

“Our heart has an ultimate, imperious, deep-set need for fulfillment, for truth, beauty, goodness, love, final certitude, and happiness’. Is this true? And what is able to correspond to these needs of the heart?”

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

2. The Christian Event as an Encounter

by Luigi Giussani*

Exceptional and with a deep human sympathy

How could the first two, John and Andrew (Andrew was probably married with children), have been won over at once and recognize Him (“We have found the Messiah”)? There is an apparent disproportion between the extremely simple way it all happened and the certainty of the two. If this fact happened, then recognizing that Man, who that Man was, not in depth and detail, but in His unique and unparalleled (“divine”) value, must have been easy. Why was it easy to recognize Him? Because He was *exceptional* beyond compare. They had come into contact with an exceptional Man, someone absolutely extraordinary, impossible to reduce to any analysis.

What does “exceptional” mean? When can something be defined as “exceptional”? When it corresponds adequately to the heart’s original expectations, however confused and hazy one’s awareness of it may be. Exceptional is, paradoxically, when what is most “natural” for us appears. And what is “natural” for us? That what we desire should come true. For nothing is more natural than the satisfaction of the ultimate and profound desire of our heart, nothing is more natural than the answer to the needs that lie at the root of our being, those needs for which we actually live and move. Our heart has an ultimate, imperious, deep-set need for fulfillment, for truth, beauty, goodness, love, final certitude, and happiness. So to come across an answer to these needs should be the most obvious and normal thing. Yet, on the contrary, this correspondence, which should be supremely normal, becomes supremely exceptional for us. To come face to face with something absolutely and profoundly natural, that is to say, something that corresponds to the needs of the heart that nature gives us, is therefore something absolutely exceptional. There is, as it were, a strange contradiction: what normally happens is never truly exceptional, because it does not respond adequately to the needs of our heart.

It is the exceptionality of the figure of Christ, then, that makes it easy to recognize Him. For John and Andrew, that Man corresponded to the irresistible and undeniable needs of their heart in a way that was unimaginable. There was no one like that man. In the encounter »

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades,
Generating Traces in the History of the World,
McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 6–11.

» with Him, they felt an unimagined, unimaginable correspondence to the heart that they had never before experienced. What an unprecedented astonishment He must have awoken in the two who first met Him, and later in Simon, Philip, and Nathanael!

Not only was it easy to recognize Him, it was very easy to live in a relationship with Him. It was enough to adhere to the bond He generated, a *deep sympathy*, like the dizzying, carnal bond a child has with his mother, which is sympathy in the deepest meaning of the term. A child can misbehave a thousand times a day with his mother, but God help you if you take him from her! Were he to understand the question "Do you love this woman?" imagine how he would shout "Yes!" The more he had misbehaved, the more he would shout, "Yes, I love her!" to reaffirm it. This is the logic of knowledge and morality that life with that Man made necessary: a profound sympathy. Learning from His exceptional nature was therefore an ultimate sympathy made manifest.

2. GOD'S METHOD

An event, not our thoughts

The first chapter of St John's Gospel documents the very simple and profound manner in which Christianity emerged in history: the happening of a human event, the encounter with an exceptional presence. For John and Andrew, Christianity, i.e., the fulfillment of the Law, the fulfillment of the ancient promise in whose hope the faithful remnant of the Hebrew people (Anna the prophetess,¹ Simeon,² the shepherds,³ all described in the first chapters of St Luke) had lived, the Messiah, the One who was to come and for whom the people were waiting, was a man standing right before their eyes. They had come across Him, they had followed Him, they had gone to His home and spent the whole afternoon there with Him, filled with astonishment, open-mouthed, watching Him speak. And when, on their way back, they said, "We have found the Messiah," they were repeating with certainty words they had heard from Him. The fulfillment of the great biblical promise was a man right before their eyes. *Event*: No word in the dictionary reflects the way in which the "issue" became real, became flesh in time, better than the word "event." Christianity is an "event," something that was not there before and arose at a given point." Not that John and Andrew said, "What happened to us is an event." It was clearly not necessary for them to specify what was happening to them by means of a definition. It was happening!

Christianity is an event. There is no other word to indicate its nature, neither the word *law*, nor the words *ideology*, *concept*, or *plan*. Christianity is not a religious doctrine, a series of moral laws or a collection of rites. Christianity is a fact, an event. All the rest is a consequence. The word "event" is therefore crucial. It indicates the method chosen and used by God to save man:⁴ God became man in the womb of a fifteen- to seventeen-year-old girl named Mary, in "the womb... where our desire did dwell,"⁵ as Dante says. The *manner* in which God entered into relationship with us to save us is an *event*, not a thought or a religious sentiment.⁶ It is a fact that took place in history, a fact that reveals who God is and points out what God wants from man, what man must do in his relationship with God. As »

¹ See Luke 2:36-8.

² See Luke 2:25-35.

³ See Luke 2: 8-20.

⁴ See L. Giussani, *At the Origin*, 100-4.

⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, The Rev. H.F. Cary, trans. (London: William Smith 1845), XXIII, 104-5.

⁶ See L. Giussani, *At the Origin*, 29-35.

» a way of communicating Himself to man, God could have chosen direct enlightenment, so that each individual would have to follow what God suggested to him in his thoughts and in his heart. This would have been by no means an easier or safer road, since it would be constantly exposed to the fluctuation of feelings and thoughts. But the way God chose to save us is an event, not our thoughts!⁷

For the salvation of man

Christianity is an event that man comes across, and in which man discovers himself to be "of the same blood."⁸ It is a fact that reveals the self to itself. "When I encountered Christ I discovered myself to be a man"⁹ said the Roman rhetor, Marius Victorinus. To say that man is "saved" means he recognizes who he is, he recognizes his destiny and knows how to direct his steps towards it. As Albert Camus writes, "it is not by scruples that man will become great. Greatness comes, if God so wants, as a fine day."¹⁰ It is an event—the breaking in of something new—that gives rise to a process whereby the self begins to become aware of itself, aware of the destiny towards which it is heading, aware of the journey it is making, of its rights, of the duties it must respect, and of its entire makeup. The dynamic of an event, moreover, marks out the way of knowing in each new step it takes.¹¹ Without an "event," nothing new is known, no new element enters our awareness. The French critic Alain Finkielkraut, in an interview on the relevance of the poet Charles Péguy for today, states the following, "An event is something that breaks in from without, something unforeseen. And this is *the supreme method of cognition*. We need to give back to the event its ontological dimension of a *new beginning*. It is a breaking in of the new that breaks apart the mechanism, and that sets a process to motion."¹² To come to know is to come face-to-face with something new, something outside ourselves, not built by us, something that breaks the mechanism of the things already established, the definitions already given. Cesare Pavese says, "Something external has to intervene in order to change direction."¹³ An event is therefore crucial for every "discovery," every type of knowledge.

Now, that Fact, the event of an exceptional human presence, posits itself as the method chosen by God to reveal man to himself, to awaken him to a definitive clarity regarding the factors that constitute him, to open him up to recognize his destiny and to sustain him on the journey towards it, and to make him into a subject suited to action that bears the meaning of the world within history. This event, then, is what sets in motion the process through which man becomes fully conscious of himself, of his entire physiognomy, and begins to say "I" with dignity.

God became an event in our daily existence, so that our "I" might recognize itself with clarity in its original factors and attain its destiny, be saved. So it was for Mary and Joseph. So it was for John and Andrew, who followed Jesus, taking their cue from John the Baptist. »

⁷ Isaiah 48:6–7.

⁸ 2 Peter 1:4.

⁹ See Marius Victorinus, "In Epistola ad Ephesios," Liber secundus, in *Marii Victorini Opera exegetica*, cap. 4, 14.

¹⁰ A. Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1959* (New York: Marlowe 1998).

¹¹ See the three methodological premises (Realism, Reasonableness, and Morality of Cognition), in L. Gius-sani *The Religious Sense*, John Zucchi, trans. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1998), 3–33.

¹² A. Finkielkraut, "Tirerò Péguy fuori dal ghetto" (*I Will Pull Péguy out of the Ghetto*). Interview with S.M. Paci, in *30 Giorni* (6), June 1992.

¹³ C. Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere*, (*The art of living*) (Torino: Einaudi 1952), 14.

» God was entering their lives as an event. Whether they always kept it in mind or at times forgot it, especially during the early days and months, the whole of their lives depended on that event. Insofar as an event is important, you cannot retreat from it. That is how it was with them. This is how it is today with us: an event can mark the beginning of a journey. The event can point to a *method for life*. It is, in any case, an experience to be had. This journey requires the engagement of the person who is struck by the event, and will eventually reveal the true meaning of what he or she has begun to glimpse: it is the development of a way of looking at things.¹⁴

¹⁴ See I. de la Potterie, "Guardare per credere." Interview with A. Socci, in *Il Sabato* (46), 14 November 1992, 60–5.