

TRACES

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04



***Be realistic,
demand
the impossible***

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Vol. 26

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Full moon. Arlington (USA)

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GIUSSANI

100

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Logical at all costs

This issue looks at Fr. Giussani's bold *realism*: "It is not realistic for a person to live without this openness to the impossible. As it says in *The Religious Sense*, the reality of the human person is a relationship with the infinite. The infinite or *the impossible*." This is the opposite of what is normally thought. Be realistic, lower your expectations. But for him, being realistic coincides with a reason thrown wide open, a reason that does not block the cry for meaning and seeks that which "corresponds to the deepest needs of the heart. To be exceptional, an encounter must correspond to what you're waiting for."

The title on this issue's cover is part of the famous line from the "French May" of the 1968 student protests, which echoes Albert Camus's *Caligula*: "I'm not mad; in fact I've never felt so lucid. What happened to me is quite simple; I suddenly felt a desire for the impossible. That's all. Things as they are, in my opinion, are far from satisfactory. [...] I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world." His servant Helicon responded, "That's sound enough in theory. Only, in practice one can't carry it through to its conclusion." And Caligula answered, "You're wrong there. It's just because no one *dares* to follow up his ideas to the end that nothing is achieved. All that's needed, I should say, is to be logical right through, at all costs."

There is no more beautiful wish for vacations as well, for that "time of freedom" as Fr. Giussani called it (you can find the text at clonline.org): "Vacation time is the noblest time of the year, because it is the moment when one becomes as involved as he likes in the value he recognizes as dominant for his life." It is the time of "responsibility of freedom," the time "when an understanding of what it is you really want can come to the surface."

Letters

Ruggero, Alessandra, Annalisa, Simona

edited by
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The new notebook

This year I started to do charitable work at Portofranco, a very meaningful reality that pairs a hundred students with an equal number of volunteers, few of whom are part of the Movement. I said yes because charitable work has always been important for my education and also because of the insistence with which each year we are reminded of this gesture. Furthermore, I read a notice that they were looking for someone to help tutor a young high school girl in economics, and especially in accounting, which is a subject I teach at the university. From the very beginning, this has been an experience of awareness: Giulia (not her real name) has dyslexia and dyscalculia. I could see how enormously difficult mathematics was for her, given its orderly nature and its calculations and precision. Many questions arose in me about the struggles of my undergraduate and graduate students where I teach. I'm surprised by a newness in my lessons, in which I have become more interested in developing relationships with my students. With Giulia, we started out with a generous 5/10 on her first test, and then, little by little, she started to get 7/10. But still, during our lessons, it was clear to me that her preparation was very shaky. In time, we both looked forward to that moment of working together. I was surprised to find myself (and my wife) praying for Giulia in her difficulties and challenges. In this last month, however, something changed. During a lesson in which we were preparing for the oral exam, where perhaps her difficulties become more evident, I realized for the first time that Giulia perceived that she was not prepared. Previously, in fact, she would always tell me that she was ready, even when it was clear that she was not. In

the following days, this helped her to study with greater awareness. And then she got an 8/10. Thereafter, we got together to prepare for an in-class assessment. We worked on an exercise that simulated the possible test questions. And I was struck by numerous things: the quickness with which Giulia carried out the writing and the orderliness, confidence, and precision in her calculations. For the first time, I noticed that she was ready, that the subject had become hers. Furthermore, she had decided to start over in a new notebook, where neatness and precision stood out like never before. I was blown away by the change in her and I told her that surely the assessment would go well. In fact, she wrote to me that she had received her second 8/10. A few weeks later, the teacher who coordinates the class phoned my wife (who is responsible for student study support) to say that she and her colleagues had been amazed by the change in Giulia, not just in economics, but to some extent in all of her subjects. This change, so unexpected and surprising, has taught me that truly Christ makes all things new, certainly not magically and automatically, but with our yes. **Ruggero**, Sondrio (Italy)

Uncomfortable, but true

I teach at the university and as part of one of my courses, we have collaborated with a project that involves women who are in a state of extreme vulnerability. At the end of our final meeting, some of the female students proposed to our guests that they take part in a sort of "guided visit" that they had organized of the campus. They brought the women to see the classrooms, the library, and various study spaces. At a certain point, one of the women involved in the project burst into tears. The students attempted to console her, trying to understand what was happening. The woman said, "If as a young woman, I had found and frequented these places, I wouldn't be where I am now. I see you, who are splendid and blossoming, while I am ruined. And I don't know if it makes any sense for me to continue in the project I'm involved in, because after all, my fate is sealed..." The students were

upset. They came to find me and tell me (I had left for another commitment). I asked them to bring the woman to my department. In that instant, I had to brace myself in order to stay in front of that pain. Sometimes I also find myself feeling exactly as she feels. When we met, I let her tell her story again. Then I asked her, “But why are you crying now?” She said, “Because today has been a very beautiful day.” Then Fr. Giussani’s words from *The Religious Sense* came to me again: “It is necessary to perforate always such images induced by the cultural climate in which we are immersed, to come down and grasp our own original needs and ‘evidences’ and to judge and evaluate accordingly every proposal, every existential suggestion.” I had before me a person who, because of what she had endured and done, because she felt judged by the dominant climate, according to which her life had turned out badly, felt she was a “failure.” I said to her, “But if you cry because today was a beautiful day, that means that you desire something that exists, otherwise you would be simply indifferent. And this means that your life is not irredeemably ruined.” She answered me, “It’s true. It’s very uncomfortable, but it’s true. So maybe I should go ahead and continue with this project.” This dialogue made me understand that the problem doesn’t consist so much in making “right” decisions, which in reality are always the result of a synthesis we use on the basis of prepackaged images, but rather in recognizing what corresponds to the constitutive demands of the heart. Correspondence is not a feeling, but a judgment that liberates.

Alessandra

At the burraco table

An eighty-two-year-old woman who has lived in my building for forty-eight years is a passionate card player. A while ago, while having a coffee, my husband told her that I get together with some of my women friends to play burraco. The lady expressed the desire to learn this game that she did not know. So I invited her. After a few games, she began to tell us about her life and the questions she had. Once, at a certain point, she interrupted the game and said, “But how is it that you are the way you are?” So I invited her to the CL Mass. At the end of it, she said she’d like to know more about the Movement, because she was struck by how we related to each other. This is what had struck her; not so much the mass, the songs, the conversations, but the kind of rapport she saw among us... playing burraco. From that point on, we began telling her about our experience. I invited her to the Exercises and to School of Community. She told me she had had a fight with God, but since that

first mass, something she had set aside had reemerged in her and had pushed her to get involved with us. She also asked me to get her a copy of *The Religious Sense*. I am struck that after forty-eight years such a beautiful relationship can spring forth in which the questions about life that she said she had set aside can reemerge.

Annalisa, Abbiategrosso (Italy)

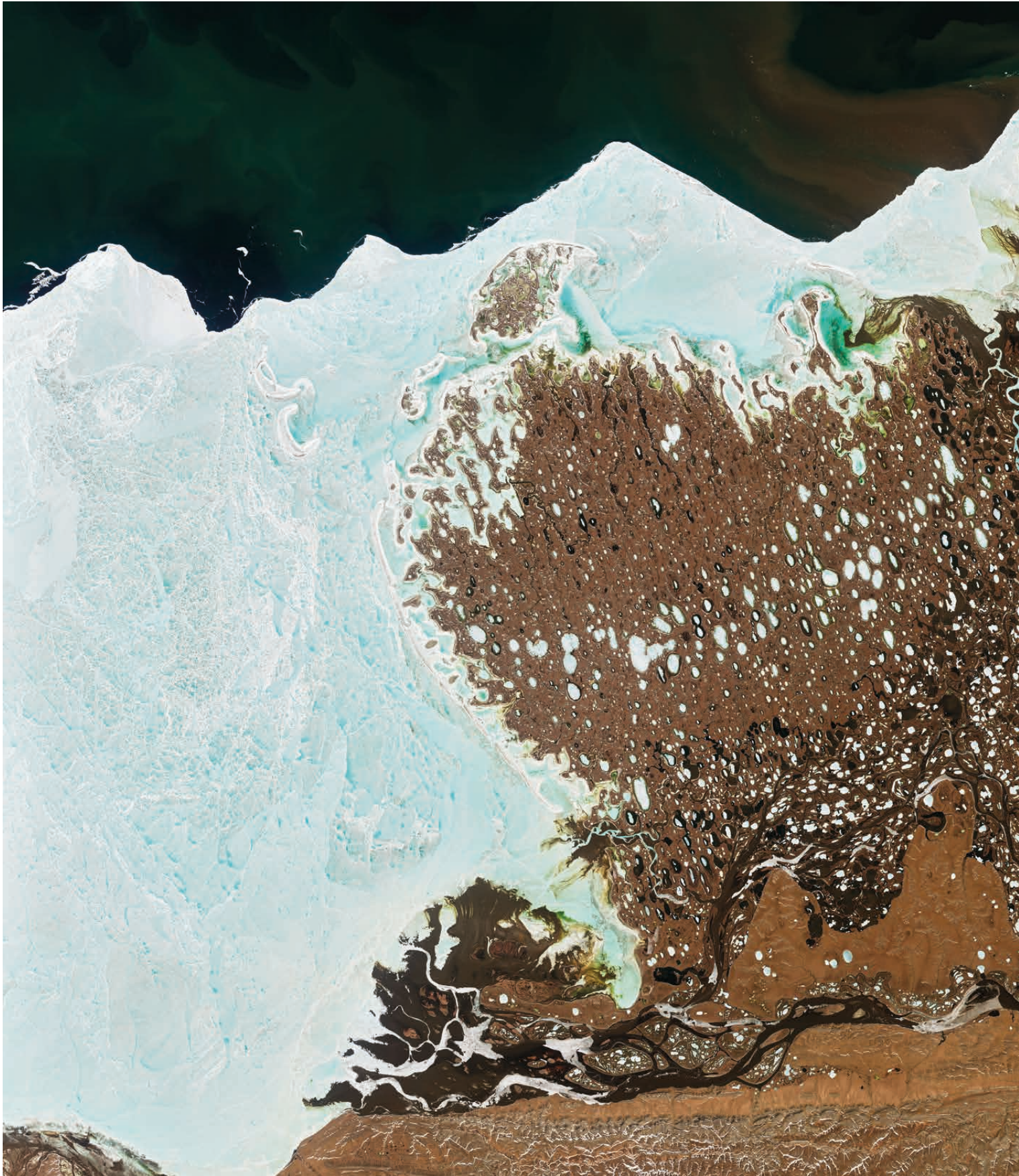
On vacation with our kids

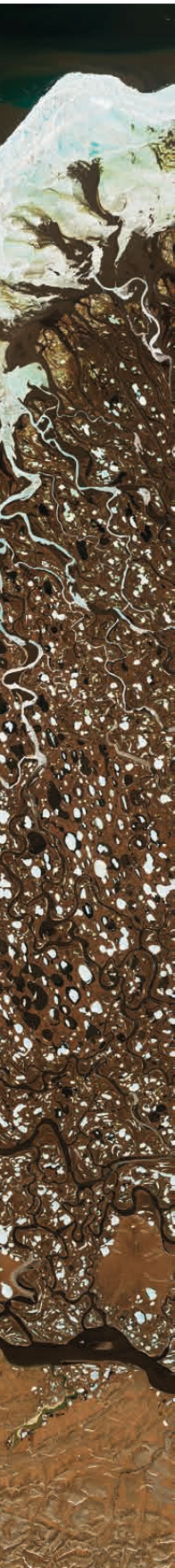
I did not think our three teens (thirteen, fourteen, and sixteen years old) would want to come to the family vacation, especially our oldest. They still come to mass with us and are friends of our friends but don’t live our experience. They decided to come last minute only because the place looked nice and had they no better plans. There were only four or five other kids of their age and nothing prepared specifically for them. From the first morning I started to fear their defiance when we closed ourselves in a room for morning prayer and they were left outside with the little kids and then when we went on a rainy hike. But they did not complain. I was puzzled when they stayed for all of Fr. Michael’s witness on the second evening. Then there was the hike, where apparently they had become friends of other little kids and took them hand-in-hand all the way through the hardest part to reach the beautiful falls. At the end, the singing night came, and they started singing and participating in ways I was not expecting. Yesterday, I literally could not believe my eyes when they wanted to stay for the final assembly (I confess I even advised them against it). As soon as they jumped in the car to go home, our oldest started to share how wonderful the vacation was, and said, verbatim: “I wanted to talk at the assembly and say three things: 1. This is the only place where you can see that Catholicism matters to life and where people are “real” and don’t live fake lives; 2. To all the moms that were sharing their struggles with little kids at the assembly I wanted to say, I was one of those kids, but I am here now, so keep bringing your kids; and 3. The food was extraordinarily good and we need to thank Mrs. Z. for how much she worked on it (he is a foodie kind of guy so this is an unexpected compliment from him).” Marco and I thought we were dreaming. Our kids are ordinary teenagers, always critical, defiant, strong-willed, ready to defend the opposite of what we do. It is our biggest prayer, struggle, and question how they could at least see what I saw at fifteen and live the beauty of true friends, even if the forms and times are different and re-creating GS seems impossible in most places. God, as always, took the most incredible route.

Simona, Cincinnati (USA)

Close-up

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The need for the unimaginable

That girl waiting to ask a question. Our thirst, “because water exists.” The posture of free persons that “makes them hunt for the event.” A conversation with writer **Daniele Mencarelli** on Fr. Giussani’s challenge in *The Religious Sense*.



Paola Bergamini

The Eighty Mile Beach on Australia’s west coast photographed from space.

“**H**ey Paola, I’m at the beach with my family. But not even a ray of sun,” Daniele Mencarelli begins on the phone, in the lively Roman accent that had struck and delighted me back in 2019 when I interviewed him about his novel *La casa degli sguardi* [The house of gazes]. We had hit it off immediately and our conversation lost any formality as we revealed ourselves to each other, recounting what we held most dear in life. “It’s been a beautiful year,” he says. I immediately thought of the success of the Netflix series *Tutto chiede salvezza* [Everything calls for salvation], based on his book (winner of the Strega Prize for Young Adult Readers 2020), and of his last novel, *Fame d’aria* [Hunger for air], which sold over twenty-five thousand copies in four months, as well as his theatre piece and his articles in various publications. “A very beautiful year because of all the people I’ve encountered. Above all young

people.” He blows me away when he says, “They are hungry for meaning in life, and reality throws it against me daily. This relates to our conversation on *The Religious Sense*, right, Pa’?” “Right, Dan.” But let’s relate the full conversation as it happened.

When did you read Fr. Giussani’s book?

In the 1990’s, Davide Rondoni, knowing my passion for poetry, said I should read *Le mie letture* [My readings] and that was the discovery of Giussani and one of the poets I’ve loved the most since then, Pär Lagerkvist. In 2001, when I was working at the Bambin Gesù hospital as an attendant, Davide gave me *The Religious Sense*.

What struck you then, and what strikes you now?

The reasoned idea, which I had more instinctively, that people need more than just themselves, that we need to search beyond ourselves for

the answer to the meaning of life, to look for the love that from within asks us to look at each thing, and that nothing fulfilled me at the time. Thinking about the “three premises,” I am fascinated by Giussani’s challenge: in order to know reality, don’t start from your preconceptions, but instead live it, or better, put yourself in the existential position of not asking what reality can do for me but what I with my openness to the other can do for others. I ask young people to do this exercise: go into a shop smiling and look the shopkeeper in the face. Then do the same, but looking down, frowning. Observe how two different worlds open up.

You spoke of knowing reality. In his preface, Bergoglio wrote that *The Religious Sense* “is a book for all human beings who take their humanity seriously.”

The Religious Sense is an extraordinary book of methodology for the “posture,” as Fr. Julián Carrón called it in *Reawakening our Humanity*, with which people must face reality and the other. If you start from this existential striving, God is not a premise, but a natural consequence, a promise of fulfillment that is realized. It is a book for those who want to know themselves and to know in a totally different way than the usual reading of reality as being always malign. Humans have this interior voice warning them to “not to trust reality; it is your enemy,” and even more so today with the advent of the digital world and social media (without slipping into easy demonization). But the risk is certainly higher.

You said that young people thirst for meaning in life. Giussani called these “original needs and ‘evidences.’”

It’s an experience I’ve seen in these last three years, starting from my books, thanks to which I’ve encountered about seventy-eight thousand young people. Often, in speaking with teachers, the same old expression arises: the “problems” of young people. I say that the fragilities (not the “problems”) of young people (I think of the digital world) are different from those we had at their age. They want to talk about this. I also ask whether we adults, both teachers and parents, are open to dealing with themes of existence, the meaning of life and death, justice, and happiness. I’ll tell you about an experience. I was in Fasano at a techni-

cal high school. I’d arrived early and noticed a girl who was already waiting to enter and sit in the first row. At the end of the gathering, the teacher moderating asked if anyone had any questions. The girl’s hand shot up, and she stood and asked me, “For someone suffering for those she loves, what answers do you have?”

And you?

I told her, “Let me tell you what I saw of you: a girl who arrived an hour early, stood there next to the door waiting to be in the first row, and as soon as possible asked this question. You are one of the most loving and courageous people I’ve ever met.” These are the unexpected encounters that throw my life wide open, like the nun in *The House of Gazes* and my companions in the psych ward in *Everything Calls for Salvation* who make me believe in the unbelievable.

Referring to *Caligula* by Camus, Fr. Giussani said, “It is not realistic for people to live without yearning for the impossible, without this openness to the impossible.”

“The human person thirsts because water exists,” Cardinal Matteo Zuppi said recently in a very beautiful public conversation we had in Bologna. In that encounter, who did not feel a correspondence with that thirst? When I enter into reality and find one, ten, a hundred people in front of me who share this need for the unimaginable, I understand how reasonable this search is. Mostly it is experienced individually, but I think there is also a community dimension.

In what sense?

Our era is marked by a deep individualism. It is irrational to ask yourself certain questions, and in any case, if you do ask them it is better to answer them on your own. Instead, it was no coincidence that I gave the example of Zuppi. There are people whose words and actions “translate” the reasonableness of this search for meaning. All my life has been, initially in an unaware and extreme way, a stepping toward people who gave me back that glimmer in the eyes, that love that “moves the sun and other stars,” as Dante wrote. As I’ve always told you, I’m an aspiring believer, and this is why the itinerary of *The Religious Sense* is fascinating.



Daniele Mencarelli, born in 1974.

“The wisdom of this book is in inviting the reader to be there in the middle of what reality offers in that precise moment. It makes people hunt for the event.”

Even if it is a book that asks so much from the reader.

What do you mean?

You need courage and openness of heart to read it. I would give it to anyone who wants to live reality fully, not just as an approach for reaching God. The wisdom of this book is in inviting the reader to live reality, to be there in the middle of what reality offers in that precise moment. It is the posture of women and men who are free and alive, and it makes people hunt for the event. Today I sense a dual temptation, be it at the age of fifteen or the age of ninety: living in the past or in the need to build your future in an overly intense and anxious way. This does not mean not trying to achieve your desires—if I think of myself, I’ve always pursued writing—but, rather, actualizing the future through the present.

Seizing what happens, now.

I often tell young people, “Live reality in this way: you never know where it will go.” And they respond with, “What?” I answer, “Put in the object yourselves:

the event of love, of a lifelong friendship...” It’s like that for me, at forty-nine. Really, there have been some wonderful conversations with young people in which I feel like I’m a seeker just like them. I tell them I don’t have answers because I have the same hunger, thirst, and passion for meaning. The same heart.

You’re one of the curators of the exhibit at the Meeting, *Alone Is Not Enough*, and in Rimini you will have a conversation with Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça on the theme of “The Cry of the Heart.”

Other opportunities for encounters! In the fall I’m going to concentrate on my new novel, the one I’ve been pursuing for 32 years, because I have yet to write the most beautiful one. You know, I’m a lucky man, and I’m grateful for this. My life has been and is one great flow that I’ve received as a gift and so ... there is Someone who gave it to me.

It is the infinite game of “tag” between you and God, as you told me the first time we met.

Right. ■



8

The world in a room

Is it possible to “live the real intensely” in intensive care, without being able to move anything except one’s eyes? The testimony of Jone Carrascosa, which was referenced by Father Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori at the Exercises of the Fraternity of CL.

“**W**hat could it be?” I have been a physical therapist for patients with neurological disorders for 42 years, and for this reason when I began to feel a tingling sensation that kept getting stronger, I did not like it one bit. While I was sitting in the emergency room waiting to hear my diagnosis, I thought, “Whatever it is, let Him do what He wants with it.” As I saw my body becoming more and more paralyzed at rapid speed, I decided to say yes three times. That was the beginning of my adventure.

Guillain-Barre syndrome takes everything away from you: the ability to swallow, to chew, to speak, to breathe, and to contract your muscles. Everything. All of a sudden I found myself full of tubes everywhere. “And who am I?” The situation was no fun at all, and yet, I understood more than ever before what is my dignity, because it became evident to me that it is something that He gave me and that it depended solely on my belonging to Christ. Even though I had become completely paralyzed, there was strength



Jone Carrascosa

Jone Echarri Carrascosa.

“When Fr. Giussani had gone through a tough day he was able to talk about things as they were but, at the same time, he went deeper. He used to say that the circumstances that God has us go through are essential factors of our vocation.”

within me that allowed me to say, “This is how I am, but I have dignity because I belong to Him.” I understood the reasons later, but I felt that strength from the beginning.

The intensive care unit is an unpleasant place, and it made me think a lot about the suffering that Father Giussani experienced with his illness. Because he had a strong realism, when he had gone through a tough day he was able to talk about things as they were but, at the same time, he went deeper. Whenever I thought about him, I would ask myself, “What is my place now?” By following his realism, I was soon able to say, “This is a cross.” And I would remember when he used to say that the circumstances that God has us go through are essential factors of our vocation. Faithfulness to the cross led to knowledge of Christ, a knowledge of Christ that led me to know and live the Resurrection more intensely. This became clear to me because I began to feel at peace. But what is peace? Peace is the sense of satisfaction in our hearts that we feel when we understand

that our lives are sustained by Another who is greater than us. This is something that I am learning better now. I have started to experience *happiness*. In Spanish, this word is not normally used in this way, but what I feel is a lasting happiness, a sense of happiness that has continued during the nine months I was in the hospital. Sometimes I even felt joy. Those times when I felt it, I remembered Pope Benedict, who said that joy, when it comes from God, is a “redeemed joy,” meaning that it is not just a feeling, but rather it is Someone who transmits to you that joy to show you that He is present.

How could there be peace, joy, and happiness in a state of extreme weakness? I felt like a head without a body. How was that possible? “They will recognize Me by the joy in your eyes.” This is exactly what happened to me. That period of time was a mission in silence, because I could not speak, but it was incredible how someone in intensive therapy could make friends just by looking at others. I’ll give one example.

One day, one of the doctors came to my room and said, “Look, Jone, let me tell you what happened to me. Yesterday my professor treated me badly. It was terrible. He publicly humiliated me and I came here full of resentment, but then I thought of you and said, ‘Jone has a problem a thousand times bigger than mine. And I felt grateful for your presence here, because that day you helped me live in a more human way.’” But that man did not realize that it was Christ who had changed me, which meant that he too had been changed thanks to the powerful help that Christ had given me. In other words, He had changed both of us. He is the one who won in my heart and also in his. Had He not won in my heart, he couldn’t have won in the other person’s heart. For the three months that I stayed there, every day I said yes and never once did the thought “I want to get out of here” cross my mind. I did not leave because that was the place that Christ had chosen for me and I wanted to answer Him there. I wanted to answer Him, so that place, which was still unpleasant,

became dear to me. How did it happen? Don't ask me. I do not know how it happened, but I know Who it was.

The value of the instant. When my husband, Carras, became the leader of the Movement in Spain, he became busy with meetings and trips, and I was in agreement with this. In the hospital, paralyzed, I understood that what he did and what I did not do had the same value because both were a response to the mysterious plan that the Father had decided for each of us. This has made me see that something that seems insignificant to the world has tremendous value when it is offered. With that instant that is offered, God can do many things, because in His design He uses what He does for the outcome that He wants, and everything that He wants is good.

It's true that I also argued with God, precisely because of the familiarity I have with Him and because I offered up what was happening to me and it felt like He was taking from me more than I had offered. And for a while I stopped offering up what I was going through. But I was uneasy until I acquiesced and trusted again. I said, "I must trust, because if I don't, I close the doors to a new awareness, I shut the doors! And He wants to keep showing Himself!" So I decided to surrender. It was then that I began to understand that what I was living was for the world! I was there... paralyzed, but I was at work; I was useful! I had a horizon as wide as the world.

Every path and change and everything we want to accomplish starts with the key moment when we get up in

the morning, with all the things that we need to do! In that moment my head can be overwhelmed with things, which can be good things, but usually they are things I can control and I believe I am responsible for, which is not true. It's the illusion of autonomy. We think that we can do something, but it is not possible. My husband and I were anarchists when we met the faith, and at the beginning there was a verse from the Gospel that made me uncomfortable. It was when Christ said, "Without me you can do nothing." "What about me?," I would ask myself. "Without me you can do nothing." How well I know that now!

Silence is a position of the heart that allows a person to get up in the morning, look up at the sky and say, "I offer you the entire day because You made me, and I want all the things I do today to be for You." After that one may forget, get distracted, and do a million things. But silence is a position of the heart that says, "You are my Guest."

One time I asked Giussani, "Are you always aware of Christ's presence in every moment?" He answered, "No. Many times I go out, I offer Him everything, and then I spend twelve hours doing things that may even be good; then I come back home, I go to my room, and I realize what a whirlwind I got caught up in, all the time without being myself. Because to be without Him means to not be myself." He added, "But when I come home, I become aware of Him and say, 'Now, God, I reclaim what I forgot for several hours, now I can go in peace because I have seen your salvation which You prepared in sight of all the peoples.'" ■



■
Giovanna Moretto, CL leader
for northwest England.

Wheat therapy

Children's suffering and attempts to anesthetize their pain. But what happens when you take your questions seriously? **Giovanna Moretto**, a developmental psychologist, talks about her work. "An ongoing education for me."



Maria Acqua Simi

Giovanna Moretto lives in Chester, UK, with her husband Luca and their two daughters, and works as a developmental psychologist for the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Liverpool. Every year she deals with young men and women in great difficulty: self-harm, suicide attempts, violence, psychological disorders. But time spent with them, she explains, is an ongoing education because it forces one to trace goodness even in the most hidden corners and seemingly insignificant gestures. "My first need," she recounts, "is for my life to be united. I am a mom, a wife, a psychologist, and I am a Christian. But how do these things hold together? Here in England, especially in work, it is impossible to talk about faith, because there are people who might be offended, and you risk being investigated. But in the face of certain things one cannot back down."

Faced with what can one not back down?

In November last year I was assigned to a new department and immediately I was assigned a complicated case. It involved a 14-year-old girl with frequent and very serious episodes of self-harm and with a difficult family history that led her to attempt to take her own life several times. The situation was so severe that everyone who had to deal with her was scared and defensive. No one wanted to work on this case. I got angry. I knew that they had “given” her to me knowing that because I was a newcomer I couldn’t refuse or complain. Instead, starting to work with her—and the team behind her—was the best thing that could have happened to me.

Why?

Because she forced us, with her pain, to look at our own need. When I met her, I was faced with a teenager living in special accommodations, a kind of “home-clinic” that was totally antiseptic and had no furniture so that she could not hurt herself. About twenty caregivers were caring for her twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, taking a thousand steps and following protocols and procedures to prevent the worst. But the problem remained. She kept hurting herself, and the team caring for her lived in fear of failure. Everyone wanted me to quickly prescribe therapy for her, but I had no magic recipe. I then asked to work together with those who were with her day and night, those who were called to love her. It was necessary to get creative, to start looking at the good that this girl is, not just at what is wrong.

What does it mean to “look at the good”?

The evil she inflicts on herself is a language, the only way she knows how to express herself. Up to that point, we had tried to take this away completely without giving her an alternative. It was then that, in talking with the rest of the team, words came to mind to share with them—people who are totally atheistic and disinterested in God—the Gospel parable about the weeds. That girl is just like a field where so many weeds have grown because of all of the evil that has been done to her, but where there is still wheat. So even the house where she was hospitalized could be an opportunity to sow good seeds. If we, on the other hand, in order to get rid of the weeds, anesthetize everything, we rip out even the good that is there. I said to them: we must make the wheat grow, which will one day be so beautiful and shining

that the weeds, even though they may never disappear, cannot take away the light.

This is beautiful, even poetic, but what does it mean concretely?

We began to build a relationship with her made up of small gestures, dialogues, and even silences. Every step between me and my colleagues was dictated by what was happening and not just by protocols. After four months she stopped cutting herself. It’s not that she won’t fall again—it will happen—but she began to look at herself for the first time with new eyes. And my colleagues and I also looked at each other with new eyes. All this has changed me.

Why?

My last resort, when cornered, was to bring to the table what I held most dear, which was my experience of faith, in a way I had never been able to do at work. And the most wonderful surprise was to see how my colleagues were so impressed that they wanted to reverse all of the procedures and start over with this teenager. We really started working together.

From the Christian experience, a method...

Yes. A unity was born between me, the social worker, and the head of the institution that became a working method: we shared the steps to be taken and we discussed issues with each other. We didn’t work autonomously in solitude or, worse, rigidly follow manuals and protocols. Even the girl’s dad, who had remained on the sidelines up to that point, was amazed at this new way we were going about things and began to dialogue with us about how to be close to his daughter. A colleague said to me, “I never thought that working on this case could become such a great experience.” I learned that I don’t have to be afraid of anything. What I encountered in Christianity is really for everyone, even in the most difficult circumstance.

What made you take this risk?

What we are learning now in School of Community, reading *The Religious Sense*. I started looking at my elementary experience: I want to go to work to find beauty, justice, hope. I need to understand that I am wanted and loved. And this is possible within a companionship of friends, in my relationship with my husband and my daughters,

“Behind their every gesture is a demand for meaning. Why all this pain? Why all this heartbreak? We adults, instead of being scandalized, need to look at this deep question of meaning.”

in following the Movement. All of these questions are also asked by the young people I meet at work and by my colleagues. Why shouldn't I take them seriously?

Help us understand one thing: Why do so many young people today turn to self-harm?

Here in England we have a very high percentage of cases: three out of ten young people deliberately hurt themselves. Self-harm is an expression of emotional distress, of a difficulty in accepting one's emotions, of a lack of meaning. We could define it as “exasperated and desperate” language, the only language that young people are able to use when there are no longer words that make sense. It is, however, a language that should be listened to because it is still an attempt to communicate. Self-harm has several functions. The most common is to feel something. If a person is depressed or traumatized, his or her body turns off sensory perception because there is too much pain to bear. When you get hurt, the body releases endorphins that, for a few moments, make you feel alive, and so many young people use this method: they adopt a biological solution to deal with psychological pain.

You deal with them every day: What questions do they have, what do they ask?

Behind their every gesture is a demand for meaning. Why all this pain? Why all this struggle? Why all this heartbreak? Why me, and some go so far as to make it explicit: “What is the point of my life if I have no friends, if I am teased at school and my family is always fighting?”

I have met many teenage girls, for example, who started self-harming because they felt used and cast away by their first great love. We adults, instead of being scandalized, need to look at this deep question of meaning that comes to mark our teens' bodies.

You said they don't feel anything anymore; however, it seems to me that young people today are instead hyper-stimulated: pornography from an early age, an inordinate use of social media and the internet. We let them have access to everything without the tools to understand what they are seeing...

It all stems from loneliness. They are overexposed, but they are lonely. From an early age they experience a kind of omnipotence over the things they can access, but there is no one to guide and protect them. So you can go from cooking videos to raunchy videos as if everything is the same. But it's not all the same. That's why the point is, first of all, to recover a meaningful relationship and dialogue with teens. If I think about the girl I was working with, for me the most important thing is not to point the finger at her mistakes, but to understand who the adults in her life are, who really supports her in a path of growth.

What if she answers that she has no one?

That's what happened. But I told her that I was there with her. She did everything she could to send me away, and I stayed there anyway. My colleagues who were just afraid before stayed. This is what the Lord does with us: we can push Him away a thousand times a day, but He doesn't leave. He stays. ■

A certainty about the human

Today's cultural climate poses challenges that are different from those at the time that *The Religious Sense* was written: ideologies have waned, scientific knowledge has been challenged by the relativism of the digital age, and the new dominant thinking denies the facts of reality. Why is Fr. Giussani's method more relevant than ever?

14



Martino Cervo

In the post-factual world of the information society, the urgency of truth completely evaporates. Truth collapses into informational dust, which is blown away by the digital wind." If Byung-Chul Han, in his recently published *Infocracy*, were right, a book like *The Religious Sense* would have to be considered—on a gnoseological level, that is, relating to the scope, method, and limits of knowledge—an almost un-serviceable text. And the philosopher is right: compared to the period in which Fr. Luigi Giussani condensed his lectures into the recently re-published volume, with Jorge Mario Bergoglio's text as the preface, not only is the "age of ideologies" mentioned from the very first page, but the category of truth itself, understood as the yearning and object of every energy striving to know, appears to have been annihilated. First by what Ratzinger called relativism (according to which "everything is equally valid (...) truth and absolute points of reference do not exist," which "does not lead to true freedom, but rather to instability, confusion and blind conformity to the fads of the moment"), then by something else that, before our eyes, has driven the very interest in truth out of the picture. Without crossing into impassable territory, it could be said that the ratio-



nalist legacy, the confidence that we can concentrate the adventure of knowing into what is scientifically measurable and fractionable, has precipitated into a world literally created by digital power and its minimal unit: the bit, 0/1, the binary atom at the base of everything. There is no need to get to the deepfakes or the dangers of so-called artificial intelligence: we are already in a system of unavoidable connections (social, information, work, leisure) in which truth is “disintegrated” into monitored and marketable data, and the principle of non-contradiction—something on which the West was more or less founded—is peacefully obliterated. Not coincidentally, perhaps, a typical characteristic of power dressed up as science is that of claiming the right to impose one thing and its exact opposite by referring to “experts”. Nearly a hundred years ago writer and journalist Hilaire Belloc predicted that “it can be foreseen that we will be presented

with ever-increasing masses of hypotheses as dogmatic facts, and that when one hypothesis is proved erroneous, in place of admitting the error another hypothesis will be constructed to conceal the fracture, and so on, until a whole structure of imaginary hypotheses built *ad infinitum* on previous hypotheses will raise its veil of fog intended to hide reality.”

The individual thus inhabits a world peopled with extreme “challenges,” impending apocalypses, continuous and necessary but metaphysics-free conversations: from the climate to health, from economics to labor. And it is a world that hides or fights reality: what else is the extreme drift of “cancel culture,” the “woke” ideology already transformed into violence and into a serious problem of freedom, if not the impulse to deny the given and its reconstruction through language? In the liberal conception, the ultimate character of the

scientific method, more specifically that of technology in its economic and legal applications, has made the path of knowledge about what is excluded from that method almost impracticable to follow. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1967, the great biologist Jacques Monod, Nobel laureate in medicine and the author of the celebrated *Chance and Necessity*, explained that if the modern person lives in anxiety it is because of a “distrust of science”: “The sole purpose, the supreme value, the sovereign good of the ethics of knowledge is not the happiness of mankind, nor power over time or well-being, nor the Socratic ‘know thyself’: it is objective knowledge itself. I believe it is necessary to systematize this ethic, to liberate its moral, social, and political consequences, to disseminate and teach it, because, as the creator of the modern world, it is the only one compatible with it.”

But what is this objective knowledge? The modern makes nothingness coincide with what escapes the “scientific” method thus understood; indeed, extending this conception to its extreme consequence; reality is a product of this method. This seems to generate a world that, as philosopher Peter Sloterdijk writes, “we do not primarily have to interpret or change, but endure.” Indeed, is it a happy world? Not really. The rise of confused rebellion is not unnatural. The escape route, however, is a solipsistic and suspicious idea of knowledge, often veined with the rejection of any authority and distrust of any principle that is not defined by pure opposition. Polarization, amplified by search engines and social media (whose algorithms are based on predictive reinforcement that offers only the confirmation of our tastes, tendencies, and ideas), is becoming increasingly captured by hallucinatory ideas, among groups but also among individuals, and even in families.

There is a lot more in common than meets the eye between radical woke and what we call a conspiracy theorist, and both contribute to the erosion of common ground. “Today,” Byung-Chul Han wrote, “we are not

only in an economic or pandemic crisis, but also in a narrative crisis. Narratives provide meaning and identity, so the *narrative crisis* leads to a vacuum of meaning, an identity crisis and a lack of orientation. In this context, conspiracy theories, as micronarratives, are a remedy. They are taken up as *resources that provide identity and meaning.*”

If this is the crossroads, if the alternative to “dominant thinking” is a delusional reactivity, and if one can know nothing about what is precisely most valuable (insofar as it interests us, insofar as it is worthwhile), does the conception of knowledge in *The Religious Sense* hold up, after so many decades? One should not do the book wrong by considering it to be a philosophy textbook. The aspects that Giussani’s lecture develop are an original re-proposal and constant realization—partly linguistic—of the categories of Christian anthropology: so much so that a chapter of the second volume of in-depth study on the Desio priest’s contribution has been dedicated to Giussani’s inferable gnoseology (*Vivere la ragione* [Living reason], edited by Carmine Di Martino, Rizzoli 2023). Knowledge is—in short—an event, an encounter between the knowing energy of the subject and the object that is reality: a dynamic to which nothing is extraneous and whose criteria reside in the subject itself, although they are not created by it. As we read in Tommaso Mauri’s essay published in the cited book, “Giussani leverages the definition of reason as openness to reality, the capacity to grasp it and affirm it in the totality of its factors in connection with the possibility of acquiring, through the mediation of a witness, knowledge of something of which one does not have direct evidence (faith as a method of knowledge). These considerations are not to be understood as uncritically accepted presuppositions, but are also obtained through phenomenological means.” They are an “enlargement” of reason that is at the antipodes of modernity, which associates the term “faith” with an abstraction, a superstructure. On this level, however,

“The continuous comparison with the ‘elemental experience’ is fruitful for doing what the contemporary mentality obliterates but which the depth of the everyday relentlessly demands: the living of meaning.”

“knowledge by faith” still does not imply a belief, but a possibility of understanding, now denied a priori, about what is most concrete and important: oneself.

Giussani’s lesson in *The Religious Sense* opens up an object that remains outside Monod’s conception: the fabric of the self. And this boundless and mysterious road is not mystical refuge, but rational knowledge. The continuous comparison with the “elemental experience” caught in the folds of things is fruitful for understanding oneself, for doing one’s work better, for decoding the headline of a newspaper, for loving one’s children, for doing what the contemporary mentality obliterates but which the depth of the everyday relentlessly demands: the living of meaning. A certainty about the human is possible: in an age when even the facts of nature and sexual identity are subordinated to the terms decided by power, this is the ardent relevance of Giussani and his idea of knowledge against all abstraction, even if it is religious in nature. Certainly, to employ the sieve of experience even in the investigation of the human is a dizzying adventure: it is a yardstick that measures itself. But is it not less reasonable to defer the criterion to others? The compelling force of these pages by Giussani,

of his (and Thomas’s, and Pascal’s) idea of knowledge, the unpredictable intersection of truth and experience, opens a space of freedom and commitment that invests all spheres of life.

The oppressive alternative between servile abandonment to the prevailing mindset and refuge in skeptical rejection thus dissolves into a different path, one that allows one to inhabit and judge even a world made in this way, at least giving a name to things. And since the nucleus of constitutive needs is common to everyone, this new space is the most useful sphere for possible unity and communication among people throughout time and history: “Without this cognitive method of faith,” Giussani writes, “there would be no human development.” This is why it is a path that is as negated as it is necessary: it touches on realities that are immeasurable yet decisive, it allows a beginning of freedom that arises from tradition, and recognizes the need to be loved, to taste the beautiful, to do what is right, to understand what is true. If the method—as *The Religious Sense* states—is imposed by the object, it is also true that the object of knowledge is better revealed and brought into focus by a method thus understood and defended. ■



***There is nothing
ordinary***

Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012).

One hundred years ago the poetess **Wisława Szymborska**, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was born. Nothing was insignificant for her—a family dinner, the tears of Neanderthal man, wonder. What kind of knowledge and certainty emerge in her poems?



Andrea Fazioli

“**P**oets do not know, and often will never know the true recipients of their work.” Thus said Eugenio Montale in 1975 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Poems travel a long road: they are read, translated, shared on the internet, and scattered to the four winds. Is there really something like a “true recipient”?

Personally, I’ve always considered myself a “true recipient” of the poetry of Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012). Naturally, we never met and she certainly was not thinking of me when she wrote. And yet the Polish author, who also received the Nobel Prize in 1996, was capable of making each word *personal*: she never seemed to address a generic readership or her contemporaries, but just me, exactly me, my daily life, a weaving together of apparently insignificant facts.

No fact is insignificant. This is one of the fundamental points of Szymborska’s poetics. Let’s take a family dinner. The children are uptight: one needs to study for a test, another is tired or maybe in love, who can say. The phone rings and the youngest daughter takes advantage of the moment to explore a fragment of reality: “She’s been in this world for over a year, / and in this world not everything’s been examined / and taken in hand.” The child decides to examine “things that don’t move by themselves.” Some things are unmovable. “But the tablecloth on the stubborn table /—when well seized by its hems—/ manifests a willingness to travel. // And the glasses, plates / creamer, spoons, bowl, / are fairly shaking with desire.”

The poem describes something that really happened. Szymborska was on the phone with a colleague when her youngest daughter dragged the tablecloth down,

causing plates and glasses to crash to the floor. The colleague expressed her dismay and added that without any set phrases Szymborska exclaimed, “It’s a good subject for a poem.”

Why was it a good subject? Maybe because that curious little girl wanting to move the dishes to see what would happen is a figure of the author. In fact, Szymborska takes care to keep her eye on the ordinary, miniscule things, expressing her wonder. She said so in a poem of her youth: “From wonder / arises / the need for words / and so every poem / is entitled Wonder.” In her case, this “wonder” manifests itself above all as mystery, in the conviction that no one can say: I know this, it’s a subject or fact well known to me, I’ve studied it for years, I already know everything.

In the times in my life when I’ve been tempted to think I’ve reached a stable point, one of Szymborska’s poems has always arrived to warn me. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, she said, “Whatever inspiration is, it’s born from a continuous ‘I don’t know.’” This may seem like an invitation to disengagement, but the contrary is the case. She distrusts those who “know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all.” In fact, “any knowledge that doesn’t lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life.”

No knowledge can completely plumb the depths of mystery. This is another crucial point in Szymborska’s work, the ability to look at reality as a miracle, because each thing reveals unexpected profundities. “A miracle, just take a look around: / the inescapable earth.” Attention to detail reveals “a miracle that’s lost on us: / the hand ac-



Jan Vermeer, *The Milkmaid* (1660 ca.),
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

tually has fewer than six fingers / but still it's got more than four." Or the fact that the sun "rose today at three fourteen a.m. / and will set tonight at one past eight." Szyborska's poetry is a flowering of questionings, and the most unsophisticated ones, those that seem childish, are the most pressing.

Her famous poem "Vietnam" relates a conversation with a Vietnamese woman who answers every question with "I don't know," like a litany. What's your name? How old are you? Where are you from? Why did you dig that burrow? How long have you been hiding? Don't you know that we won't hurt you? Whose side are you on? This is a war; you've got to choose. Does your village still exist?

The questions follow one after the other, and the woman says, "I don't know." Then, the last question, "Are those your children?" "Yes." Certainty is not based on some theoretical knowledge, but on the thing that defines that creature, that makes her human in the midst of her abject state: motherhood.

The ability to start from minute facts, the attention, the questions, the multiple points of view are all characteristics of her poetry, together with the power of her imagination. Maybe this explains her popularity: her poems have been translated into many languages, and her anthologies sell very well, not bad at all considering that it is poetry. At the same

time, she has the esteem and attention of critics. She committed grave errors in her life, such as supporting the Soviet Communist regime, with youthful poems honoring Lenin and Stalin. She herself acknowledges it: "I make no excuses. I wrote them, and I regret it."

It is interesting to note that she felt those poems lacked "knowledge and imagination." Certainly, she did not know how things were truly going under Stalin, but at the same time she had not yet found one of the main elements of her style: her power of imagination joined with irony and self-deprecation. These are fundamental points of her poetics as well because in addition to serving as an antidote to ideological rigidity, they make her capable of compassion. Just read the stunning final line of the lyric "Any Case": "Listen, / how quickly your heart is beating in me."

This is what enables the poetry of Szyborska to be personal, to speak to the inner depths of each

*So long as that woman from the Rijksmuseum
in painted quiet and concentration
keeps pouring milk day after day
from the pitcher to the bowl
the World hasn't earned
the world's end.*

Vermeer

person. This also happens with less literary texts, such as articles for newspapers or magazines. Take for example her reviews in the books section of a Polish magazine. They were not classics, often not even novels or poems, but for the most part manuals on ornithology or elegant dress, essays on historic figures, graphology, dolphins, roses, as well as the Guinness Book of World Records, statistical yearbooks, and dictionaries. With lightness and precision, she succeeds in transfiguring the material.

Thumbing through these “optional readings,” as the author herself called them, I have the impression of being in her private sitting room on a rainy day. We are drinking tea as we leaf through the strangest books, attentive to seeking traces of ourselves, as always. Hey, look, there’s a volume on prehistory! And she goes right to the point: “Did Neanderthal man cry? Did his tear ducts react to physical pain, and above all, to the most varied reasons of affliction and sadness? Maybe he wasn’t able to name them yet. Nothing strange there: at times it’s a

problem for me, too.” From anthropology we’ve come to the essence of poetic creativity: finding the names to express what we feel inside ourselves. It is difficult because things are more vast than our definitions. But this attention keeps us alert and eliminates any trace of nihilism. With her usual irony, Szyborska expresses the inescapability of hope: “I prefer to take into consideration even the possibility / that being has its own reason.” Also because, as she wrote in the last two lines of “The Three Oddest Words,” “When I pronounce the word Nothing, / I make something no non-being can hold.”

So here is the key point in her works: hope. Often it is hidden, and often its opposite appears as melancholy or bitterness, but there is always resistance. In her poem, “Old Professor” she asks a series of questions of an elderly teacher who has become tired and disillusioned: “I asked if he happened to be happy // I work /—he answered me.” The last lines open a glimmer of hope: “I asked him about his garden and his bench. // When the evening is clear

I observe the sky. / I never cease to wonder, / so many points of view up there /—he answered me.”

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, she referred to her dream “to get a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavors.” This is the author of the book of the Bible by the same name, also known as Qoelet. After bowing before him, she would take his hand and say, “*There’s nothing new under the sun*: that’s what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you.” Then she has him note that his readers are new, and also the cypress he is sitting under, because each thing is unique. And she concludes: “The world, whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering [...] is astonishing.” Nothing is ordinary, not a cloud, not a stone; every single person that exists on this earth merits our wonder. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

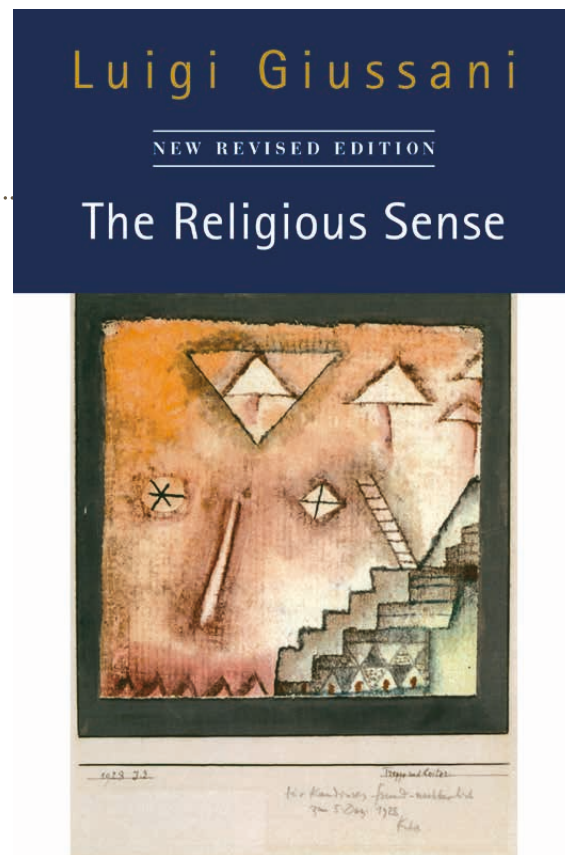
A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

The Religious Sense, the fruit of many years of dialogue with students, is an exploration of the search for meaning in life. Luigi Giussani shows that the nature of reason expresses itself in the ultimate need for truth, goodness, and beauty. These needs constitute the fabric of the religious sense, which is evident in every human being everywhere and in all times. So strong is this sense that it leads one to desire that the answer to life's mystery might reveal itself in some way.

Giussani challenges us to penetrate the deepest levels of experience to discover our essential selves, breaking through the layers of opinions and judgments that have obscured our true needs. Asserting that all the tools necessary for self-discovery are inherent within us, he focuses primarily on reason, not as narrowly defined by modern philosophers, but as an openness to existence, a capacity to comprehend and affirm reality in all of its dimensions.

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Monsignor **Luigi Giussani** (1922–2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy. His works are available in over twenty languages and include the trilogy *The Religious Sense*, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, and *Why the Church?*, as well as the three volumes of *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*



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