

Beginning Day | September 26, 2020

You Only See What You Admire



COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

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*Beginning Day of the Adults
and University Students
of Communion and Liberation
By video link, September 26, 2020*

COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

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for the text of Julián Carrón

© 2020 Fondazione Meeting per l'amicizia fra i popoli
for the text of Fernando de Haro's interview of Mikel Azurmendi

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Introduction
by Julián Carrón

God can do nothing without our willingness, without our openness. Therefore, let's begin this gesture by asking this willingness of the Holy Spirit, praying that the openness that led us to participate in today's moment together, even while we are physically distant from each other, may bear abundant fruit.

Come Holy Spirit

We find ourselves midway in fording the dangerous river of the current situation, one whose duration we still cannot foresee. How many times in the past months have we been forced to revise our forecasts and acknowledge facts that showed us our errors of perspective! Thus it is reasonable for us to feel a certain apprehension at the "uncertainty" of which Mario Draghi spoke at the Meeting.

The news is full of new unknowns, here in Italy, where we are speaking, and everywhere. They relate to school and university and to the economic situation and its repercussions on employment and the survival of firms. There is "a shadow of doubt over the efficacy of vaccines" for Covid because virologists are stressing that re-infections can happen, as they do for other in-

fectious diseases. In other words, we cannot even hope for resolution of the situation from a vaccine. We have no shelter and remain exposed to the risk of contagion.

Other phenomena, perhaps even more disturbing, add to this panorama. There is the gratuitous violence that dominates our daily news, a terrible violence that makes people reflect. And there is an increasingly widespread inability to recognize what is happening, even when it is an absolutely evident reality like Covid, that leads to the most irrational denialism in a so-called evolved society.

These are all symptoms of a *dark cause* that devours us from within and makes us increasingly more helpless, incapable of reaction or effective response so that it can continue its work of destruction in our innermost beings, like a virus, further weakening an already feeble “I.” Some have begun to have the courage to call this dark cause by name: *nihilism*, a “kind of intimacy with nothingness” as Antonio Polito, the vice-director of *Corriere della Sera*, wrote recently. This current manifestation of nihilism “has lost the intellectual power to throw itself against values: it is less ambitious, often having the face of a ‘normal life’ [...]. It is a bottomless pit.”¹

The deep *fear* that assails us with ever greater force is the foremost of its symptoms. The clearest confirmation of this nihilism that has spread more and more comes, paradoxically, from those who deny it, the “deniers of nothingness,” who, like those who deny Covid, are incapable of staying in front of reality because of the ex-

¹ A. Polito, “La violenza nichilista tra i giovani” [The nihilist violence among young people], *Corriere della Sera*, September 17, 2020.

treme fear of looking it in the face. We dare to look at it only because of the grace that has happened to us.

In front of this situation, we have two options. Either we try to strike at its symptoms, like those who try to solve the problem by proposing fear management, or we go to this nihilism's origin, unmask its source, and thus counter its power.

With their bold acts and attitudes, young people always provoke us and keep us from settling for inadequate answers. As a professor wrote, "All of them have a disturbing hunger for a meaning [that can answer to their emptiness]. This summer a girl threw this challenge in my face: 'There has to be someone who communicates to us kids the meaning of living, the gusto for everyday life.' She added, 'There has to be someone who shows us it is possible not to fear questions about meaning and happiness.'"

The needs this girl has described make us understand the drama that is underway. It is a battle between being and nothingness, between gusto for daily life and the void that seizes us from within. If we don't attack it directly, we will be the next victims of this spreading nihilism, if we are not already.

In order to describe the nature of this battle between being and nothingness concisely, we have often used an expression of Nietzsche's that represents an extreme consequence of *his* nihilism: "There are no facts, only interpretations."² This position leaves us tossed about by a thousand interpretations, unable to distinguish which of them really grasps the facts and submits itself to the

² Cf. Freidrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), 267.

authority of experience. It means that no fact “grabs” us to the point that we emerge from the equivalence of interpretations. They all seem equal.

Is there something that can challenge Nietzsche’s assertion? Are there facts that can challenge the avalanche of seemingly equally valid interpretations that buries us in this society of “information”? Where can that girl or any of us find some clue that enables us to recognize the victory of being over nothingness?

As I have repeated on many occasions in these months, the prime example is that of the man born blind, healed by Jesus.

A man born blind who acquires his sight is an event. “Before I couldn’t see, and now I see,”³ he repeated over and over. As soon as this fact happened, it was met with all sorts of interpretations by his family, his neighbors, and the Pharisees. It is amazing that after the miracle Jesus did not fear leaving him alone in the midst of all those interpretations. But the man born blind was not confused even for a minute. He did not have even the slightest doubt about what had happened to him. He was not moved an inch by interpretations that did not respect the event.

But it is worth noting that he did not immediately side with Jesus. First of all, he adhered to reality. He sided with the fact that had happened and was honest about the event. “First I could not see, and now I see.” This evidence of the truth—“before I could not see, and now I see”—found space and shone forth in him and made him then side with Jesus. His choice was not ideological; he was not repeating the party line. His

³ Cf. Jn 9:25.

acknowledgement of the evidence that he could see brought him to recognize Him. The man born blind was not an intransigent fanatic who wanted to impose his own interpretation; he was the only one who did not tread what happened underfoot (now he sees, and this happened through that man named Jesus); all the others wanted to deny what happened in order to impose their own ideology on the evidence of reality. Ideology is an interpretation that erases the facts out of prejudice or the need to defend something. In *The Radiance in Your Eyes: What Saves Us from Nothingness?*⁴ I tried to offer a hypothesis leading to a response to the nihilism that is today overflowing everywhere.

We are all called to verify that hypothesis. During the summer, in the gestures in which we participated in one form or another, in the words of one person or another, in that person's way of being present in reality, we were able to see being vanquish nothingness, the gusto for daily living win out over the void. Each of us was able to verify what was generated by what we saw and heard, what made our hearts leap, what rekindled them, what drew them out of the void, and, in contrast, what did not have an effect, leaving no trace, leaving us empty as before. You can argue about this or that, but the difference between one thing and the other is clear: when we are in front of something able to change life (as it changed the life of the man born blind), no comparison is possible.

This summer we were offered a testimony that was exceptional in its self-awareness and consciousness

⁴ Julián Carrón, *The Radiance in Your Eyes: What Saves Us from Nothingness?* Human Adventure Books, 2020.

of the steps that often pass by unnoticed. Ever since I heard Fernando de Haro's interview of Mikel Azurmendi for the Meeting of Rimini, I have wanted to see it again together with all of you, to share it with everyone. What better occasion than Beginning Day?

The first thing that struck me about this interview, which some of you have probably already seen, was the natural way in which Azurmendi recounted his journey after bumping into a simple, very particular happenstance, a radio program hosted by an unknown journalist that he heard at dawn in a hospital bed. It was impressive to hear the sincerity and honesty with which this man, already over 70, and a great sociologist, embraced that first repercussion, which set in motion the process we will shortly hear him describe. I think it documents how in these times of spreading nihilism, a person can recognize an experience that is different when it happens. A person can see a difference, something that is not nihilism, and can be amazed to see this nihilism defeated simply by following the initial evidence of that difference, no matter how tenuous. That little crack is enough to make the dam give way.

What happened to Azurmendi was an unforeseen event. He described it this way: "I did not expect to encounter any of this in my life. It was a big surprise. Completely out of the ordinary. I was surprised. I said to myself, "this is worth listening to," and, little by little, I slowly entered a state of admiration. [...] Admiration is that movement that carries you to identify with the thing you care about most because you did not expect it."

Admiration dictated the method of Azurmendi's journey, which can be summarized in the title of this

Beginning Day: “You only see what you admire.” By following this admiration for an unknown journalist speaking on the radio, and then for many other people encountered afterwards, he was led to question the dogma of sociology, according to which one must not establish a communion with the object of study because it violates the law of the observer’s neutrality, which must be respected in order to gain knowledge. Azurmendi had to progressively free himself from all the filters and blinders he had accumulated in his work as a professor. “This was always under my nose; why didn’t I look at it? It needs to be explained.” You only see what you admire. You see, you truly notice, look at, and understand only what strikes you (“*affici aliqua re*”), attracts you, seizes you. Your eyes open only when a certain encounter happens.

In order to explain what he saw, he wrote *L’Abbraccio* [The embrace],⁵ which will be the next book of the month. “My problem with writing this book was that I wanted to show how what I saw stirred up surprise and a great deal of emotion in me. But I also wanted to show it because I didn’t see it myself.” The video we will see shortly and the book *L’Abbraccio* show us a trustworthy witness who helps us understand why we do not see, as he did not previously see, a certain encounter, and end up in nothingness, as he had ended up in the nothingness of ideology.

At his age and with his history, he opened himself to looking (from schools to charitable work, from families to Fraternity groups) in an attempt to understand

⁵ Mikel Azurmendi, *L’Abbraccio: Verso una cultura dell’incontro* [The embrace: toward a culture of encounter] (Milano: Bur, 2020.)

“the causal and temporal links for my wonder,” he said, and to understand the consequences. In this way he became aware of everything in front of his eyes that he had not seen before.

Azurmendi asked, “This life, which is so beautiful that I would like to live it, the lifestyle of these people made up of dedication and joy, this lifestyle, what makes it possible?” He added, “You can have a flash of inspiration. There are spectacular, beautiful people who have a kind of flash of inspiration, but then they burn out.” He concluded that “there is only one explanation for that fact: that what they tell you is true; that the truth is really truth in action. [...] Truth produces life. This lifestyle is produced by something: they say it is Jesus Christ. [...] And it is not just that Jesus said it, it’s that these people are the ones who are doing it. So, you put two and two together, and you say, ‘I have to believe in this; this is the living Jesus in whom I believe.’ I would not have believed in God. [...] There is a moment when you are forced to ask yourself, ‘How can they all be wrong at the same time?’ Even His enemies knew, but they didn’t know Him. John and Andrew went with Him, but they did not know Him.”

So then, let’s watch him and listen to him together.

THE EMBRACE

Transcript of Fernando de Haro's [television interview of Mikel Azurmendi](#), done for the Meeting 2020 Special Edition, on the occasion of the BUR Rizzoli publication of the book *L'Abbraccio*.



Fernando de Haro. *Azurmendi, Mikel!*

Mikel Azurmendi. Fernando, how are you?!

– *Finally, after a long, long wait!*

– What news do you have to tell me? No hugs or anything like that.

– *This is the embrace. Can't do hugs right now.*

– How are you?

– *Good; it's nice to be here; you take good care of everything here.*

– It's work; work is important.

– *It's a vegetable garden.*

– A little one, here close to the house. I have another one, with tomatoes. If you want to see them, we can go this afternoon. It's across the street.

– *Shall we talk about The Embrace?*

– Go ahead.

– *Let's talk about the first pages... you could almost listen to the first pages of this book, rather than read them.*

– Yes, they are made for listening...

[Fernando de Haro uses his cell phone to play the recording of a clip from one of his radio shows:]

– *To close, I've chosen a photo that appears on the inside pages of La Vanguardia.*

– That is journalist Fernando de Haro, for COPE radio, who starts at 6:30 AM; that's just before finishing at 8:20.

[the recording continues] “...and against the wall was an African American woman, dressed in a black jacket. The woman’s name was Rita, she was covering her face with her hands...”

– *Where were you when you heard this?*

– In the kitchen. I get up in the morning at 6 or 6:30, and on weekends I started listening to this journalist who, later on, I learned is named Fernando de Haro. I didn’t know who he was.

– *We didn’t know each other then.*

– We didn’t know each other; I’d heard you while in the hospital. I was there...

– *Why were you in the hospital?*

– It’s a long story, which goes back to 2014, six years ago. I suffer from arthritis in my hands... that’s why I work... so they don’t get weak... and they prescribed some injections; six injections. With the fourth, I nearly died. The injections aren’t supposed to be used without checking your lungs before each shot, and I had had four. I couldn’t walk; I couldn’t walk from here to there... It was July 7 and I decided to go to the hospital to die. And I said to my son (now my son isn’t here, but at the time he lived here): “Take me to the hospital; I’m going to die,” and I summarized the situation: “I don’t owe anyone anything. The house is paid for.” At the hospital, they told him four evenings in a row I would not make it through the night. But I did. I wanted to die, and did my best to die. In the hospital, I had this cell phone; I’ll show it to you... and I listened to you one Saturday morning; I wasn’t sleeping much. Now I sleep a little more. I listened to you and said to myself: this is interesting. And each Saturday and Sunday, from 2014 to 2017, I listened to you, every Saturday and Sunday. I know exactly what you think. I know what

you think about reality, about the news about reality, and what you think of yourself reporting the news about reality. These are three important aspects. I was interested in all of it, and I continued to listen to you. I listened to you in my kitchen, where I have a little radio.

– *The book begins with a few of the images I commented on...*

– That's how I began...

– *This is why you began that way...*

– I began the book that way, but, when you begin in a certain way, you don't know why... or maybe you do; in any case I had a hard time starting to write the book. I had taken notes for a year and a half, and I decided to write a book about this unusually special tribe. I did not expect to encounter any of this in my life. It was a big surprise. Completely out of the ordinary. I was surprised. I said to myself, "this is worth listening to," and, little by little, I slowly entered a state of admiration.

– *Before explaining what admiration is, why not show me the other vegetable garden?*

– Let's go see it.

The surprise at a person, this surprising fact: that you find something or someone, or a book... and when you see it could be interesting for you, it becomes admiration. Admiration is that movement that carries you to identify with the thing you care about most, because you did not expect it. It is unexpected. There are thousands of things written about this. Admiration is what pushes you to agree with what you have come across, because you want to *be* it. You want to be that thing you see.

– *The surprising things about the book is that you, who have always been a sociologist, an anthropologist, who have done a lot of research...*

– Yes.

– Remember El Ejido, the immigrants, etc.... Here, you change methods. The “dogma” of sociology is that you cannot establish a connection with the object you study. You, instead, perhaps out of admiration, violate the neutrality of being an observer.

– Exactly. Sociology, since Durkheim and Weber, says that when working with man you need to approach things scientifically, quantifying and objectifying as much as possible; quantification is ideal. This is why they calculate so many statistics, because of that. It’s thinking... it’s the conviction, shared by Durkheim and by others, that explaining man is the same as explaining a mineral; that the facts about man are in the same category of the facts about the world, current events. I decided to give an unfiltered explanation of what was happening before eyes filled with amazement. All the others do not want to see what is happening. I said to myself, “This was always under my nose; why didn’t I look at it? It needs to be explained.” Every sociologist has to explain why, at a certain point, he looked at something that was under his nose every day. You look at it only when you admire it, when you think there is something good for you there. Man always has some interest in looking at something, and the same goes for a sociologist. A sociologist looks to see what he wants to see. What I decided to do, and this is the book *The Embrace*, was to identify the causal and temporal links for my wonder. I started with you, because that was the explosion, like Saul’s horse. Falling off the horse, or St. Martin’s cloak, which he gave to the poor man... There was a “falling off the horse,” which was listening to something. It was the encounter with you, with no intermediary, with your voice... it could have been

a book, it could have been anything. I thought, “I like this; I would like to have this outlook on the things that happen. Why don’t I?”

– *You begin to make a comparison.*

– You begin to ask, “Why don’t I have that viewpoint?” and then I began to reassemble and identify the boundaries of my Self, the vantage point from which I look at and listen to you. A sociologist would never do that. A sociologist is white in the morning and black in the afternoon; tomorrow morning, yellow and in the afternoon red. He changes. Just look at our president...

– *There’s another thing that strikes me about the book, because it breaks a certain kind of inertia. The book is full of names: first mine, then Javier Prades, and Macario. They are all particular stories, from which you draw out knowledge.*

– They are encounters... they are encounters...

– *But the Enlightenment said the opposite: to gain knowledge, you have to look to the universal; yet you looked at particulars.*

– Why should you look to the universal?! The universal is a fabrication. You cannot find a universal anywhere. It doesn’t exist. You can formulate a hypothesis based on experiences you have had. But these are images. I wanted to identify the causal and temporal links for my wonder. The next object of my wonder was Prades. Prades is a person I wrote to after eight years, during which he sent me a Christmas card every December, because we met in 2002 in Madrid for a roundtable on immigration and multi-culturalism. He wrote to me and I never answered, never! After I was sick I decided to try to do all the good I could still do, and the first thing I did was write to him. I wrote to him asking him to forgive me. “I did not write to you for

eight years; I never replied to your cards, I apologize.” He replied saying he was coming through San Sebastián and that we could meet up. It may seem unremarkable, but we discussed the Enlightenment. Our views overlapped, even though we started from different angles: he from the realm of knowledge and I from that of ethics. I was an ethics professor at a university for many years, until I moved over to anthropology. In Prades, you find a person who listens to you, asks questions... who surprises you and is himself surprised, surprised by the fact that you need to talk to him; he is surprised that you look to him, and that surprises you even more. He has a gaze that penetrates and calms you. He invited me to give a talk in Madrid, and I told my wife Irene, “I’m not going.” She answered, “But you told him you would.” It was true, I had said yes... I wanted to be reconciled with that man who looked at me in a special way, who understood me and listened to me. And I went to EncuentroMadrid. To go, I had to overcome myself: what did I have to do with a group of Christians?

– *You went there, and you say it was like the Festival of Humanity you had seen in Paris.*

–Yes, it reminded me of the *Fête de l’Huma*, the Festival of Humanity... I lived in Paris for nine years; before that I worked in a factory for a year. I was at the Festival of Humanity in 1970 because I identified as a Marxist. I was never in the Communist Party, but I had ties to it. That was the year of Burgos’s trial, and the Communist Parties of Spain and France spread all over Europe. I attended a meeting in Switzerland and one in Belgium, both organized by the Communist Party. I saw what Communism was, and I never sympathized with that party. At EncuentroMadrid, I encountered humanity itself; not the Festival of Humanity. I met people who were human, who

were smiling, coming and going in silence. They greeted each other, hugged, listened to you and asked questions. Children running around... Smiles, joy. I was floored. I never would've imagined anything like it.

– *I, as I listened to the beginning of your criticism of the Enlightenment at EncuentroMadrid, was really struck. [I thought,] “This man, who has all of modern and contemporary philosophy in mind, is critiquing the Enlightenment in a way unlike anyone else in Spain.”*

– It was what I had talked about with Prades. He had said to me, “Just say what you think!”



– This is Ondarreta Beach, which is connected to La Concha beach. The two are divided by the promontory, Pico de Oro. There is a palace there where King Juan Carlos was born and lived. That was the first settlement of San Sebastián. In the 11th century, there was just that and a convent.

– *This is your neighborhood, Ondarreta?*

– It's my neighborhood. I was born a little up the way, in Cuesta de Igueldo. My father had a coal business here. The Ondarreta prison was here.

– *You entered seminary, and when you were 22, they threw you out, or you left?*

– They threw me out. I was 21. They expelled six of us, five plus another one who came with us voluntarily. They sent us away with no explanation, so I went to ask why they were kicking me out. Do you know why?

– *Why?*

– They told me, “You said that all priests need to know Basque.” I said yes, and, “Maybe I did not say it, but I think it.” That was the reason.

– *What was Christianity for you, at that time? Something made up of ideas, doctrine, piety?*

– A mix of myth and doctrine: the sacramental side was mythical, and everything was a system of rules and creed, and nothing else. What captured my attention was justice. What is justice? Why is there no justice? It was the era of Franco, 1962 or '63.

– *You joined the ETA [a Basque separatist group] in 1965, the year I was born.*

– Yes, first I worked for two years in a factory. When they asked me to leave seminary, what I wanted to do was what you call, “verifying a hypothesis.” And I did. My hypothesis was that social justice was necessary, and that it was impossible under the regime in which we lived. I wanted to see how it was in other regimes, for the working world. I went to Germany and to Paris to work for Hutchinson. In Paris, something incredible happened: I met an extraordinary person (I met three members, but one was extraordinary) from the ETA. He had fled into France after a break-in, but was determined to go back. He had me read Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Che Guevara... I was fascinated by this guy. A surprising encounter. I had gone to Paris to study; I had spoken with the dean, there was no problem and I was about to enroll, but when I was just about to enroll, my ETA friends told me to go back to study in Spain, and I had started to sympathize with their ideas...

– *And the famous vote... was Julen Madariaga your leader?*

– I got here and the head of the ETA, Paxti Iturrioz, sent me to work in Pasajes over the summer to form a labor union cell. I worked all summer as a longshoreman. A bit of a friendship grew with Paxti Iturrioz, and that fall,

in 1966, a person from the outside, Julen Madariaga, got all of us from San Sebastián together and told us Paxti Iturrioz was going to be killed that night. We asked for a vote and Julen gave himself two votes. He laid his gun on the table and said, “We have to kill him tonight.” We all had a lump in our throats. We voted, and the answer came out “no” by just one vote.

– *That incident left a mark on you...*

– A permanent mark. I joined the organization and the first thing I am asked to do is to vote to kill a person; I looked around me and saw a bunch of cowards, not like me. It’s terrible when you vote to kill a person. Who are you? You are forced to take stock of yourself. Something didn’t add up. I didn’t get out of the ETA; I fell apart, but I did not go to the assembly. It was the fifth assembly, the first part of it; but one of my friends, who was a leader, invited me: “You have to come. You have to come,” so I went to the second part of the sixth assembly, and I came out with a minor office, enough to push me to leave school, because I had been studying Economics at university. That’s how I joined the ETA. The day of *Corpus Domini* in ’67, we broke into a store, and in the middle of it, as we were about to enter, having broken the window, the Civil Guard came and shot at me. It was at a range of 2 meters; I could have been killed. I ran and hid in the mountains, where I stayed for three weeks. In ’69, we gathered a few reform groups of the ETA and proposed that the ETA lay down its weapons and stop killing people, because in ’68 something really terrible happened. A friend who had taken my place, because I had fled, and another I had introduced to the ETA; the two of them killed the Head of Civil Guard, José Pardines. It was 1968, and I was in Paris. I saw all of it, and I put myself in the place of the

dead. Extebarrieta died because he pulled out a gun and the Civil Guard shot him. And I thought, “That would have been me.” I really saw myself as an assassin.

– *What did that time mean for you? Because, a number of years later, here in downtown San Sebastián, the ETA killed Gregorio Ordoñez in a restaurant.*

– That was in ’95, about 30 years later. I—to address the question of Ordoñez—fought against the ETA at a personal level, through my students, but never at a political one, publicly. I did something public when they killed Ordoñez, who was supposed to become the mayor of San Sebastián, as the member of the Popular Party who received the most votes. So, we held an assembly at the university, the first and only assembly ever held at the University of the Basque Country. There has never been an assembly except the one we held the day after Ordoñez was assassinated. Savater spoke of it, because his wife was there with us. There were five of us professors, and all five of us were threatened in the following weeks. They sent us the innards of dead animals.



– *The Peine de los Vientos* [“Comb of the Wind”] by Eduardo Chillida. Chillida lives up that way. He said something beautiful. From west or east: the wind enters here. We call it the “Galician wind.” Chillida said the wind has to come into San Sebastián “combed.” Look, there is San Sebastián. Individual parts only make sense in the whole. A comb, a broom or a brush is a collection of bristles that only make sense all together, like a human person.



– *Cracking eggs...*

– I'm making you a *tortilla de Bacalao* [salt cod omelet]. I have the cod and onions ready.

– *The cod is already desalted?*

– First, you desalt the cod and then you add the onion; and I put in a little pepper. Other people do it differently, but now, you'll see, you'll eat a *tortilla* made just as God commanded.

– *Let's go back to the book. You, who dedicated your time for many years to education, visited a number of schools linked to Communion and Liberation, and were struck by their method of education. What caught your attention?*

– The education... we were teachers. The first surprise was that the CL educators did not consider themselves teachers or use the word "teacher." For them, the point was to educate. There is a difference between teaching and educating. A robot can learn how to teach. To educate means to love the student, and I saw how they did this. I saw the love, passion and dedication they put into everything they did. I saw in one hallway, at Kolbe [school], or Newman [school], maybe at Newman, "You are a gift." To the child who is learning to speak, even before learning to write, they teach him he is a gift. You know what that means? They teach the child he is a gift, that there are others who are also a gift, and there is someone who gives. That is essential for them. The child...this is how you explain to them what reality is... his first introduction to reality, the first steps he takes in the world... he already knows he is the recipient of a gift. That astonished me.

I don't use much salt.

– *Neither do I, because it raises your blood pressure.*

– Raises blood pressure and decreases your attention, *atención* as we Basques say.

– *Another theme that struck me is charity. When you go with the people from Bocatas, people who care for drug addicts, to Cañada Real, where all the drug addicts live... I went to report on the place, and it is astonishing, because many of them are like corpses. It overwhelms you...*

– I was there for two hours; I went with Macario—he had never been there, but came because I asked him—and I said to him, “Let’s get out of here, this is absurd. What are they doing here? Who are they saving?” The concept of charity I have is that of Max Weber, as I say in the book. I took it from *Economy and Society*—a book I know well—I cite the paragraph in which he says “charity is giving alms to people.” I thought that was charity, giving alms to those in need. And I asked the young people, “What are you doing here, serving lentils to these people?” Up walked a black man, who could hardly stand, he walked with a cane, and here was the counter, he took the milk and put it in his backpack, took a packet of biscuits, and walked away without raising his head. They said, “We are here to empty ourselves of ourselves.” It gives you a lot to think about. You have to talk a lot to understand what it means to empty oneself. Emptying oneself means being ready to hear just about anything, and not say anything in response. You are there to receive something. If you don’t empty yourself, you don’t receive anything. You have to empty yourself of your prejudices. We were so full of prejudices, you and I, “What are we doing here?”

– *I thought the same thing.*

– That’s the prejudice we have, but we don’t have to give anything; you empty yourself. You are there, you wait, they have needs. This is what Jesus did. Emptying yourself means being open to being loved. Open to someone giving you something, or saying a word to you. I know

there have been results at *Cañada*, some of them have gone clean.

– *But often, there are no results.*

– There are no results; in fact, they have saved two dozen people in 24 years. But they themselves were saved. They gave themselves.

– *Shall we make the tortilla?*

– I'll make some snap peas, and I have the rabbit here. This pot is for the peas.

– *You spent time with a group of families, with Ferrán. You were struck by the education, the charity, and all of a sudden were struck by the unity present amidst those families.*

– I see you are following the chapters of the book. When we were in the garden, I wanted to tell you, but didn't, that my problem with writing this book was that I wanted to show how what I saw stirred up surprise and a great deal of emotion in me. But I also wanted to show it because I didn't see it myself. I had to put together the various moments of emotion, of wonder, what I called "admiration" earlier. To see the temporal progression of that admiration, because I spent two years...

– *Of course, it was a long study...*

– Temporal, but also causal. You ask me about the things that surprised me. I say this so that people understand your question; there could be people who haven't read the book and wonder, "Why is he asking that?" I saw so many people meeting each other there. I was one of them. The first thing they did at Masía was to say, "Tell us about your life. Tell me about yourself." I thought it was a kind of group therapy. It was not group therapy. I understood what it meant for them to tell about yourself. I understood it very quickly, speaking with them. It is

not group therapy; it is God's therapy. What a therapy! In explaining a person's life, the first point is that you have an identity.

Pollicino doesn't tell his own story, other people tell it, but when they tell you you need to tell your story, you do it. It is a question of identify, of whether you can give a unified history of yourself from infancy up to today. The big problem with identity, as sociology has shown, is that the person, since Sartre, has trouble...

– *Maintaining the continuity of his or her identity.*

– Because a person believes he is master of himself, that he has his own preferences, that he is master of himself and always does what interests him, what satisfies the desires he has. But that changes each moment, going from one thing to another. We all know this perfectly well. The problem is, in the first place, finding what unifies all our changes of behavior into a single "I," so that all these differences in behavior can be attributed to me. I am this "I" and I am master of myself; I answer for myself and for what I have done. Then, second, I can follow the transition from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence up to this moment. And I am the same. I am myself, the same person, though I am not the same, because I have changed.

– *But there is a continuity in your "I."*

– The continuity is in the fact that I am the master of the changes in my behavior. Because, in the end, that is what the "I" is, our behavior.

– *Not an abstraction.*

– I saw the truth of that perfectly. And I saw it because they do it; you realize it because they do it. They do it because God exists. This is interesting, I saw it in a marriage, too; I asked one couple, "What is there between

you, as husband and wife?” And they told me, “God.” I asked for explanations all over the place, and you see that God is always the element that can unite two lives.

– *Why did you, at a certain point in this internal battle, think of Wittgenstein? You had studied him a lot, and at a certain point in the book you cite a passage from Wittgenstein’s Diaries where he says, “Unless God visits me.” Why did you think of Wittgenstein while you were in the middle of that struggle?*

– I think Wittgenstein is one of the four or five most important figures of the 20th century. A real master. He had everything. He renounced money and fame and went to a little village in Switzerland to teach. He was an extraordinary person. His *Tractatus*, and philosophical reflections... I read *Disarming Beauty* by Julián Carrón at least three times, and in it I found this quote from Wittgenstein’s *Diaries*: redemption, is there anything we want more than redemption? But where is it? Still, he says, we are here sitting at our little table, receiving the light from a window above, a little ray. You look at it; it is a sign of the absolute, toward which I would like to climb, but I remain concentrated on worldly things. And I stop there, unless God comes down and shines light on me. I understood where Wittgenstein did not dare to go. I went to his *Diaries*—I have a copy here—and I thought, in an agnostic, there is always a fear of discovering the truth. He prefers to say, “I don’t know, it could be, but... May that light come down on me!” I cannot pronounce a judgement on Wittgenstein, on the end of his life, on where he is today. I admire him. I think he never realized that he was a recalcitrant agnostic. He could have said, “But if I did climb toward the light? Why not climb up and stick my neck out?”

I believe that is what I wanted to do: climb up to the window and look out. And I saw all of you!

– *You realized you couldn't stop there.*

– If I had done as Wittgenstein did, I would have been repetitive. I always try to go a step further.

– *The tortilla de bacalao was stupendous!*

– The next one will be better!

– *There is a moment in The Embrace that I think is the most fascinating one: you are in front of this tribe you are studying, and at a certain moment in time you begin to think it is possible, a plausible hypothesis that everything you are seeing is a consequence, not only of God, but of an incarnate God. You do not shut down the question, asserting these people act the way they do because they are victims of a collective neurosis or out of a sublimation of their desires. There is a moment in the book in which you affirm the plausibility of that hypothesis. How did you come to that moment?*

– You must be referring to one of the last sections, where I do a kind of calculation: “This life, which is so beautiful that I would like to live it, the lifestyle of these people made up of dedication and joy, this lifestyle, what makes it possible?” You can have a flash of inspiration. There are spectacular, beautiful people who have a kind of flash of inspiration, but then they burn out. Instead, you see these lives, I followed the story of these lives for two years; these people (in the book they are characters, but they are really people), families, and I know it is impossible without a miracle. This family is a miracle; that person is another miracle. There are miracles everywhere. It is very mysterious. The lifestyle pushes me to ask myself, “What causes this lifestyle?” You can live a flash of inspiration for a year or two, but

an entire life... But your life, the next person's life, lives like these: they've been around for two thousand years. I think Christians have lived as you live for two thousand years, making humanity beautiful, bringing charity and love into blossom. Sociologists don't talk about it because they are not interested. They don't speak of Communion and Liberation or other Christians that I have not met but who exist, I know they exist because I have met some, in confraternities or fraternities. So, you start to wonder. You could explain one life, one life for a good bit of time—not one's whole life—but explaining the families, the many lives, generations who do good, who embody goodness... There is only one explanation for that fact: that what they tell you is true; that the truth is really truth in action. Truth is always operative. Truth produces life. This lifestyle is produced by something: they say it is Jesus Christ. If I need that life, if it is an object of admiration for me, I have to look with admiration at the motor that animates this life. And that's everything. Then, you understand that motor was human. God made man. That's the only way you can understand. I was a professor of Comparative History of Religions. I want to close with this: the gods that we all study are abstractions. There was never a person who said what Jesus said, "Forgive one another, love each other, visit the sick, feed the hungry, the other is more important than you, life is not given to be saved, but to be given; if you seek to save it, you will lose it." No one throughout all of humanity—at least I did not encounter it, and go figure if I do not know world religions; I've read hundreds of volumes—no one said that. And it is not just that Jesus said it, it's that these people are the ones who are doing it. So, you put two and two together,

and you say, “I have to believe in this; this is the living Jesus in whom I believe.” I would not have believed in God.

– *Why not?*

– Because God is an idea. Philosophy, first, and then religion and theology, fell into the trap of reducing God to an idea. That is the difference. We are not talking about God. We are talking about a man who was God, who teaches us where we need to go.

– *I remember the day you told us, “And if it were true that Jesus rose?” You were wrestling with the veracity of that testimony.*

– There is a moment when you are forced to ask yourself, “How can they all be wrong, at the same time?” Even His enemies knew. But they didn’t know Him. John and Andrew went with Him, but they did not know Him. “But He is the Master.” They spent two or three years with the Master. A person would really be transformed after that! That is the resurrection. We know there is a resurrection. He rose and He told us we will rise from the dead.

– *Mikel, thank you for writing *The Embrace*. Thank you for this conversation, and for what you have worked on over the past few years.*

– I am the one who should thank all of you. Thank you for being there at the microphone for these four, five, six years. It was lightning bolt. I’m the one who should thank you, Fernando. It was those radio shows that brought us here. I can never thank you enough.

– *I can never thank you enough for what it has meant to meet you and to learn.*

Thank you, Mikel.



Conclusion

by Julián Carrón

Like Azurmendi, each of us is invited first of all to watch what happens in front of our eyes, what is happening now. Why do I feel it is so crucial first of all for us, for the esteem we should have for each of us? Because if we do not watch what happens, the event of Christ that happens, if we do not follow it, we cannot journey or make a contribution to others. The event that *happens* now is what shapes life; all the rest is powerless to change it. We cannot substitute for the event with an explanation or interpretation or doctrine. This would only increase the nothingness! Deep down, behind many discussions there is absolute nothingness. You see this in the fact that they fail to change us, and in the end, they bore us. No discussion can erase what we have seen happen in many people this summer.

The place where we verify our openness to watching and being struck, as we saw in Azurmendi, as it was for all those who found themselves in front of the healing of the man born blind, is in front of the facts. Nothing is better able to challenge our nihilism, our nothingness, than the happening of an event. "A new, different, truer, more fulfilled, more desirable humanity is the only 'council' that can open a breach in our consciousness as women and men, as contemporary women and

men.” It is the only fact “that can be heard as a fascinating and liberating invitation.”⁶ Only in this way, as an event that happens now, in your history and mine, does Christ make Himself able to be experienced as hope in the present, as something that conquers the present and fills the future with hope.

We recognized this in many testimonies this summer. The Christian Palestinian woman we heard about at the International Assembly of Leaders, who considered her birth in Palestine a punishment for herself and her children: what must she have seen in the group of Italian pilgrims from CL that she would then decide to remain in her homeland after years of desiring to flee it? She had an encounter that changed her judgment, her gaze on everything. What experience must have our gravely ill friend Xiao Ping had to make her become “the beating heart of the community” of Taipei? Even to the point of saying, “Lately I’ve understood that my duty now isn’t so much to learn to be in front of pain or a death that approaches, but rather to use the time that remains to me to tell everyone what I have encountered.”⁷ She understood what the most urgent need of the present is.

As one of you wrote me, “I was struck reading in Wednesday’s Morning Prayer, ‘We have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’ The ‘radiance in your eyes’ that saves us from nothingness will be seen in those who live this experience of liberation from fear, this experience of freedom.” This is the case of these friends in Bethlehem and Taipei.

⁶ Carrón, *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, 98.

⁷ Letters, *Traces* n. 10/2020.

However a person may look, whatever features she or he might have, maybe even they are the most recent arrival, “authority is a person who, when you see them, you can see how what Christ says corresponds to your heart,” Fr. Giussani said (remember last year’s Beginning Day?); in other words, you see that Christ is true and victorious. He added, “This is what guides a people,”⁸ not the chatter or discussions someone engages in or the roles someone has!

This was expressed in secular terms by Polito regarding the recent explosions of youth violence that reveal the true emergency as an emergency of education. What can respond to this? Only “teachers, masters, capable of touching the inflamed point in the heart and mind of every personality in formation. How fortunate are those who have encountered one such person once in their lives.”⁹

To touch the inflamed point! As Giussani says, it may have been just a breath, “for the Lord works even through whispers [...] Even in a whisper, even just for a moment, man notices a kind of attraction, a suggestion; he has the intuition of something more beautiful, more correspondent, something better,”¹⁰ and admiration is kindled, as Azurmendi said. This is how the battle against nihilism is fought, by being open in that

⁸ From a conversation of Luigi Giussani with a group of *Memores Domini*, Milan, September 29, 1991, in “Who Is This Man?” *Traces* n. 10/2019.

⁹ Polito, “La violenza nichilista tra i giovani” [The nihilistic violence among young people].

¹⁰ Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 71.

moment to perceiving and following that “whisper.” Therefore, everything depends on our morality, our openness, or in other words, our love for truth.

Therefore, as we have seen, the first condition for making the journey is to *watch*. As Fr. Giussani stressed in 1994, “The Gospel [...] uses the verb ‘watch’ over 500 times, and uses the verbs ‘believe,’ ‘love,’ and ‘follow’ only 150–180 times.”¹¹

To watch. “That’s it?!” I understand that it may seem too little for some with all the challenges facing us. But it was not too little for Fr. Giussani, who always suggested it as the first crucial condition for a truly human journey. The oldest among us will remember having read it in the famous Easter Poster of 1992, the one with the face of Marcelino: “The companionship tells you: keep watching, because afterwards the sun will shine. Above all, it tells you to ‘keep watching’ because in every vocational companionship there are always people, or moments in the lives of people, to watch. The most important thing in our companionship is to watch people.”¹²

In a conversation with Giovanni Testori in 1980, Giussani said, “I’m unable to find an index of hope other than the multiplication of these people who are presences. The multiplication of these people, and an inevitable fondness [...] among these people.”¹³

¹¹ Luigi Giussani, *Il tempo si fa breve* [Time is short], Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Notes from the Meditations (Milan: Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, 1994), 24.

¹² Communion and Liberation Easter Poster 1992, from Luigi Giussani, *In cammino* [On the road]: 1992-1998 (Milan: Bur, 2014), 366.

¹³ Luigi Giussani and Giovanni Testori, *Il senso della nascita* [The meaning of birth] (Milan: Bur, 2013), 116.

The second condition is to *recognize*, which is the blossoming of what is already implicit in watching. It is recognizing something within something, as our friend Mikel did after three years of shared life with the people of the movement in Spain. But in order to recognize, you need a basic honesty and sincerity, if you do not want Jesus's harsh observation in the parable of the two sons, which we will read in Sunday's Gospel, to hold for you. Which son did the Father's will? The one who recognized the facts through which the Father's will manifested itself! "And Jesus said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe in him.'"¹⁴

For Jesus, everything depends on your openness to recognizing what happens. Why are openness and sincerity needed? Because "the Mystery, destiny communicates to women and men through a flesh, through a reality of space and time, according to a physical modality of things, according to precise circumstances, that maintain all the fragility and apparent futility of natural circumstances, like the eyes of the Pharisees, like Christ and His family, what He did, what He said. The recognition of this method is called faith because it involves the intelligence of the person who recognizes a great presence in a specific, given appearance. It is a matter of recognizing the great presence of the origin [as we saw in Mikel's testimony], of the ultimate

¹⁴ Mt 21:31–32.

substance (“everything consists in Him”), of destiny in the naturally specific and given appearance. [...] If the great mystery of Christ does not become a precise circumstance close to me, it remains in vain and at the mercy of my interpretation, my sentiment, my whim, my self-affirmation.”¹⁵

Today, how does Christ knock on the door of every person, of your and my humanity?

“How abstract the Jesus of Andrew and John would also be, if He did not become concrete now–now!–in this moment, in His presence within the mystery of His body, within the mystery of the Church that each of us serves to build “like living stones,” as the liturgy says. [...] But let’s ask further: *How* does the mysterious Body of Christ (‘mysterious’ because its deep form eludes our imagination), this living Church, which is His body–as He told St. Paul: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *Me*?’ and Saul had never seen Him before; he persecuted the Christians. The voice of Christ said to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *Me*?’–*how*, therefore, does this reality of the mystery of Christ communicate itself or, according to the expression in the Apocalypse, ‘knock on the door’ of every person called to faith? [...] In the life of the Church!” Fr. Giussani continued, “But when you encounter a face that is different from the others, a face in which the mystery of Christ and the belonging to the Church change your way of looking, feeling, touching, your way of relating to people and things, and you are there with your mouth open, watching it, like John and Andrew with Christ,

¹⁵ Luigi. Giussani, *La familiarità con Cristo* [Familiarity with Christ], (San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo [(Mi)]: San Paolo, 2008), pp. 108–109.

then it is *a particular, interesting occasion*. The Spirit of God is free to reach a person, or another person, filling her or him with an ease in thinking in a Christian way, with a cheerfulness in feeling in a Christian way, with a generosity in building in a Christian way, so that all those who draw close to this person are in some way struck. There! The extreme modality with which you can be struck by Christ's continued presence in history and that according to which the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, causes us to encounter someone, and by following this person faith becomes more easily clear, and affection for the faith more easily intense, and the desire to spread the kingdom of Christ more aware and more easily creative. This is called *charism*: it is *the event of the charism*."¹⁶

We are here for this, for "the event of the charism"; we are here for this "living" event "today," as documented for us in Azurmendi's testimony, those of our friends in Bethlehem and Taipei, of many others who I have not quoted and of those that we all have in front of our eyes. If it were "yesterday," it would no longer be an event and would have no capacity to attract us, to change us, because "Nothing exists outside this 'now'! Our 'I' cannot be moved, aroused, that is, changed, if not by something contemporaneous."¹⁷ If this event were not today, were not living, we would be left with only doctrine in our hands, an extraordinary doctrine, but even so, a doctrine. No doctrine is able to overcome the nihilism that "eats" our soul.

¹⁶ Giussani, *Il tempo si fa breve*, 35–36.

¹⁷ Luigi Giussani, Communion and Liberation Easter Poster, 2011, clonline.org

“Dear Julian, in these time I’ve often wondered if Giussani’s charism is a living or a dead doctrine. If the second were true, we would be in a situation similar to that after the death of Hegel: there would only be the debate between the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ Hegelians, the game of their interpretations. I’ve been in the movement for 47 years, and in the *Memores Domini* for forty, and I still feel my heart leap when I remember how more than once I was saved from the pit of terrorism and a dark fascination for nihilism by the moving rationality of Fr. Giussani. My heart leaps in the same way now when you flip my tendency toward nothingness into a desire for life, ‘raising the bar’ with love for my life and those of the poor desperate souls of this world, with an affection that embraces the forgotten and lacerated heart of people and calls it to be an ‘I.’ Is Christianity a theory or the event of a father’s love today as well, in this culture that leads 18-year-olds to commit suicide for no apparent reason (as happened to a dear student of mine)? I have a sister who is almost 70, abandoned by her husband over thirty years ago, and childless; she has battled cancer and now has Parkinson’s. She is an avid reader, from Marx to Husserl, from Tolstoy to Barthes, from Simeon to Borgna. A few days ago she spoke to me about *The Radiance in Your Eyes* and how it was an important book for her life; when I asked why, she said, ‘Because it made me discover what I’ve always hidden from myself: my nihilism. And now I want to move ahead.’ For me, it is precisely this loving understanding of the tragedy of our century that is a sign of the presence of the charism of Fr. Giussani today; at the same time that it makes us aware of the lack of meaning that dominates us, it rekindles in us an awareness of being daughters and sons.”

We dealt with these things in chapter 6 of *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, in particular in the first three sections. We will return to these pages, which will be the object of our work in School of Community in November.

I said there, “However, it is not enough that this paternity be present: I must be willing to let myself be generated by it. The fecundity of our life depends on our willingness to be daughters and sons. ‘It is what Jesus said to Nicodemus: “You must be born again.” [...] Those who agree to follow Him, becoming daughters and sons, will be surprised by the newness that begins to happen in their lives.”¹⁸

This is the wish we have for each other as this new year begins, with its drama and beauty.

We hope that the Father will find us open to follow what happened in Fr. Giussani, and which continues to happen through the method he constantly stressed—no one generates unless he is generated—because it was the Spirit who acted in him and through him. Each of us should feel personally responsible for maintaining this openness. We are friends, helping each other in the yes that each is called to say to Christ, each having at heart the destiny of the other!

¹⁸ Carrón, *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, 135.

