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MEMORES DOMINI

By Lucio Brunelli and Gianni Cardinale

That is the name of the new “association” approved by the Holy See, with the aim of living the memory of Christ in the workplace. Though they are laypeople, they practice poverty, chastity, and obedience. What follows is a conversation with the group’s president, Monsignor Luigi Giussani.

They hold their goods in common, they practice chastity and live under obedience, but they do not wear religious habits or take vows. They dedicate at least two hours each day to prayer and contemplation, but they are “entirely immersed in the world,” and they earn their living by their own work, like everyone else. It was not easy to find a place in the canon law of the Church for these lay monks of our time who call themselves “*Memores Domini*”—those who live the memory of the Lord. The association was founded in 1964, but only in 1981 was it recognized as a “Pious Lay Association” by the Bishop of Piacenza, Italy, Monsignor Enrico Manfredini. Seven years later, on December 8, 1988, the Holy See approved their way of life and recognized their juridical status as a “Universal Private Ecclesial Association.”

In the meantime, they have grown in number, now counting several hundred members, both men and women (with a slight majority of the latter), and houses in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The President of the *Memores Domini* (“for life,” as the association’s constitutions state) is Monsignor Luigi Giussani. For the first time, in this interview, Giussani has agreed to recount the history and meaning of this new experience of Christian life born out of the Communion and Liberation movement.

How and when was the idea for the Memores Domini born?

LUIGI GIUSSANI: It was conceived a long time ago, at the beginning of the 1960s. It started with some young people in the Italian “Student Youth” movement (which later took the name Communion and Liberation), who wanted guidance in living a life of dedication to God within the world. I admired their idea, but I was not immediately drawn to it. Thus, in the beginning, I participated without great enthusiasm in their bimonthly prayer meetings. Only after a period of two or three years did I see the evidence that this could be a provocation for a unique and meaningful realization of the Christian experience which we had begun years earlier. So I defended the decision of some of these young people to adapt a farmhouse on the outskirts of Milan to serve as their house, their headquarters. Many years later, and with the necessary modifications, it continues to serve as the motherhouse of the *Memores Domini*. Back then, I was also uncertain about the rather generic name “Adult Group,” which we used until the 1980s to describe the small groups that were slowly multiplying.

What was the reason for your uncertainty?

GIUSSANI: The idea for this form of dedication was not mine. I was obedient to the circumstances that led to a proposal addressed to me by the young people themselves. Moreover, there was the fear of taking on an additional and far more serious responsibility.

What does the pontifical approbation of this association mean to you today?

GIUSSANI: It provides relief and security, for which we are grateful to the Supreme Pontiff, because the approval means not only support for our endeavor but, more profoundly, it inserts what we are and what we desire into the great obedience to the mystery of the Church.

What are the fundamental rules that a member of the association must follow?

GIUSSANI: They can be synthesized in the categories with which the Church traditionally sums up the imitation of Christ. Obedience, in the sense that spiritual effort and the ascetic life are facilitated and authenticated by a discipleship. Poverty, as a detachment from the individual possession of money and things. Virginity, as the renunciation of family life in order to dedicate oneself totally, even in a formal way, to Christ.

In the constitutions of the association, members are asked to live in houses where they share their goods in common and observe a strict schedule of meditation and prayer...

GIUSSANI: Yes, the members of *Memores Domini* are generally advised to live together in “houses,” in a community of three to 10 or 12 persons. The community to which the Lord calls one with one’s own vocation constitutes, as it were, a sacramental sign—in an analogical sense, obviously—where the presence of Christ and the dedication to it is realized in such a way as to be recalled every day and at every moment, as the first environment where one learns to live the faith, to confront and shape the reality of the world, according to the love for Christ that one lives. It is thus the primary place from which all of the work which defines man’s entire life must draw its exemplary form. When the members of the *Memores Domini* enter their houses, they are invited to become aware of why they are within those walls, of the very disposition of the furnishings of the house, of the manner in which time is spent in the house. The perception of that small portion of the world as the large room of the humanity of Christ, the large house of humanity in Christ, is impressive. Thus one understands why the emphasis on silence in the life of the *Memores Domini* houses is so important. In each house, there is an obligation to keep total silence for an hour each day, during which time each person places himself before Christ, and this silence is also kept after the recitation of night prayer. It is precisely the understanding of the house as the beginning of the way in which all men will live at the manifestation of Christ, as the first place where one offers one’s existence in order to hasten this moment as much as possible, that demands a vigilance which only a continuous tension toward silence can foster. This climate of physical silence is pursued throughout the day, even if it obviously does not exclude necessary speech—words which must be spoken with an awareness of the environment in which one is, and therefore with respect for the contemplation of others.

The silence is suspended when everyone gathers at the table for meals. The members of *Memores Domini* also agree to place their salaries and personal possessions in common. The amount which exceeds the needs of the individual house is handed over to the common fund of the *Memores* to be used for works of charity and mission, or for general needs.

Is it true that the houses of the association are forbidden to have televisions?

GIUSSANI: There is no prohibition. It is advised, with some emphasis, that television should not be watched without strict necessity. Television is like speech: one can govern it, one can use it in a reasonable way. But, first of all, it is difficult to make a reasoned case for watching television because of the contents of the majority of television programs. Furthermore, this advice aids in saving us from vain curiosity. Therefore, more than the absence of television, which is already a healthy precaution, we stress the reasonable use of time.

Are exceptions to the requirement of residing in a Memores Domini house allowed?

GIUSSANI: Yes, when there are valid family or personal reasons. In such a case, the members of the association participate in the important moments of the life of the house, while economically it is obvious that they remain responsible for their family members first of all.

Vatican jurisdictions aside, what distinguishes the Memores Domini association from a religious congregation or a secular institution?

GIUSSANI: The *Memores Domini* association does not entail making explicit, in the classic

“vows,” the prospect of life to which its members commit themselves. And this is not due to a sort of reticence, but because it seems to us that Baptism and Confirmation can be sufficient to found a total dedication to Christ and the Church, without having recourse to the formal characteristic of religious life that is expressed in vows. My image is that of a layperson who freely lives an existence that is totally immersed in the world with a total personal responsibility. For example, if he is an entrepreneur, he is fully owner and joint responsible (with other possible associates) of his enterprise. It’s not presumption of a greater freedom, but evidence of complete respect for and trust in the personal responsibility of the Christian layperson. Nevertheless, there is a moment in the journey of the *Memoires Domini* in which the vocational commitment is undertaken as permanent before the whole community. Such a moment has always been understood as an assumption of responsibility before the entire mystery of the Church.

Does this determination to preserve the lay character of your endeavor, as a new form of monastic life for a new time, mean that you believe that the historical function of the traditional forms of religious life has been exhausted?

GIUSSANI: I think that associative realities that are totally determined by faith are alive in the measure in which they respond to the “signs of the times,” as John XXIII would say. Now, it is a sign of the times that today God and Christ (and tendentially the Church’s conception of reality) are not denied, but relegated—in the best case scenario—to the margins of life, or outside of life, with its storyline of concrete needs. It is necessary, therefore, that witness to Christ be given within worldly reality, in its daily dynamic, in work. Work is the phenomenon that expresses man’s attachment to life, the activity that renders concrete the image of his realization. It is within the working condition thus conceived, with its totalizing meaning, that witness to Christ must be given. And this is exactly the purpose of *Memoires Domini*: those who live the memory of the Lord in their work. Precisely in the heart of a world where the deification of work goes hand in hand with the spread of a hedonistic religion, the witness to a more powerful enjoyment, an indestructible joy, a new sense of beauty, a true affective and loving intensity, becomes even more surprising. This is increasingly true as the intolerant or inevitable attempt to control feelings—even the most common ones—carried out by the State finds likewise inevitable breaks imposed by pain, disappointment, or sudden silences generated by boredom or by an “incomprehensible” emptiness.

Congregations and religious orders, as in fact some examples already make clear, must see themselves in this incarnation of witness, even when the witness is rendered before the angels of God: in the silences of a cloister, or in the narrow limits of a conventual rule. They must bring about, within the limits of the possible and according to the rules of each order, a renewal of their origins, which were and must again become immanent to the life of the populace.

Sometimes, precisely in the name of a presumed immanence to the populace, some religious communities embark on social-political activism, becoming the jewel in the crown of parties and cultural trends that are traditionally hostile to the Church...

GIUSSANI: The dissolution of the original matrix from which orders and congregations are born certainly does not correspond to the need for incarnation to which I referred. It would be even more of a lie to reduce immanence to the world to an identification with the world, accepting criteria and models from worldly culture as the decisive criterion for understanding one’s religious life, thus making concessions to practices whose form and source is neither Christ nor the Church. In such a case, one’s own faith, instead of judging the world, would be judged by the world. And surreptitiously, one would begin to separate oneself from one’s own religious definition and the dynamism that it implies.

The Ecclesial Association Memores Domini—according to Article 1 of its constitutions—has a “private” and not a “public” character. Therefore, it does not involve the responsibility of the Church as such in its concrete action. Is there a particular meaning in this choice?

GIUSSANI: This experience, like the experience of Communion and Liberation that generated it, desires to be totally immanent to the ordinary life of the Church. If it requires an organization, it is only to safeguard a solidarity of help in the difficult task of Christian witness, and to continually nourish the spirit from which this commitment originates. Thus, it is as if I wished that the members of *Memores Domini* were not distinguished as an “association” in the Church. Let what is remarkable and notable, therefore, be the people with the example that they give, and not the fact that they are members of a new entity in the Church. In this sense I accepted the formula of “private.”

Following the desacralizing permissiveness of the 1970s, today—in the era of AIDS—there are even those in the secular world who list some “good reasons” to live chastely. At the same time, even the pagan religious world knew and practiced the ideal of virginity: for example, the “state chastity” of the Roman vestal virgins, or the condemnation of matrimony by the gnostics of the 2nd century. How does Christian chastity differ from these other types, in your view? Is it perhaps because the consecrated person lives the same renunciation for a different purpose: the service of others?

GIUSSANI: The difference is the same one that distinguishes the Christian from the pagan: the love of Christ, the recognition of His presence and the grateful wonder for His enduring in history. A greater availability for the service of one’s fellow men is, and must be, a normal consequence for one who is not constrained to sacrifice his physical and affective energies to have a family and raise children. However, this is by no means the motive for Christian virginity. Even a militant revolutionary could impose upon himself the renunciation of a family in order to dedicate himself totally to his political cause. The motive is, first of all, the fact that Christ called some of His followers to this form of life. One discovers from this that, if this was Christ’s form of life, then it could not imply a mutilation of the human or a diminished realization of the affective value. So, made curious, as it were, or spurred by this consideration, we ask ourselves what was the force of love with which Christ looked upon the men and women He encountered: Simon, John, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene... It was a relationship which surpassed everything and descended, embracing all of the humanity of the person, to the destiny for which each one of them had been created.

There is no love greater than this love for the destiny of the person, for the sake of which one can really lay down one’s life for one’s friend, as Jesus says. From this point of view, even a father and a mother, if they do not live the profundity of this gaze with regard to their children, would, in a way, love them less. The profundity of this gaze implies, paradoxically, a detachment. But existentially, it is precisely this detachment that renders possible an even more profound human embrace. From this point of view, virginity is an ideal for everyone, even for those who do not choose it as a state of life. The person who lives it as a state of life is like a finger pointed in the community, in order to say to all: let us remember who we are. For this reason, one of the aspects of the Christian event that is certainly suggestive like few others is the identifying of ourselves in the relationship that Joseph had with Mary. Virginal affection does not exclude any of the characteristics of human love. It validates the preferences as it redeems the antipathies.

What you are saying does not correspond to the commonly held idea of Christian virginity, as an amputation (heroic or paranoiac, according to one’s point of view) of human love, or as a mystical detachment from the unredeemable “flesh,” in the manner of the Eastern monks...

GIUSSANI: I have been to Japan, where I spoke at length with a number of Buddhist monks. I am not an expert on Asian religions, but my impression is that, in the mysticism of the East, virginity is a suggestion that springs from a pessimism regarding matter, from a perception of

individuality as a limit to totality, and thus as the origin of evil. Good is the whole, evil is the particular. Procreation, the unavoidable aim of the natural relationship between a man and a woman, is a continuous generation of that human particularity in which evil becomes pain. However, concerning this supreme aspect of the truth of the person that Christianity has generated and brought to light, there is a trace in every human experience, an ineradicable trace of a nostalgia for an ultimate purity; however, historically, outside of Christianity, it often comes to express itself in moralistic, pessimistic, or violent forms.

It does not appear that in the movement of Communion and Liberation the young people are the object of a repeated insistence on the norms of Catholic sexual ethics, nor are there special campaigns to promote vocations. Nevertheless, vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and lay virginity continue to flourish, even among very ordinary young people who are, like others of their generation, little inclined to make unreasonable sacrifices, in this as in other areas of human life. How do you explain this paradox?

GIUSSANI: It is quite true, there is this apparent paradox. But I would like to say that the aspect emphasized in CL that plays the most important role in obtaining the result you have noted is—to use the words that John Paul II addressed to us—precisely the fact that we believe in Christ who died and is risen, “present here and now.” His is a real presence, which is revealed and demonstrated in the aspect, though it be transitory, of the life of the Church. Undoubtedly, the young person, and even the person who is no longer young, needs to be continually introduced to the moral consequences, in his concrete life, of the great and peace-giving light of faith. This call represents the content of an education which is given within a companionship. The light of faith in Christ renders much more reasonable the motivations of the individual laws into which the moral impetus, that is, the impetus toward one’s destiny, must be translated. And thus, in a certain sense, the light of faith opens toward a joy which certainly does not avoid pain and sacrifice, but persuades the person to embrace them and, when one errs, to take up the journey again in an easier way. The ideal, the impetus toward one’s destiny that defines morality, cannot avoid the experience of struggle to the point of sacrifice, even the greatest sacrifice. But when sacrifice lived in the memory of Christ is rendered habitual, it becomes more reasonable and even bears a vein of joy.

This is why we always cite that passage from Paul Claudel’s *The Tidings Brought to Mary*, which says: “Peace is made of equal parts sorrow and joy.” In the perspective mentioned above, the sacrifices of the moral life are made more easily, in peace.

The aim of the Memores Domini is to live the memory of Christ in the working world. Traditionally Catholicism, in speaking of Christian witness in working environments, has emphasized the moral aspects: honesty, seriousness, and professional competence; the altruism of the individual Christian worker. What image of Christian witness comes to your mind when you think of the Christian presence in the working world?

GIUSSANI: I fully agree with the need to emphasize the things that you mentioned, but we are more concerned with establishing the attitude of the person, which can then translate into a witness without moralism and with coherent humanity. And the origin of this is the most real, and thus habitual, awareness of the presence of Christ and of the destiny of all reality to glorify Him. In particular, it is necessary to have a vivid awareness of the content of one’s own personality as belonging to Christ, so that it may leave a different imprint on things and on one’s environment; and therefore it may creatively achieve a form of relationship with one’s fellow workers, occupy the passage of time with full intensity, and fill with rational beauty the relationship with things in space. In fact, the most revelatory sign of this position is a vibration of joy, which is not born out of a lessened sense of responsibility, but which originates precisely in the awareness of the presence of Christ who has risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven, and for this reason, is already at the root of all reality—even of the reality that we have right in front of our eyes—and already redeems it, already makes it

participate in eternal truth. A vein of joy that, born from this awareness, causes one to feel more profoundly the pain, though temporary, of the weight of things, and above all of the alienation of man from his brothers and from the very objects of his work. It is a joy without irresponsibility, as one reads in Milosz's *Miguel Mañara*: "Do not reproach my tranquility of spirit and of heart: I do not neglect any of my duties."

Some Vaticanists say that you were inspired by the thought of the founder of Opus Dei. Others emphasize the elements of diversity between the two groups. Who is closer to the truth?

GIUSSANI: When the *Memores Domini* group was born, I did not yet know what *Opus Dei* was. *Opus Dei* is an association which greatly edifies me with its clear affirmation of Christian truth and its all-encompassing effort to form the person. But I have never spoken with them about these things, though I believe that many of the considerations I have expressed up to now would be easily recognized and shared by the members of *Opus Dei*. Perhaps some of the individual statements would need clarification, and I would be happy if they helped me in this, while on other matters there may be different points of view which characterize the diversity of the two charisms.

Is there any secrecy, within CL or outside of it, regarding who is a member of the Memores Domini?

GIUSSANI: There is no secret regarding membership in the *Memores Domini*, just as there is no propaganda. A certain discretion seems to me to be an entirely natural and comprehensible need. I hope that the members of this group will be recognized by the people around them for the witness that they give, and not because they are members of an association.

Speaking of similarities with and differences from Opus Dei, I cannot help but ask if there are hair shirts or other instruments of bodily mortification in the Memores Domini houses...

GIUSSANI: A person might have them in his own room because, within the limits of the possible, there is an insistence that everyone have his own room, his own "cell," and that the privacy of this room never be violated except for a sufficiently serious reason. Therefore, one of the *Memores Domini* might even have a hair shirt in his room. I do not have one...but I pray humbly to God that this does not signify a lesser desire for mortification.

Is it true that there is a policy that the heads of the most important CL communities and operations are chosen from among the members of this association?

GIUSSANI: No, absolutely not. Von Balthasar suggested to me on several occasions that the CL movement be led and directed by the *Memores Domini*, but I always replied that I was unable to see the necessity. It is obvious that, precisely because they must live the Church according to the vocational history that God has given to them, they also live the experience of the Movement. They are therefore always invited, because there is always a need to invite coherence in a position, to give generously of their energies to the institutional forms of the Church, as well as to the various forms of life of the Movement.

Your words bring to mind a phrase discussed at a recent Communion and Liberation gathering in Rome: "It is not at all a given that someone who has a particular religious propensity has an easier path to encounter Christ." This is a phrase that might appear "heretical" to the contemporary mentality. What do you think?

GIUSSANI: I do not find anything "heretical" in this phrase, because a religious propensity can also work in such a way that one may be attached to formulas of his own design or to moralistic concepts. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees certainly had a notable religious propensity, and this did not at all favor their acceptance of the Messiah... In fact, accepting Christ demands a forgetfulness of self as one focuses exclusively on the wonder of a

recognition. In the instant that one recognizes this presence, it is like a child who looks at his father and mother: that first instant, as he stretches out his arms, the baby forgets himself, yet realizes true love for himself. It is necessary, of course, that this original purity be maintained, continually fighting against the fall into the realm of one's own reactions, the realm of the seemingly obvious.

You have always refused to be defined as "founder." Once, I heard you say that you never intended to start a new Catholic movement. An observer unfamiliar with CL might deduce from these words of yours a sort of repentance, or at least of disappointment, regarding the organizational results of the experience that you initiated. How do things stand?

GIUSSANI: One cannot dream up, and therefore one cannot claim, a grace. In this sense, I do not accept the label of "founder." The Movement is a great grace for me, and the *Memores Domini* are the most acute moment of this grace. The repentance, if there is any, is the continually renewed awareness of my inadequacy, even in the pain for the inadequacy of others, in relation to what has been given to us. It is not at all a disappointment, but if anything the temptation, or at least the understandable desire, to unload a great responsibility before God. In any case, it is like a father and a mother who have given life to a child: they remain father and mother for their entire lives, and there is no divorce possible from the flesh of their child. For this reason, it is striking from the anthropological and moral point of view that Christ gave the same reason for the indissolubility of marriage and for virginity—that is, "for the Kingdom of Heaven." It is striking that the effort necessary to make virginity fruitful should find its parallel in the effort of indissolubility: in this sense, the first is like an encouraging companionship to the second. Whoever looks Christian matrimony full in the face not only does not wonder at virginity, but also gives thanks to God for giving this grace to humanity, because it is like a support and a comfort, the prophecy and the anticipation of redemption, fully realized in the midst of the struggles of the present.

In Catholic circles, even in those who claim to be close to Communion and Liberation, one often hears observations like the following: "How lovely this movement would be if its religious soul were not contaminated by the activities of some of its members, who plunge into economic affairs, or political and journalistic battles, which are inevitably divisive and controversial." Are you sensitive to this type of charge?

GIUSSANI: I feel hypersensitive to this type of charge inasmuch as I feel hypersensitive to every abstraction. But my unease becomes greater if the abstraction is the product of people who have Christian faith, because it is precisely the recognition of the presence of Christ and the love of Christ (which uphold Christians in hope: *spe erectus*, says St. Paul) that oblige the Christian to encounter and to answer—without avoiding anything, without being repelled by anything—the crowd of conditioning factors through which Christ Himself calls us. Christ calls man through the concrete reality of the conditions of every day, or rather, of every moment. For this reason, the members of CL, including the *Memores Domini*, according to the modalities through which they are called by the Father, must face the provocation of circumstances in that faith and that love in which they must continually set forth. The outcome of this depends on the mystery of the freedom of grace, and on the mystery of the freedom of the response of individuals, and also on the limits of their individual gifts used in humility. Indeed, each of us is called to pray to God that the faith and love of Christ so greatly vibrate and so fully determine his human efforts, giving them an evident and resplendent goodness, that others, from the goodness of the work, are forced to ask themselves: "How do they do it? Why are they so different, yet so human?" Just as Christ, with His miracles, aroused the question, "Who is this man?" among the people.

Jean Guitton wrote in Le Christ écartelé (The Lacerated Christ) that the scandal caused by the "form which is mixed together with matter, the eternal with time, and the pure with the

impure” constitutes the perennial temptation of gnosticism. Do you agree?

GIUSSANI: What scandalizes people is the relation between the ultimate and unique consistency of things—that is, Christ—and the contingent form of those same things. At the root of the abstraction of this scandal, there is an erroneous idea of the transcendent, which makes it more difficult to acknowledge that everything consists in Christ, and that human work must tend to manifest this consistence. In this sense, virginity is the witness that history is the pledge, the promise, of the manifestation of the recapitulation of all things in Christ. Without this vision of the transcendent, even for Christians there would be no alternative between the fundamentalist option—“religious truths” that impose themselves on reason from the outside—and the rise of the dominant culture, which has action alone as the ultimate criterion. In this sense, the *Memores Domini* are making a contribution to the solution of the most intense struggle taking place in the world and in the Church today. It is a struggle which, seeing the opposition of fundamentalism and secularism, ends by denying the very possibility of an Incarnation and, above all, the continuity of such an Incarnation in history.