



TRACES

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***The
charity
that
builds***

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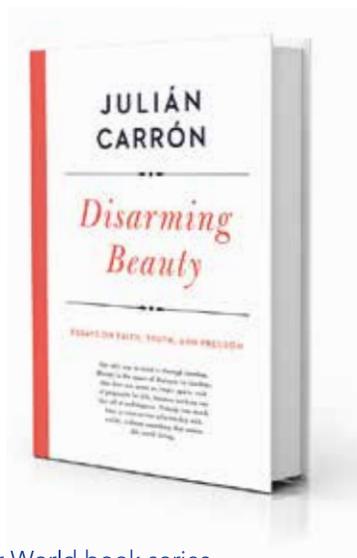
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That which is not fragile

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM



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The true difference

If there is one thing we cannot allow ourselves in the situation of widespread malaise in which we are immersed, it is a failure to perceived facts that point in the opposite direction.

We have these facts right in front of us, at times even enormous ones (how do you describe a food collection for the poor that all over Italy in one day mobilizes 150,000 volunteers and five million donors?), and yet we risk not seeing their importance, which lies not so much in their numbers, but in the method they imply. If we follow the thread of those facts, if we stop to look at them carefully, all the way to their source, it is clear that they emerge from the extemporaneousness of a “lovely initiative” and indicate a road, one which surely goes against the flow of the prevailing diffidence and rancor, but is real and open to everyone. This is the most urgent reality in front of us today.

For this reason, it is crucial to go back and look attentively at the Food Drive held in Italy and in other countries, as well as other gestures that fill daily life, even though they more often remain hidden. If you explore more deeply you find something more than solidarity and volunteerism. You find the wellspring at the origin of many rivulets and streams of good that often flow into works that challenge time. This is called charity, the heart of a way of living and sharing that Christ brought to the world, He Himself a “gift of self, moved” to women and men, to use Fr. Giussani’s words, Who makes it possible and desirable for us to imitate Him.

Charity is the strongest mark of Christianity in history, the true difference, capable of thriving in dark circumstances, eras, and moments, and of building, of generating a different humanity, of attracting those who no longer expect anything from a faith reduced to doctrine and morality. All this happens as long as one condition is met: not losing sight of the origin.

It is no coincidence that before the Food Drive at the end of November and the World Day of the Poor proposed by Pope Francis, Fr. Julián Carrón invited members of the Movement of CL to participate in these and other gestures, primarily as an opportunity to verify the faith, or in other words, an opportunity to pursue more deeply their bond with Christ and together to understand better what this bond can offer today’s wounded world. Does this mean a simple “pat on the back,” some flash of good and goodness here and there, or instead something more solid, perhaps even crucial? This issue of *Traces* is a small step on this journey of verification, which begins with events and personal testimonies and shifts to society and politics, because charity changes these realities also.

Cecilia, Gioia

edited by
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Why does my mother-in-law live this way?

For the Advent Retreat, we asked my mother-in-law to come on Saturday to give us a hand and on Sunday to stay with our son. It was all arranged but we didn't count on me getting sick. Saturday, in fact, I experienced a depressive episode that kept me in bed. I wasn't able to get up all day. I lay in the dark haunted by ghosts of the past that return only when I am not well. In the meantime, I heard my mother-in-law taking care of my son, helping my husband with lunch, cleaning the floor, and tidying the kitchen. That evening I was a little better and was rocking my child to sleep, thinking about the day. I realized in that moment that the presence of my mother-in-law was God's tenderness toward me. I was overcome by a great peace that freed me from the sense of guilt and shame I felt for having stayed in bed all day. I have been observing my mother-in-law for a long time. She takes care of everyone; not only those in her family, but also me and a string of relatives who have no one to count on but her and my father-in-law. I've tried to explain her behavior in many ways: she's from Romagna (prepare the pasta, clean, iron, keep an eye on the children, pick up prescriptions at the pharmacy, all at the same time); she has the temperament of someone who prefers to have something to do rather than sitting on the couch; perhaps she operates out of a sense of duty or she's retired and therefore has more time. But none of these explanations alone or together explain the tenderness and thoughtful concern and sense of compassion and charity with which she takes care of everyone. Sometimes it's clear that she's tired

but her fatigue never prevails: a gaze of compassion always dominates in her. And this is what I cannot explain. The most I've seen in similar situations is the fulfillment of one's duty, for example in helping others until one drops. Surely this dedication and carrying out of one's tasks are a response to what we are called to do and are sources of "merit" in front of oneself and God. But when I'm not able to get out of bed, I need more than just assistance: I need that gaze full of compassion and acceptance that I cannot explain (a welcoming of the entire mystery that I am and a welcoming also of a sickness that at first glance is difficult to swallow). At first, I didn't pay attention to that gaze, but it has become more evident to my eyes over time, and I can't chalk it up to a generic goodness of character or generosity. Perhaps it has something to do with her reading an article in *Tracce* when she sits down for a few minutes, or her reading the Gospel at night before she goes to sleep, or perhaps the School of Community, or Mass. I will have to ask her. Often, I think that the presence of God in my life has to manifest itself as some great light or as a dove descending from heaven. Today, however, in the simplicity of my mother-in-law's actions and the differentness and irreducibility of her gestures, His Presence was manifested like a gentle breeze that I could feel only because of my total poverty caused by my sickness. I never would have imagined that Christ would manifest Himself in my mother-in-law, and this is the difference between my thoughts and Christ's: "mother-in-law" is abstract; "my mother-in-law" is concrete. His manifestation is an event and therefore concrete and within history. How could I have forgotten this?

Signed Letter

School of Community among strangers

Dearest Fr. Carrón: I wanted to thank you for the gift of Fr. Giussani's meditation at the Beginning Day [see *Page One* at clonline.org]. It keeps me company, above all in this period of change for my family and me in

having just moved from China to England. In fact, I unexpectedly found myself in a foreign country where on the one hand I am responsible for taking care of my family and on the other I must begin everything again, including my friendships. In the beginning, this caused me anxiety because it seemed that everyone was settled and happy, while I didn't know where to begin in spite of the good intentions and clarity with which we started out. Then something happened: last week I was invited to a School of Community in a town not far from where we have settled; I went even though I didn't know anyone. That evening, while putting my children to bed, I realized that I was inexplicably happy and grateful and that even the tiredness and fatigue of being home alone in that unfamiliar place no longer weighed on me as it had the day before. I had to ask myself what had happened. The only possible answer was that on that day, in that town where I had never been before, with people I knew nothing about and who knew nothing about me, my heart had inexplicably found rest because for the umpteenth time in my life I saw Another at work through particular faces. This was no less true on the following days because even though, every once in a while, fatigue and fear reemerged, I couldn't get out of my mind's eye what I had seen. I was so full of what had happened that I no longer needed to add anything else but only to ask that this fullness enter into everything I had to do, like cooking, playing with my son, and talking with my husband about his work. Okay, so I don't understand everything Fr. Giussani says—on the contrary. But I intuit in what I have seen in this last week a possibility of fullness and the certainty of being able to rest all of myself on Something. It's a promise made to me in following the experience of the Movement, and I desire to always make space for this in my life.

Cecilia, London (Great Britain)

Who are you who has preferred me so?

Dear Fr. Carrón: I wish to tell you what has been happening to me since returning to live at home after five years of CLU in Bologna. My return and working in a bar while I write my thesis has been the occasion of a true crisis. As one of my friends said, life is marked by these moments of crisis which are God's gift to us so that we are forced to make a judgment. What struck me from the Beginning Day was when Fr. Giussani spoke of "hope in me," but I didn't understand. At first, I thought I should be "hopeful," which I thought referred to some kind of "performance" I should be able to sustain. But in looking

at myself, this hypothesis quickly vanished: I spent my days in my room writing the thesis about a topic I had chosen and was excited about, but nonetheless I was annoyed. At a certain point I asked myself, "Where can I start again? What exactly is this 'hope in me'?" What came to mind were the things that had become reference points for me in Bologna: the School of Community and the diakonia on Mondays with you. Even though I initially didn't feel like it, I began to follow these gestures here in Forlì. With time, I have noticed that unexpectedly the diakonia has begun to move me again, and returning to the School of Community and seeing people who have a truly incredible faith experience, I felt an envy that also moved me. I wanted to live like they do, to experience again the pleasure of studying in the way one of them said pleased her. These things have been an event for me, something unforeseeable that has saved me from the nothingness of my days, given back to me all of my desire, and reminded me of a whole story. It was above all the beginning again of a faithfulness to those gestures and to that company whose face is always changing. Because of this event, I remembered the charitable work, the homeless people I served breakfast to. Talking with a friend, it turns out that there is a similar reality in Forlì. I went to meet them and decided to begin doing the charitable work there. Last week, I saw a young guy there who was a couple of years behind me in middle school. He told me he is working there in the last months of his house arrest. He told me he had never had a job and had done nothing with his life, and that now things are hard for him because there someone wakes him up at 8:00 and tells him to wash the bathroom or clean the labs, and he is not used to this. It makes him feel humiliated. Then he asked me what I was doing, so I told him about studying law as a possibility for my future and I told him that some of my friends in the judicial system are helping me to understand this journey. He said, "You have friends in the legal system but all of mine are in jail." I stopped and thought, "But who are You to have preferred me?" Saying good-bye, I asked him to tell me, every week I was there, about at least one thing he had discovered about himself that was good because I was certain there was something. His bearing changed completely—he almost couldn't believe what I had suggested. Returning home, a certain uneasiness remained in me, however: when I consider the dramatic condition of man I can't help but feel a sense of powerlessness and of questioning, so much so that I have offered him up to God in my prayers.

Gioia, Forlì (Italy)

The secret of charity

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The many different stories from the annual Food Drive in Italy to collect food for the poor, each meaningful in its own way, strike one not so much for their exceptional-ity but for what emerges from them. This river of charity is fed all year round through similar gestures (such as the “charitable work” of the Solidarity Food Banks described in the second article) that go far beyond a generic commitment to “do good” and become a factor in our education, gradually generating a different conception of self and others. This is the level at which Christian charity operates, going deeper than volunteer work or solidarity, as laudable and valuable as these are. It is something else because it has another origin: Christ. Davide Prospero’s article confirms this, showing how Christian charity is a judgment on the world, especially on today’s world. (dp) ■





Hope at the Food Drive

We describe here faces and stories from a day that moved all of Italy and continues to move it because it offers everyone “a hope for all of life.” This hope came to Emidio, who came back from the brink of suicide, and to Roberto, who lives in a poor neighborhood of Taranto, but discovered an unexpected “richness”...

When a tall and dignified elderly man entered a Milan supermarket on November 24th, the Food Drive volunteers gave him a flyer inviting him to contribute and a plastic bag for donations. “He seems sad,” noted Tiziana, who had been volunteering there for a few hours. The man went to the fruit and vegetable section and grumbled a bit, finding it difficult to choose something. “Isn’t your wife here to give you a hand?” Tiziana asked. All morning long there had been a stream of couples of a certain age. “I’m a widower,” he answered, in a way that indicated that the wound was fresh. Then he asked for more information about the Food Drive, which products were needed, and whom they would help. “I saw that his shoe was untied,” says Tiziana, “but I didn’t dare tell him, for fear of embarrassing him. I pointed it out to my friend,” who bent over and tied it for him. “His face changed. He smiled. Then he went about his shopping. After twenty minutes he returned and said, ‘I went home to get 100 euros. Could you come with me and help me choose items for the Food Drive? Let’s not forget some sweets.’”

This is an example of events that arise “out of an experience of gratitude,” and bring to everyone a “hope for all of life,” to use Julián Carrón’s words on the eve of the last Food Drive, when he invited people to look on the proposal of the Food Bank as an opportunity to see how “charity” can be an open door through which those who volunteer and those who receive can enter in order to renew every corner of life and truly enjoy life in these difficult times, even when it seems impossible. The tons of food



Paolo Perego



collected are important, but they are not the most important thing about the Food Drive. A visit to some of the thousands of Italian supermarkets to be among the almost 150,000 volunteers who participated in this 22nd Food Drive, encountering millions of people, shows how that “hope for all of life” can blossom.

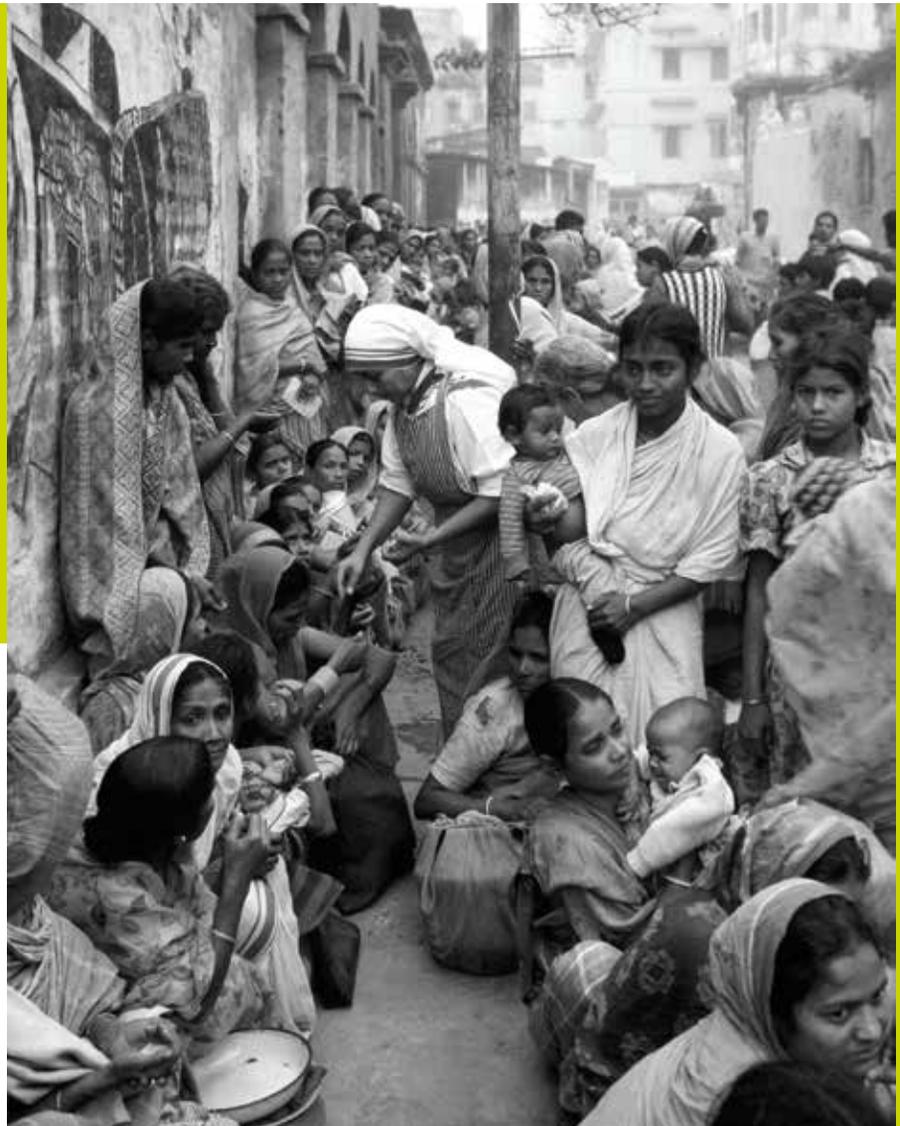
Take for example the supermarket in Taranto, in the poor neighborhood of Tamburi, affected by the closure of the Ilva steel works. You might expect the residents, when asked to donate, would say, amazed, “Don’t you see that I’m needy myself?” Twenty-one-year-old Roberto was born in Tamburi. He was put in foster care when he was 11, and returned home when he was 17, though his situation had hardly improved. “For a few

years now, I’ve been volunteering with some friends at a center that distributes food to the poor in the old part of Taranto. I also sing in a choir, and I’m active in the life of my parish. And I participate in the Food Drive.”

This year Roberto invited all of his friends and gave them *The Meaning of Charitable Work*, a booklet containing Fr. Giussani’s instructions to the first Student Youth members who went to organize games with poor children in the Bassa area south of Milan. Roberto explains, “Volunteer work and charitable work are not the same thing. By myself, I wasn’t able to explain that charity is love, and that in charity you bring the beauty and good that have happened to you.” Over two thousand

 A moment during the Food Drive held in Italy on November 24th -

A Calcutta road. This “Close-Up” is illustrated with images from the works of the Missionaries of Charity of Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the paradigm of Christian charity. Fr. Giussani wrote: “How important it is to read certain notes written by Mother Teresa and her sisters!—especially one that I have often read about how one of Mother Teresa’s sisters found a dying man in an open air sewer. She brought him home, bathed him, and laid him in bed. He said, ‘I have lived like a wretch, but I die like a king.’ Only a Christian can do this.”



© Tim Graham/Getty Images

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pounds of food were collected in Tamburi. “It was an unexpected gift. Many people gave, even if it was just a little.” Roberto brought his nephew with him. “He’s thirteen years old and far from the Church, but that day he asked me to accompany him to Mass and said he wanted to help prepare the ‘food packages.’” That evening, they gathered with friends who had volunteered at other supermarkets. Someone said, “Roberto, I saw your mother and father. They gave away half of what they bought.” Roberto wondered how that could be. “They didn’t say anything to me, but something moved them to do it. This reminds me of a conversation I had with a fellow at the gym. ‘You’re different,’ he said. I told him about my life, full of many experiences. He said, ‘No, it’s something more.’ I couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about the things I have done, about my story. I can recognize the experience of Christ in all this, and some guy I hardly knew saw it too.”

This also happened to Federico, who said that unexpectedly a stranger “made me see who I am in a new way.” At the Food Drive in a

supermarket in Rho, in the northern part of Milan, he was very busy and did not pay much attention to a young African who was there begging. “He observed us all day long, smiling every time our eyes met. We were doing the same thing as him, waiting for someone’s gift.” In the evening, the young man gave a bag with a few things in it to Federico, who thanked him. It could have ended there, but Federico returned with a friend later to see him. His name is Angelo and he is from Nigeria. They offered him breakfast. “No, thank you. I am observing Ramadan.” Asked if he was Muslim, he replied, “No, I’m Christian, but I don’t know how to explain to you that I’m fasting... to thank Christ for the fact that He is there and that I am well.”

Stefano, in Cernusco sul Naviglio, had a similar experience that “could have ended there,” with a phone number forgotten in his jacket pocket. “Omar, a man of about 40, came up to me during the Food Drive and asked if I could help him every now and then with a food package. I left him my number and asked him to write down his, and I sent him off.” But later “I

“Volunteer work and charitable work are not the same thing. Charity is love—in charity you bring the good that has happened to you.”

stumbled across that piece of paper and I called him. He answered, ‘Ciao Stefano, I was waiting for your call.’ Do you understand? Notwithstanding my distraction, someone was waiting for me, and he called me by name.”

“It is as if the world is waiting for nothing more than that hope, that opportunity. It takes just one person to rekindle it,” says Alessio, who brought his group of recently confirmed youngsters to help at the Food Drive in a Florence supermarket. The young people approached a handicapped man, Michele, in front of the entrance. “I thought, what are they doing? They really shouldn’t bother him.” But there they were, talking with him, and he wasn’t even there to do any shopping. He listened to them, went in, bought things for the Food Drive, and then stayed on to volunteer.”

The Food Drive was also present to prisoners. For example, Felice brought Tony out of the juvenile detention center of Nisida for a few hours of service in a grocery store in Naples. “Tony wrote a letter to express his thanks: ‘Dearest friends,’—this from a fellow for whom friendship is almost impossible—it was an unforgettable day.” Paola and Fulvio talked about the Food Drive in the newcomers’ wing of the San Vittore prison in Milan. “These people have nothing, and yet there was one fellow we told about the Food Drive who went to his cell and came back with a tangerine and a piece of bread. He didn’t have anything else: he gave everything he had.”

In Chioggia, friends volunteering with the Solidarity Food Bank had a party with the volunteers of the associations that had participated in the Food Drive. There was an aperitif, then games and testimonies, including Michele’s. He encountered the Food Bank during a difficult time in his life, and from then on could never turn his back on this gesture, “Together with my family, the Food Bank is the most beautiful thing in my life.” Emidio, an entrepreneur who fell into disgrace years ago, says, “There were the children, and the separation from my wife. My sister-in-law brought me groceries. I was thinking of killing myself.” Instead, he had a series of encounters with friends volunteering at the Food Bank and participated in the charitable work. He was able to start again, amidst highs and lows. “Today I may not have a dime to my name, but who can take all this away from me?” He was so “full” that he invited his ex-wife to volunteer at the Food Drive.

Rita recounts the follow-up to a story that began at the Food Drive the year before, when she met a former student who had many problems. “I began bringing her food packages, getting increasingly involved, above all with her 13-year-old daughter’s preparation for her First Communion, which she had not yet had.” The day of the ceremony Rita was moved. “Her mother arrived early to go to confession and to receive the Eucharist after a very long time away. Her desire for something great for her life is the same as mine.”

The usefulness and meaningfulness of charitable work can be a beautiful experience for those engaged in it. Pietro, 33, married with two little children, works in a hospital. “I tell myself, ‘Look at what has happened.’ It is His hand.” Three years ago, after the Food Drive, he was asked to bring food packages to a middle-aged ex-convict on the outskirts of Milan, destitute and unemployed. “The first months were difficult. I felt like a delivery man. I just unloaded the packages from my car, said a quick hello, and left.” That was not the “promise” of charitable work. His friends told him, “Don’t give up. Look more closely at what happens.” Time passed, and the sidewalk became the building entrance, then the foyer, then the apartment door. “One day he invited me to come in.” It was the beginning of a simple and true relationship. “I told him about myself, and got to know him as well.” A year later, Pietro invited him to volunteer at the Food Drive. “He was enthusiastic, wanting everyone to ‘understand how much good I have received.’” Their friendship grew and expanded to include others. It began to enter into the details of the daily life of each of them. “It is a relationship that changes me, one that is nourishing my faith. It makes me expect something in everything I live, from the troubled situations my wife and I are both facing at work, to the desire to raise our children well so that we can help them see all the good in the world. Every thing is becoming expectancy and prayer.” ■

“How can a person be *grateful* for his need?”

Thought-provoking notes and anecdotes from the latest assembly of the “Solidarity Banks,” 250 organizations serving over 80,000 people throughout Italy. This is how “charitable work,” one of the pillars of Fr. Giussani’s proposal, can cut through intellectualism, take away fear, and bring unity to life.



Paolo Perego



Preparation of food packages
to be distributed to the disadvantaged
by the "Not by Bread Alone" Food Bank in Varese.

“When we see everything collapse, there is nothing to keep us from beginning again. And when we propose this, it is not an abstract discourse. The Church is a life.” Fr. Julián Carrón is leading the discussion one Saturday morning in mid-December during the Italian national assembly of “Solidarity Banks”, a network of food banks and charities. The meeting was held in Milan and broadcast online in about 50 cities throughout Italy. The Solidarity Banks comprise 250 organizations from all over the country that provide assistance to 80,000 people. The method? It’s called “charity” and involves people who freely go once or twice a month to deliver a package of food to someone in need: pasta, olive oil, milk, canned food... “It starts with that: the material need. But it doesn’t end there,” says Andrea Franchi, president of the National Federation of Solidarity Banks. It offers a new start and changes lives, because a man’s “need” goes beyond the need to eat. And charity also changes the one serving, because that deeper need is felt by everyone. It is what Fr. Giussani called “charitable work,” a gesture occurring within a faithful commitment, which he always indicated as an opportunity to verify the faith, a criterion for going deeper into every aspect of life, something that renews life. No theories, just watch what happens: this was Franchi’s invitation to his friends in preparation for the assembly. Giovanni is studying engineering in Milan. He has been delivering a package of food to a young man for two years. “A little while after I started visiting him with a friend, he told us he wanted to go to Switzerland for an assisted suicide. He suffers from the same degenerative disease his mother died of. We stayed with him as best as we could, trying to accompany him. But it was hard not to try to talk him out of that idea.”

A decision is made. The young man “wrote a letter explaining his motivations, a procedural requirement. But he also sent it to Pope Francis. Why? Because he was not totally resigned to the idea that Switzer-

land was the only option...” The Vatican answered, and Giovanni managed to arrange a meeting with the Pope. “It didn’t help. Even meeting the Pope was not enough.” Back home, he sent us away again.” Even though the relationship became rocky, the young man never totally cut them off, though he still occasionally mentioned Switzerland. Giovanni continued: “I never stopped reaching out. I needed the relationship. He sent me a text: ‘I feel God with me; He will never abandon me. And he gave me you two to accompany me for this stretch of life.’” “Why is that young man still alive?” Carrón asked. “You have to recognize what you are carrying when even the Pope wasn’t enough, the hope that is in you.”

This was not so different from a story told by Norbert from Varese province. This was the story of another “impossible” hope written in a few lines on the paper he was holding about one of his friends who had lost his wife and started coming to the food bank because of a promise his wife forced out of him on her deathbed. “She and my wife had been friends since they were little,” Norberto wrote. That friendship picked up again when the woman got sick, and Norberto’s wife went to visit her almost every day, first by herself, and later with some friends. The woman saw “a kind of life quite different than hers, but one she could no longer do without.” All of that led to my friend’s promise. “Now my friend comes to the food bank. Not just because of his wife’s wishes, but because of what he saw happening in his own home over those months.”

“How can a person be grateful for his need?” Carrón asked. “Look, Christ came to reawaken us so that we could see the nature of this need and to place us in a position to be able to remain and face life.” Being needy is not to be condemned—a person can “be surprised to find in another person a gaze he desires for himself” and begin to spend time with that person and, gradually, find himself changed.

This is a discovery, as it was for Fabio, a businessman from Piemonte. “In twenty years of helping with food drives and the food bank, I’ve come to understand my

own needs more than the needs of others.” From the first day of his participation, his commitment steadily increased. “Fascinated by the beauty of those gestures, I got more and more involved.” It was a kind of “doing good” that, however, fell short of his needs over time. “It wasn’t enough, but I didn’t understand what was missing” until a friend challenged him: “Who truly responds to your desire?” The answer appeared over time. He speaks of when “on a summer vacation with a group from CL, as soon as we arrived that friend hugged my wife and me with an embrace I’ll never forget. It was as if...No, a correction: it was Christ who embraced me, saying ‘I was waiting for you.’” This changed Fabio’s way of doing charitable work, which now became “grateful and full of tenderness for all you meet.” It even changed work, “For example, how I dealt with an employee who asked for a raise.” Fabio gave him one, but the employee thought it was too small and threatened to quit. “I could’ve reacted badly; instead I met up with him.” They spoke and Fabio intuited that the person in front of him just wanted to be respected for the work he did. “He wanted to be loved...That made it easier to embrace him and his desire and look at him for the cry in his heart. And, though I told him the conditions weren’t right to give him the raise he wanted, that became a minor detail. Just a few days later he said to me, ‘But, then, you really care more about me.’ Now he works with even greater passion than before. Christianity generates an intelligence for life, a gaze that is truly good for us, even in a business.”

This is crucial, Carrón reiterates. “Doing good” does not last. “Unity of life is one of the essential characteristics of the Christian life.” And charity, charitable work, cuts through intellectualism. “Do we recognize the value of this gesture? It helps us to understand what we think we already know.” This is why Fr. Giussani proposed it as a foundational pillar of the life of the Movement, together with School of Community. “We cannot understand one without the other,” Carrón goes on to say, referring back to the anecdote Elisabetta related at the beginning of the assembly. The woman from the Marche region faced a hundred inconveniences in delivering food to one family, including waiting in the

pouring rain “clutching her package,” and ungrateful recipients. “I went home with my heart full of an odd sadness. It came to mind that in order to learn how to face life I should look at the text of School of Community, which always surprises us with its ways of thinking that are different from our own. As I read, I saw myself beginning to look at what happened with different eyes. I stopped feeling the burden, and the sadness lessened. Now I’ve started to be more serious and faithful to my work on the School of Community, beginning simply from my need. This is why I keep delivering packages.” Continuing is not automatic. “You have to recognize, right now, what happened to you,” Carrón said to Matteo from Carrara. He found himself delivering food to a family of convicted felons, without knowing that the woman was under house ar-

“I quit school at 16 because I was afraid of reality. To my parents, I was a failure. But I met someone who embraced me, who loved me just as I am.”

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rest for selling drugs: “One time, after visiting them, I was stopped by the police,” and an hour of searches and interrogations followed. “They let me go, but I went home angry. Why?” Matteo met with the head of the anti-drug unit. “He explained the woman’s history; they thought I was part of the circle. I asked him if I should stop going to see them and he said, ‘No, they need you.’” However, for three months, he stopped showing up. “One morning, the woman called me and I didn’t answer. She called again the next day, and the next. I had my excuses all ready. I finally answered and she started with “ciao, Matteo, why aren’t you coming anymore? Don’t you care about me?” It was like a punch in the stomach. I quit school at 16 because I was afraid of reality. To my parents, I was a failure. But I met someone who embraced me, who loved me just as I am. Am I any better than that woman?” Years later, he describes himself as happy and without fear, neither about “my work in the quarries or my family... Charitable work is a gesture that puts back into focus that all I need to live is Jesus. A living Jesus.”

What we need is “not something from the past. We need for the Word to become flesh in our midst,” Carrón emphasized. “Do you see what charity is? What makes it possible for a person to recognize his need for Jesus, for One who makes life truly ‘life,’ so that he can wake up in the morning happy to go work in the Carrara quarries? This is the Christian life, which nothing can get keep us from, even now with the collapse of certainties and the liquid society... What takes away our fear is seeing Him at work. We have everything we need in order to live.” ■



Calcutta, 2007. serving food to the volunteers of the Sishu Bhavan Children's orphanage.

The beginning of a *new world*

In the current crisis, gestures of charity embody a cultural and political judgment because they disable a certain mentality we find within ourselves and set us in front of a crucial task: proposing a concrete ideal that meets needs and touches hearts even when it seems that nothing has the power to do so anymore.

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Davide Proserpi

Vice-President of the CL Fraternity

For some years now, the same old refrain has been repeated ever more frequently and tediously: there is a crisis in politics in Italy and elsewhere. Even the most recent elections, which should have marked a long-awaited and long-demanded change of course, actually only contributed to reinforcing the melancholy conclusion that politics has once and for all lost its role, if not in institutional terms, then at least as purporting to meet the needs of the people.

This sentiment is nourished by the social networks and exploited by the many mass media outlets that dance to the tune of the political and cultural figures who identify with anti-politics and the deconstruction of society. What does it matter that they have no concrete proposal to build something? This question seems irrelevant to most people. Now is the time to demolish because everything is rotten and does not deserve to stand.

Everyone can see that politics is in crisis, but to my mind, this ruinous crisis does not derive from the absence of a political elite, or even from the loss of a network of associations—the “intermediate entities” like associations, labor unions, etc. These are factors in the crisis, but the deep reason for it lies in a refusal to

believe that politics is first of all an attempt to express an ideal.

The most dramatic aspect of our era is the absence of proposed ideals, even particular or limited ones, as have been present in many periods in our history, and which were the expression of an attempt to answer the deep questions of the human person. Very often these proposals went on to betray that initial impetus, becoming ideology to the degree to which they did not take reality in all its aspects into account. But now we observe bitterly that even these attempts no longer exist.



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Calcutta, 1979. Mother Teresa with one of her poor.

Why is it that today “the belly” prevails more and more in our decisions? It is because only my immediate self-interest matters, in the sense that there is no longer an acknowledged ideal to exert one’s efforts for, which causes people to believe that they are somehow freer. Instead, the only result is slavery to the dominant mentality by which our ideas are unwittingly shaped, and which Fr. Giussani referred to as “the powers that be.” Inevitably, there is always a power that orchestrates things and that prompts people to do what it wants, and this is increasingly so the more we move toward a conception that views the person as autonomous and unbound by ties, relationships of affection, or authentic educational realities that can support the development of a mature human subject. We must become aware that this is the road we have taken. We must recognize that we need to change course.

For this reason, in recent years CL has proposed another way of living our relationship with politics. It has not involved a renunciation, but an affirmation of the need to become aware of this historic shift that concerns not only Catholics and is the root of the unease that is profoundly undermining the foundations of our society. What is at the core of the educational concern of this proposal? A firm affirmation that the first bulwark against the prevailing power is the construction of a solid human subject. The recent idea in favor of the rebirth of a Catholic party in Italy cannot take hold when there is no longer a social fabric that supports it. We inevitably return to the same point: today more than ever, it is not be possible to have such a party if the subject who lives a certain ideal experience is lacking. This is the true problem. The current challenge is to show that a lived ideal can be something very concrete.

In this sense, I believe that certain gestures of charity CL has been engaged in for years have a meaning that goes well beyond the collection of goods for the most needy. The truth is that they publicly express a cultural and also *political* judgment inasmuch as they represent a concrete proposal of an ideal, a hypothesis of response to certain needs. In recent weeks, many of us have participated in various gestures of charity, and others will continue in various forms in the coming months, such as the Christmas Tents to support the AVSI cooperation projects and the great gesture in Italy of the Food Drive, described in these pages.

Let's take the latter as an example.

The Food Drive is a gesture of colossal dimensions, collecting the equivalent of 17 million meals to donate to those most in need, thanks above all to the presence of 150,000 volunteers who animated the day, showing everyone that freely doing good can still benefit one's own humanity. It is interesting to try to look at the reasons for such enthusiasm for this kind of gesture. Where does it come from, and where can it lead us? Certainly, many who participated did so for a variety of reasons, personal and otherwise, but there is always a well-spring for this shared enthusiasm.

To my mind, the true root of the educational value of these gestures, first of all for those who do them, lies in the affirmation that the ideal for which people work together, reaches the concrete level of touching the need of individual persons. Only such a concrete ideal can be strong enough to affect others in an age in which it seems that nothing has the power to touch us any longer,

in which people do not even feel the need to get together to do something or even just to understand.

Today we are living in a condition in which a great many challenges are emerging for society and humanity on all levels. However, in all this it seems that a concise judgment is lacking. For example, I was told about a public gathering in Milan where the Sisters of Charity of the Assumption gave a testimony about how they offer real help to immigrants, from the smallest details to educational help, freely and often without being recognized. Some of the attendees, most of whom were Christians committed to engagement in society, felt a sort of distance, half expressed with sentiments like "yes, fine, but these people are invading us. We have to set up bulwarks, and slow down their arrival." What is the reason for this kind of reaction? Why can we sense the scandal caused by a distance from even such profoundly human gestures? It scandalizes us because this gratuitousness, this way of welcoming, is a judgment that challenges a mentality that we ourselves have by now taken on. It undermines a habitual way of experiencing things. Charity is a judgment in history, not merely something that concerns a space of generosity that one can create in one's life.

So why propose the ideal beginning with charity? Because the only thing in any situation that has the power to affect the human heart is to perceive a different gaze upon yourself, to perceive that someone sees your life as worthwhile, to realize that you have a destiny and that this destiny is good. Fr. Giussani began from this point in *Recognizing Christ*. What is the factor of difference that makes

you encounter the fact of Christ here and now? You see people who live this difference, with this profoundly human goodness inside. This is the beginning of a new world because it is the principle of a new subject in history that is generated by an encounter with Christ present.

"Work that becomes obedience is called charity," observed Giussani: "Love for your woman that becomes a sign of the final perfection, of the final beauty, is called charity. And the people that, instead of being the subject of a human history that is a chronicle of fights and battles, become the story of Christ, the reign of Christ, the glory of Christ, is charity. Because charity is looking at a presence, every presence, with one's soul seized by a passion for Christ, by a tenderness for Christ." Gladness and joy, those things we desire in normal everyday life, are possible only under these conditions; otherwise, "these two words should be expunged from the human vocabulary," because they can no longer exist. Giussani continues: "Contentment, satisfaction, all you want, exist, but gladness does not exist. Gladness demands absolute gratuitousness, which is possible only with the presence of the divine, with the foretaste of happiness, and joy is its momentary explosion, when God so wills it, that will support the heart of a person or a people in significant moments of education."

This is the point. "To support the heart of a people," so that "it is not a confused mass of faces, but the advancing reign of Christ." This is why charity is what we need most, because, as Giussani concludes, "it is the law of everyone." ■

That which is not fragile

It is often said that the best investment a country can make is in education. This is not just rhetoric, as could be seen during the three days of the CLU Spiritual Exercises. The students wholeheartedly took on a question most want to avoid: in life, what holds true?



Ubaldo Casotto
photos by **Elena Iannella**

Italy, Rimini, December 7, 2018, the CLU Spiritual Exercises, 5:00 pm. A group from Naples arrived in the hotel lobby and a receptionist told them that she would call out their names in order according to their room number, and asked them to pull out their IDs. “Guys, one document for the entire group,” said the group leader. “Excellent,” a voice exclaimed, “One document for all of us!” “No, one document per person,” clarified the first voice. Within minutes, someone had already lost his key. “Whose is it?” asked a third voice in vain. This comical situation contrasted with the attention paid by the secretaries to the smallest details, from the memos with very detailed schedules posted backstage to the strict security system the police required to enter the Rimini Fiera Expo Center, where 3,500 students were expected. Individual passes, lines, security checks at the gate... But the students did not complain about these things even if they were inconvenient; they acknowledged them and that is it.

At 5:30pm, Julián Carrón arrived in the meeting room. On the screen behind the stage was the title of the Exercises: “What Withstands The Impact Of Time?” The choir stood to the left of the stage and the ushers were stationed in front of it. Carrón began the Exercises by addressing them: “Thank you, because you do not come here automatically and your decision to be here is in itself something to acknowledge. If we live these days without asking ourselves why we decided to come, we miss the best part. Let’s not take it for granted. Paying attention to how we give our time and energy reminds us of what happened to us, for which we are grateful.”

Carrón continued to repeat the word “gratitude.” It is clear that he did not want to communicate the fluctuations of a feeling to the youth, but the substance of a reason. The verb he used was provoking: “We are here together in these days to live [Editor’s note: he does not say “to understand”] this question: What withstands the impact of time? What makes our decision to be here

matter in time?” He challenged them: “I am telling you, but I am telling myself too: you can lose yourself in what you have to do, just as I can lose myself by letting the anxiety of what to say overwhelm me.” Supporting the logistics of these days—the way everything comes together is always striking—can be an opportunity for “a new awareness that can be applied to life. Be present in front of what you do and you will be able to better understand what we tell you.”

To be present in front of what we do. This can be said and it can be demonstrated in action. On Friday night, people entered the room in silence (moments of silence are always a sight to behold). The music started to play; it should have been Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony*. Backstage, a person with an ear more perceptive than any technology said, “this is not Schubert; it’s Mozart.” In other places, people would have let that slide, but not here. Stop. Then back to work. Ev-



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ery second was filled with purpose, always driven by an attraction to the ideal. This was not just something that happened behind the scenes. Rather, for those who witnessed it, it was the first chance to verify what a group of 30 or so students said at a dinner with Carrón: “In order to come here, one must have a reason. The reason is life. Our life together is the reason.” This appeal to life can be, and most of the time is, a reference to some vague “life force.” The conversation that unfolded around that table, however, was rational.

The way those students engage without difficulty in a discussion with someone who, on the jackets of his books, is described as a theologian, though to them he is clearly just a wise friend, once again demonstrates what Giussani means when he says that, “The solution to problems does not unfold by studying the problems directly, but by studying the nature of the subject that faces them.” One student, when speaking about friends who did not come, said that “their ‘no’ can be linked to a history of insecurity in relationships—it is necessary to give them time and for them to see that we do not abandon them, we do not deceive them.” He may not have been a group leader, but he is someone who first and

foremost takes himself seriously. Carrón responded, “You have spoken about your friends, but I am struck by your experience, how you reached out to them: a positive experience in which you discover the way that we are called to live. Membership in the group is no longer a sufficient incentive. A person can adhere to the invitation made at the Exercises only in an experience of a way of life.”

After dinner was the introduction and two songs: at the beginning, “La guerra” (“The War”) by Claudio Chieffo and at the end, after Mass, “Estote fortes in bello” (“Be Valiant in War”) by Luca Marenzio. “The war” was ignited by the question, “What can withstand the impact of time?” “We feel the necessity for something that will last,” said Carrón, but “we have become used to nothing lasting,” caught up as we are in the vortex of ever-changing feelings and “a constant dance of perceptions.”

It is a question that “makes the whole drama of living stir inside us.” The usual response to dramatic moments of life is to console someone, but Carrón says that, “The first act of friendship is to take seriously this question, a question that forces us to be

In the following pages, some accounts of the CLU Spiritual Exercises (Rimini, December 7–9, 2018).

ourselves, to experience true affection toward ourselves, that does not let us slip into the void.” He read many witnesses, signs of a relationship with the students that is not improvised, but rather that he has lived and followed faithfully over the past year. One young woman said, “This question has struck a painful chord and has brought me to ask, ‘In what do I place my hope?’” For her, it has awakened “an attentive gaze so that I can recognize the faces that express something greater, as I have seen those who live for Christ do.” The question is, in a sense, a means to an answer; it makes people alert, she explained, so that they can “detect the slightest possibility of an answer.” A friend is “one who takes seriously the question,” someone who does not turn his back on his own humanity.

Carrón interrupted his reflection so that they could sing “Farewell” by Francesco Guccini together, emphasizing one line: “But every story has the same illusion, the same ending,” and repeating the question, “What holds true?” he remarked: “A friend is someone who forces us to take seriously the relationships that are most dear to us, who forces us to look at this truth.” The alternative is what Eugenio Montale describes as “the emptiness behind me.”

But at the heart of every disap-

pointment, as with every beautiful thing, “something endures: the desire to be truly happy.” This sense of, “I will keep looking for him until the final day of my steps on this earth” (Borges). How? “Look / the clear eyes open / signals in the distance and listening / on the shore of the great silence” (Machado). Concerning silence, Carrón says at the end of the evening that you should “let it penetrate to the bone”; if you do this, when something beautiful happens unexpectedly, “you will run to meet it.” “It could not be, because we never would’ve thought of it, and yet it’s here,” Giussani said to other students 50 years ago: this is the unexpected that causes us to emerge from anonymity and frees us from the fear that everything ends in nothingness.

On Saturday morning, Carrón transitioned from Guccini to Isaiah: “Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.” We want to know “if this great promise is kept.” We are caught between two extremes, but the promise confirmed by evidence of “something that happened” is stronger than the weakness recognized and documented in several contributions, which are “something pointing toward something deeper” that for an instant manifested “immediacy, certainty, and unquestionable evidence”; but, at the other end, there is the fear of losing these things. Paradoxically, there is a “fear of beauty,” the suspicion that Christianity is an illusion. “What is missing is faithfulness to

what has happened,” Carrón challenged the students: “Hypothetically: you are at point A (your normal lives, with everyone’s criteria in place); B happens, which introduces a newness of life; and then the next day, you fall back into A as if nothing had happened.” It is as if in life there is nothing definitive that can be gained, only a feeling, the precursor to skepticism and nihilism.

There has to be a judgment, “an understanding of what has happened.” The word “judgment” should not be abstract and dry, divorced from experience; rather, it ought to be a word full of existence. This is made clear by the previous example: in that moment, Giussani, as he listened to *La Favorita* by Donizetti, intuited “with great intensity that the thing we call God is that happiness for which the heart has an irreducible need.”

Giussani was a genius, okay, but this genius is shared by the girl who wrote a letter read by Carrón: “I remember exactly how it began, I can never forget it, I can never let emptiness have the last word because of the simple fact that I have found something that has filled me.” You cannot reduce what you have seen, even if you only caught a glimpse of it.

The chaos of the world today, the fluidity in which we are immersed, and the dominant confusion, do not blunt this need, but rather heighten it: “In this chaos, thanks to this suffering for which you must be happy,

it is easier now than in other periods of history to see the uniqueness of Christianity.” A true educator in these critical moments has the harshness of one who loves the destiny of others: “Your weakness is not the problem! It is not a matter of strength; it is a problem of reason!”

The alternative, Carrón warned, is the miserable banality of daily life, which you can only emerge from “with a judgment and with love,” in the same way (he did not propose a similar experience, but an identical experience) as happened to the apostles when they were with Jesus: “Do you also wish to go away?” To leave is the reoccurring temptation after the initial encounter, it means denying “the entire experience of certainty” that occurred. To remain is a “profound and reasonable” judgment. The reasonableness of remaining allows for the reemergence of the factor of time: Jesus “waited for time to make the disciples more certain.”

Is this possible today? “Verify this,” answered Carrón. “The Church does not deceive you, so don’t deceive yourselves.” The promise is “a life far greater than any other” because “Jesus has given you what you need to face the world.” (This could be said, incidentally, to both clergy and laity distraught by the challenges of the world; if it is a life, the Church challenges the world.)

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During the assembly on Saturday afternoon, the content and method of the challenge materialized, not so much in the answers but in the questions Carrón posed to those who spoke that encouraged them to go back to their experience, extracting that which is not fragile, so that it can last. At dinner, he stated it plainly, “We have deluded ourselves for a long time by giving ‘theological’ answers that people could repeat without understanding rather than letting the answers come from experience. As for me, guys, I do not want to answer your questions by filling your minds with empty formulas.”

At the level of experience, there was the witness of Matteo Severgnini, the principal at the Luigi Giussani High School in Kampala (Uganda), which merits an article of its own. He told a story, recounting its steps. A “story” must have a central point of reference, otherwise it is an illogical cluster of episodes, anecdotes, emotions, and feelings. Severgnini’s story rested on certainty: “I asked myself ‘who am I?’ and discovered that I am one ‘who is precious in the sight of someone, of Christ.’” This discovery gave rise “to the desire for a radical change in my life,” that brought him to enter the *Memores Domini* [Editor’s note: lay people who dedicate themselves to Christ in the workplace]. “While Seve was speaking, I didn’t take any notes,” said a student



from Rome: “I had to look at him. To listen to him meant watching him speak.”

Carrón resumed here on Sunday morning: “The newness you have found in you needs to find its source, the apex that makes it possible. You have to verify what has happened to you, accept it, and stay faithful. You have firm evidence of a gaze that revealed you to yourselves and that filled you with excitement. It will not be by the effort of your will that you resist the decay you immediately detect in your lives, in contrast to the newness that just a day ago attracted you completely. There is a weakness that is fundamental, structural, that you become aware of, so it would be delusional to believe you can resist the mentality that

surrounds you with just your own effort. Still, a reduction in your enthusiasm cannot negate the exceptionality that has been seen.”

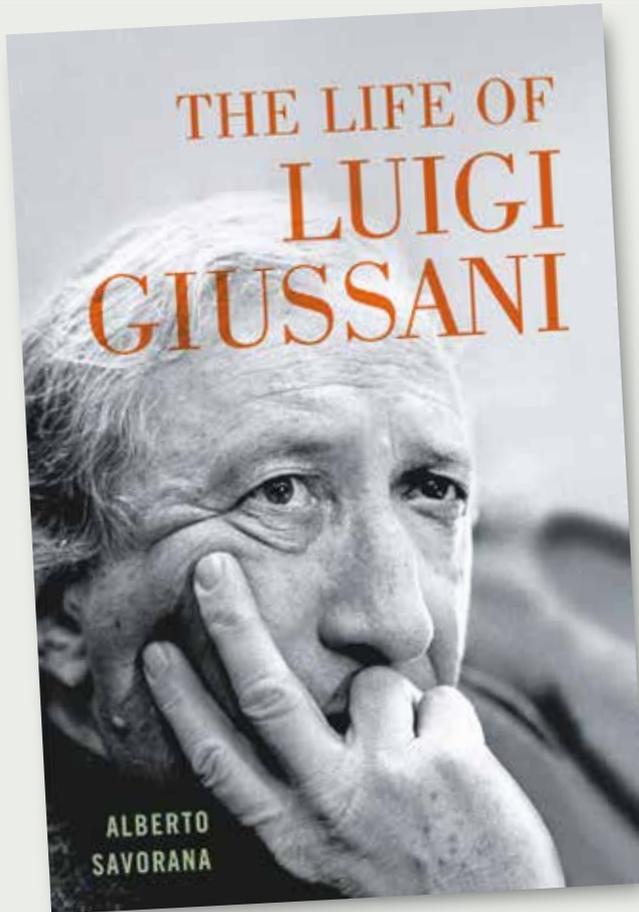
Carrón continued: “The exceptionality is the fact that the change lasts, that it becomes a part of history. But ask yourselves: has Christianity become history through the strength of the will of the disciples? After the death of Jesus, they were disoriented, disappointed, and defeated, and shut themselves in a room; historians have asked themselves how it is possible that a few days later they were completely transformed.” It is clear that something happened. “They saw Him, that is what happened!” Alive because He was risen, so present now. “The exceptionality is the claim of Christ’s presence *now*, in history,” as the one who has triumphed over

history. “This is the certainty we call faith.” So then history becomes “the manifestation of meaning.” Something that will outlast the span of an emotion or a feeling has its origin in this: “Revisit the sign of the victory of Christ. You will be able to endure the circumstances that you must live only by going to the place that lasts,” the Church, which has undeniably lasted in history, and in time you will verify “the fulfillment of humanity,” of a humanity that blossoms in its truth. “This is our contribution to the world and to history, the cultural significance of our change.”

It is often said that the best investment a country can make is in education. This is not just rhetoric—this author has seen the proof of it in action, and every true fact demands commitment. ■

THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan



A detailed account of the life and legacy of the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement.

1,416 Pages, December 2017

Monsignor Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy, which has hundreds of thousands of adherents around the globe.

In *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, Alberto Savorana, who spent an important part of his life working and studying with Giussani, draws on many unpublished documents to recount who the priest was and how he lived. Giussani's life story is particularly significant because it shares many of the same challenges, risks, and paths toward enlightenment that are described in his numerous and influential publications.

In addition to providing the first chronological reconstruction of the life of the founder of Communion and Liberation, *The Life of Luigi Giussani* provides a detailed account of his legacy and what his life's work meant to individual people and the Church.

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