



TRACES

litterae communionis

Communion and Liberation  
International Magazine

Vol. 22  
April 2020

04

***What can  
conquer  
our fear?***

## TRACES

Communion and Liberation International Magazine  
Vol. 22

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**Publisher (Editore)**  
Editrice Nuovo Mondo srl  
Iscrizione nel Registro degli Operatori di Comunicazione  
n. 26972

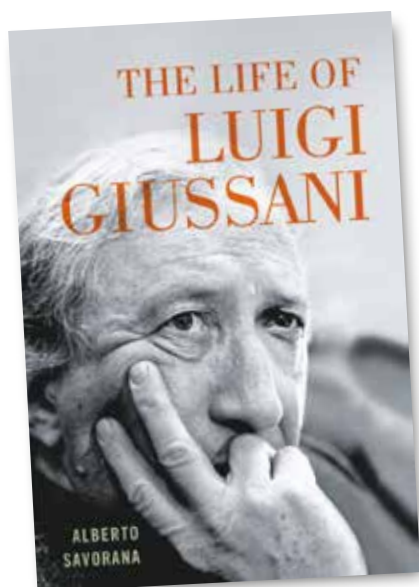
**Cover**  
The Easter poster by Communion and Liberation.  
*The Gospel according to Matthew* (1964), directed by P.P. Pasolini.  
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for the texts by Luigi Giussani and Julián Carrón

# n. 04

April 2020

- 01**     **Editorial**
- 04**     **Letters**
- 06**     **Close-up**  
*The new normal*
- 07**     *Fear and presence*
- 12**     *The cry from the "red zone"*
- 16**     *A day in the hospital ward*
- 20**     *At the wellspring*



## 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

MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS

## “What saves us from nothingness?”

Milan, March 12, 2020

This issue's editorial is the letter that Fr. Julián Carrón, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, sent to the whole Movement.

*Dear friends,*

Though the authorities have still not given any instructions regarding the month of April, the current public health emergency and problems related to the organization of our gestures require us to cancel our regularly scheduled events for this time of year: the Fraternity Exercises, the Exercises for workers, the GS Easter Triduum, the CLU events for Holy Week, the Way of the Cross and Fr. Carrón's School of Community with video connection on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

This decision, imposed by the health emergency, does not eliminate the insidious presence of coronavirus among us, nor does it lessen its capacity to provoke us, nor give us permission to look away, as if it does not affect us. Like it or not, it is a concern for all of us. Our question is the same as for all people: how can we face this circumstance as men and women?

On such occasions—which the Mystery does not spare us—we can grasp even more clearly what a grace the charism that has taken hold of us is, verifying its capacity to help us face all that happens. “The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious [...] is to live always the real intensely” (*The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1997, p. 108), as Fr. Giussani told us. With this conception of religiosity, we recognize every circumstance in the context of vocation. “Living life as vocation means tending toward the Mystery in the circumstances through which the Lord has us pass, by responding to them. [...] Vocation is going toward destiny, embracing all the circumstances through which destiny has us pass” (*Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida [Reality and Youth: The Challenge]*, Rizzoli, Milan 2018, p. 65). Fr. Giussani was well aware of the dizzying effect this has on our life: “Man, the human being's rational life, would have to be suspended on the instant, suspended in every moment upon these signs, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, [which are] the circumstances through which the unknown ‘lord’ drags me, provokes me toward his design. I would have to say ‘yes’ at every instant without seeing anything, simply adhering to the pressures of the occasions. It is a dizzying position” (*The Religious Sense*, p. 135).

It is hard to find a better description of the situation in which we find ourselves when we truly face all that happens in life, a dizzying experience of being suspended “in every moment upon these signs, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, [which are our] circumstances.” Yet this is the only reasonable position, because it is through our circumstances that the presence of the Mystery, of that “unknown ‘Lord,’” challenges us and goads us on to His design, to our life's fulfillment.

“Reason,” however, “is impatient. It cannot bear to adhere to the single unique sign that is the means for following the Unknown. This sign, which is the chain of circumstances, is so obtuse, so dark, so opaque, so apparently random that to pursue it is like placing yourself at the mercy of a river's currents that toss you here and there” (*The Religious Sense*, p. 135). In the coming weeks, each of us can see which attitude prevails in us: the

willingness to adhere to the signs of the Mystery, to follow the provocations of reality, or letting ourselves be tossed about by any and every “solution,” proposal, or explanation that can distract us from that provocation and avoid the resulting dizzying position. Each of us, then, can verify the true solidity of the “solutions” in which we seek shelter.

How can we accompany each other in all this? What kind of companionship do we really need? So often, we seek an answer, emptying out the event that reached us, reducing it to a web of relationships that protects us from the impact of things, that spares us the challenge circumstances pose instead of spurring us to embrace it! A companionship like that, however, cannot respond to our need: in moments like the one we are living, when the urgency of life appears in all its unavoidable power, this is as evident as ever.

A young friend of mine just graduated college and started his new life. Consequently, we cannot see each other as often as when he was at the university. Recently, he was complaining to me about that, so I reminded him of a scene from the Gospel. One day, the disciples were in a boat with Jesus and realized they had forgotten to bring the bread. Despite the fact that they had witnessed two gigantic miracles—two multiplications of loaves as had never been seen in history—they began to argue because they had forgotten the bread. I pointed out to my friend that Jesus was there, beside them, in the boat! But they kept complaining! The problem was not that they were alone, because Jesus was with them, but that it was, for them, *as if He was not there*. So they argued about the fact they did not have bread! To help them see the real problem, Jesus did not perform another miracle. What good would it have been to perform another one, after all they had already seen? So, what contribution does Jesus give? He asks them three questions. First, “When I broke the loaves the first time, how much was left over?” Then, “And the second time?” And, finally, “Do you still not understand?” (cf. *Mk 8:19-21*). How invaluable is this contribution Jesus offers his friends that does not spare them the questions! He does not continue to explain, or perform other miracles, but rather solicits them, within their own experience, to make full use of their reason, that they might be able to recognize *who it was* they had encountered (they had the lord of the “bakery” with them!). If they did not understand, pay attention, it was not because they were alone or did not have the elements they needed; it was because they still were not using their reason well. Jesus had revealed Himself to them through

the many signs they had seen as an exceptional response, one that finally corresponded to their heart, to the needs they and other men and women had on many occasions, including in dramatic ways, but they had still not recognized who He was with that recognition called faith that, “flourishes on the extreme boundary of the rational dynamic as a flower of grace to which man adheres with his freedom” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, p. 24).

Jesus takes advantage of every circumstance to show His disciples His way of facing all that happens, even unexpected and painful things, so that they might experience the relevance of His presence, of their relationship with Him—of faith—to life’s needs. “The content of faith—God made man, Jesus Christ who died and is risen—that emerges in an encounter, at a point of history, embraces all its moments and aspects, which are brought as if by a whirlpool into that encounter, and must be faced from its standpoint, according to the love that springs from it, according to the possibility of its usefulness for one’s own destiny and for the destiny of man it points to” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 20). If the encounter we had does not become like a whirlpool that draws in every moment and aspect of life, we will find ourselves lost in front of every unexpected happening, every narrow door we face.

It is in the continual experience of an unexpected ‘advantage’ in one circumstance after another that “the encounter we have had, which is all-encompassing by its very nature, in time [let us underline that: in time] becomes the true shape of every relationship, the true form by which I look at nature, at myself, at others, and at things. When an encounter is all-embracing, it becomes the shape, not only the sphere, of relationships. It not only establishes a companionship as the place where relationships exist but it is the form by which they are conceived of and lived out” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 20).

It is at this level—the recognition of the all-embracing nature of the encounter, which becomes the true shape of every relationship—that presences who are truly “friends” come to our aid, bearing witness to the road that will allow us to live through a situation like today’s. Presences that we do not plan, so exceptional—though found in the same circumstances as everyone—that they leave us speechless, in silence. “I was suddenly thrown into the trenches. It feels like being at war.

My daily work and family life changed overnight. As a doctor, a mother, a wife, I found myself sleeping isolated from my husband, not seeing my children for two weeks, and not being able to have direct contact with patients. Between me and each sick person is a mask, a face shield and their protective suit. Often, they are elderly people who are living all this alone. They are afraid. They die alone. Their relatives, isolated in their homes, cannot help their loved ones; they receive calls from me in the middle of the night to communicate the death of their family member with the phone standing between me and them. What can I do for them, at a human level, as a Christian? I go back to the ward; I look for the smile and hug from a nurse who is a friend: during this time of isolation I also need to physically feel togetherness. They are the only ones I can hug. In the face of all this, I am strengthened by rereading Carrón's letter to *Corriere della Sera* ("This is how we learn to conquer fear in times of difficulty," March 1, 2020, p. 32) every day because it helps me return to an attitude of openness, of asking myself what holds up in the end. I am called to recognize what is essential, what is true. Then there's the path I've walked in the work of School of Community: trials are the way faith can grow if our freedom is put into play in the face of that Preference that asks everything of us. This is dizzying. We have to entrust ourselves and accept the risk. The certainty that sustains our life is a bond, and there is a journey to make before we arrive at that affective certainty. Circumstances are given to us to help us become more attached to the One who calls us in a mysterious way. Faith is trusting that He is calling us. 'It is only when a well-founded hope prevails that we are able to face our circumstances without running away.' We are called, now more than ever, to respond to Him who calls us in a mysterious way. This is the certainty I can give to my patients, to their families, in addition to medical care."

This is the challenge we all have to face. At this time, in which nothingness is rampant, our recognition of Christ and "yes" to Him, including in the isolation each of us might be forced to maintain, is already our contribution to the salvation of every man and woman today, before any legitimate attempts to accompany one another, which should be pursued within the allowed limits. Nothing is more urgent than that self-awareness.

Even though we will not be able to have the Fraternity Exercises, nothing can keep us from proceeding on our journey and continuing to increase our certainty, that "well-founded hope" which we absolutely need to keep living through these

circumstances. I am providing you here, therefore the question that I had intended to use as preparation for the Exercises, which has never been as relevant as it is right now: **"What saves us from nothingness?"**

We all saw how useful the question we sent last year was in helping us be attentive to our experience. This year, it could make an even bigger difference. I, therefore, invite anyone who would like to send his or her contribution to [comunicazionifrat@comunioneliberazione.org](mailto:comunicazionifrat@comunioneliberazione.org).

We will later consider together how to make the path we walk in the weeks awaiting us into a treasure for us all and the most suitable way to respond to any questions that emerge, with openness to the unexpected.

It is an unprecedented and dramatic time. One in which those gestures so dear to us, like the *Angelus* in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, the *Memorare* before going to bed, our daily work on the School of Community individually and with our families, the short prayer *Veni Sancte Spiritus* when we first wake up and in every moment in which circumstances become so challenging that we need to cry out to be able to face them, take on even greater significance!

I urge you to remember fraternal charity, paying attention to the needs that emerge among us, to stay in contact as much as you can, and to make the best use of all the tools technology offers us.

Finally, following Pope Francis's invitation, "we continue to pray for all who are ill, for healthcare workers, the many people suffering due to this pandemic."

I embrace each one of you during this time of Lent, so decisive in our conversion to Christ, who is victorious over death.

Let us accompany one another, allowing ourselves be challenged by the times in which we live, so as not to miss out on the opportunity the Mystery has prepared for us!

Yours,

Fr. Julián Carrón



# Letters

## Riccardo, Loredana, Silvana, Maria Grazia

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
*pberga@tracce.it*

### “By what do I live?”

Dear Fr. Carrón, it seems to me that the coronavirus has laid bare so many things. I felt put to the test: all of a sudden, I had so much more free time, which triggered in me an inner struggle. Deciding what to do was anything but simple, but every possibility that I could live by inertia was swept away by this unexpected situation. On Sunday I had gone to see my folks in Forlì (I study in Bologna) when the situation began to deteriorate. I asked myself, “But where am I being called to be?” I had already decided to return to Bologna that evening for lots of reasons—there was a deeper question than feeling bound by my obligations. “By what do I live?” This question made its way into my heart and has kept me company. For example, one thing that amazes me is how there is room in me for silence during the day—studying, reading, writing an email to a friend, playing music, reciting Lauds. The desire among those of us from CLU who stayed in Bologna was further revealed as the desire to not lose our lives while trying to live them, which is the sign of a still-beating heart, and the desire to recognize Christ, which allowed us to be united in what we had decided to do. Even though we had just come back from some very intense days, I was struck that the tension did not lessen. Taking all due precautions, we rushed to help each other tidy up or set the table. We decided together how we would spend the following day. Then, during evening prayer, we reaffirmed our dependency on the One who was allowing us to enjoy life in that moment. It was beautiful to run into my professor

who is mentoring me for my thesis and who was surprised to see me in Bologna, and to tell him why I had chosen to stay, as well as to discuss with my parents my unexpected choice (when choice was still possible) to return to Bologna, putting everything on the table. I don’t want to live the coming days without this intensity, which I do not hesitate to call the hundredfold. My desire is that we always remind each other to live at this level, with or without coronavirus. I am inclined toward and attached to Him, so I want even more for my life.

**Riccardo**, Bologna (Italy)

### A domestic church

If Christ is present in reality, it means that He is also in this specific moment we are living, a moment that is calling everything into question, that has wiped away our certainties, our efforts to be efficient, our routines. Schools are closed, people are working from home, businesses are in crisis, the healthcare system is stretched to the limit. Even our freedom is affected—we are under “house arrest.” But what does God have to do with all of this? In my experience, He has a lot to do with this. The fact of not being able to go to Mass or the parish center or to meetings makes me understand how important the absence of these things is for my life. It has brought about a greater unity in my family as we pray the rosary together or watch the Mass on TV. This absence makes you desire God even more and makes you desire that your home become a domestic “church.” Also, paying attention to the rules they’ve given us makes us understand the meaning of obedience because my incorrect behavior can harm someone else. Avoiding contact with others is a great sacrifice for me, especially refraining from gestures of affection with my husband (from whom I must sleep apart), my children, and others dear to me. This step away from people (a meter away to be

precise) makes me contemplate my family and loved ones in the same way that I contemplate the Most Blessed Sacrament. For this reason, a gratefulness to God arises within me, along with an awareness that I would give my life for them. Because of them my life is full of meaning, and when I look at them, I can't help but go to Him to ask that He save them, and not only from the virus. But I must do everything without touching them, because in my home, a meter of distance has been necessary from the very beginning given that my husband's immune system is compromised and I am a healthcare worker and a possible carrier of the virus. In this season of Lent, I offer this up to God and pray to the Madonna that she might work a miracle, or better yet, that the whole nation might get on its knees and pray. But at the same time, I live everything that is given to me as an opportunity for my conversion.

**Loredana**, Italy

### Outside my comfort zone

I am in a managerial position at work and found myself caught up in a power game that involved a number of people I considered friends and held in high esteem. A short time later, my husband was diagnosed with lymphoma for the third time, which would require him to undergo a series of chemotherapy treatments and other sufferings. I am able to stand in front of these situations not because I have learned the right strategy or have hired a "trainer" to find the right strategy. I simply remain standing—this doesn't mean that pain, disappointment, and fear of the future have been eliminated, but rather that I am not determined by these circumstances, that I am more than the circumstances because He Who made me loves me (of that I am sure) and has given me a company of friends to remind me and make me aware of the urgency of judging everything. I can and must make a judgment about everything in the reality that faces me. Doing this saves me, makes me free. I have learned from the School of Community that what happens is not always wonderful—it can also be unpleasant. But the things that unexpectedly happen rip me out of my comfort zone and make me look at Him who is giving me everything I am living for my own good. I experience the love of His presence through the faces of my friends in the community and Fraternity.

**Silvana**, Salvador da Bahia (Brazil)

### The "perfect joy"

Dearest Fr. Carrón, On the night of February 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>, our son Matteo was in a very bad accident. From that moment, our life and the lives of our family and community have changed. In front of Matteo, my complaints that his friends aren't around, and the fact that we don't ever see each other, and all the other silly things no longer seem to matter much. Either I beg Christ to make Himself manifest or everything is lost in meaningless explanation. I began to feel a strange joy within my great suffering on seeing Matteo injured in that way, and have come to understand that while Christ does not spare you anything, He also gives you everything. Maybe the hundredfold is present in this strange joy or, as St. Francis called it, "perfect joy." I am beginning to understand this now, and what I ask of Jesus, what I ask of Matteo's friends, my friends, and my family, is that we never forget what is happening to us, that we never forget the grace contained within Matteo's suffering and within our suffering. I ask that we not forget how much God loves us now. My husband and I look at each other as never before—I can say that I have fallen in love again after almost 27 years of marriage. What has happened to Matteo has made us understand what it means to love. If I allow myself to be loved by Him in the circumstances He sets before me, I am able to love others and above all love myself. Vanni and I are standing on a rock, and it is evident that our family has changed. Everyone is praying for Matteo, even a cardinal from Mauritius. We entrusted Matteo at once to Fr. Giussani, to Our Lady, and to all the saints. The signs of his recovery, both large and small, have given us a clear and evident certainty that the Lord loves us and guides us: we need only say yes to Him. I have been bowled over by the question, "Do you love Me now?" to which I could only respond, "Yes, Jesus, You know that I love You. In my misery, come to do what I cannot." From this response, everything has become new; there has been a steady stream of friends who hold us tight and millions of miracles. Out of the poverty of my heart I ask: "Come, Lord Jesus, through the situation that is before me." In this way, even this difficult and arduous journey becomes joyful because it is offered up.

**Maria Grazia**, Cormano (Italy)

# Close-up



© Betty Magistretti



Milan, the deserted Gallery.

6

## The new normal

**W**e have never seen anything like it, at least not here in the Western world, since the last war. Yet, it is happening. Over the course of three weeks, the coronavirus has turned our lives and all of our certainties upside down. Everywhere. There is no point in presenting the statistics that, by the time this comes out, will already be outdated. The numbers we are all watching hour by hour unfortunately point to thousands of people sick and dying, and the suffering will last months. One fact is certain by now: the latent insecurity that in many forms marked our lives before—characterized by a vague, underlying fear about an increasingly hard-to-imagine future—has suddenly become something concrete, present. Which makes the question we addressed a few months back and which in some way also appeared in the last two issues of *Traces*, all the more essential: right now, in all this, what saves us from nothingness? Fr. Julián Carrón posed this question in his letter to the CL movement, which you can find as the editorial in this issue. It was a compass pointing the way to living even this circumstance as an opportunity for growth and personal discovery. He had

already hinted at this in an article for *Corriere della Sera* on March 1<sup>st</sup>, in which he asked, “What can conquer our fear?” He invited us to look at ourselves and at the awareness of ourselves that emerges in a situation that leaves no room for mere words, formulas, or things we already know but do not help us live. And he encouraged us to look for “presences” capable of conquering our fear because they point us to something greater: the presence of God made flesh.

This issue is dedicated to the urgent, powerful need for these presences and to better understanding what is coming to light about us as a result of this situation (as you can see from the interview with the journalist Antonio Polito). It is dedicated to discovering how we can tap into those presences, great and small, to be found in the midst of the storm, such as in Italy’s first “red zone”—the one that has been in crisis the longest—and specifically in the wards of Sacco Hospital in Milan, or in Uganda with Rose Busingye and her friends, who have been forced to come to terms with sickness and death for many years, but are now discovering something new—something that can help us all live. (dp) ■



# ***Fear and presence***

Fragility and dreams of technological dominion, the need for others, and the lack of true authority. The coronavirus is sending a Western civilization “increasingly indifferent to the very idea of Jesus” into crisis, leaving us at a fork in the road... An interview with Antonio Polito, a columnist for the most important Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*.



**Davide Perillo**

“It is a powerful image. And an effective one, because it speaks to an experience we have all had.” When Antonio Polito, a 64-year-old columnist for *Corriere della Sera*, read the piece by Fr. Julián Carrón released in his newspaper on March 1, a simple but powerful passage struck him: “What conquers a child’s fear? The presence of his mother.”

It may seem strange to see that image as the response to a drama that has upended our lives and the whole world, but it raises a crucial point. Coronavirus has suddenly pushed us into the gravest crisis we have faced in decades. It has revealed the “deep fear that grips us at the depths of our being,” Carrón writes, a fear to which only “a presence” can respond, but “not just any presence. This is why God became Man” and entered human history. The need for this presence is why it is so vital for us to seek out His witnesses, those “presences in whom we see an experience of the victory over fear in action.” In other words, the key, more powerful than a thousand analyses, lies in an experience, a mother and her child. Polito underlines this, saying, “I see the need to have faith in something greater than us that loves us infinitely and therefore protects us, the same need children have. When I encountered the mother/child image in Carrón’s letter, what came to mind was Our Lady of Mercy, the one you see in many paintings, do you know the one? She opens up her mantle and shelters the people.” He, too, has been shut up in his house for days, like (almost) all Italians. “It is a kind of social distancing, but also of family closeness,” he observes, smiling. “For the first time in many years, we are always together.” It is from that perspective, from his living room and the days packed with unexpected discoveries (“Have you ever tried to get Google Classroom to work? It’s infuriating”) and conversations with his children (“They, too, are really struggling with being on lockdown, but they understand the reasons”) that he observes Italy—and the rest of the world—as it grapples with an event that can bring countless truths to light.

New York, USA.



**What can free us from our fear?**

That is one of the most important lessons for us to learn. It's imperative because this situation with coronavirus goes really deep. It has called into question at least four of the great myths of today's world, of a Western civilization that has become increasingly indifferent to the very idea of Jesus. And I'm saying this as a secular man, in some sense.

**What are these myths?**

The first, if you will, is that of the goddess Gaia. The earth, nature. For some, she has become almost an idol, as if she were a divinity in her own right. Many ideologies are derived from this, including that of the most reactionary super-environmentalists who think there are too many of us, that it would be better if man were extinct, that the earth has more rights than we do...I am not talking about a healthy environmentalism, let's be clear: nature is extremely important and defending it is critical. But, according to its own laws, life fights in every way to survive, even a virus. And we have to face that sensibly. Nature is not God: it is part of creation. The same applies to another myth, equal in scope but opposite in nature: the myth of Science.

**That, too, is indispensable, but has its limitations...**

Exactly. Modernity lives and breathes the notion that no matter what problem or emergency comes up, Science and Technology will be able to overcome it. We will find the remedy and the problem will be solved. That's not true. There is no medicine to fight a new virus like this one. We have to start all over again, patiently, for example by looking for a vaccine that might be able to stop it a year from now, but who knows what will have happened in the meantime. Technology cannot do everything. Science is essential, but it is not omnipotent. This may seem obvious, but it is an important lesson for those who worship the goddess Techne.

**What are the other myths?**

They all go together, to some extent. One is the god Ego, individualism. This situation is demonstrating to us that, in a state of emergency, only certain collective behaviors will yield results. Egotistical attempts constructed on individual interest alone are so ineffective that they actually cause more damage: if I run away from the red zone to go back home, or get together with my friends at a cafe because "only old people are getting sick," I become part of the problem. The old law that the market is built on—seeking one's own best interest creates well-being for everyone—does not hold up. There are critical realms of life in which it simply does not apply. And connected to that illusion, if you will, is a fourth idol: Chaos. Some of us are convinced that, in the end, things work better if you do not follow the rules. Well, that's not the case.



Antonio Polito is a columnist for the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*.

**Carrón observes that a circumstance like this “reveals what kind of progress we—each of us personally and all of us together—have made on the path of maturity”; we see “the self-awareness we have gained.” What do you see blossoming?**

Something important: a feeling of vulnerability. Recognizing this is critical. In the world of our parents and grandparents, an epidemic like this was an almost regular occurrence, and people often died in their thirties. This is not the case today, and so the precariousness of life is something our age tends to censor. In fact, there is even research dedicated to achieving immortality. In the most advanced place in the work of combatting this virus, Silicon Valley in California, the tyrants of Big Tech are investing millions in biotechnology and integrating man and machine. There are already hundreds of frozen corpses, waiting for science to be able to bring them back to life...The dream of immortality is stronger than ever in contemporary society, which considers itself to be the last, definitive civilization, the one that can succeed in liberating humanity from death. For a society that lives in the grips of such hubris, powerful enough to feel supremely sure of itself and invincible, discovering fragility is extremely upsetting. This discovery is resulting in terrible trauma, but it is a trauma that may help us.

**What does a reminder to seek out the witnesses of a “God who became man, a historical, embodied presence” do for us in such a situation?**

I don’t know, but one of the reasons Christianity has spread all over the world is precisely its promise of defeating death. The warrant for this promise is nothing less than the sacrifice of God Himself. It is the only religion in the world in which God becomes man and passes through death in order to say to man that all of us can rise again. There are historians who contend that one of the reasons for the success—let’s call it that—of the faith was the fact that Christians acted differently during plagues and epidemics: others ran away, but they instead helped the sick, even at the cost of their own lives. This gained everyone’s admiration. “Why do they do it? They must be protected by the Almighty...”

**Is the same true today?**

The only way to fight death is to hope in the resurrection, and that hope coincides with the figure of Jesus. This is an answer that secularism, unfortunately, has chipped away at over the last few decades, and it has lost some of its strength. By this, I do not mean a reduction in the number of Christians, but rather in the strength of the faith of Christians themselves in the resurrection. Christianity has been

reduced to a series of values and precepts that can be shared to a certain extent with a secular society, but its true significance has been totally lost. Yet the prospect of the resurrection is the only way to fight the fear of death, and death itself, at its root. Actually, not only our fear of death, but our daily awareness of our own finite nature as well.

**You mean an existential insecurity, what Carrón calls an “incapacity to face the life in front of us.”**

Exactly. The fact is that we are the only living things capable of imagining ourselves, of imagining the world after our death, the world that will come after us. This creates a kind of structural insecurity—from birth, we experience a nostalgia for the infinite. The only remedy for this insecurity that has emerged in the Western tradition is faith in Christ, Christ understood as the Risen One, as God who, having become man, died and rose again. This is why we use the word “grace.”

**Doesn’t this situation become an opportunity to discover that, deep down, we depend? On other people and perhaps on an Other?**

Part and parcel of the crisis of supposed invincibility is coming to the awareness that, more than depending on one another, we *complete* one another. We cannot fight something like this on our own, not



only because we feel a need to stick together, but because we are a *community*. We need solidarity, to see our neighbor doing something good. More than dependence in a secular sense, I would say “interdependence.” In front of something so immense, we need other people. In Christian terms, if you think about it, this is the redemption that mercy brings.

**Carrón speaks of this moment as an “opportunity we do not want to miss”...**

Yes, and I understand why. I do not know if I would say the same. No one is happy to find himself in such a circumstance; you perceive what is happening as a punishment of some kind. But it certainly is an experience. Something that three or four generations of Europeans have never experienced. A threat like this, so widespread, which has brought on wartime economic conditions so quickly—they have never seen such a thing. It is an exceptional experience at a collective level and unthinkable under normal circumstances. It will surely push us to reflect on our human condition. ■

Tehran, Iran.



## *The cry from the “red zone”*



Maurizio Vitali

*We offer here some voices from the first towns where the coronavirus contagion exploded in Italy. The shout of people who have seen fear and then death enter into their families, hospitals, and workplaces. A young man who asks, “Can you tell me what I have to live for?” And those who say “yes” in front of reality.*



Codogno is one of the first ten towns in the Lombardy region which on February 21<sup>st</sup> were locked down.

Thus day after day, increasingly, “the words of the Christian announcement that the leader always calls us to and that we often repeat to each other have been shorn of any sentimentalism and abstraction. Now it’s more evident than ever that those words affect and explain our life in the flesh. It has become impossible to say these words in an offhand way. Now we don’t read, we *devour* the letter Fr. Julián Carrón wrote to the *Corriere* and the one he sent to the Movement,” [See the editorial] said Eugenio, a sixty-something computer expert. He has led these virtual assemblies from the Bassa Lodigiana area, which has become well-known to Italians as the epicenter of the coronavirus. He stresses that “the first task is to respond to reality. Carrón told us that we must not miss this opportunity. Many friends are providing us with evidence that this is the right thing.”

**Beginning in mid-March**, the number of cases began to decrease in this zone, but the ambulance sirens still continue to rip through the air and through people’s souls. Families are in mourning or have relatives in intensive care or live separated inside their own homes. This has been going on for a long time. At the School of Community assembly, Fulvia, an employee of the Lodi health authority, described how she is living the drama of the epidemic minute by minute through the data she collects. She spoke about the severely overburdened hospitals, the hours or even days those with the

virus have to wait for a bed, the various wards sacrificed to make space for intensive care, and the scores of doctors and nurses who are sick, not a few of them gravely so. And so many deaths every day. “None of us is used to seeing people die this way. Of course we’re scared. And we feel impotent when patients who seem to be improving suddenly succumb and leave us; when doctors and nurses, our defenders and protectors, are also struck and incapacitated by the illness; when our belief that medical science can keep at least 98 percent of the situation under control is shattered; or when patients in isolation die alone without their loved ones or the comfort of the sacraments.”

But in all this, amazingly, “I’m living a Lent that has no equal in terms of awareness and a grip on my heart. I see and touch the pain of Christ. I work a lot, more than before, but I find time for prayer and for following the gestures proposed by the movement. What is happening reveals me to myself, makes me recognize what corresponds to my heart. What has happened—I’m not crazy—is a miracle.”

Skype and other platforms are being used for school lessons, too. Benny is a young educator, and a good number of her students, who are between the ages of 15 and 18, have been participating with unprecedented attention. At a certain point, one of the older students signed on and blurted out, totally off-topic, “For fifteen days now I haven’t showered or gotten dressed. Can you tell me why I should? Can you tell me what

“I’ve never done School of Community like this,” so intensely, truly, and carnally, so dramatically and beautifully. This was the comment of CL members in the towns of Codogno, Castiglione d’Adda, Casalpusterlengo and their environs, the first “red zone” in northern Italy where the coronavirus contagion exploded in late February. Obviously, their School of Community has been held on Skype. For those participating, a few weeks had changed their world. Their newfound familiarity with fear, which was already by itself a hard blow, had been joined by a familiarity with death.



The Tube, in London.

14

I should live for?” Benny said, “He was asking me about the meaning of life, straight out. A priest friend of mine came to mind; I was 16 and he was 26, a handsome guy, and I asked him why he had sacrificed having a wife and family. He answered, ‘You see, I’m like a little flower in the mountains. Nobody sees me or plucks me, but it is beautiful that I exist, that God wanted me in this world.’ I told the student that he was like that, too, a little flower in the mountains. The next day he showered and dressed before signing in and told me that ‘today I’m a fragrant little flower in the mountains, just for you.’ You see, desiring Christ oxygenates and reanimates us.”

**Betty, a woman suffering from asthma,** spoke up. Obviously her condition does not help things. “We are more human in the way we look at each other. With our friends and with the bishop, there’s truly a companionship guided toward destiny. Because of my asthma, they worked like crazy to find me the right kind of mask, and they succeeded: Model ffp3, the top of the line!” It would take a book to tell all the stories. We’ll just add the story of Francesco, anguished at having to stay at home and “not being able to play the game and face the challenge: it’s as if I’m pulling back, and it doesn’t seem right to me.” Eugenio answered, “Look, your game and challenge may be precisely the fact that you have to stay home.”

Carlo, too, has been facing the challenge of privation. The 64-year-old computer scientist retired last year, and recently spent five days in the hospital because of a heart problem. His daughter, a nurse, did not feel well and was not at work. “I hadn’t imagined I would feel such a sense of privation, above all for the lack of the Eucharist. It feels like on Holy Saturday when Jesus is in the tomb. But that is just one day without the Eucharist, while now we have no idea when it will end. It’s a Lent lived radically.”

Marco’s challenge is dealing with autistic youth. The 54-year-old heads L’officina, a social cooperative in Codogno, and suddenly one day was not able to go to work or even enter the building. “The sure things that daily life gave us have gone out the window. I don’t know what will happen with the cooperative. But at times, sure things can be cumbersome. Now, we feel much more strongly the question of what our foundation should be. I’m certain I’m not alone. I have friends who have never failed to help me feel the companionship of the One who has never abandoned me.”

At the time the coronavirus outbreak first happened, Eugenio was convalescing from an operation in the hospital for a few days before returning to home and work. Asked “What is your state of mind in facing this situation?” he answered with the words he had just communicated to his bishop (Bishop Maurizio Malvestiti of Lodi) by WhatsApp: “As you know, the situation is not easy, but I want to stay within reality, certain that over time I will be able to discover the reason for the steps that the mystery is asking of me.” And the response from the bishop? “You are in the daily Eucharist! In *silentio et spe* [in quietness and trust] shall be your strength...step by step with the Mystery.”

**“Sine dominico non possumus”**—we cannot live without celebrating the day of the Lord. This was the message sent by Fr. Edmondo Massari, the parish priest of Caselle Landi, in inviting the faithful to follow Sunday Mass via streaming. The quote is from one of the 49 martyrs of Abitinae, sent to their death during the Diocletian per-



secutions for having celebrated the Eucharist, which had been outlawed by the emperor. Fr. Edmondo, 45, experienced the early days of the outbreak “almost like a nightmare, with pain and worry.” His friend Mattia was the first person known to have the coronavirus in northern Italy. “Celebrating Mass via streaming, as a number of priests are now doing, has been a positive experience notwithstanding the pain of not being able to celebrate it live with the people. I’ve invited the children and grandchildren of ill elderly people to join in. Because of this, young people who maybe didn’t go to Mass end up watching it with their older loved ones.” What is he learning from this experience? “We are afraid, but above all we’re afraid of being afraid, that is, of acknowledging and showing that we are what we are: fragile creatures dependent on an Other. The risk is that instead of becoming aware of this, we transmit this fear, distancing ourselves from others and viewing them with suspicion. For this reason, we must trust ourselves to the good Lord, who is not punishing us but rather challenging us to seek the essential.” The essential is making itself known in many ways for Paola from Lodi. “In the beginning, those of us outside the ‘red zone’ but with many friends inside trembled for their safety. Now we are touched directly. I feel a hundred times more intensely the great need for ‘Someone to deliver us from evil,’ to quote a line from a song by Claudio Chieffo, the need for Someone who will overcome my uncertainty. I see that this Someone is there. I see Him present in the testimony of my friends, true friends, not superficial,

fair-weather friends. Friends like Roberta, who is on the front lines, and continually calls me to center myself on Christ again. Like another friend in Pavia whose husband is gravely ill and confided to me that she is heartbroken but serene, certain of a good destiny; I know her well: she’s no visionary. And like Fr. Cesare Beltrami, who is a true daily companion through his blog.”

**What can withstand** the test of reality? Eugenio recounts, “Last year after the Spiritual Exercises, someone told me he didn’t understand what this ‘test’ meant. Well, I don’t think a lot of explanation is needed now. A prayer of entreaty comes from a heart that cries out its need for One who is present.”

The cry, the shout. “Don’t be afraid to ask for what your heart desires. Ask for the strength to say yes to what reality asks of you. Shout it out.” This was Fr. Cesare’s counsel to his friend Roberta. You don’t usually hear priests using the word “shout.” This is tough stuff, not normal fare for a homily. But Roberta’s concern is not about listening to homilies – she has to bear the violent impact of her reality as a physician at the hospital in Lodi. A gastroenterologist, she has been reassigned to work in intensive care. At the beginning they worked 12-hour shifts, but then the hours were reduced because many could not cope. Every morning she runs for 20 minutes before beginning the long process of getting outfitted with medical pants and top, mask, head cap, shoes, shoe coverings, and a double layer of gloves. At the end of every shift, removing these things also takes a lot of time. But this is nothing.

Many doctors and nurses are no longer at her side because they have caught the virus, and some of them are in grave condition. She can’t be everywhere at the same time—she has to revive one person, but another dies a few yards away. And then at home, she has four children and elderly parents to attend to. “I’m living through a personal shock. I’m in front of death every day, in front of terrible decisions involving difficulty and pain. Today we had our first virus patient leave the hospital, in good health again. But there are so many who die without the comfort of relatives or a priest. I find myself there alone with them, making the sign of the cross over them, and then saying a Requiem, as Fr. Cesare suggested.” Roberta cries often. “Inside myself my very faith is being tested. I’m a limited woman; I’m not a heroine. I think of Jesus in Gethsemane. I cry out to God. Knowing that someone is praying for you gives you the energy to start fresh. I’ve asked for holy oil.” What about her family? “I’ve explained the situation to my children. When I get home I go straight to the bathroom – I avoid contact with them and I eat in my bedroom. One of them said to me, ‘I miss your arms.’ We are in the hands of God. That’s all. From the beginning of the emergency, my days have been a continual yes.” She says that “I’m going through some very difficult circumstances, and this makes everything, all the questions, more acute. Who am I? What do You want of me? I’m rediscovering my vocation as a physician, too. What task are you asking me to perform? Please answer so that I can say yes.” ■

Close-up

# A day in the hospital ward

Expectation and hope in the hospital ward. The problems faced, the relationships with patients, the hundreds of phone calls, and prayer... The story of Amedeo Capetti, an infectious disease specialist at Sacco Hospital in Milan who has been fighting the epidemic on the front lines since it began.



Paola Bergamini

16

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**F**riday, February 21<sup>st</sup>. Amedeo Capetti, an infectious disease specialist at the Sacco Hospital in Milan, turned on his cell phone after the nursing students had finished their physiology exams. He found countless text messages expressing concern or asking questions, such as “What is happening?” “What do we do?” He went on the website of the region of Lombardy: the numbers indicated that the epidemic had begun. Patients from Codogno and Lodi were immediately transferred to Sacco. It was the beginning of the crisis that placed this Milanese hospital on the front lines. New intensive care units were opened in addition to more locations for patient intake.

Capetti is the head of the department that specializes in sexually transmitted diseases and provides treatment for about 600 patients who are HIV positive. While he tries to keep up with these responsibilities as much as possible, he finds himself immersed in the crisis, during his shift in the emergency room and in the ward. He told us his experience over multiple phone calls. In the first call, in the café during his break, he said, “To patients who say ‘health is everything,’ I have always said, ‘Look, that is a losing battle. Eventually we all die. Health is an instrument through which life can meet the One who gave it to us, the One who wanted us, so that we may obtain His beauty and greatness.’ This is even truer for me in times like these.

What Fr. Giussani taught us and what Fr. Julian Carrón repeated in his article in the *Corriere della Sera*, which is the basis for a great companionship, is true. It is self-awareness, that is, a relationship with the infinite, that makes you pay attention to reality in every detail. You understand the importance of the brick that you are laying.”

**The first Sunday** in the ward, all non-COVID 19 patients had to be released or transferred to create space for the wave of new arrivals. The last one remaining was an elderly man who was admitted with symptoms of possible pneumonia, though he actually may have a tumor. The instructions were to send him home as soon as his wife came for him. When his wife arrived, Amedeo explained to her the situation and offered support for in-home care. After he had finished, the woman confided, “I hope that he gets through this. He truly is a good man. I am much younger than he is, but when I met him, I understood immediately that he was special. I fell in love with him and I have loved him ever since.” That evening, while with his small group of friends of the Fraternity, he said, “Had I been in a rush to release him from the hospital, I would have missed this beautiful encounter.”

A few days later, a friend of Amedeo’s who is a nurse was tested positive for the virus and admitted to Sacco. Her family was in quarantine, so Amedeo’s wife said, “Let’s call



Amedeo Capetti, an infectious disease specialist at the Sacco Hospital in Milan.

18

them to ask if they need us to bring them groceries.” He went to visit her, but he could not stay long in her room for medical reasons, so every morning he brought pastries for her and the other patient in the room and left her a note. He began to do this with other patients, too, with “people that friends tell me about. I go as soon as I can or I call them. The greatest need of those who are very sick is medical care, while those who are not severely ill or are in quarantine feel trapped and are overcome by fear. Sometimes even a phone call makes a difference.”

**Fear is the word that is repeated** in the many phone calls, up to 150, that he receives daily. Most of those calling are his patients with HIV. They ask him how he is doing and want to chat. He is often forced to tell them that he will call them back because he does not have time to talk. “My response to fear is to follow the prevention guidelines, but also to never lose sight of the question of the meaning of life, to not close in on oneself, to not lose touch with friends, and to look out for those in need. Of course, this was easier before the situation forced everything to close and people to stay home. But people are creative. Limitations can spur

the imagination. The patients feel the need to communicate their fears to me because they know I care about them. It has always been like this, even before the outbreak of coronavirus, and this is only possible because of the overflowing experience I have had in my life. I wake up in the morning and give thanks for the miracle of the new day. There is an expectancy in these circumstances that make beauty and hopefulness visible. This happens every day.”

One example is what happened with the restaurant employee at the university. One day, a friend of Amedeo’s told him that he wanted lasagna. Amedeo went to the university restaurant where hot meals are prepared, but they were only serving spaghetti with mussels. He ordered the spaghetti and when it came time to pay, the employee said, “These are on the house. It is the least I can do.” A few hours later he returned with a bouquet of flowers. Embarrassed, the female employee said, “You really shouldn’t have.” He replied, “This is gratitude, the same thing that moved you today at lunch, and it is the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Some patients, when conditions allow and they can be on their own, are sent home to stay in quarantine, to wait for the results of the test. Amedeo has accepted the

task of calling over the weekend to share the results. “From the first visit, in a matter of minutes, you set the tone for your relationship with patients. An unexpected connection is born and it continues.” One day, Amedeo called the mother of a child who had been tested. The test result was positive and the boy had to return to the hospital. Amedeo offered to oversee his treatment. He asked the specialist who had been with the boy during watch to also take care of him. “As soon as he arrives, I will go say hello,” the specialist answered right away. “We did not know each other before that watch.” The boy became one of the patients he brings pastries to every morning.

**In the morning when** he first arrives, Amedeo writes down the names of all of the HIV-positive patients whose treatment he prescribes. He takes a picture of the list and sends it to his wife, who calls the patients to tell them where to buy lifesaving medicine because the hospital clinic is closed. One morning, at 5:30 a.m., she got up to have breakfast with him, and at noon she sent him an excerpt from the School of Community. “My heart has been widened. It was a caress from God. Carrón talked about ‘people whose lives show the signs of God’s victory, of His true and contemporaneous presence.’ For me, my patients have the faces of my friends whom I remember every day in the way I look

at things. There are also the nuns of Martinengo, with whom I have been in touch since the beginning to find a way to take care of the children who come to their daycare center. Their joy and usefulness are a beacon of the presence of God. It does not come from them.”

Because there is no traffic, the commute to the hospital is just long enough for morning prayer. He holds in his heart his family, the sick, and those in need. “This way, the day begins with a different awareness. In this period, prayer becomes gratitude and curiosity.” In what way? “It is as if you saw the shadow of a person and asked yourself, ‘What does he look like?’ I experience wonder every morning when I face that shadow, asking for it to become present, that it reveal itself. At a certain point, I ask, ‘Who are you who enriches my life in this way?’ It is the cry that Carrón wrote about in the letter to the movement,” uttered when “circumstances become so challenging that we need to cry out to be able to face them.” ■

*“My response to fear is to follow the prevention guidelines, but also to never lose sight of the question of the meaning of life, to not close in on oneself, to not lose touch with friends, and to look out for those in need. People are creative. Limitations can spur the imagination...”*

# At the wellspring

São Paulo, Brazil.

*In Uganda, everything had been organized for a vacation drawing together members of the Movement from various African nations, but when some friends from Italy had to cancel because of the coronavirus, the initial reaction was one of fear and paralysis. However... From Kampala, the story of a journey of freedom.*



Rose Busingye

20

Everything was ready, well organized. Seven or eight friends from Italy were supposed to come at the end of February to Entebbe, near Kampala, on the Ugandan shore of Lake Victoria, as we have done every two years now for quite some time, for a three-day vacation at “The Source,” as we called it the first time it was held. About 40 people in all were planning to come from African countries where there are communities of the movement for a time of sharing, conversations, hikes, and communal life that would help us stay in front of the presence who seized our lives and now unites us, who is the source of our friendship.

**Then, a few weeks ago,** we started to receive the first news about the spread of coronavirus cases in Italy, the cancelled flights, the uncertainties, the things we all now know about. Slowly it began to be-

come clear that our Italian friends would not be able to come. I began to get worried and agitated because the vacation was an important time for me and their presence would be a great help.

The news reports began to pile up, and we heard that in Nigeria, where some of our friends were to come from, there were rumors of a case of the virus. I got scared. What should we do? Should we meet without the Italians? Should we postpone everything? I asked Carrón and others with whom I often speak, hoping to be told what to do, but instead they said, “Whatever you decide, we’re with you.” I was a bit disconcerted – it would have been easier if someone had said, “Go ahead with the vacation anyway” or “Don’t do it, it’s better to postpone it.”

**I was nearly paralyzed.** It was my call, and I was forced to engage personally, called to draw from within myself everything I had learned in the movement. And not “words”: they would not have been enough because the thoughts whirling around in my head would have prevailed. “What if they come to Uganda and put us at risk? And what if someone gets sick with the coronavirus?” It was with great gratitude and a sense of relief that I came to realize that I was not the one who would save these friends who were planning to come. Not one hair of their heads depended on me. This was a rediscovery that I did not make myself—that I do not create even a second of anyone else’s life.

I again picked up the letter Carrón wrote to the *Corriere della Sera* for Christmas. “Our ‘I’ is worth more than the whole universe!” I read, which made me wonder, “Well, if that’s the way it is, can this ‘I’ be reduced by a virus? Can it be annihilated by everything that is happening?” This



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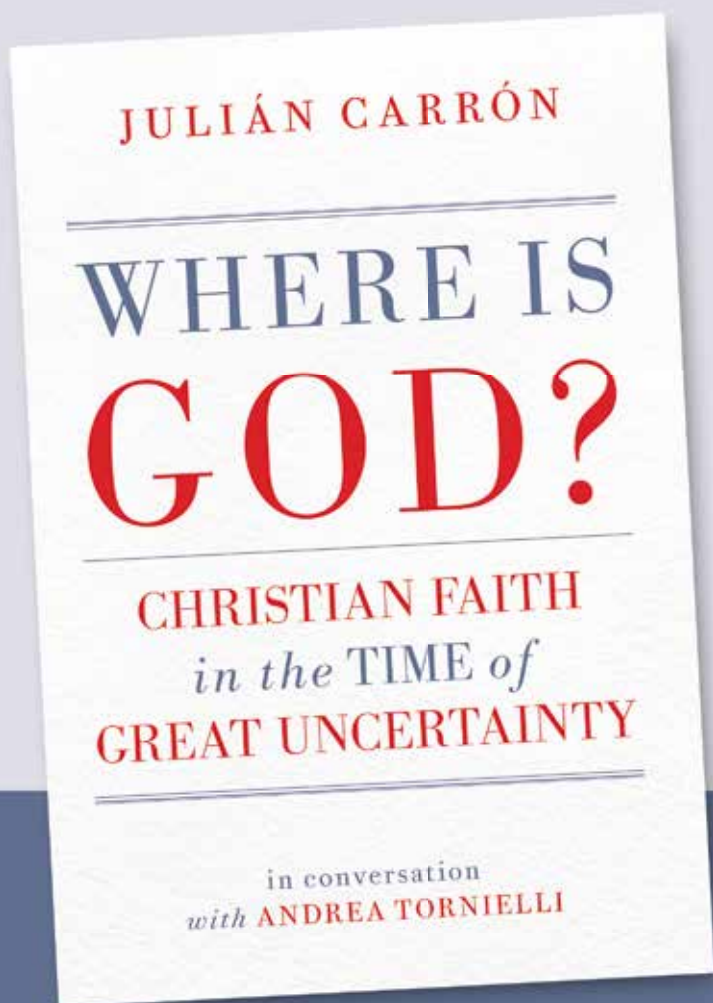
was the point from which we had to start, and I began to emerge from my paralysis. I decided that the vacation should go forward without the Italians and focus on these words, together with the provocation of the School of Community, which, taken from *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, spoke about faith as the “loving acknowledgment of an exceptional presence” by “the entire self, intelligence and affection, [...] moved in this acknowledgment laden with love,” moved by a real correspondence. If Jesus has attracted us to Himself in this way, who or what can take this away from us? The companionship is what enables me to stand on my own two feet, what enables me to live our circumstances with a different outlook, starting from the question: “Whose am I?” Whose, not who. That’s all. “Whose am I” in this precise instant?

**So in Entebbe on the evening of Friday, February 28<sup>th</sup>,** a small group of us from Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon, and other African countries gathered together. It was reasonable to do so in that moment, and it was a very beautiful moment. We were serene, even though a lot of friends were missing. At a certain point, when some of us mentioned feeling a bit “abandoned,” I said, “Well, thank goodness this has happened. This

moment is one more opportunity to become aware of what we always say to each other, of what we learn by being in the movement and following Carrón. Does the experience we live take away fear or not? Does it enable me to remember “whose I am”? We cannot give ourselves even one instant of our lives. This awareness alone can give us the peace and tranquility that I have seen among us. At the end there was a conversation by video link with Davide Prosperi, the vice president of the Fraternity of CL.

Here in Africa, people generally tend to be afraid no matter what, and so in front of a fact like the coronavirus epidemic, you can imagine how easily people can become fearful, frightened that those who govern us will hide information and not tell us what we need to know, or worse, will not warn us about the danger. Notwithstanding all of this, the tranquility and peace of which I spoke were palpable in the conversations and contributions.

**I am grateful to the mystery,** to God, who has given me this circumstance, these moments, so that I can get back on my feet. He was once again asking me, “What have you encountered? Who are you? Whose are you?” And He draws me to Himself continually. There is nothing that corresponds to me more. ■



# WHERE IS GOD?

CHRISTIAN FAITH  
*in the TIME of*  
GREAT UNCERTAINTY

Julián Carrón  
*in conversation with*  
Andrea Torielli

Should we battle a plural and relativistic society by raising barriers and walls, or should we accept the opportunity to announce the Gospel in a new way? This is the challenge Christians are facing today.

In an extended interview with Vatican expert Andrea Torielli, Julián Carrón examines the historical moment we are living through in order to revive the essential core of Christian faith. Starting from the realization that the world is experiencing an evolution in which the difficulty of finding shared values and natural morality makes sincere dialogue between believers and non-believers challenging, Carrón reflects on the possibility of communicating the essence of the Christian faith in a form that can inspire interest in modern times.

Addressing the central questions concerning the announcement of Christian faith in today's less regimented society, *Where Is God?* discovers and rediscovers the contents of Christianity and asks how they can be witnessed again in a society that is not yet post-Christian, but potentially headed in that direction.

Julián Carrón is President of the Fraternity of the lay Movement of Communion and Liberation and Professor of Theology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

176 pages - \$ 29,95 CAO

MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS