’ve always lived in violent contexts and dramatic situations. But you can’t take for granted that they understand what “normal” means. “They rarely say ‘thank you’ to us,” though Agnese says it happens when they’ve eaten particularly well. One evening Myrko (*the names used here are not their real names*), a Roma boy, agreed to cook

with Stefano. That evening they were frying potatoes. Unfortunately, Myrko dumped the cut potatoes all at once into the pan, causing the oil to cool, so that the result was a yellow mush. After dinner Stefano said, “It didn’t turn out very well, but did you like cooking with me?” The reply was, “No, it was disgusting.” Stefano didn’t take it personally, though, maybe because he’s learning that “it is not we who make them happy,” as the booklet says. This is doing for others, not out of enthusiasm, but just doing it.

Since September Agnese has been teaching in a school well known for its student body from the elite and very wealthy families of Milan. “My students have problems that appear different from those of the residents here, but deep down, they are alone, too. They have lots of money and the designer clothes that the Kayrós kids would like, but they’re on their own in living the difficulties of life.” It is a challenge for Agnese to see the gap between one of her classes and this kitchen, between kids who have everything and others who often have nobody outside these walls. “I come here and do charitable work, and the next day I ask myself, ‘What did I see?’ Maybe just a lot of



anger. When I think about my students, I hope that they encounter someone at school who cares about them. This is why I prepare dinner here at Kayrós, to learn this hope.” Alex comes into the kitchen. Each and every finger is tattooed, and he has a cross tattooed next to his eye. He keeps his sweatshirt hood over his head and is more taciturn than usual. He’s hurting, and won’t even kick a soccer ball around with the others after dinner, but his gaze... His eyes don’t disclose what he has seen in his young life, but speak of an abyss filled to the brim with the wrong things and a need for redemption. Only an exaggerated good can fill this abyss and give him peace, a bit like the Samaritan woman, who had filled her pitcher with five husbands, and now was trying with some water when He arrived. Stefano tells us that one evening “an educator, pointing to Samir sitting in a corner, told us, ‘It’s not a good evening for him, leave him alone.’” That day Samir’s friend had died, hit by a train. Even so, Stefano asked him if he wanted to talk about it. “Do you really give a shit?” the boy asked. When Stefano said yes, Samir pulled a photo of his friend out of his jeans pocket. “Not even a good-looking girl would cheer me up.” That evening

Agnese understood the words of the booklet: “I do not know what the other truly needs nor can I measure or possess it. It is a measure that I do not possess; it is a measure that is in God.”

In the meantime, the risotto is bubbling away. In a pan next to it the sausage for the non-Muslims is sizzling. Stefano and Agnese also work on getting the table set. Everyone sits down and enjoys the risotto. The conversation, some of it quite off-color, ebbs and flows. Stefano stands up and interrupts them to make an announcement. “I’ve given my girlfriend an engagement ring. I’m getting married!” There is some halfhearted applause and congratulations. The comments around the table reveal that getting married is something very far off, not only because they are young, but because it is so “normal” that it seems impossible. It is time to go. People get in their cars to return to their own homes with the faces and eyes of these kids in their minds and a feeling of pained love at the thought of each one. I’m reminded of a friend’s words: “I wish some of them would fall in love with what we’ve fallen in love with! But for this to happen, we have to burn with passion for people, that Christ may reach them.” ■

Amazonia

Beyond measure

“It is always something new...” For more than two decades, the faithfulness of the Macapá and Santana communities to charitable work.

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Claudia Figueiredo

The experience of charitable work is one of the dimensions of our charism that helps us live and deepen our relationship with Christ. It challenges us to stand before the other while remaining ourselves. For this reason, twenty-three years ago we started doing charitable work in the Jesus Bom Samaritano parish in the Zerão neighborhood of Macapá, when Fr. Ignazio Lastrico, a PIME missionary, was working there. And since 2008 we have been going to the John Paul II Center in the same neighborhood. We are also present in the community of Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes in Santana. From 2000 until today, we have always been faithful to the proposal of meeting with children and adolescents once a month with a simple gesture, proposing a moment of recreation with games, music, or soccer, and occa-

sionally a movie. But even in play, the whole freedom of each person was involved. It is a moment that is eagerly awaited by all; on the day of the charitable work, the children invite their friends, neighbors, brothers, and sisters to participate. Due to the pandemic, we had to stop the visits but we resumed them this year when in-person activities could start again. On average, ten people from the Movement and about fifty children and teenagers living in the neighborhood participate. We prepare snacks and everyone contributes something: cakes, cookies, sandwiches, juice, soft drinks...

If for the children and adolescents charitable work is an opportunity for recreation, of encounter, of joy, for us it is the possibility of continually verifying the path we are living, of standing before Christ through an encounter with them, of dedicating time to the other, of opening our gaze wide and beyond our measure. Pope Francis told us, “There are many men and women who have not yet had that encounter with the





Lord that has changed your life and made it beautiful!” Charitable work spurs us to do this, to wish that those children might also experience this beauty. What always moves us is that at the end, before the snack, we ask them if they are happy and they all answer with a loud “yes!”

Then we conclude with a prayer in which each person can express an intention: sometimes it takes a long time, depending on the number of children and adolescents present, but no one neglects to offer his or her intention. There are moving invocations that always arise from the reality in which they live, which is generally very painful, and not only because of their economic conditions. We return home certain that Christ has made Himself present there, wishing that our whole life and theirs will be like that, full of His presence. “Even today I ask myself why I do this gesture. What does it bring to my life?” says Andreia, who has participated in the gesture for many years. “For me there is not only one answer, because even if it is the same gesture, there is always something different. It is an educational gesture, it is always something new. I find that I always have a different attitude at the end. But one of the clearest answers I have is that I am the one who is most in need. And as Fr. Giussani educated us, ‘Seriousness with the School of Community is fundamental to understanding charitable work.’ For me it is a gesture of witness, beauty, and truth.” Socorro, who lives in Santana, says the charitable experience “gives me immense joy—being with the children is so rewarding that I do not even notice the time passing. I enjoy living this moment because it is a gesture that makes my heart burn.” ■



Charitable work in Macapá, Brazil.

Arab Emirates

“Thus I learn to love”

“Without that gesture, I would lose my openness with my colleague, with my friend, and with my children.”
In Abu Dhabi, amid work and family commitments, a nostalgia for the charitable work emerges.

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Charitable work has always played a fundamental role in the education for life that my encounter with the Movement has given me. Growing up in a community that offers this gesture so that we can find an answer to our need to love, I realized that I had learned to give of myself through simple gestures such as helping kids from underprivileged families in math or spending one afternoon a week with people with disabilities. However, after college, when life became more demanding between family and work, I forgot about that education. And I found myself increasingly incapable of giving attention to the other.

I saw that without the gesture of charitable work, I lost the openness that I was once familiar with, with my colleague, with my friend, with my children themselves.... Charity had taught me to love and I was unlearning it. I discovered that charity and life in communion were no longer “an almost instinctive way of conceiving all of life,” as Giussani says in *The Meaning of Charitable Work*. Re-reading it, I realized that the easiest way was to start going again. The concerns of life were no longer an alibi: I find time to watch Netflix and go to the gym, so if I am interested and need it, I’ll take the time to go to charitable work.

I made my decision and started looking around. Through friends, I met a lady from the parish who single-handedly helps women who



are victims of human trafficking. I proposed to the community that we accompany her on a regular basis, reading Fr. Giussani's booklet together to remind us why we are doing this and how we want to be educated by doing it. We spent time with these people—shopping, preparing food and clothing, responding to their needs. We also had the privilege of spending time with a young mother and her newborn baby. Some mothers in the community taught her how to breastfeed and shared their experience with her. What I appreciated about this was how little room there was for sentimentality: it was pragmatic work accomplished in the face of very delicate situations that forced you to really

understand why you were doing it. The fact that those people were passing through helped me remain true to the purpose.

For various reasons, at a certain point there was no more need for this support and we were discouraged because it is not easy to get involved in charitable work in an Islamic country. But recently Erika, a friend of the community, met a lady who runs a children's shelter and we started helping her. We also responded to the new bishop's call to get more involved in the parish. Some people who had recently learned about the Movement invited us to the parish teen group, and we proposed it to the whole community. We also discovered

the need to organize catechism for families who live far away from the church and cannot bring their children to catechism because of the schedule (there is only one place in Abu Dhabi where catechism is held and it is only early in the morning). Once a month, the proposal for the community is to read the charitable work booklet and exchange experiences. Through these gestures and the education of the Movement, we learn to love and have learned again that charitable work is fundamental not only for those who receive help, but also for those who give it. Personally, it teaches me to conceive of my life as connected to others and to give more and more. ■

Alberto, Abu Dhabi

Holland

All of us are needy

A group of volunteers helps the Little Sisters of the Poor to cook meals for the poorest of the city of Amsterdam: “We are reminded that nothing is ours. Things are given to us.” In the light of this gaze, all the measures are removed.

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The Jordaan neighborhood in the heart of Amsterdam is a bustling maze of narrow streets, bridges, canals, and historic houses built very close to each other. In one of these live the Little Sisters of the Poor, the order of nuns established by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It has three floors and a large kitchen where the sisters prepare a meal for the poor of the city. Every afternoon at three o'clock, they open the front door and they invite in about one hundred guests. Some are homeless, some are very poor, and some are elderly people who live alone; there are even delivery workers who come to take a break from making deliveries to eat a meal inside where it's warm. Despite the multitude of languages that are spoken at the table, everyone calls the nuns “sister.” There are only five of them, and one of them is advanced in age. One Saturday every month, the small community of the Movement of approximately fifteen young adults come to help them.

They have been coming here since 2018 and even during the ups and downs of the pandemic; they ride their bicycles here from various parts of the city to do charitable work. They split up into two shifts. Those in the 9:00 a.m. shift prepare and cook the food and those in the 2:00 p.m. shift serve the meals and clean up. The sisters are very orderly. Nothing can be left to chance. All their energy is directed toward welcoming the other. They even go as far as telling the volunteers how many drops of dish detergent to use when washing the pots. “They give the same level of attention to these activities as they give to their guests,” said Silvia. “From the first moment, I was struck by their sensitivity toward those that do not eat pork or have certain dietary restrictions. They always offer a vegan option. But what impresses me even more is the silence and respect in this place before each meal when the sisters are reciting their prayers. Everyone

stands and tries to recite the words posted on the wall of the cafeteria.” It is one of the few moments the volunteers share with the people who come to the cafeteria. Most of their time is spent back in the kitchen.

“Basically, we peel kilos of potatoes,” said Stefania, “But it is my favorite morning of the month. Even though I need to pedal my bicycle for more than half an hour to get there, often getting rained on, it feels effortless. Accomplishing a positive result at work does not give me the same satisfaction. This makes me wonder about what we really do while we are doing charitable work. Observing the nuns, who, in their simplicity, coordinate the various tasks for the volunteers, help us understand more deeply our gesture.” “First of all, they welcome us too,” said Gloria. “They are always happy to see us again. They remember all of our names and where we are from and in the middle of the shift they



Working in the kitchen of the Sisters of the Poor house in Amsterdam.

prepare tea for us; they want us to take a short break.” Gloria began to do the charitable work shortly after giving birth to her youngest daughter; she worked the shift between feeding times. She was always anxious about making the most of the time and being efficient.

One afternoon, as she was changing to go back home, one of the nuns handed her a bag of vegetables that had already been washed. “She wanted me to take them home to make for dinner so that I did not have to worry about stopping at the grocery store. Taking that food home did not seem right to me. But she reassured me with a few words, saying, ‘All of these things are not ours. They are given to us so that we can share them with everyone. And all of us are needy.’ In that moment, it became clear to me: I had become in that moment the recipient of the charity that I want to live.”

Emanuele, her husband, came

to the same realization. He often brings their son, Giovanni. He is seven years old and never sits still, but when he is there he does things that normally he does not do. The superior has become fond of him. She tries to make sure to have a bag of chips and a Coke for him every time he comes. Then she takes him with her to the cafeteria to distribute the bread. One Saturday, Giovanni and his father spent an hour and a half cleaning a whole crate full of brussels sprouts. Emanuele was stunned. “I was expecting that any minute he would say that he was tired. Instead, when the nun arrived with the second crate, he gave me a look as if to say ‘We can’t stop now.’ I had never seen him so happy.” However, on the following Monday, Giovanni got in trouble at school. He had gotten upset and had thrown one of his classmate’s glasses into the toilet. “On the way to pick him up from school I thought to myself, ‘Why did he mess up the



wonderful experience he had in the charitable work?” said Emanuele, who was trying to talk to his son in the car. His son mumbled one-word answers, but Emanuele was able to understand what the root cause was. “On that day, he had felt the difference between how he was treated at school and how he was treated by the nun. I understood why I go to charitable work: to learn to look at others and at myself in the same way that the nun looks at my son.”

It is a gaze that Paolo, another Italian in the group, has also gained from working with the sisters. He is an introvert and socializing with others is not one of his strengths. But for the sisters this is not a problem. One Saturday morning, the sisters asked him if he could go buy some spare parts for a bicycle. So he spent half of the shift going to different stores and the other half installing the new parts. When he had finished, the nun thanked him and asked him to follow her to the third floor. They entered a room full of pieces of wood flooring ready to be installed. “Can you take care of this?” she asked him, as if it were the most normal thing to ask. Paolo looked at her and said, “Look, I am not able to do this.” She replied, “How am I supposed to do it?” Paolo

understood that all the measures he had imposed on himself and on others had been removed. There was only the great freedom of asking and giving.

Tommaso was also provoked by what a nun said. At the beginning of the shift, everyone had left their jackets in the cafeteria. The nun walked in and said, “Don’t leave them there, one of the poor people may take them away...” Then all of a sudden she stopped and corrected herself. “The poor... who are Jesus for us.” For Tommaso, it became clear what makes that place “an oasis nourished by pure charity, without any strings attached.”

One afternoon, while the volunteers were busy grating horseradish, the oldest nun walked in. It was their first time meeting her. She had trouble walking and the other nuns supported her as she sat down at the table. She grabbed a knife and did what she could to help. Gloria looked at her with admiration. She had a million questions she would like to ask her. She mustered up some courage and said, “Mother Superior, we are here to learn about how to live charity.” She looked up at us with her small eyes and said, “Good for you, I am ninety years old and I am still learning.” ■

Borova, near Kiev, February 18, 2023.

Ukraine

Safeguard your heart

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“I arrived at the New York Encounter just after returning from my last trip to Ukraine, where I saw the drama of my people. I visited a parish in downtown Lviv where the funerals of three hundred soldiers were held. Imagine what it means for a priest to be close to all these mothers, wives, and daughters. Arriving at the Encounter, by contrast, I was impressed by the atmosphere of joy and friendship with which I was greeted. I met educated, curious people, free from the contemporary factions in which one takes sides even within the church, men and women who seek depth and authenticity, a seeking that generates peace. This is the task of the church.” Monsignor Borys Gudziak, the metropolitan archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, spoke at the New York event alongside Monsignor Gabriele Caccia, apostolic nuncio to the United Nations, on the theme “Peace on Earth.” On that occasion, Gudziak said, “Peace is

His story and that of his martyred land. Monsignor Borys Gudziak, the metropolitan archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, speaks of a people who continue to live.



Luca Fiore

Borys Gudziak.



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really a divine thing. It is the life of the Trinity. War, invasion and imperialism, on the other hand, are the work of the devil. War is a violation of every single commandment. It is a violation of God's will. The ministry of the church is to remind us of this; it is to help us live according to what God asks of us. Prayer and acknowledging ourselves to be in the presence of the Lord are foundational. Preaching the gospel, attentiveness to God's word in all circumstances, but especially in the face of war, have great meaning. Moments of prayer, more than protests, leave people with a sense of peace." Born in 1960 in Syracuse, New York, to Ukrainian parents and the former rector of the Catholic University of Lviv, the archbishop begins with his roots in recounting the last twelve months experienced by his people.

What has your experience been from February 24, 2022 to the present?

I grew up as a child of refugees. My parents fled during World War II (in which seven million inhabitants of Ukrainian lands were killed) and met in New York. One of my mother's sisters died in the resistance, and my father's parents buried eight of their ten children. Then there was the great famine caused by Stalin in the 1930s, the genocide of Ukrainian Jews under Nazi occupation, and the persecution of the church under the Soviet Union... These all gave us stories of war and destruction. The large-scale Russian invasion, following eight years of war in the Donbass and the occupation of Crimea,

made me think back on all these events of the past in a new and vivid way. I think that many of my fellow citizens have also reflected on these things.

A new wound on a wounded body.

I am a historian and I spent twenty years gathering information about the persecuted church in the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was, from 1946 to 1989, the largest illegal church in the world. In 1945 all of our bishops were arrested. Hundreds of priests, with their families, were sent to Siberia because they refused to break communion with Rome. At that time the Ukrainian Eastern Catholic Church was very deeply rooted in the fabric of society in the western regions of the country. The priest was a community leader and his wife might be an educator, a choir director, or a theater organizer. Their children often became members of the intelligentsia. This church was a reality that, because of its communion with the universal church, had a bond to the outside world, even a canonical one, that made it more difficult to control. That is why Stalin wanted to make it disappear. Today in the occupied eastern regions there is not a single Catholic priest left, and in Crimea those who remain are persecuted.

You have been to Ukraine six times since the invasion began. What have you seen?

A traumatized people confronted by daily bombing,

both the actual bombing and that of the headlines. Every Ukrainian checks the news five or more times a day to find out what happened overnight and which areas have affected. They want to find out if family and friends are still alive. There is a smartphone app that reports attacks. All of this causes double the amount of stress. I encourage people to turn off their phones. In the first two months of the invasion, seven million people left the country and another seven million became internally displaced persons. I cannot recall another occasion in history when fourteen million people were forced to leave their homes in such a short period. Many have since returned, but the exodus has not stopped. Inside this drama is the additional one of family separation, because martial law prevents men between the ages of eighteen and sixty from going abroad. Added to this is the trauma of violence against civilians. I do not think you can still doubt what happened in Bucha. I talked to people who were tortured, widows, parents who lost their children, young people who lost their friends, soldiers who were maimed or paralyzed. It amazes me that among the hundreds and hundreds of people I met, no one said, “we have to surrender.” I am not saying that there are no Ukrainians who think that. But it never occurred to me to meet with them.

What is the root of this violence?

Adam seizes the fruit that leads to death. This “grabbing” is the origin of all violence. God has given us everything and said, “Live this gift.” War is “the great grabbing”; it is a violation of all the commandments. It is taking other people’s lives, it is taking other people’s land, it crushes humanity, culture, and creativity. Yet I do not only see violence.

Meaning?

People go on living. They do not talk much, but they do things, they act. The country goes on. We have seen an incredible surge of solidarity. I see principles of the social doctrine of the church in action: the defense of human dignity and solidarity, as well the practice of subsidiarity and the pursuit of the common good. Today seven million people live in other people’s homes or in religious or cultural institutions. It is very significant that, with fourteen million displaced people, there has been no need for refugee camps. There has been a huge mobilization abroad as well, in Europe and also in the United States, Canada, and other countries. When I talk to

Ukrainians, they always ask me to thank the people who are helping them.

The pope keeps calling for peace and dialogue.

Peace is the end of war, but it needs justice to be so. And the only person who can stop the war is President Putin. Ukraine has no interest in attacking Russia, but Ukrainians cannot stop defending themselves. If they do, there will be no more Ukraine, with its language and its Eastern Rite Church. The pope always asks for us not to be abstract. For Jesus, the highest commandment is “love God and your neighbor,” and to explain what “love your neighbor” means, the pope recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus loves the one who recognizes and helps the victim. The criterion for peace should be the position of the victim. And here the victim is clear. Ukraine has historically shown its option for peace.

In what sense?

I am referring to the Budapest Memorandum signed in 1994 in which Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal (then the third largest in the world) on the condition that its security, independence, and territorial integrity be respected. That document was signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. In that year, the Ukrainian army numbered 900,000, but by 2014 the number was down to 150,000. This was an act of trust in humanity, in peace, in the possibility of coexistence between peoples. These steps taken by the Ukrainian state and people are often forgotten. The answer was war.

And what does “loving one’s enemies” mean to you?

First of all, I pray for the conversion of the invaders. A friend, an Italian, counseled me in the aftermath of the invasion to “safeguard your heart.” And I have been working on this every day. It is difficult, especially for those who have lost family members, and in light of torture and war crimes. In a world dominated by individualism and relativism, where everything is treated as something that can be bought and sold, there are those in Ukraine who say, “Yes, my life is important. But there is something even more important: the truth. There is truth and there are lies. There is good and there is evil. And I am willing to risk my life to affirm the good. And I can do it because God is present. Even if I die, I will not fail.”

What can we do for peace?

Pray, become informed, inform others of the facts, and help where and however you can. There are so many humanitarian needs, even near you. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

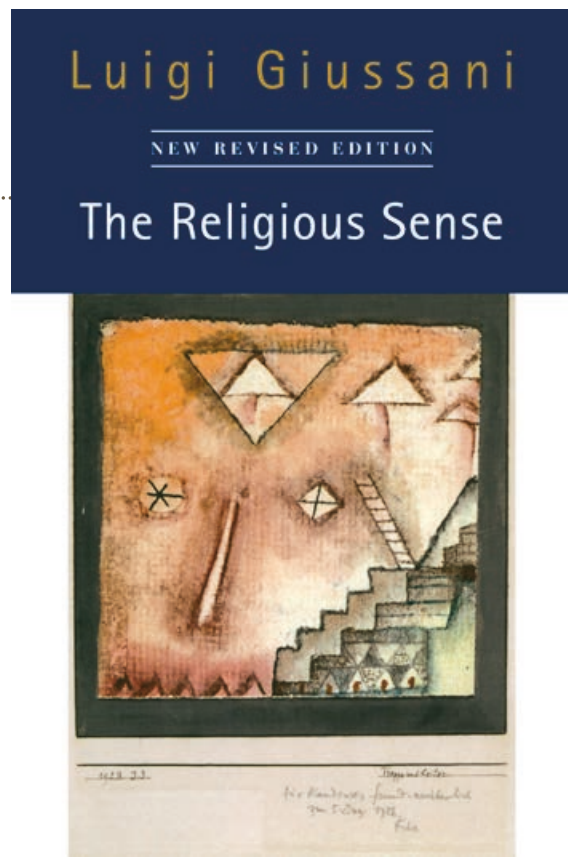
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