



# FRATERNITÀ DI COMUNIONE E LIBERAZIONE

associazione di diritto pontificio civilmente riconosciuta

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## ***Davide Prosperi's message to the movement of Communion and Liberation on the death of Benedict XVI***

### **The childlike giant**

*From his fullness  
we have all have received  
grace upon grace.  
For the law was given through Moses;  
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.  
No one has ever seen God,  
But the one and only Son who is Himself God  
And is at the Father's side,  
has made Him known.*

Dear friends,

The end of the Prologue of the Gospel of St. John reminds us what the gift of grace we have received consists of: God has been revealed to us, the Being, the origin and purpose of all that is, has been and will be, the meaning of everything, of our lives, of our rejoicing, toil, suffering, loving, weeping, giving, desiring, of everything that fills our poor yet great existence. He who made us has come to stay and never leave us alone fumbling in the dark. He has made Himself a companion to man, an apparently fragile companionship, as fragile and humble as the flesh of a baby in a manger; and yet solid and indestructible, as solid as the granite of the cornerstone on which the companionship of the Church is founded: Jesus Christ—the *Logos* made flesh—as Pope Benedict XVI, echoing the Evangelist John, liked to call Him.

A child. But all of God's Wisdom, God's gaze on the world, on man and on history, is made present in that child. "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." A light that does not impose itself by overpowering the freedom of the person, but that proposes itself with both humility and courage to the scrutiny of every person's heart and reason.

Remembering Benedict XVI, a giant of faith at a time when faith seems to be losing ground, at least in our Western world, it is precisely this unity of meek humility and courageous proclamation of the "True Light," that first of all strikes and moves us. Truly, in the voice of that man that was so still, and at the same time charming, humble and authoritative, it is as if we have seen the paradox of the charm of Christianity embodied again; the paradox of the fascination of an announcement that enlightens and illuminates with the simple force of His reasonableness, that attracts by its ability to correspond to the need for truth, beauty, and love that dwells in the heart of



every person. Above all, what was striking about him was his lucid awareness of the ever-growing rift between faith and life, which characterizes the secularized societies of the contemporary West.

From the years of the Second Vatican Council, and then during the crisis of 1968, he perceived with prophetic acumen the signs of that epoch of change—quoting Pope Francis—that would become more and more patent in the years to come: that is, the transition from a world in which the faith of the Church remained an obligatory reference point for most, to one in which Christ has become a stranger to most, and the Church is perceived as something useless, if not an obstacle, in dealing with life's urgencies.

Already as a priest theologian, Ratzinger understood that the true cultural challenge that modernity, which was becoming increasingly scientific and positivist, posed to the Church lay at the level of the relationship between faith and reason. Can one still rightly claim that faith is reasonable, in a world and time in which everything says otherwise? With his inexhaustible theological reflection, Ratzinger boldly claimed the contribution that faith offers for an adequate use of reason is: “One of the functions of faith, and not among the least relevant, is that of offering renewal to reason as reason, not to use violence against it, not to remain estranged from it, but to bring it back to itself anew. This historical tool of faith can newly free reason as such, so that it, pointed in the right direction by faith, may see by itself [...] Reason cannot renew itself without faith, but faith without reason does not become human.” And Pope Ratzinger thus described the profound reasonableness of faith: “How does faith still succeed? I would say it is because it corresponds to human nature [...]. In human beings there is an inextinguishable desire for the infinite. None of the answers they have tried to give suffices. Only the God who made himself finite, to shatter our finiteness and lead it into the dimension of his infinity, is capable of coming to meet the needs of our being” (J. Ratzinger, “La fede e la teologia ai giorni nostri,” in *Enciclopedia del cristianesimo*, De Agostini, Novara 1997, p. 30; cited in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2018, pp. 1009-1010).

In a world in which, as God disappears, even the intelligence and taste for the realities of this world are increasingly depleted, Joseph Ratzinger has served the Church by showing everyone how “the knowledge of faith becomes knowledge of reality” (Benedict XVI, *Address to participants at the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*, May 21, 2010). For Pope Ratzinger, the God of Jesus Christ is not an enemy of life, but rather a God who, in opening man's eyes to the truth of God, of himself, and of the things of the world, allows us to enjoy life a hundredfold: “Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way?”, he said in his memorable homily at the Holy Mass for the beginning of His ministry as Pope, “if we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him [...] might [He] take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? [...] No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. [...] Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life” (April 24, 2005).



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How much hope he awakened in those who listened to him with a simplicity of heart! His entire magisterium was marked by the profound conviction that the adequate answer to the questions of the contemporary person, the Word that all words sum up and consist of, is the flesh of the man Jesus of Nazareth. It is in becoming flesh of the *Logos* that one encounters the true face of God, and it is in the gaze of this Man that one sees the truth of oneself reflected, of the other, of everything: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus caritas est*, 1). Joseph Ratzinger used similar words to describe Fr. Giussani’s contribution to the life of the contemporary Church: “It seems to me that the fundamental point for Fr Giussani is that Christianity is not a doctrine, but an event, an encounter with a person, and from this event of an encounter is born a love, a friendship, a culture, a reaction, and an action in the various contexts (J. Ratzinger, “A New Beginning that Opens Doors to the Future,” interview edited by R. Fontolan, *Traces*, no. 9 - 2004).

Christ makes Himself present to today’s person through the encounter with the experience of a different humanity, that is, with the “new creature” (St. Paul) generated by Baptism, within the living reality of the Church. This is the element that struck the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger upon meeting Fr. Giussani and the movement in the early 1970s: “In Italy we found Fr. Giussani and his people. And [...] I saw that, at that time of great Marxist revolution, there were others (in this case mainly young university students) who had understood the Christian revolution, and who did not respond to the Marxist revolution [...] with conservatism, but with the fresh and much more radical revolution of the Christian faith” (Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, *I movimenti ecclesiali nella sollecitudine pastorale dei vescovi*, LEV, Vatican City 2000, pp. 224-225; cited in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, op. cit., p. 1044).

He continued, “I saw young people full of fervor for the faith, quite far from a sclerotic and weary Catholicism, and without the mentality of ‘protest’—which considers all that was there before the Council as totally superseded—but a faith that was fresh, profound, open and with the joy of being believers, of having found Jesus Christ and His Church. There, I understood that there was a new start, there was really a renewed faith that opens doors to the future.” (J. Ratzinger, “A New Beginning that Opens Doors to the Future,” interview edited by R. Fontolan, *Traces*, no. 9 - 2004). Speaking to the missionaries of the Fraternity of St. Charles a few days before his resignation, Benedict XVI said this of Fr. Giussani: “I became acquainted with his faith, his joy, his strength, the wealth of his ideas and the creativity of his faith. So it was that a true friendship developed” (Benedict XVI, *Address to participants at the General Assembly of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo*, February 6, 2013).

There are many anecdotes in this regard that can be recalled of the friendship between the two—a friendship that had a decisive influence on Fr. Giussani’s thought and educational proposal. The latter used to confront the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Cardinal Ratzinger to ascertain the orthodoxy of some bold formulas he used in his speeches. Once, during one of these meetings, the two inadvertently exchanged glasses. Fr. Giussani did not notice immediately, but when it was pointed out to him, his response was more or less this: “It seems that we see things the same way!” Fr. Giussani was deeply marked by a statement by Ratzinger that he made us learn by heart: “Faith is the obedience of the heart to the form of teaching to which we were entrusted” (J. Ratzinger, Presentation of the New Catechism of the Catholic Church, *L’Osservatore Romano*, Jan. 20, 1993; cited in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, op. cit.,



p. 1092). He felt that it expressed a fundamental direction for our journey: to live in obedience to the charism that the Holy Spirit granted to Fr. Giussani, that is, to that way of living faith, full of attractiveness and reasonableness, which we have encountered and that has changed our lives; but together with the objectivity of the faith of the Church, which has reached us through the charism of Fr. Giussani.

The words of Cardinal Ratzinger in his homily for Fr. Giussani's funeral, which he himself asked to take part in because of the friendship that bound him to Giussani, will remain forever etched in our memory: "Upon seeing Jesus, the disciples rejoiced.' These words from today's Gospel show us the centre of the personality and life of our dear Don Giussani. Fr. Giussani grew up in a house that was—to use his words—poor in bread but rich in music, so that from the very beginning he was touched, or, better, wounded, by the desire for beauty. He was not satisfied, however, with just any ordinary beauty, with beauty however banal; he sought rather Beauty itself, infinite Beauty, and thus he found Christ. In Christ he found true beauty, the path of life, true joy. [...] Fr. Giussani kept the gaze of his life, of his heart, always fixed on Christ. It was in this way that he understood that Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas, or moralism. Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story; it is an event. [...] Fr. Giussani truly desired not to have life for his own sake: instead he gave life, and it is precisely in this that he found it not only for himself, but for so many others. [...] He has truly become the father of many and by guiding people not to himself but to Christ he has truly conquered hearts, he has helped to make the world better, he has helped to open up the doors of the world to heaven" (cited in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, op. cit., pp. 1167-1168).

Allow me to conclude this message with a personal recollection. Pope Benedict XVI indeed played a fundamental role in my journey of faith, particularly in the most decisive moments of my adult life. His election to the Chair of Peter struck me greatly. From the very first moment, and increasingly as his pontificate unfolded, I perceived him thus: a childlike giant. A giant because of his intellectual and spiritual stature, because of the depth of his thought; a child because in the candor of his gaze, in his way of speaking, which were so simple and direct, a child's heart shone through. When we "watched him speak," perhaps in front of the TV, we felt safe. Furthermore, we felt that our dedication to Christ as the totalizing Ideal of life was rekindled, for he had the gift of knowing how to place us back before the beauty of Christ every time. I especially remember his homily for the beginning of His papal ministry, which I have already quoted above. I remember the warmth that invaded me right at the end of the homily when, commenting on the famous "Do not be afraid, open the doors wide to Christ!" of his predecessor, he said, "And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and He gives you everything." That day I decided that whatever would happen to me in life, I would follow that man, I would trust him. And that is what I have always tried to do. Moreover, I was lucky enough to meet him in person on several occasions. An intelligence that would have awe-struck anyone, coupled with an extraordinary irony: he transmitted peace, certainty, hope. As the Gospels say of Jesus, he also had the gift of elucidate the deepest and most inaccessible mysteries with simple words. Thus, his books on Jesus of Nazareth, while full of the deepest reflections, can be read and understood by anyone. The truth is for the simple, not the property of the learned. He helped me make fundamental decisions in my life, and without his help it would have certainly taken a different direction at certain points.



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Today we are saddened and grieved. We will miss the quiet yet comforting presence of the Pope Emeritus. On the other hand, precisely the kind of company he has kept us in recent years tells us something of the way in which he will continue to be effectively present among us: by the power of his intercession and by the light of his teaching, always devoted to the Church. Let us ask God that such light may continue to illuminate the Church today, even after his departure.

Dear Pope Benedict, support our path from above, the path of the Church, of our dear Pope Francis, and the path of each of us. Accompany also the path of our Fraternity toward that holiness that you have witnessed to us, giving your life for your beloved Master, serving Him always as a “humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord.” (April 19, 2005).

*Daide Prospero*

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