

“That man may return to the religious sense”

by **Julián Carrón***

“A world in such rapid transformation calls Christians to be available to look for forms or ways to communicate with a comprehensible language the perennial newness of Christianity.” These words of Pope Francis describe the attitude of then-Archbishop Montini when he first reached the diocese of Milan: a profound attention to the situation of the human person, aware that “modern man is losing the religious sense” and that “a rational rehabilitation of the religious sense is needed” (1957) in order for faith to be a pertinent response to the needs of life. In those same years, Fr. Giussani had perceived in his young high school students this loss of an authentic religiosity and for this reason, following in the footsteps of Montini, wrote *The Religious Sense* (1957) to demonstrate the reasonableness of faith in the face of the challenges of the secular culture of the era.

In his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), Paul VI described how to achieve this task: “The Church’s ever-increasing self-awareness” will enable her to “listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have in their hearts. Only then will we understand them and respect them, and even, as far as possible, agree with them. [...] Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our faith.” Provoked by these words, Fr. Giussani wrote a few months later, “dialogue implies an opening towards the other [...] but dialogue also implies a maturity, a critical awareness of what I am.”

Fr. Giussani shared Paul VI’s perception of the challenge the situation of contemporary man represented for the Church, in “a world in profound transformation, in which such a great number of certainties are disputed or questioned,” and thus he also agreed on the point from which a new start could be made. During what Benedict XVI defined as “historic caesura,” the social upheavals of 1968, their response was common. Fr. Giussani loved to repeat a line of the Pope, who, in the face of this collapse, responded with the humble certainty of a Presence that is the wellspring of true humanity and of hope: “Where is the ‘People of God,’ so spoken of in the past, and still spoken of today, where is this ‘ethnic entity *sui generis*’? How is it composed? How is it characterized? How is it organized? How does it exercise its ideal and invigorating mission in the society in which it is immersed? We know well that the people of God has now, historically, a name that is more familiar to all: it is the Church” (1975).

And in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) he insisted on the method of mission as the only one that can respond to the needs of the human person: “Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness” of Christians, who “stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way?” The harmony with Pope Francis is stunning. “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.”

Fr. Giussani always remembered with gratitude Archbishop Montini’s, and later Paul VI’s, human openness toward the good he saw happening in the Church and his illuminated guidance, for example in allowing him to begin his educational efforts among the young people of Milan and then accompanying the development of the Movement, even to the words that Paul VI told him in Saint Peter’s Square on March 23, 1975: “Courage! This is the road,” inviting him to continue, as he had already done in the mid 1950’s.

For all these reasons, how can we not be deeply thankful to our Mother Church for acknowledging the greatness of the testimony of Paul VI to Christ, the One who takes to heart all our humanity?

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