

# Fr. Luigi Giussani: his gaze penetrated your soul

Celebrations have been held throughout the world in memory of the charismatic founder of Communion and Liberation, an innovative educator and untiring force for good in society, who died 15 years ago in Milan. The recollections of Julián Carrón, president of the Fraternity of CL and Fr. Luigi Giussani's successor as leader of the movement.

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**“He sought beauty and found Christ,”** and from this encounter drew the vital force that inspired generations of young people from the postwar years up to today, 15 years after his death in Milan after a long illness, on February 22, 2005, at the age of 83. He was born in Desio, in the Brianza area north of Milan, Italy, and was the son of Beniamino, an artist, woodcarver, and socialist, and Angelina, a textile worker and Catholic. At the tender age of 11, Luigi Giovanni Giussani entered the minor seminary of Venegono. Ordained at the age of 23, he requested that he be allowed to teach at the Berchet Public High School, and did so for 13 years. He then became a full professor of theology at the Catholic University of Milan, a position he held until 1990.

## A life-filled relationship with his students

In the 1950s and 1960s, times of great zeal and fervor for many high school and university students, **the young Fr. Giussani laid the foundations for the birth of the movement of Communion and Liberation** in high schools, where Student Youth, which was related to Catholic Action, was already active. Student Youth gained new drive from the young priest's teachings about the religious sense and the reasonableness of faith, the pedagogy of Jesus in revealing Himself, and the nature of the church as the continuation of the presence of Christ in history. These were years of renewed activism among young Catholics. In connection with the 1968 protests, many of them were induced to abandon the Christian experience and join the student protest movement.

## Communion and Liberation is born

The times were ripe for channeling the initial engagement of young Catholics into **an educative proposal centered on the Christian faith that continues throughout one's entire life**, a proposal that does not run out, but is continually renewed by listening to the gospel and penetrates every sphere of daily life. Thus, with the intent of furthering this proposal, in 1969 a movement called "Communion and Liberation" was born. It would soon spread throughout society to schools, universities, parishes, factories and other workplaces, where it often posed a challenge in culturally and politically hostile contexts.

## The tumultuous expansion of the movement

In the 1970s and 1980s, this journey was marked by the tumultuous expansion of the movement in Italy and abroad. **Today CL is present in about ninety countries and on five continents**, though participants are not asked to apply for formal membership. As Fr. Giussani often reminded listeners, "I wagered everything on freedom," even though he was not unaware of the risks and the possibility that the movement would stray off course intellectually, organizationally, and politically. He continually recalled its followers to "the true nature" of CL: faith lived in communion as the foundation of an authentic liberation of the human person.

## Give value to the true, the beautiful, the good, and the just

A year before his death, Fr. Giussani wrote an illuminating description of what he saw as his role as an "educator to Christianity." "Not only did I have no intention of 'founding' anything, but I believe that the genius of the movement that I saw coming to birth lies in having felt **the urgency to proclaim the need to return to the elementary aspects of Christianity**; that is to say, the passion of the Christian fact as such in its original elements, and nothing more. Perhaps it was precisely this that awoke the unforeseeable possibility of encounter with personalities in the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Protestant, and Orthodox worlds, from the United States to Russia, in an impetus of embrace and appreciation of all that remains of truth, of beauty, of good, and of right in whoever lives a sense of belonging."

## The School of Community and the Fraternity

Among the most significant realities created around the movement are the School of Community and the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, an association recognized by the universal Church in 1982, its **members commit themselves to live faith as a journey in holiness** according to the method transmitted by Fr. Giussani. Today there are more than 65,000 members throughout the world.

## The Meeting of Rimini and the Food Bank

Two initiatives have seen great popularity in Italy, with the involvement of **hundreds of thousands of volunteers**: the Meeting of Rimini, dedicated every year to public debate on current topics in civil society and in the ecclesiastical community, and the Food Bank, which collects food and recovers surpluses from agricultural and industrial production, and distributes them to charitable organizations throughout the nation.

## The enthusiasm and the inexhaustible charism of the founder

Fr. Giussani lived an intense life of prayer, social engagement, travel, encounters throughout the world. He had an inexhaustible charism and enthusiasm for every expression of art. Only seven years after his death, **in 2012, the Vatican opened the cause for his beatification and canonization**. His tomb in the Monumental Cemetery of Milan is a destination of devotion and prayer for the many people who knew him, valued his pastoral work, and benefited from his undeniable human and spiritual gifts. Among these is **Fr. Julián Carrón**, Fr. Giussani's successor as leader of Communion and Liberation, the president of the Fraternity of CL, and a professor of theology at the Catholic University of Milan.

**Fifteen years after the death of Fr. Giussani, this extraordinary and charismatic priest, what is the greatest legacy of his charism that remains?**

**Carrón**—The greatest legacy that remains is that he introduced us to an experience of faith and Christian life that fascinated and continues to fascinate all who encountered him. The more we live his charism in these dramatic and confused times, the more grateful we are for the educative method he showed us; he seemed to have foreseen today's multicultural situation in which the only possibility for people to become interested in the faith is to find something that fascinates them and prompts them to live more intensely. For this reason, as time goes by, we are ever more grateful for this grace we have received.

**Fr. Giussani sowed the seeds of the movement in the difficult years of powerful changes that led to the political and cultural revolution of 1968. What lesson can be learned for facing today's challenges to Christianity and for motivating young Catholics to be socially engaged?**

**Carrón**—Fundamentally, what he did in those dramatic years leading up to 1968 is what we do now in another context, a context that is not as homogeneous as it was then, but is much more multicultural, featuring a continuous interrelationship among personalities from completely different backgrounds, from all cultures and religions. The challenge remains to find a modality of living the faith that people can clearly see. I think this is the greatest thing that can be done – as the

pope always says, Christianity is not communicated by proselytism but rather by attraction. Thus the question is whether people can discover something that attracts them with such power and beauty that they are able to find the true nature of the faith: an experience in which life becomes a hundred times more beautiful and intense.

**Today the movement of Communion and Liberation has spread throughout the world. In which countries do you see particularly strong vitality in proclaiming the good news, the heart of the Christian message, and the beauty of living?**

**Carrón**—In many countries, but above all, outside Italy, where the presence of the movement is very widespread, I think of Brazil, the United States, and Spain as places where this vitality is particularly intense. For example, the social reality of the United States, which I have just visited, might seem less likely to be interested in us, but instead, there are spaces and modalities where people dialogue, get involved, and live a life that amaze us. We were struck speechless in seeing how they can be interested in a proposal of faith as an event that changes life.

**So then, we shouldn't be timid in proposing Christianity, though at times we feel a lack of confidence and think that today Christianity is incapable of proposing itself as it should...**

**Carrón**—Absolutely, there should be no timidity. If you conceive of Christianity as a form of moralism for hitting people over the head with concept after concept understood only as doctrine, then yes, you should be timid, because this persuades no one. But if instead people are challenged by a beauty, an attraction, a way of living life that challenges the mediocrity of living as mere survival, then there is no reason to be timid. Rather, we should be bold so that people can be presented with the possibility of a full life, which unfortunately doesn't happen very often. When we live with awareness the true nature of Christianity as an event that changes life, more people will be able to perceive a gaze and a way of being in reality that are fascinating.

**You were very close to Fr. Giussani. Is there something of this closeness you had the joy to experience that you particularly cherish in your heart?**

**Carrón**—Above all his gaze on people. If there is something that could encapsulate Giussani's personality, it is the way he looked at you, how his gaze penetrated to the innermost being of each person he encountered, and the way he wanted to be present for each person as if that person were the only one in the world, giving value to all that the person was, even to the point of being willing to give his life for that person. Those who experienced this even for a brief moment will never forget it and will cherish it in their hearts; it is like recognizing Jesus. Now more than ever, in this moment of fear and discouragement, we need to find a gaze like this.