

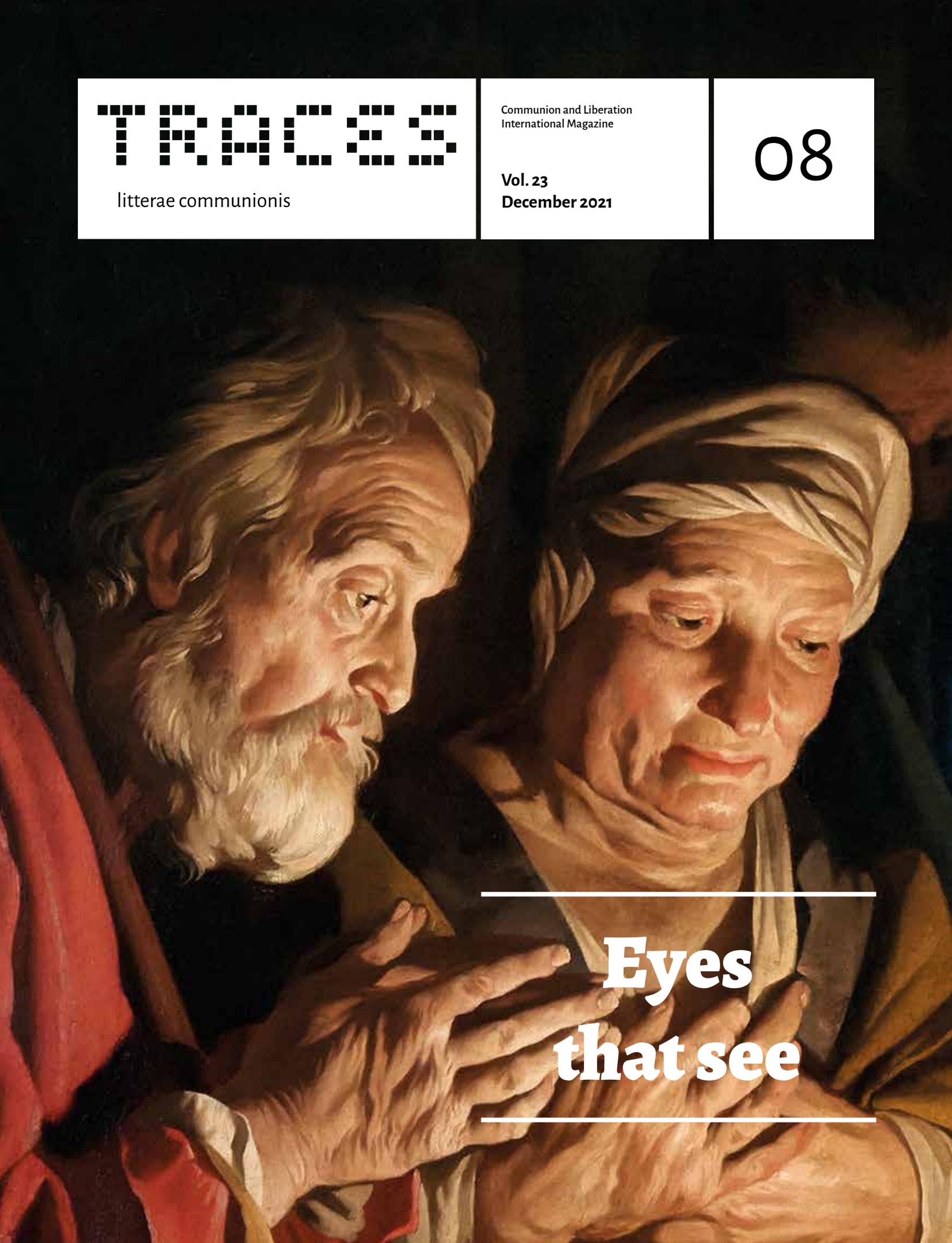
TRACES

litterae communionis

Communion and Liberation
International Magazine

Vol. 23
December 2021

08



**Eyes
that see**

To Give One's Life for the Work of Another

LUIGI GIUSSANI

Edited by Julián Carrón

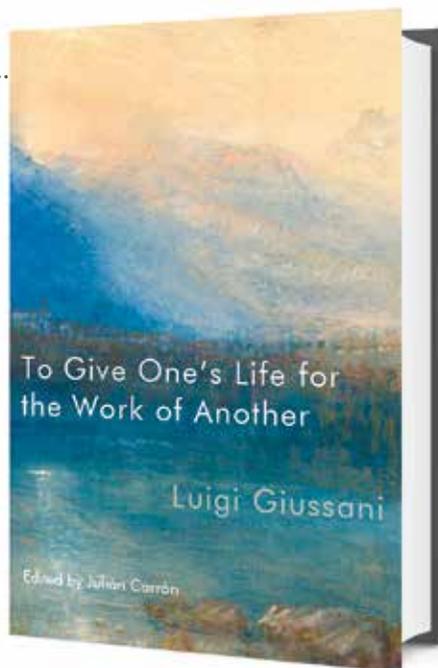
Some of Father Luigi Giussani's most poignant teachings, available in print for the first time.

Father Luigi Giussani engaged tirelessly in educational initiatives throughout the course of his life. Much of his thought was communicated through the richness and rhythm of oral discourse, preserved as audio and video recordings in the archive of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation in Milan.

This volume presents the last three spiritual exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, drawing from the transcripts of these recordings. In these exercises Giussani investigates the rise of ethics and the decline of ontology that have accompanied modernity and the spread of rationalism. Bearing up against old age and illness, he resisted the urge to withdraw, instead finding new avenues of communication and the technological means to reach all corners of the movement. *To Give One's Life for the Work of Another* explores the nature of God, the powerful human experience of self-awareness, and the fundamental components of Christianity, in the unmistakable voice of a consummate teacher.

At a time when young people are abandoning the church and questioning the value of faith, Father Giussani's method of judging and verifying Christianity as an experience is a timeless intervention.

Monsignor **Luigi Giussani** (1922–2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy. His works are available in over twenty languages and include the trilogy *The Religious Sense*, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, and *Why the Church?*, as well as the three volumes of *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*



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Julián Carrón was president of the fraternity of the lay movement Communion and Liberation from 2005 to 2021. He is professor of theology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.



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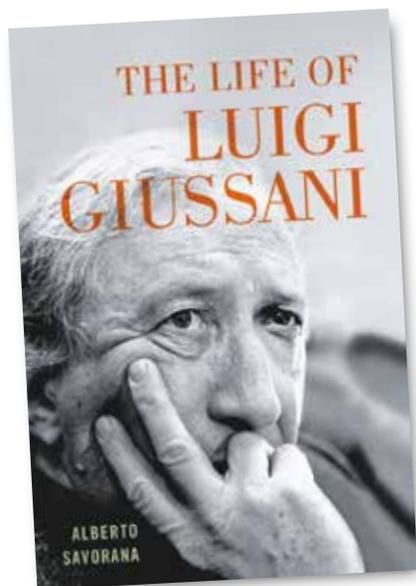


A detail of the CL Christmas poster.
(Matthias Stomer, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*,
17th century. Palazzo Madama, Museo Civico
d'Arte Antica, Turin).

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"They are made of what they see"



1,416 pages | December 2017

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.*

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The letter of Julián Carrón

The General Decree of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, *The Associations of the Faithful*, which regulates the government of the international associations of the faithful and entered into force on September 11, 2021, establishes that “the terms of office in the central governing body at an international level can have a maximum duration of five years each” (art. 1) and that “the same person can hold positions in the central governing body at an international level for a maximum consecutive period of ten years” (art. 2).

Furthermore, the Vatican Dicastery establishes that “Associations in which, at the time of coming into force of this Decree, positions in the central governing body at an international level are conferred on members who have exceeded the limits referred to in articles 1 and 2, must provide for new elections no later than twenty-four months from the coming into force of this Decree” (art. 4), that is, within and not beyond September 11, 2023.

Since he has been president of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation for over ten years, Fr. Julián Carrón has decided to resign from this role, in order to facilitate the immediate start of the process of change required of international associations of the faithful recognized by the Holy See.

Here is Fr. Carrón’s letter communicating his decision to the members of the Fraternity of CL:



FRATERNITÀ DI COMUNIONE E LIBERAZIONE

associazione di diritto pontificio civilmente riconosciuta

Ufficio: Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano - Tel. 02/66595088 - Fax 02/66594670 - e-mail: clfrat@comunioneliberazione.org

Milan, November 15, 2021

Dear Friends,

In this delicate moment in the life of the Movement, I have decided to resign as President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, to help the change of leadership to which we are called by the Holy Father, through the Decree to regulate government within movements, to take place with the freedom that this process requires.

This will lead each one to personally take on the responsibility for the charism.

It has been an honor for me to carry out this service for years, an honor that fills me with humiliation at my limitations and if I have failed some of you. I give thanks to God for the gift of the companionship I have been able to enjoy, in front of the beautiful sight of your daily witness, from which I have learned constantly and from which I want to continue learning.

I hope you will experience this circumstance as an opportunity for the growth of your ecclesial self-awareness, so that you may continue to testify to the grace of the charism given by the Holy Spirit to Fr. Giussani, which makes Christ a real, persuasive and decisive presence that has struck us and drawn us into a flow of new life, for us and for the whole world.

Always yours,

Fr. Julián Carrón

The letter of the Diaconia

On Saturday, November 20, 2021, the Central Diaconia of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation held a meeting in Milan to acknowledge the irrevocable resignation of their president, Fr. Julián Carrón, and to deal with some issues related to the life of the Fraternity, including a first sharing of a draft revision of the Statute according to the guidelines of the Vatican decree that regulates the government of international associations of the faithful.

Here follows the letter that was sent to all members of the Fraternity of CL after the Diaconia:



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Milan, November 20, 2021

Dear friends,

in the face of the irrevocable resignation of Fr. Julián Carrón, the central Diaconia of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, which met today, November 20, 2021, in Milan, wishes to thank him wholeheartedly for all that he has represented in these years, since Fr. Giussani called him to share with him the leadership of the Movement. And we are grateful to him in advance for the contributions of his testimony he will continue to give.

As President of the Fraternity, he has led us to identify ourselves with the living experience of Fr. Giussani and with his method of education to faith—that the Church has recognized as a road to holiness—, by experiencing “an obedience of the heart to that form of teaching to which we have been entrusted.” (J. Ratzinger).

Therefore, we feel the urgency to let these words by Fr. Giussani into our hearts, so as not to waste the gift we have received: “The charism is an intervention of the Spirit of Christ in order to increase belonging to Christ in the world: it is a fact of the history in which we are born, in which the Spirit takes us by surprise, that history in which the Father has placed us. The plan of the originating Mystery, of the Father, has placed us on a given path, on a given road within the Church; it has immersed us in the fact of Christ, it has made us participate by making us His, in terms of our awareness and affection.” (*To Give One's Life for the Work of Another*, forthcoming).

On the journey of these years, we have experienced that “the charism is like a window through which you see space in its entirety. The proof of a true charism is that it opens you to everything, it doesn't close you in.” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 80).

In this regard, we wish to fully welcome what Fr. Carrón's letter suggests: to experience this circumstance as an opportunity for the growth of our ecclesial self-awareness.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to renew in ourselves the grace of the charism that has struck us and drawn us to Christ, inside the life of the Church, our mother, and by following Peter, in order to be active contributors of the will of our Father at work in the today of history.

The members of the Central Diaconia of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation

The letter of Davide Prosperi

On Saturday, November 27, 2021, the Central Diaconia of the Fraternity of CL gathered in Milan so that it could be informed by the vice-president about the interview that took place with the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life some days before, to which he had been called after the resignation of its president, Fr. Carrón. Prosperi reported that the Prefect of the Dicastery, Cardinal Kevin Farrell, confirmed to him that, according to art. 19 of the Statute of the Fraternity of CL, in the event of the president's resignation, the Vice-President fully takes over. Therefore, he acknowledged to him that he had the full powers as *interim* president of the Fraternity. Thus, the Central Diaconia unanimously took note of the task he was entrusted with and expressed their complete availability and cooperation.

Here follows the letter in which Davide Prosperi informed all members of the Fraternity of CL about the contents of this interview and about his assuming the role as *interim* president.



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Milan, November 27, 2021

Dearest friends,

as already announced in last Saturday's press release, a few days after Fr. Julián Carrón's resignation, I was called by the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, as Vice-President of the Fraternity, for important communications. The audience took place on Thursday, November 25, at the Dicastery's offices in Rome, in the presence of Cardinal Kevin Farrell, Prefect, of Dr. Linda Ghisoni, Undersecretary, and of Dr. Isabelle Cassarà.

Today, after reporting the contents of this interview to the members of the Diaconia of the Fraternity, I am writing to share with all of you what Cardinal Farrell wanted to talk to me about.

In the first place, the Prefect confirmed that, according to art. 19 of the Statute of the Fraternity of CL, in the event of the President's resignation, the Vice-President fully takes over. He then asked me to take this responsibility and I, even though aware of my own limitations, accepted.

Therefore, the Prefect acknowledged to me the full powers as *interim* President of the Fraternity, i.e. until new elections are held, as provided for by the General Decree issued on June 11, 2021 and that has come into force with effect from September 11. This cannot happen earlier than twelve months since the start date of my assignment.

Secondly, the Prefect explained the procedures we should go through to prepare the election of the new President of the Fraternity.

The first step will be the approval of a new Statute. In the revision process, which is to take place under the supervision of the Dicastery itself, consultations inside the Fraternity will also have to be included. The purpose of such consultations is to let the new rules most appropriately reflect the originality of our charism and thus the specific identity of the Fraternity of CL inside the church.

Therefore, in order to continue the work already started by the Central Diaconia in the past months, I have agreed with the Dicastery on the institution of a Committee for the Statutes which is both streamlined and sufficiently representative, so that the work may proceed efficiently. I will disclose the composition of this committee as soon as possible, so that all those who so wish can make their own contribution through these delegates.

Finally, the Prefect invited me to commit myself to let the life of the Fraternity be nourished and to not let its activities stop. Thereby, he entrusted me with the great responsibility to continue to provide all of us with a clear educational proposal, so that our experience may be enhanced even during this transitional stage. I will soon ask other people to help me in such a delicate task.



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I have purposely written to you in an essential and almost technical way, in order to faithfully share the indications I have received. However, I wish to share with you the concerns that I have and the reflections that I see as most important soon, so that we can go through this new stage in the life of the Movement safely together.

For this purpose, let's join next Monday, November 29, at 9:00 p.m., for a communication by video link.

Please let me conclude with a personal note.

I have accepted the post I hold as an act of obedience to the Holy Father and I wish to perform this task as a service to the life of our companionship and of each one of you. As far as possible, I would like to listen to everyone and to give space to the initiative of whoever wishes to take part. The task of bearing witness we are given by God is great and, as Fr. Julián reminds us in his last letter, each one of us is called to take responsibility of the charism in this particular moment. I ask each one of you to please help me to take my own, granting me your trust and esteem in advance.

In communion,

Davide Prosperi

The text of the communication of Davide Prosperi to the CL Movement made on November 29th by video link is available at clonline.org.

Ester, Paolo, Chiara, Adolfo

edited by
Paola Bergamini
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A trip to Lejeune

Ours was a trip that began far away from but ended at Chalo-Saint-Mars, a small town eighty kilometers from Paris, where Jérôme Lejeune, a French physician, is buried. In the early 1960s, he identified the chromosome linked to Down's Syndrome. As always happens in the truest encounters, nothing was prepackaged. It just happened. Two young families from Milan, on their way home from a vacation in Puglia, stopped in Pesaro to meet another family. They have in common the Down's Syndrome of two splendid daughters—Rachele, eight years old, and Letizia, who is thirty. At dinner, the idea was born to travel together to Dr. Lejeune's tomb to thank him on behalf of our daughters. We parted with this desire. COVID froze everything for two years, but not the path to sainthood for Lejeune, who became "venerable" in January, 2021. At the beginning of the summer, we decided to put together the trip. Other families, even though they did not know each other, also joined. They were united from the start, not because they all had children with Down's, but because of an experience of faith that sees us all as brothers and sisters. We left on October 2nd: a group of about fifty, with more than half being children. Fr. Mario Garavaglia, a parish priest from Milan, also came with us. While waiting for the others, the first families to arrive visited the cathedral of Chartres. We were amazed that some sculptures and decorations were put so high up as to be almost invisible. We were told that they were put there so they would "alone" give glory to God. But our trip became even more of a true gesture when, in front of Lejeune's tomb, we sang, prayed, and offered our personal petitions and listened to

our shared intentions. One of us said, "What moves me (which is not a given for me, as I am poor, distracted, and superficial) is that a man like Lejeune gave his life in order to understand, help, and accompany children with Down's and their families." Someone else added, "Whether it's a column in the cathedral at Chartres, or a medical exam by Dr. Lejeune of a child who, according to science, shouldn't have been born, whatever is done for His glory has eternal value and fills one's heart with peace. Which is why Fr. Mario had us sing 'Non Nobis.' What could be more moving?" Anouk, Lejeune's daughter who was with us at the cemetery, responded, "For my father, engaging in his work was never an effort or a heroic act. The value of the children he cared for was always in evidence." We returned home with this certainty: even though we came from different places, so many strangers of differing ages within the experience of the charism, we can discover who our true friends are, or rather "the significant presences" who with their existence reveal to us that "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift." To encounter people like this pushes us to meet others in order to communicate the beauty we have experienced.

Ester, Pesaro (Italy)

"Serial craftmakers"

My home has always been Grand Central Station. Ours is one of those homes where, when you wake up, you never know who you'll find: GS students, catechists, work colleagues, the group of veteran Army Mountaineers, the parish priest, or even just the neighbor who stops by for a cup of coffee and a chat. I will admit that, as a daughter, this situation sometimes bothered me, and I was sometimes angered by my parents' (especially my mom's) ability to attract people who were constantly invading my space. But with the same honesty, I have to acknowledge that, once my first moment of annoyance passed, I was always happy to

have those often unexpected and sometimes unfamiliar faces around. I am aware of this now that I live 300 kilometers away from my parents and I still look for that same familiarity, that same openness toward the other that constitutes me, whether I like it or not. I discover that I am grateful because, just as they have not lost their genuineness and gratuitous openness, neither have I stopped being amazed and fascinated. It happened then that, returning home for a weekend, I found, bent over around the round kitchen table, a group of “serial craftmakers.” This is a group of ten women between the ages of sixteen and seventy who get together from October to December to organize the AVSI tents. Each woman brings herself, her craftmaking tools, and a hot-glue gun. They create Nativity scenes, Christmas ornaments, and other things to sell at the tents, which are set up in the town’s main square. Each one, bent over the table, brings her own story, her own struggles, her own questions that emerge between the ribbons and a hot cup of tea. So, while you may see a neighbor get angry with the neighbor from the apartment above over a bow that came out poorly, or while you may hear a young woman talk about a sadness so deep it takes your breath away, you realize that the Christian event is this: the coming of One who makes us close—neighbors, brothers, and sisters—in a way so true that it is sometimes uncomfortable but also essential.

Chiara, Italy

“I have to come with you”

One evening I went to dinner with some first-year law students. At a certain point, a guy who barely knew us asked, “But why do you go to School of Community?” I was just about to give the right answer when another first-year student, with whom an incredible relationship has blossomed, said, “I go because Paolo invited me and Paolo cares about me.” And to think that we’d only known each other for a month! After dinner, I went out with him for a beer. We began talking and I told him about my relationships with my friends and my girlfriend. At a certain point, he stopped me: “You really do make me so mad.” “Why?” “Because everything you say causes me to have more questions.” I was struck by how he tied being loved to questions welling up in him. This way in which I feel free to tell him about myself and to ask him questions, and the fact that he feels loved, is due to the fact that I have felt loved in the same way. It’s incredible that he can make the leap to saying, “I don’t understand everything that is said and certain things

sound off-pitch, but if you care about me and you go to that place, then I have to come with you.”

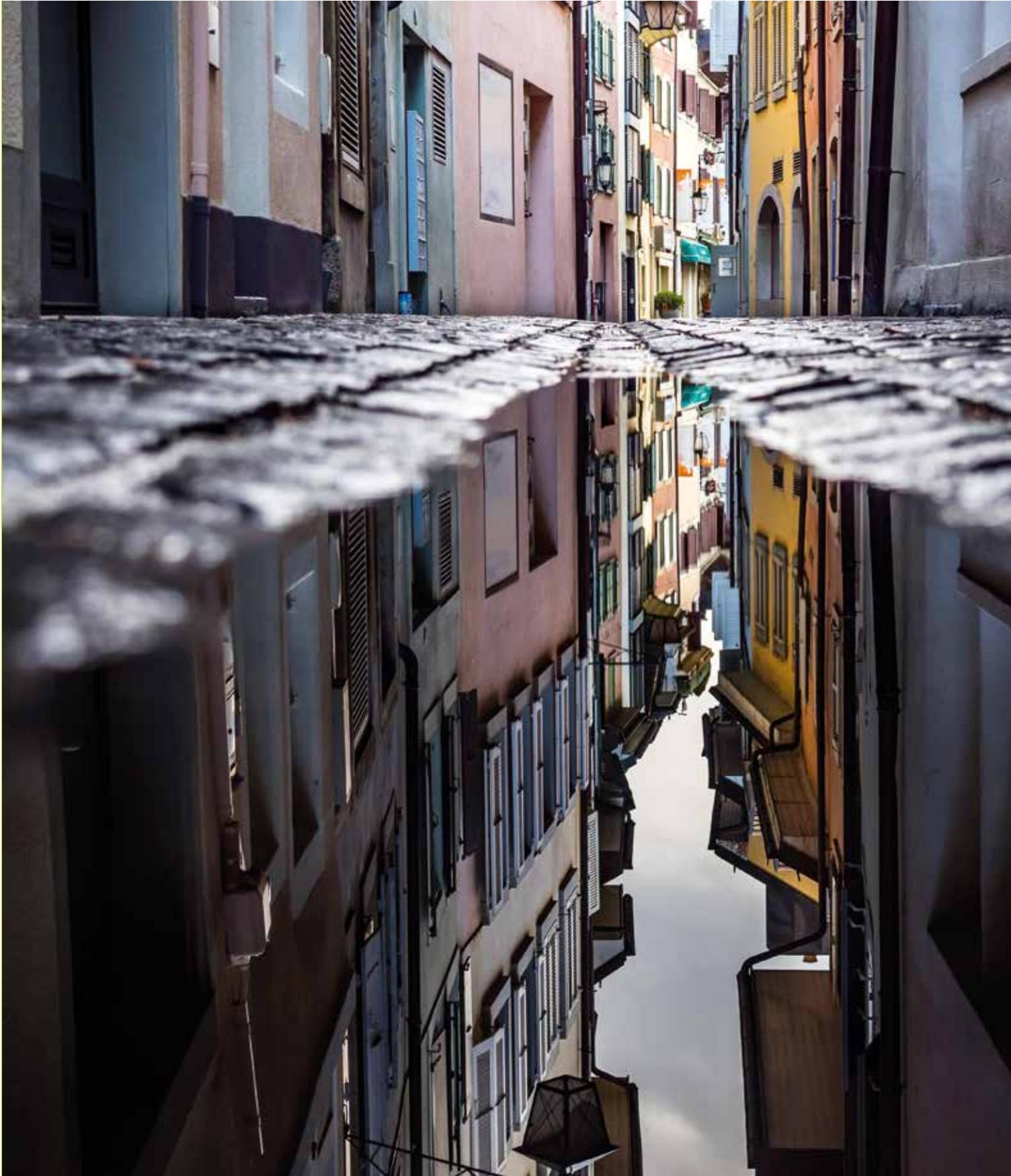
Paolo, Milan (Italy)

At the food drive

A while ago, I agreed to help with one of our parish’s institutions, which for twenty-five years has organized a volunteer effort to support the needy. One day the president called, asking if I could help with one of the food drives that we hold periodically at the local supermarkets, the food for which is then brought to the Food Bank. Doing this is contrary to my reserved character: stopping people who are going about their business to ask them to buy food for the poor is very hard for me. At the supermarket, they introduced me to my follow volunteer, a forty-five-year-old foreign woman. In our free moments, we chatted a little and I learned that she was from Albania and had been in Italy for five years and that she had a difficult past and a challenging present. “And yet,” I asked, “you offered your time to volunteer. How come?” “Because I have received much from these people and I want to give back, at least in part.” I was deeply struck by this phrase. I was also struck by and admired the courtesy and friendliness she showed those who were entering the supermarket. We chatted a little more and I was surprised by how she talked about her grandson, born to her daughter when she was seventeen. I didn’t sense any fatigue, tiredness, or resentment about a life that has always been difficult, but rather, only the manifestation of her joy in front of the child who, “When I look at him, all sadness and tiredness leave me and I am filled with happiness.” To our group leader I suggested, “This woman is special: don’t lose track of her. Even though this is her first time, she knows how to do this better than I do, even though I’ve done it many times.” While I took up my place again, our group leader jokingly said to the woman, “Did you hear what he says about you? Did you offer to pay for a drink?” She responded in a very low voice, but it was still loud enough that I was able to hear, “No, it’s just that he cares about me.” Conclusion: the Lord surprises you even in the less positive moments, causing you to encounter people who are luminous even though they don’t realize it, and they open your heart—you who have everything but allow yourself to be in a bad mood. They are witnesses, more with deeds than with words, with lives lived with humanity, with an awakened awareness, with great sensitivity, with serenity and with a smile even through difficulties and struggles. In the end, it’s really just a matter of the heart.

Adolfo, Italy

Close-up





Things as they are

The repercussions of what happens are crucial, most importantly when they concern the meaning of life. In this case, it is no longer sufficient to only be part of the growing confusion, the proliferation of interpretations at all levels, personal and social.

Today when everything is uncertain and debatable, is it possible to know with certainty? Where does the ineradicable desire for truth lead us?

“Only a certain vibration reawakened by a fact or event enables us to grasp the complexity and richness of what is happening,” as you will read in this Close-Up in the reflections of someone who deals with the challenges of knowledge daily, from justice to information sciences.

In the abstract, we would all like ironclad security, as if facts should impose their truth without our participation. But actually, we are attracted to those who do not distrust our capacity to judge things and who invite us to engage with all of reality. In other words, we search for what opens our eyes wide to see things as they are, which is part of a journey that does not devalue but rather exalts freedom and liberates it from systematic doubt, from being at the mercy of others.

“In order to know things, you need to love them,” wrote Costantino Esposito in *The Nihilism of Our Times*. “However, this affective dimension should not be understood as a ‘sentimental’ addition or as a subjective emotion, unlike the cold observation of the objective data of reality. On the contrary, this affection constitutes the core motivation for our every act of knowledge, an openness of our mind, which searches for the meaning of things. We can describe it as an ‘attraction’ that reality—things, people, nature, events—always exerts on our ‘I,’ calling and challenging it to a journey of discovery. But this is not automatic, because it involves our freedom.” (A.S.) ■

“You will always know what time it is”

“What orders reality is a particular experience.”
From Beethoven to the Armenian farmer described by
Vasily Grossman, how does human knowledge occur?



Fernando de Haro

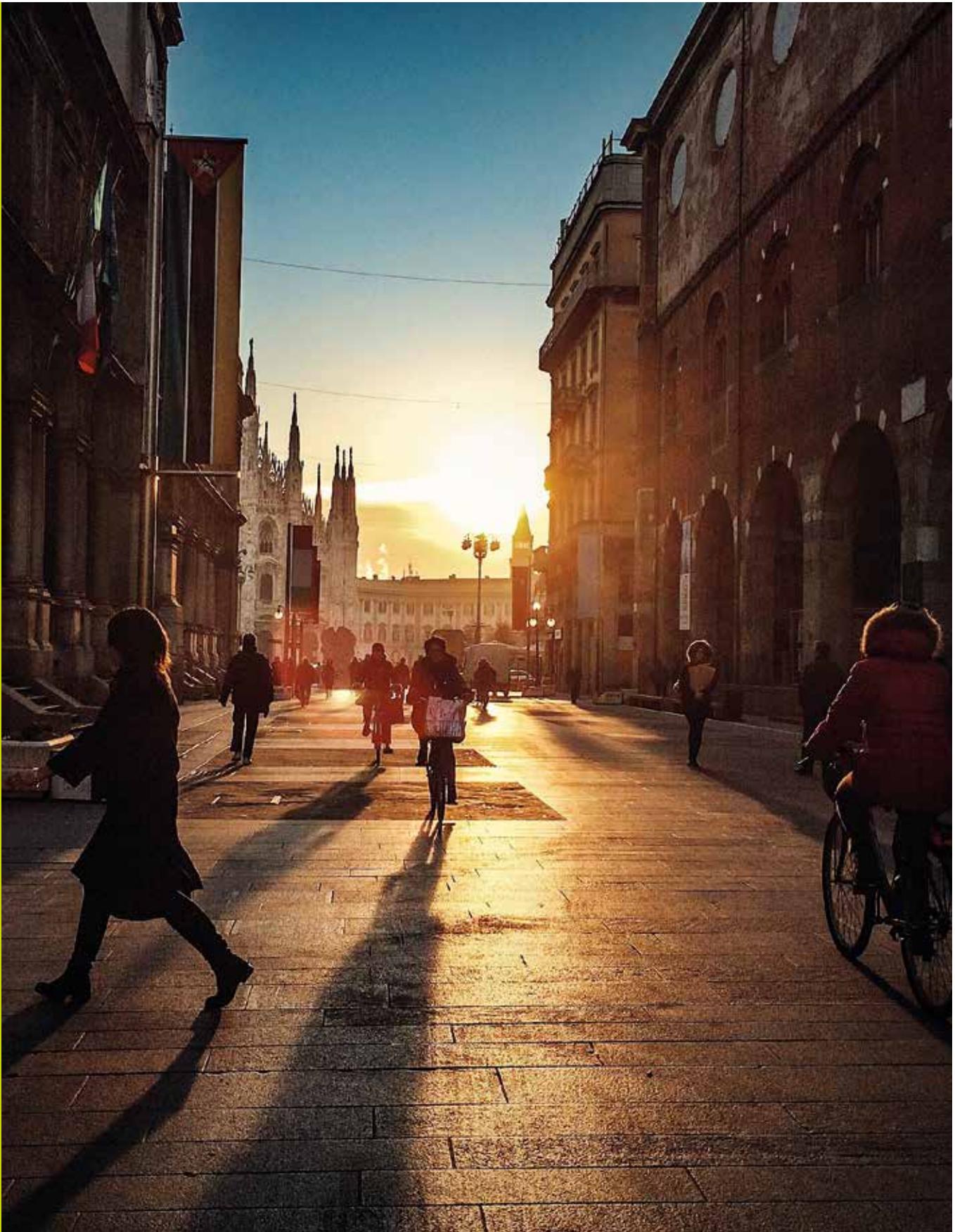
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In June 2019, on a Harvard University campus almost deserted after the end of exams, a group of technology experts and musicologists climbed the stairs of the Loeb Music Library to gather in one of its rooms and work on an ambitious project: completing Beethoven’s “Tenth Symphony” on the basis of the fragmentary sketches left when the composer died in 1827. Recently, music historians and developers of artificial creative intelligence have “completed” it.

Can we know what the German genius was going to create? Is it possible to know the secret of a composer by processing data from all of his works? These two questions lead us to a third that has become pressing: Do we truly know what human knowledge is and what distinguishes our intelligence from the “intelligence” of machines? This question was posed some months ago by James Lin, the Chief Product & Technology Officer at Lynk and an expert in digitalization, in an article for the World Economic Forum entitled “Knowledge is Power: Why the Future Is Not Just about Tech.” According to Lin, in order to achieve success in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in artificial intelligence, “business leaders first need to understand how [human] knowledge works.” According to this expert, a distinction should

be made between explicit and tacit knowledge, the first “easily articulated, quantified, codified, shared and programmed,” the second more archetypally human. Explicit knowledge can be assigned to machines, but intangible knowledge, “ranging from insights gained through personal experiences to accumulated expertise and even basic instincts,” cannot be captured by algorithms.

The refusal of a certain sector of the Western population to receive vaccinations has helped us understand how we acquire the intangible knowledge that distinguishes us from artificial intelligence. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, when the No Vax movement was already widespread, the World Health Organization published a report, “Vaccination and Trust,” explaining how the decision to accept or refuse immunization is made; it states a very eloquent practical case that dismantles the old idea that we make decisions only after having acquired all the available data on a problem. The study asserted that “human beings are not perfect information processors.” In fact, “an individual’s emotions can have a stronger impact on behavior than her/his knowledge” of the data. Judgments formulated and decisions made are not the consequences of broadly analytical process-



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“Judgments formulated and decisions made are not the consequences of broadly analytical processing of information, but other factors.”

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ing of information, but other factors such as “events or examples that immediately come to [our] mind,” or conclusions that confirm our inclinations or our emotions, like fear, anger, and uncertainty, or on the basis of what is considered familiar. “If they have recently heard a credible source express a certain opinion on vaccination (for or against), they will adjust how they assess future information according to this.”

What orders reality is a relationship of trust with a source, a particular experience. James Baldwin expressed this much more poetically in his *Nothing Personal* (1964). “Pretend, for example, that you were born in Chicago and have never had the remotest desire to visit Hong Kong, which is only a name on a map for you,” observed the American writer. “Pretend that some convulsion, sometimes called an accident, throws you into connection with a man or a woman who lives in Hong Kong; and that you fall in love. Hong Kong will immediately cease to be a name and become the center of your life. (...) You will know that one man or one woman lives there without whom you cannot live. (...) And you will, I assure you, as long as space and time divide you from anyone you love, discover a great deal about shipping routes, airlines, earthquake, famine, disease, and war.

And you will always know what time it is in Hong Kong, for you love someone who lives there.”

Vasily Grossman, the author of *Life and Fate*, did not fall in love with a resident of Hong Kong, but in the last months of his life he went to Armenia and, sitting in a traditional rural wooden house, was struck by a farmer whose faith “was mixed with the borsch to cook, the laundry to wash, the bundle of firewood collected in the woods! (...) And Armenia, Russia, reflections on the national character, on greatness or genius had nothing to do with it; it was about the heart of a man, the same heart that was moved and tormented, that had believed in the midst of the expanses of stone and vineyards of Palestine (...). And that heart, that faith were also in an illiterate old man. (...) My eyes filled with tears because I had touched that faith, because I had understood its power.” Grossman understood through the face and gestures of a farmer. They touched him and he understood. “That time, the emotion that I lacked in many other cases of life, filled me entirely,” added the Russian writer in *Good Wishes*.

During the homage to the anthropologist Mikel Azurmendi last October in Madrid, one of those praising his career stressed the value of this form of knowledge,

which is “based on following what life puts in front of us,” reflecting on what one experiences (*Ensayo y error* is the title of the Basque thinker’s autobiography), becoming aware of all the factors involved in experience. It took Azurmendi a long, difficult journey to reach this method of knowledge. “My search for a good life, not finding any empirical point of reference, ran out of energy in the midst of the argumentations of illuminated authors,” he said some months ago. This difficulty in knowledge is overcome only

through wonder. “You can look at something,” he said, “only when you see it with wonder.” This wonder rekindles the desire to understand its origin, “the temporal and causal reasons” for the amazement.

This method differs significantly from the typical processes of artificial intelligence and the cold, distant search for universal laws reached presumably through a deduction or induction that claims to be neutral. It is a rationality that depends on what happens. In his last book, *The*

Other Is a Good, Azurmendi stated, “Rationality is the fruit of absolute dependence on each other.” He added, “Between having the reasons and knowing how to judge them as good or evil, there are many steps to take. In order to learn this, a child always depends on the presence of other people.” The child and the adult depend on what happens to them.

The elaboration of all the data about Beethoven’s works, while no doubt necessary and desirable, will lead to less and less intangible knowledge of the intelligent emotion evoked by the cathedral of notes making up his *Ninth Symphony*. The desire and longing to be able to speak and live with the expressive power and beauty that the composer shows from the first whisper of the work, from the first falling interval in D minor of his last symphony, are the answer to James Lin’s question about what characterizes human comprehension. A certain supposed neutrality transformed into sterile information makes it impossible to know the world.

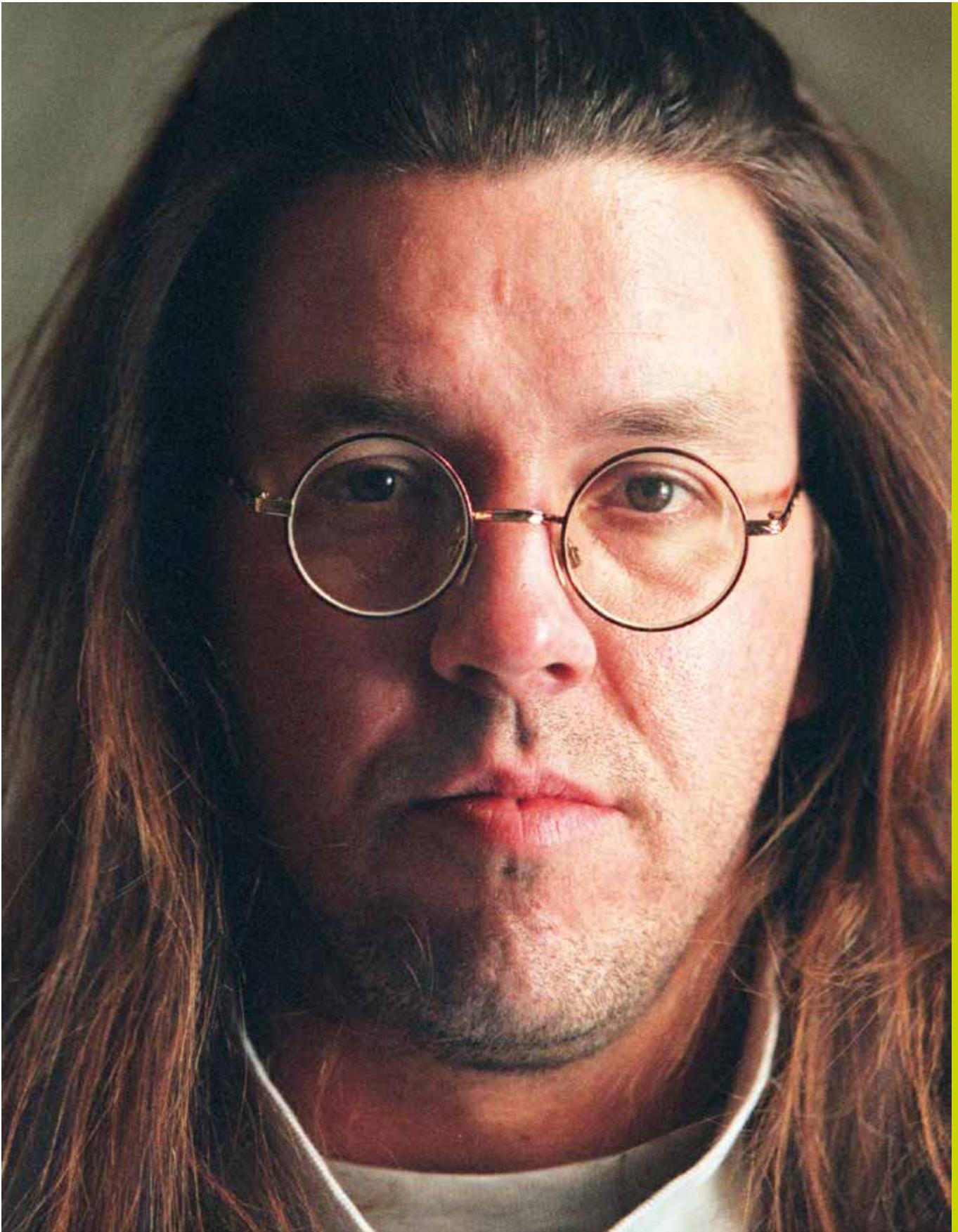
The journalists who travel to war-torn countries or who want to recount what is truly happening where they live know this well. Only a certain vibration reawakened by a fact or event enables us to grasp the complexity and richness of what is happening. ■

“The journalists who travel to war-torn countries or who want to recount what is truly happening where they live know this well. Only a certain vibration reawakened by a fact or event enables us to grasp the complexity and richness of what is happening.”

Close-up

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In a bar in Alaska

*“The world always exists: it is enough to look at why, even when it seems close to nothing, it manifests its presence.”
A literary journey through the continents in the company of Wallace, Lispector, Charms, Weil, and Hampâté Bâ.*



Andrea Fazioli

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An anthropologist often went on walks together with various groups of Australian aborigines. The first couple of times he walked with them, the man was not able to understand why, every now and then, the natives would stop without warning, even when they had no need to sleep or eat. They would stay still for a few minutes, and then would set off again. When he was able to build up enough confidence to ask them about this strange practice, the aborigines told him that they were waiting for their souls, which had tarried along the road.

Reading this episode, I laughed. Then, I thought, What if they were right? What if I had left my soul along the road somewhere, admiring the landscape, while I ran off to some other place? The way of knowledge passes through waiting: sometimes you understand a place only after having looked at it for a long time. Even in what pertains to the human being, comprehension is a reciprocal process comprised of rapid enlightenments and long pauses, of time spent waiting for another.

With the help of the American author David Foster Wallace (1962–2008), I would like to jump from the aborigines to the Eskimos. In his speech, “This is Water,” given as a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, Wallace relates the story of two men, an atheist and a believer, who were speaking as they were “sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness.” The atheist talks about how he had found himself lost and in a sticky situation and began to pray to God to save him. “Well then you must believe now,” responded the believer, “After all, here you are, alive.” And the other shrugged him off: “No, man, a couple of Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.” The same experience can lead to two different interpretations, Wallace comments. But we cannot forget that one’s



David Foster Wallace (1962 - 2008).

interpretation depends on a precise personal choice, not on an innate reaction or something imposed from above. In the same speech, the author described a difficult situation: a long line at the supermarket after a long day of work, weighed down by stress, by annoyance at the stupid and overbearing behaviors of others. Resentment, gloom, and rage rapidly mount. Wallace invited his listeners to look at things differently. Why not think that the others in line to check out are as frustrated as me, and that many of them have a life that is more difficult than mine? The choice is between “operating on your default setting,” taking for granted that you already know what reality is, or “consciously deciding what has meaning and what doesn’t.” In order to choose this second option, we need to “really learn how to pay attention.”

As he said in an interview, for Wallace, the task of narrative is “not so much to observe for people, but rather to let the reader know they too are able to observe.” In certain cases, however, the choice to pay attention can seem difficult, if not impossible. Wallace expresses something of this in the fulminous short story, “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life.”

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed very hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who’d introduced them didn’t much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one.

This disturbing description of a society filled with nothingness, with the need to please, with an inability to communicate, can be found in many of Wallace’s works: the characters are closed within the confines of their anguish. The finale—“now did one now did one now did one”—shows a certain awareness of the lack of hope. It reflects an interior state that is close to depression. The one who has faced this sickness knows that it is not enough to choose to change perspective; it is not enough to hear speeches full of common sense or the need to use one’s reason, precisely because it is obfuscated. As Wallace writes in *Infinite Jest*, “A person in such a state is incapable of empathy with any other liv-

ing thing.”

The problem posed by the American author has to do with the essence of reality: either it is outside of us and we can dedicate attention to it, we can interact with it, or it is just a reflection of our own “I.” To explain myself better, I would like to propose another short story, this time from the Russian author Daniil Charms (1905–1942).

There was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. Neither did he have any hair, so he was called red-haired theoretically. He couldn’t speak, since he didn’t have a mouth. Neither did he have a nose. He didn’t even have any arms or legs. He had no stomach and he had no back and he had no spine and he had no innards whatsoever. He had nothing at all!

Therefore there’s no knowing whom we are even talking about. In fact it’s better that we don’t say any more about him.

The narrative consists in the dismantling of the character, so much so that he progressively disappears, becomes nothing, and yet—since we can speak of a character, since we can define him as a “he”—in some way, he does truly exist. The character is not, but, at the same time, is. And he stands before us with his red hair (which he does not have). This paradox helps us to understand that the world always exists and that it is enough to look at the reason why, even when it seems near to nothingness, it reveals its presence.

Here’s the point: it is enough to look. But how can we have a gaze that is truly in tension with knowledge and not just an accumulation of notions? We know many things about many people, and yet they seem less alive than the man with the red hair who was evoked by Charms. Again, I will entrust myself to a piece of flash fiction, written by the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector (1920–1977). It is the story of an erudite who, at the end of a series of circumstances, becomes the manager of a shoe store. Here is the ending:

He had been the best history student and he was also interested in archaeology. But what seemed to be missing for him was cultural history or archaeology; he simply had erudition. He was missing the intimate comprehension of what had happened in this world and what had happened to those men who had been behind the events, what had happened on the earth that he strode upon, that at one time had no inhabitants and in which fish had been transformed into amphibians which were the same that he



Simone Weil (1909–1943).

one basic rule: the subject must let himself be guided by the object. The object, however, does not allow for the erudite approach, nor the gaze that examines from afar. And so we arrive at the method: to love the other-than-us so that it might truly leave a mark on our lives.

We've visited five continents: from the Australian aborigines to the North America of Wallace, from the Asia of Charms to the South America of Lispector and the Europe of Weil. Leaving out Antarctica, only Africa is missing, so I'll conclude, then, with Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901–1991). I'd like to reflect on the book that the Malian author dedicated to his teacher, the wise Tierno Bokar (1875–1939), the founder of a Quranic school and of the Sufi confraternity Tijaniyya. On a windy afternoon, Bokar was explaining complex theological subjects when something fell from the branch of a tree. He heard a cry. Bokar interrupted the lesson. He approached and saw a broken nest and a small swallow. Patiently, the teacher reassembled the nest with needle and thread, and placed it back in the tree, with the little swallow inside it. Then he invited his students to be attentive to the call of the "children of the others" because "without charity of heart, the five prayers that we pray every day are a vain series of gestures and every pilgrimage is simply a profitless stroll." The small swallow cannot do anything by itself: this fragile being, and its pain that calls for attention, is an excellent symbol of how we must love the world so that we can understand it. ■

could now eat. And still today, he places the shoes down like an erudite, as if he was not in contact with that bitter earth on which the soles would be consumed.

In truth, therefore, it is not enough to look at things, but it is necessary to compromise oneself: to feel that one is part of what is to be understood, to place one's feet on the earth, to perceive the soles that become worn through, the tiredness, the sense of being on one's feet and walking. In this sense, I use the word "compromise": to implicate oneself in the alterity that is to be known, to welcome it, and, in a certain sense, to become part of it, all the while

without abdicating one's self. Another writer to express this concept was the French thinker Simone Weil (1909–1943), as she reflected on how what Lispector defined as "intimate comprehension" could be reached.

A gaze that before all else is attentive, with which the soul empties itself completely of its own contents in order to welcome in itself the being that it is looking at as it is, in all of its truth. Only the one who knows how to pay attention is capable of a similar gaze.

The action of knowing does not require techniques, or, if it does require them, they are subordinate to

On the desire for the truth

Fake news, Nietzsche and falling in love. Our relationship with the truth seems to be a story told with cumbersome concepts, but it comes back onto the stage because of our unerasable need for freedom.



Costantino Esposito

18

There was a time in the history of modern nihilism when, almost without our realizing it, the word “truth” had become embarrassing in public speech and without a doubt irritating in private speech. In the collective imagination, the very concept of truth was loaded with a scarcely bearable claim, so awkward and cumbersome had it become: the reference to one absolute, binding, inalterable vision of things. Just think of how the appeal to a truth that constituted human nature or to the ideal truth of a political value almost always met with the objection that it was actually a choice posing illegitimately as a universal.

Certainly, the often-hidden motive of this type of objection lay in political circumstances and ideological stances, so that in some cases the same factor that was considered a false “truth” based on the interests of only one part of the population or government was in other cases presented as an irrefutable truth. Examples are not lacking, at least in Italy and Europe: from the flow of illegal immigrants from North Africa to the possibility of homosexual marriage, from the lawfulness of planning the end of your own life or that of your loved ones

in the absence of certain conditions of “quality” to the obligatory or arbitrary character of vaccinations, from the recent controversy about a law against homophobia to one that recognizes a person’s “gender” identity, not merely his “biological” one. And what can be said of the position of those who contest the truth that the COVID-19 pandemic is truly an emergency situation and their downgrading of it to a mere instrument of political and healthcare control over the population by governments or certain lobbies?

But in recent decades the great project of liberation from the individual and social weight of the truth, opening out to a system of multiple but not overlapping interpretations of the world, has often meant a risky rebound effect that contradicted the initial expectation of liberation. The risk has been that of liquidating reality or reducing it to what the dominant culture decided it was from one moment to the next. In effect, truth always has an enormous social weight, sometimes negative (a “totalitarian” risk that has existed at various times in our history, when someone decided what was real and what was not on the



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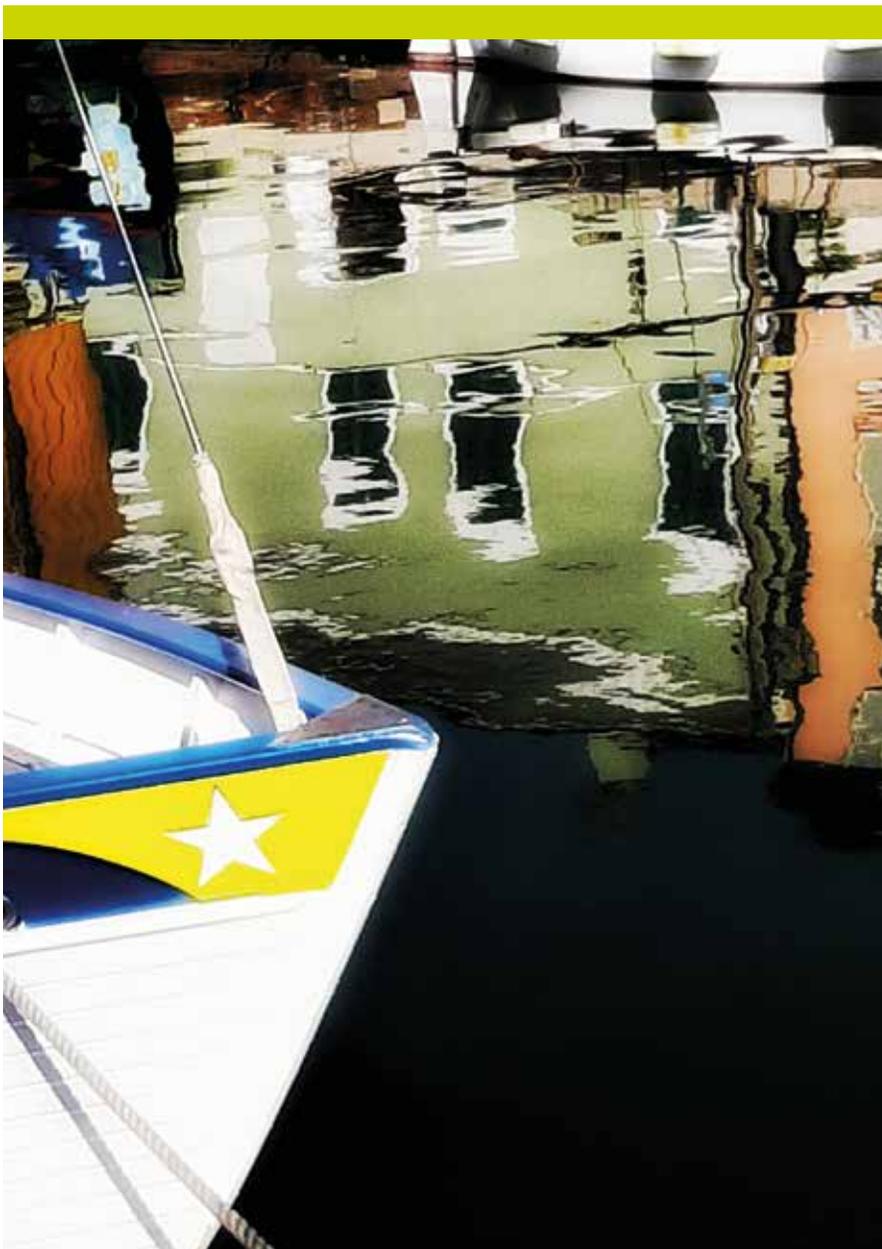
basis of an ideological framework), but also and above all in the positive sense as the protection and defense of people's freedom from the violence of prejudice. Today the turning point is in front of everyone, in the turbid question of fake news and its capacity to subtly orient consent and the very perception of the world. Precisely through the planetary dominion of technology, according to which things are no longer ultimately "given" but all reality can be created and con-

trolled by those with the monopoly over digital information, often bound to the interests of the world political and economic powers, it is no longer a duty to speak of truth, but it is still an irrepressible need of freedom. In reality, the preparation of this kind of linguistic and cultural embargo on the concept of truth happened over a very long period and, as one can readily discover, the widespread nihilism of our time is the outcome of a process that developed slowly within the

history of thought. But never could what happened over the course of Western philosophy be found in the vicissitudes of our mind, as if we had used a pantograph and traced the great lines of the culture of the last few centuries onto our daily way of being in the world.

There is an experience that specially marks modern thought about the problem of truth, the problem described by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) in which he recounted that, profoundly dissatisfied with the instruction he received at the Jesuit College of La Flèche based on the disciplines of the "scholastic" tradition because it did not provide him with a sure criterion for recognizing the truth, he decided to embark upon a journey to discover "the great book of the world." He noted, "I always had an intense desire to learn how to distinguish truth from falsehood, in order to be clear about my actions, and to walk surefootedly in this life." It is significant that the driving force of his research was a desire that not by chance he called "intense"; it is like the tension of every other problem of philosophy and life: the desire for the truth, to succeed in understanding, in touching, the real in its truth.

At the beginning of modernity, truth returned to being a problem that was beyond the traditional solutions because it was reaffirmed as an act of *desiring* by human beings. This is the sign of the truth: that it is desirable and emerges in the "I" as an irrepressible need to be able to exist and achieve self-fulfillment. Truth is a problem of *life*, and we can possess the truth only in the degree to which we seek it, desire it, strive toward it. Certainly, starting from this initial point, Descartes made his journey and set



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forth a method that ensured the most controlled and robust possible knowledge of the world; namely, that knowledge managed by mathematical analysis. But his initial move has always continued to fascinate and challenge me and, paradoxically, has enabled me to highlight a question in Descartes's thought that has remained unresolved: Did his identification of the truth of the world as the sign of a great machine that could be explained geometrically as a series of quantitative relations among dimensions without other possible purposes, satisfy all the breadth of his desire for the truth? Did it exhaust the expectancy for truth that was questioned by the restlessness of the "I"?

Two centuries later, when Nietzsche answered these questions with a decisive no, his iconoclastic radicalness forced him to demolish the very concept of "truth." "I was the first to discover the truth, by being the first to sense—smell—the lie as a lie... My genius is in my nostrils" ("Why I Am a Destiny," in *Ecce Homo, How to Become What You Are*). This may seem strange given that Nietzsche is usually presented as the great deconstructionist, the first to demolish the concept of truth itself. But he was able to do so because he sensed anew the problem of truth in all its irrepressible nature. The beginning of the crisis of the twentieth century, a transversal problem in the most varied practices and disciplines, from mathematics to literature, from physics to psychology, from art to historiography, lies in the fact that truth became a problem. The formula is ambiguous because the affirmation is not so much that there is no truth, but rather that *the problem is the truth* because it has lost its warrants.

But the crisis did not void the initial question; rather, it opened it again. Where does this desire come from, a desire that now, precisely because it has not been satisfied, is charged with violence? This is the reason Nietzsche had his wanderer voice his own thoughts. "One day the wanderer slammed a door behind himself, stopped in his tracks, and wept. Then he said, 'This penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent, certain—how it aggravates me! Why does this gloomy and restless fellow keep following and driving me?'" (*The Gay Science*).

Why did the wanderer weep? Because he felt hunted by the problem of reality, by the need for truth he wanted to rip out of himself because it kept following him and driving him, because it got in the way of his "building himself" the way he would like. It is something like the force of gravity, but at the same time it enraged him,

"Why did the wanderer weep? Because he felt hunted by the need for truth he wanted to rip out of himself because it kept following him and driving him, because it got in the way of his 'building himself' the way he would like. It is something like the force of gravity, but at the same time it enraged him."

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because he felt its absolute urgency without being able to explain why.

We cannot think of truth starting from an "I" that is detached and freed from reality, nor of an existence without the freedom of the "I." Truth lies in the relationship. *The relationship is its problem* because it should not be considered merely as the sum of two addends, each already constituted by itself, but as the way in which each of them is true, thanks to the other. As is known by all those who think that truth as such emerges in the judgment of knowledge, grasping truth means (according to the famous canon of Thomas Aquinas) discovering the correspondence between our intellect and reality. (*Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*. Truth is the correspondence of the mind and reality.) We are

“Love can never be questioned enough, because love never has enough of hearing the reassuring affirmative reply. Behind every answer there is a new question, and behind every reassuring certainty there is an expansive new horizon.”

(Hans Urs von Balthasar)

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true and we live in the truth not because we never err or never fall into falsehood, but because we already are and always have been within the manifestation of reality. We are in the truth because, even when erring, “we are” a relationship with reality. And reality “awaits expectantly,” if we may so express it, for our openness so that it can manifest itself in its true sense.

There is a simple, but I believe effective example I often give my students to help them recognize this state of things related to the truth of our “I,” which opens itself to the truth of the world. Let’s say that you fall deeply in love with a person but that in the beginning your love is not returned, there is no correspondence, producing the evident result of your deep sadness and dissatisfaction. But over time and maybe with a bit of luck the situation changes and the other person falls in love with you too, and there is correspondence between the two of you. The evening you make this discovery everything changes, and that night you can hardly sleep because you are so “seized” by this new development of love. In the morning, as soon as you wake up, what will probably be the first thing you want to do? To call or meet that person and ask, explicitly or implicitly, for them to tell you that it’s true! (“Oh, is it really true?”) Each of us is made to enjoy that affection and together—this together is the core issue in play—its truth.

I perceived the dizzying import of this simple example when I came upon a passage by the great Swiss theologian and philosopher Hans Urs von Balthasar in one of his most important works, entitled, appropriately for our discussion, *Truth of the World* (1985). He wrote,

The mature thinker would probably compare that initial question—‘Is there really such a thing as truth?’—to a young man’s first hesitant conversation with a girl, from which he came away convinced ‘she loves me!’ Now it would be a strange lover indeed who would be content with the mere ascertainment that this is in fact the case. No, this fact, like a door springing open, becomes the starting point of a newly beginning life of love. In this life, the eternal question of lovers—‘Does he or she love me?’—the question of whether they love one another, is revived every day; love can never be questioned enough, because love never has enough of hearing the reassuring affirmative reply. Behind every answer there is a new question, and behind every reassuring certainty there is an expansive new horizon.

Truth is never actually an absolute to possess. Rather, and surprisingly, it is an event to be touched by. ■

(from C. Esposito, *Il nichilismo del nostro tempo: Una cronaca* [The nihilism of our times: An account], Carocci, Rome 2021)

A time to listen



Luca Fiore

What does it mean to have a “synodal church”?
At the outset of the diocesan and continental journey
that will culminate in the synodal Assize of Bishops
in 2023, we met Cardinal Mario Grech, General Secretary
of the Synod of Bishops.



© Catholic Press Photo

The goal of a synod, according to Pope Francis, is not to produce documents but to “draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.” On the 10th of October, a synod opened under the title, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” The church has committed to self-reflection and has begun to do this in a process of consultation at the diocesan and continental levels, which will culminate in the Assize of Bishops in Rome in October of 2023. The pope has invited all of the baptized to participate because it is a topic that is relevant to everyone.

What the meaning of a “synodal church” may be is the question we asked Cardinal Mario Grech from Malta, previously the bishop of Gozo, and, since September 2020, the secretary general of the synod. In his response, he does not mince words: “It is a church that is listening to the Holy Spirit. And listening does not mean ratifying the result of the assembly of bishops, but recognizing the Spirit that communicates itself through the life of persons in order to understand what He wants from us today. Pope Francis desires that we help each other to rediscover the beauty of a style that should inform all levels of the ecclesial experience.”

But why should there be a synod about synodality?

It is a way to take up again the conversation that began with the Second Vatican Council, which underlined the importance of the “People of God.” This theme is very dear to the Holy Father, who previously engaged with it in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The invitation to participate in the synodal path is an act of faith in the people of God, which is infallible *in credendo*, or, in the exercise of the faith. It is a proposal to rediscover the gift, too often neglected, of being a people, of sharing in a common priesthood rooted in baptism, from the most recent-

ly baptized soul all the way to the pope. We all must learn to listen and know that the smallest and the last to arrive can make a contribution. My dream is that history might remember this century as the century of the synodal church. And mind you: this is not a recent discovery or invention; it is a return to the origins of the church.

As a pastor, have there been moments in which you consciously recognized the voice of the Spirit in this way?

I was a parish priest for a year and the bishop of Gozo for fifteen. And, even if I would not have imagined becoming the secretary general of the synod, I have always believed that I need to listen. Many times, coming out of a pastoral council or a presbyteral council, I realized that I needed to change everything. Because by listening you learn, not merely human strategies or cultural content, but what is the will of the Lord.

In an interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, you said that the faith is no longer an “obvious presupposition of common life.” In such a context, is it not self-referential to speak of the internal dynamics of the church?

No. The conversation about the synodal church presupposes faith because if the recognition of the presence of the Spirit begins to wane, then we will have failed right out of the gate. It will become a sociological analysis or a debate about our opinions and will not be an ecclesial discernment of what the Lord wants from the church today. It presupposes faith, but it has the goal of helping to find or to mature the faith. In this sense, it is not a self-referential conversation. “The Church is not solely constitutively synodal,” as the Holy Father says, but is also constitutively missionary. For this work, the faith is a presupposition, yes, but it is also a goal. The church cannot lose the occasion to become more synodal precisely for the good of its mission: evangelization.



Cardinal Mario Grech. Born in Qala (Malta) in 1957, since 2020 he has been the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops.

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The synod is an astounding organizational challenge. How is it possible to not lose sight of the essential and not reduce your work to producing a document that might be just sufficient for the task?

I would be lying if I said that I do fear running that particular risk. But, at the same time, I have great hope because I know that this is not just a project of mine or of

the Roman Curia, but is a project of the Lord. Everything depends not on our own strengths, but on how much we open ourselves to the Spirit. Yes, it requires significant effort because it involves the church throughout the world. But it couldn't be otherwise: it is from the local church that everything must begin and to which everything must return.

One of the risks highlighted by Pope Francis is centralism, a risk one might fall into in Rome just as at a local level.

For this reason I spoke of circularity. There is not a local church if it is not in communion with the other churches and there is not a universal church if it does have branches that are living. Seeing it in this way avoids the danger of centralism, but also the danger of every particular church seeing itself as autonomous. The church is one body, the mystical body.

To a Movement such as ours, what is being asked by this process? How can we contribute?

Throw yourselves in. Throw yourselves into this journey in the dioceses because your Movement, which I had the fortune of getting to know in Malta, has much to offer. If the contribution of realities such as yours begins to wane in the local church, there will be an impoverishment of both the church and your Movement. Seek to break down the walls that history—and we ourselves—have built over time that take away the gusto for listening to what the Spirit wants to say to us. Not only through our brother Christians, but even through the world, because not everything in the world is wrong. In today's society, there is a great thirst for the Spirit, perhaps expressed in different ways, but it is there.

“The church is not just any society: her founder is the Lord and at the helm is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, one cannot think in terms of minority and majority.”

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On various occasions, the pope has addressed the realities of associationism, saying, “Your most precious contribution will be able to be reached, once again, by your laicity, which is an antidote to self-referentiality.” What does this mean?

Self-referentiality is abstraction. A quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer comes to mind, who said that the Christian must have the Word of God in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Only if we understand the experience of the common man will we be able to illuminate history with the Word of God. Who in the church can carry the experience of man if not each one of the baptized, in particular, the layperson? Their contribution is invaluable in helping the church to create a bridge with the world so that we can find a response to their questions in the light of Christ. The alternative is to close ourselves into a golden cage: true, it's made of gold, but it is a cage nonetheless.

“We do not need to make another Church; we need to make a different Church.” Pope Francis quoted the theologian and cardinal Yves Congar in his inauguration of the synodal journey. Why is there a need for a different church and what does this expression mean?

The church, like every living thing, is dynamic, not static. It lives and, like a body, matures. The church of today is called to reflect that which the Spirit, who is alive, is seeking to communicate in the present. John XXIII called it “aggiornamento.” It is necessary that the church receive this aggiornamento, and for this reason we call it a different church, not another church. The Word became flesh two thousand years ago but continues to become flesh even today. This does not mean that it is not the same Word or that doctrine has changed. What must change is the way in which we communicate it and the

fact that we must go more deeply into what we already know in order to respond to the questions of the man of today just as he is. It is part of our mission.

The pope has often repeated that the synod is not a “Catholic parliament.” What can help us to not equivocate about the meaning of the synod when it comes time to approve the final document?

The pope's words are not meant to disrespect the institution of a democratic parliament, which is a valid system for the governance of society. But the church is not just any society: her founder is the Lord and at the helm is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, one cannot think in terms of minority and majority, and decisions cannot be made based on who is stronger or who shouts the loudest. The method is that of ecclesial discernment. In the positions of the minority there

can be seeds of truth that need time to mature. We must listen to one another and give each other time. Listening, discerning, and, above all, praying for the assistance of the Spirit: these are all actions that do not adapt well to contemporary culture, in which everything must happen immediately.

In the recent synods, the question of the vote created division. You have even aired out the possibility of resorting to the vote only in cases where there is no accord. But does this mean that the alternative to conflict is compromise?

No—the alternative is consensus. The council used the Latin term *conspiratio*, which describes the situation in which each person decides to listen to the other and to the Spirit. In the church there are no parties; there are no ideologies that separate us. We have Christ and the gospel in common. This is the foundation that allows us to listen in an atmosphere of prayer and makes it possible to reach a consensus, the *conspiratio*. We have nothing to lose. If there is anything to lose, it would be ourselves. Because what we have in common and what moves us is that we love the Lord and that we desire that others can also experience this love.

What helps you to return to this love?

The synodal journey is also a journey of conversion. That which most urges me on is that I, in the first place, can convert. If all of us are ready to open ourselves to the Lord and to deepen our love for Him, then we will be able to prophesy, to, in other words, interpret the will of the Spirit in a right way. The alternative is trying to make one's own opinion prevail.

How do you seek to maintain this openness?

I try to execute my mission with maximum simplicity. I do not entrust myself only to my abilities and those of my collaborators, but also to the Spirit who fills the sails of this ship. Organization is necessary, yes, but there is also the importance of relationships. But to be able to create significant relationships, I need to make a daily examination of conscience and to take care of my personal discernment. I know that there is a subtle line between fulfilling my ministry and managing my office like a CEO. I miss community greatly, but here in Rome I am finding another community—my brothers in the episcopate.

Is this a friendship?

More than a friendship: it is a sharing of the same passion for Jesus, for the church, and for man. ■

“They are made of what they see”

Faces, hands, and gazes that “would never look away from what is in front of their eyes.” The CL Christmas poster features the *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Matthias Stomer.



Giuseppe Frangi

The shepherds—they were the first ones. They were the first to witness what happened that night in one of the caves outside of Bethlehem. The shepherds were very familiar with the caves because they often used them as stables. They did not hesitate to believe the angel that appeared to them. In fact, Luke’s account states that “they went with haste.” The shepherds rushed to the cave and found what the angel had announced. They could not have known; they could not have understood. Giussani described John and Andrew in the same way. Yet there was no need to explain what they saw. “There they found something akin to a paradise.”

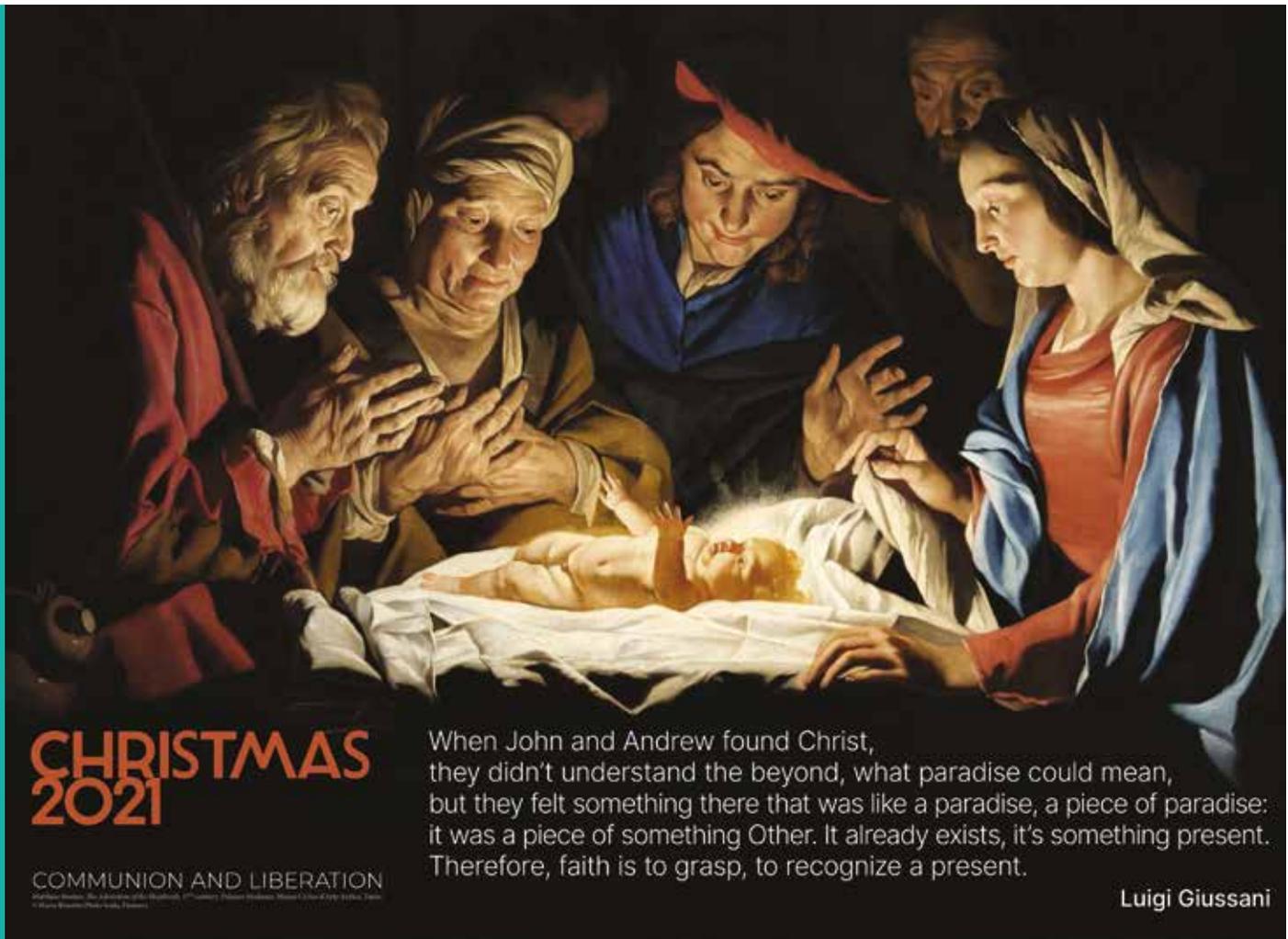
How many times have artists tried to capture that instant of immediate adhesion to reality that was manifested to the shepherds in such an insignificant but at the same time exceptional way. Doing so is challenging—it is easier to tell the story of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. Their story has more appeal,

thanks to the solemn procession, their fine clothes, and the gifts that were so thoughtfully chosen and presented. This was not the case for the shepherds. The only ingredients that could be used to create an image of the encounter between the shepherds and the Christ child were simplicity and wonder. The shepherds exemplify the victory of simplicity.

It is no coincidence that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period when great intellectual truths were explored, artists tended to reduce this astonishing reversal of the social classes to just a nice fairy tale. However, during the seventeenth century, a century full of turmoil, artists instinctively identified with the event related in the Gospel of Luke. Caravaggio’s masterpiece painted in 1609 for the Church of Santa Maria della Concezione in Messina was a turning point (it is now kept in the Interdisciplinary Regional Museum of Messina). It is a poor nativity scene; it is a nativity on the bare earth, de-

void of any ornamentation. In the forefront is the excitement of the shepherds, who can barely contain their amazement and affection as they stand over Mary and the Holy Infant. It is also in the seventeenth century that another fascinating artist, whose identity is a mystery, was active. He became known as the master of the annunciation to the shepherds because he specialized in depicting this subject.

Mathis Stomer was a Dutch artist who worked in Rome, Naples, and Sicily as early as 1630. Stomer was a *Caravaggista*—a devout follower of Caravaggio—who remained faithful to the commandments of the revolutionary artist even when other artistic movements were moving in other directions. As Roberto Longhi noted, Stomer ardently adhered to Caravaggio’s language even when “Baroque was fading out and Rome, reveling in the victory of the Counter-Reformation, paid no more attention to it.” Instead of trying to incorporate the mainstream spirit,

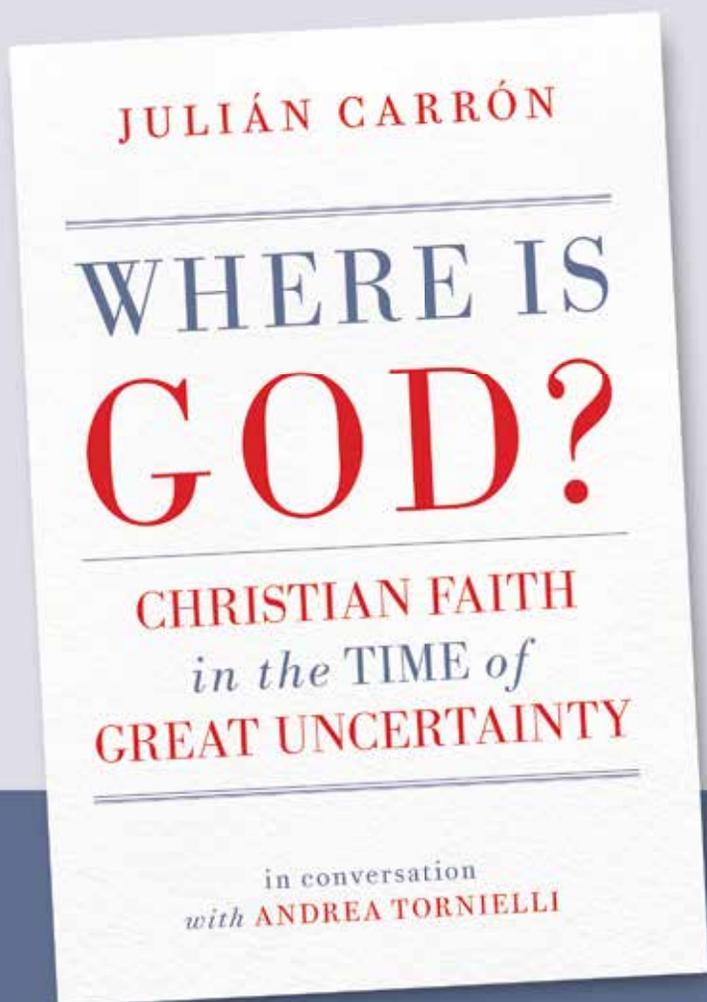


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Stomer's style became more radicalized. He made it simpler and more objective, to the point of creating an almost hyperrealistic version of Caravaggio's style. As a result, he was forced to move away from Rome, which was at the center of the art world, to work in Sicily and later also in Lombardy.

The Adoration of the Shepherds is the subject Stomer worked on with the most conviction, so much so that he went on to paint eight different versions, counting only the ones we know about. In the one selected for the Christmas poster, which is currently housed at the Museo del Palazzo Madama in Turin, Stomer seems to have created a snapshot of reality. The precise details of the faces and the hands stand out immediately to our eyes. The figures speak with their gazes, which would never look away from what is in front of their eyes. They speak with their hands folded in great devotion, held in amazement at what they had found. The light radiating from the infant Jesus illuminates the shepherds, whose presence goes beyond subjective reasoning. The shepherds are not just gazing at that "piece of paradise." The event they are witnessing becomes part of their being. They are made of what they see. ■

Matthias Stomer,
The Adoration of the Shpherds,
17th century. Palazzo Madama,
Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, Turin (Italy).



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.

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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.

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