

“How do you explain the origin of the exceptional encounters you have had?”

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

4. The Christian Event as an Encounter

by Luigi Giussani*

6. THE CHRISTIAN EVENT HAS THE FORM OF AN “ENCOUNTER”

The Christian event has the form of an encounter, a human encounter in ordinary day-to-day reality. [...]. In the Christian event, Jesus’s face has the shape of human faces, of companions, of the men He chose [...]. It is an encounter with a present, living, wholly human reality, whose exhaustive meaning is that of being a visible sign of Christ’s presence, God-made-man. [...]

The person we come across becomes an encounter if we find him engaged in a “different” way—with a difference that attracts us—in the things everyone does; if, that is, as he speaks, eats, and drinks, he perceptibly makes a qualitative difference and offers it to our existence, causing us to go away struck by the fact that eating and drinking have an absolute meaning, and a word spoken in fun has an eternal value.¹ Think of those who saw Christ and heard Him speaking, how they must have been struck! Think of John and Andrew before that Man who spoke, as they stood there, watching Him (they did not understand the depth of His thoughts, they did not understand all His words): they had never had such an encounter, they would have never imagined a look, an embrace, and an attention so human, so completely and wholly human, that carried within them something strange, wholly gratuitous, exceptional, beyond everything they could have foreseen. He was so exceptional that it was easy to recognize Him as a divine presence that corresponded to their hearts. Someone who came across Him would never go away again—and this is precisely the sign of an experience of correspondence. An encounter means coming across such an exceptional presence. [...]

8. A FACT IN THE PRESENT, A FACT IN THE PAST

John and Andrew went home that night and said, “We have found the Messiah.”² They had had an encounter—it was an event that was happening in the present—one that claimed to hold the exhaustive meaning of their lives. But where was the root of what that encounter meant, where was the content of that encounter? In an unforeseeable way, that event fulfilled a history of the past. [...]

John and Andrew—and the same applies to the two disciples of Emmaus—had Jesus before »

¹ See L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, 88–90.

² John 1:42.

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades,
Generating Traces in the History of the World,
McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 17-19, 26-28.

» their eyes,³ but the claim of total meaning for their lives carried by that event referred to a past in which that event had been the object of prophecy; from the present a memory welled up whose content began in the past. They could not explain Christ without beginning to consider what they had never consciously taken into account in their lives, i.e., the fact that God had promised His coming to expectant man. [...]

It is the same for us now. The encounter that happens today is a source of memory because it means coming across a presence that begins in the past. [...]

This is why an encounter is the source of memory. [...]

"Memory" indicates the historical depth of an encounter, as far back as the root from which it ultimately started. The encounter we have today is true because He, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, died and rose, ascended into heaven and affects reality with His Spirit. This encounter finds its value in a Fact that took place 2,000 years ago. Faith is the awareness of a presence that began in the past. This is why an encounter activates memory.⁴

Let us dwell again on the word "encounter." It does not indicate merely coming across something that moves into the horizon of our existence, but the happening within this horizon of a presence capable of changing life altogether. Thus an encounter earns the right to be called an "event" in the full sense of the term. An encounter is characterized as the impact with something exceptional, capable of "metamorphosing" life, changing its shape, its outline, so as to create a new world.⁵

In an encounter, faith begins because it carries, bears, makes present something exceptional, unforeseen, unforeseeable, which radically strikes our life, so as to change its principle of cognition, its principle of affection and its capacity to build, calling it to collaborate creatively with God's plan, which would otherwise be ineffable. The word "memory" is crucially enlightening precisely because it indicates that the encounter we have today finds its root in a past. The present encounter makes us discover the original event, which in turn is the foundation of, and is decisive for the truth of, the present encounter. It explains it. The word memory, therefore, describes the history between the event at its origin and the encounter that makes the original event an unavoidable, indestructible, undeniable presence. The whole wealth of the beginning is within the present and it is in the present that man discovers the divinity of the origin. Memory is the history that runs from the origin up to the present. The material content (thought, affection, work) of the word memory is also called Tradition.

³ See Luke 24:13-35.

⁴ See L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way? Vol. 2, Hope* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2008), 87-9.

⁵ See Romans 12:1-2.