

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

6. A concrete form

by Luigi Giussani*

On the occasion of Christmas, we celebrated the initiative of God that, just like an “event”, takes place not where man has already decided, but right where He chooses, “on a concrete historical form” and in “humanly understandable terms”. This initiative gives rise to new bonds between men and to new places looking like “homes”, where one can come back to and experience his familiarity with the present Lord. In the past months and during the holidays we have just spent, we have seen “bonds” and “places” (presentations, testimonies, moments of study) emerging from unexpected encounters and events which have redefined the value of terms such as “virtual” and “remote”, making our commitment in School of Community concrete. We invite every community to take up this restart as an opportunity to keep on (or maybe start) experiencing their own path willingly, in a creative and intelligent way.

In order to recognise these places in our history, we propose to continue the work until the end of January on Chapter 2, paragraph 8. The concrete form of the election is the temple in time (pp. 70–78), from the book by L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010.

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in the section “School of Community”.

8. THE CONCRETE FORM OF THE ELECTION IS THE TEMPLE IN TIME

The new self is born in Christ’s gesture of choosing, which places it within the human companionship generated by His Spirit, i.e., into the Church. This election, this choice, always takes on a concrete historical form.

Christ takes hold of man in Baptism; He makes him grow and become an adult. And in an encounter He causes him to experience the fact that a new human reality is close to him, one that corresponds, convinces, educates, and is creative, and that strikes him in some way. Then the person says, “I’ll go along with them”; in other words he decides to accept the prompting that he has felt, which spurs him towards the human reality he has encountered. He accepts it because he is struck by something, be it only a whisper, for the Lord works even through whispers: “Then the Lord passed by. There was a strong and powerful wind enough to shatter the mountains and split the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. »

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades,
Generating Traces in the History of the World,
McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 70-78.

» After the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was the whisper of a gentle wind.¹²⁸ The Lord was in the whisper of that gentle wind.

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. And he says *yes*. The encounter could have been with a hundred thousand other temperaments or other human fascinations, but for him it was this one. He met a particular companionship and perceived the new whisper of a promise of life; he sensed a Presence that corresponded to the original expectation of his heart. So this is the companionship, not another one, in which Christ has become a companion for his life, and draws close to him on the journey. In this companionship he can repeat the greatest, the most wonderful words, "My soul clings to you, your right hand holds me fast."¹²⁹

The Mystery of God, which otherwise would have seemed very distant and abstract, thus becomes something stirring in everyday life, an invitation to look at the sky and the earth, an emotion and a passion in opening one's heart to a preference, a preference that is true if it opens you up to the need of the whole world, thus sharing in the great love of Christ. Because the great love of Christ blossomed in the world through preferences: for John, for Simon ... But it would not have been a true preference if it had not been the sign of the great new love of Christ for the whole world.

The companionship that you meet with has certain characteristics, and it is because of an encounter with particular characteristics, with a particular accent, with a particular attraction, with a particular shape, that you find yourself there.

Man's dwelling place

God reveals Himself to His creature in time and space, and therefore in humanly understandable terms. God's Mystery, as Mystery, is irresistibly communicated to man.¹³⁰ This statement has an absolutely paradoxical feature. Christ, as the meaning of all time and all history, enters into communication with man, He reveals Himself, in a point of time and space. Through contingent and definitively given circumstances, He specifies what man is called to hear, know, acknowledge, and witness of the familiar choice to which God binds Himself and conditions the relationship with Him. These circumstances imply a place in which God asks of man that all be centred and operate as a sign of His relationship with man and man's with Him, and that all be totally a function of God's will in history. In the bible, this place is called "dwelling place," "home," "temple." The temple is the place where man meets the companionship of the Lord, where he hears His voice and His message. It is the place where the Lord points the way, the stretch of the road that He wants to show, where everything (the companionship amongst men and with things) recalls the nearness of Destiny. This is the answer to the ultimate need of man's reason, expressed by Moses: "Show me your face; if You do not come with us we will not move from here."¹³¹

An Other led us to what is decisive for bringing us into the secure and definitive relationship with our Destiny. And the form of this encounter is a precise companionship whose beginning and development can be given a date, with a face that distinguishes it from all other companionships. Just as a father—"a good father," Péguy would say—tries to make the »

¹²⁸ 1 Kings 19:11–12.

¹²⁹ Psalm 63(62):9.

¹³⁰ See L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 145.

¹³¹ See Exodus 33:11, 15, 18. See also L. Giussani, *At the Origin*, 19–20.

» proposal to his son more agreeable, as well-suited to him as possible.

This companionship established for us by Christ's Spirit has a structure, a framework, precise parameters that define it.

This basic parameter for building the structure of this companionship is the "home" or "dwelling place." A dwelling place is like the coalescence of the companionship, of the community, of charity, in a real, day-to-day, spatial dimension. It is from this home that everything starts off, that everything can start off in a new way; everything is made to grow, put in order, reinforced, made more affecting. Everything becomes love. The person you meet along the road, the person you meet in your apartment-block become possible objects of love, the person you knock against in the train, as well as the people with whom you share that place and that activity that for too many is senseless—daily work. Everything can become the object of love starting off from this dwelling place.

The great dwelling place that is the Church becomes flesh, is realized in capillary terminals (just as your veins end in tiny capillaries), in which it becomes present in every place, chosen beforehand by God's plan. The great dwelling place that is the Church is realized inside homes, the dwelling places that are the concentration, the coalescence of her life in a day-to-day dimension of space and time.

This dwelling place can take two forms:

a) Family

This is the home of those who are called to set up a family and therefore to form the generative instrument that produces the subject of all historical activity, the protagonist of God's plan—man. This is the normal vocation, without which history would come to an end—the family, the root of the perennial development of history, home of Jesus, dwelling place of the Son of man. The family is an original sign, given by the Creator himself. For the most decisive instrument for introducing us into the definitive relationship with destiny, and therefore even now to truth, to beauty, and to justice in the relationship with any thing or person, is pre-established, but not by us. We are not the ones to decide. An Other establishes this instrument; He who gives our nature the urge for mutual esteem and gratuitousness which is part of our makeup, He is the one who created the first form of experience, which will remain throughout history, a place where this urge for charity becomes stable and essential—the family.

The companionship between man and woman exists for the generation of a people. A man and a woman get married; this gesture means that each identifies in the other the sign of the relationship with the whole, with the meaning of everything, given by God to his or her life. The encounter between man and woman cannot be defined exclusively by the aim of having children, but first and foremost by being companionship to Destiny, as the realization of the fundamental aim of every kind of human companionship. This bond, therefore, becomes the example for every other companionship. The very form of community life of those who dedicate their lives to God finds its inspiration in this ideal of the family. And those who live as a family, in their turn, find in those who are dedicated to God an example in practice, full of suggestion and encouragement for themselves, of the totality of this ideal.

As it happens, historically, God wills the continuity of that initial companionship between man and woman and He makes them father and mother. Thus a man and a woman cannot establish a stable relationship and be a companionship to Destiny for each other unless they are ready to collaborate in the plan God has for the world, in other words in creation, in the generation of a people that will run the whole course of history so as to flow out into the sea of Christ's definitive glory on the last day.

What is needed for a man and woman to become father and mother? First of all a new »

» way of looking at each other. A man who looks at his wife only out of the tenderness she stirs up in him, or because she makes his heart beat faster, could procreate, could become a father in the merely biological sense, even unintentionally. But God, who is attentive, grasps even this first meaningless moment and immediately fills it with the meaning for which it is to be lived, of which it is made. Once the child is conceived, even a father who is totally unfeeling and hardhearted, after the first surprise, begins to reflect. He looks at his wife in a different way. Both look at each other differently. The first condition of this new way of looking at each other is the permanence, the essential bond, from which is extracted the fragrance of belonging. And here begins the best part: gratuitousness. From now on, even if the woman were to be unfaithful to the man, the man would forgive her and vice-versa. And above all, even were the man not to like the woman any more, the path would still be the same and the bond would last as before, even more perfectly, in other words more gratuitously. In this gratuitousness love is almost forced to squeeze into the narrow path through which it will flow out into charity. It is an Event that gives rise to this bond, just as a child gives a new beginning to a family. In the Event the stable bond emerges, the bond of belonging. Here life begins to be satisfied, to take delight in itself, in the right sense for a creature. There is a qualitative jump in the look between man and woman, where respect becomes possible (*re-spicere*), and the relationship becomes more and more meaningful as a sign of totality; in other words as a sign of collaboration with the Kingdom of God. The awareness of sharing in the building of the Kingdom of God introduces a new vibration into the soul, so that the loving feeling—through a tremendously narrow path called the cross—becomes genuine charity, virginity, gratuitousness; in other words, charity as participation in virginity, since virginity is the whole of life lived in the acknowledgment that Christ is everything in everyone.¹³²

b) *The Monastery*

The second mode of dwelling place is the monastery. This is the word that is etymologically most meaningful amongst all the words that indicate the "dwelling place" of those who are called to virginity as their form of life. The word monastery comes from *monos* (alone, solitary); for mankind's relationship with God, with the Mystery, becomes awareness, freedom, and love in the individual person. It becomes a new self. But "monastery" means many selves who live together. Even the example of the hermit is a provisional one that does not make the rule: all these *monoi*, in one way or another, express and document their being all one in the Church of God by joining together. The other word, analogous to the word monastery, is "convent" (joining together).

The monastery, convent, or as the expression of a new form of dedication to God, "house,"¹³³ according to the various modes of the call, is made, created, built by those who are chosen as "living stones"¹³⁴ to form, to generate an existence that can be experienced by everyone, which demonstrates by its very visible form that "only He is." In the monastery, in the convent, or in the house, these living stones, those who are called and chosen, are there to demonstrate in virginity, in the very form of their life, that only He is; in other words, that Christ is the King of the Universe (*Christe cunctorum dominator alme*),¹³⁵ and that all has consistence in Him (*omnia in Ipso constant*).¹³⁶

The monastery, the convent, or the house are created so that those who live there might »

¹³² See Colossians 3:11.

¹³³ See L. Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio*, 19–20.

¹³⁴ See 1 Peter 2:5.

¹³⁵ "Christe cunctorum dominator alme," Hymn for the dedication of a Church, in *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, Vol. 27, C. Blume, ed. (Leipzig 1897), 265.

¹³⁶ Colossians 1:17.

» learn to cry out before everyone, in every instant—their whole life is made for this—that Christ is the only thing that makes the world's existence worthwhile.

So, the dwelling place—that lives as a family, a monastery, a convent, a house of the *Memores Domini*,¹³⁷ or as a group of *Fraternity*¹³⁸—is the place, the temple where one learns to see in time and space, and in the other person, the Mystery of Christ. In this way we can understand why the community in a school or in a university is also like a home or a family; or even a community in the workplace, the community in one's neighbourhood, or a particular group is a home or a family, part of the overall, larger family that we call the Church. In this way, we also discover the value of that piece of the Church that exists where we live, called the parish, in other words the reality of God's love nearest to our home (etymologically "parish" means "near home"). There, the community, the friendship we share, is nourished by the sacraments, and by the Word of God that is proclaimed. What a great image the parish is, when we think that it lives as the Church! A parish cannot exist alone. It is a piece of the Church in the place where I live.

In the home, in the family, amongst those friends, we continually meet the Event of that Presence which, when it is acknowledged, changes the way we look at and feel ourselves and all things. In the house, you see the Mystery of Christ present as a face. You learn precisely from the difficulties in the relationships—enlightened by the judgment of His presence—to see the Mystery of Christ in the other person. For each one of us the companionship becomes true as it coalesces in the space of a real daily dwelling place, a home, a dwelling where everything is judged so as to make you sense their common destiny, their common goal. So the relationship with all things becomes an occasion for good in the present that is passing, continually able to recuperate, to provoke happiness, to be a source of joy, of security and of love, whose summit is forgiveness. The Christian tradition has always had this sense of veneration for the earthly dwelling that re-echoes the glory of Christ in the world:

O bright and splendid home
I have always loved your beauty
And the place where my Lord's glory dwells,
He who built you and possesses you.
May my journey sigh for you:
And I say to Him who made you
That he possesses me, too, within you,
Because he made me, too.

...

Jerusalem, God's eternal dwelling,
May my soul never forget you:
After the love for Christ, be you my joy;
The sweet remembrance of your holy name
Raise me up from the sadness of what oppresses me."¹³⁹ »

¹³⁷ The *Memores Domini* are those who live dedication to Christ and to the Church in virginity. This experience was born from the movement Communion and Liberation. The Association *Memores Domini* (commonly called "Gruppo Adulto") means to be a missionary presence through the form of virginity to bring faith into men's lives, by meeting them everywhere, in particular in the various work environments: school, office, factory. The *Memores Domini* normally live together in a "house," in a fixed community of from three to twelve.

¹³⁸ The *Fraternity of Communion and Liberation* is a Public Association of the Faithful, recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, 11 February 1982.

¹³⁹ "O domus luminosa et speciosa, dilexi decorem tuum, et locum habitationis gloriae Domini mei, fabricatoris

» It is another world that we have to build, and we are the first witnesses to it, witnesses to that normally impossible unity that becomes experience and makes us capable of forbearance, of patience and mercy towards others, of total sharing, magnanimity in every circumstance. We have been called to begin the building of this new world. The house is the space where the relationship with Christ is imprinted into all our actions, all our gestures, and thus makes us builders of a new reality.

The dwelling (family, monastery, house) indicates the reality in which we live, in our day-to-day relationships, with patience, with understanding, where everything is for us, where everything is welcoming, where everything spurs us to hope, where everything soothes our wounds, where the whole of us, all that we are, is welcomed. As Gregory of Nyssa said, "The bond of our unity is genuine glory."¹⁴⁰

Through these capillaries the Church lives in the broad context of the whole world. The Church is the reality to which God has entrusted the meaning of time. So the Church carries the meaning of history, year by year, century by century, from man to man. Outside the Church, everything falls to pieces and turns to rubble. So, on the contrary, each one of us is called, as the prophet Isaiah said, to be "re-builder of ruined houses,"¹⁴¹ of ruined mankind. Each one of us, where he is, day after day, becomes a sign of Jesus' goodness, of His will for man's good: "He turned and saw those who were following him and took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd."¹⁴² We are part of His leadership, His pity for mankind in search of good, of truth, of love, of justice and happiness. For "who could ever speak of Christ's own love for man, overflowing with peace?"¹⁴³

An Event continually generates a bond, a belonging, a new way of life, a new morality, a perfection that bears the fruit that collaborates in the earthly garden, the earthly paradise. Thus we have our part in bringing about God's plan, in the explosion of the human glory of Christ in history.

et possessoris tui. Tibi suspiret peregrinatio mea, et dico ei qui fecit te, ut possideat et me in te, quia fecit et me ... Hierusalem domus Dei aeterna, non obliuiscatur tui anima mea: post Christi dilectionem tu sis laetitia mea: dulcis memoria beati nominis tui sit releuatio moeroris et taedii mei." John of Fécamp, "Confessio theologica" 23, 39, in *Pregare nel Medioevo* (Milano: Jaca Book 1986), 241–2.

¹⁴⁰ "Hujus autem unitatis nexus est gloria" (Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Hom XV, Migne, PG 44, 1118 A).

¹⁴¹ Isaiah 58:12.

¹⁴² Matthew 9:36.

¹⁴³ See Dionisius the Areopagite, *De divinis Nominibus* 953 A 10.