

## “Passion for the person, passion for Christ”

*The text of a November 12, 2022 dialogue with Davide Prosperi about Fr. Luigi Giussani, on the occasion of the Centenary that has just ended. The conversation took place at the EncuentroMadrid*

**Rafael Gerez.** You’re relatively young, but you had the opportunity to meet Fr. Luigi Giussani personally and to enter into a relationship with him while you were a university student involved with the young people of CL. What did the encounter with him mean for you? What was it about him that fascinated you?

**Davide Prosperi.** The answer is very simple: everything. I was fascinated by everything about his person, everything that was generated in human history through him. Right away, after I met him, I wanted to be part of this history. I met Fr. Giussani personally for the first time exactly on my twenty-third birthday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, 1995, the day he received the Catholic Culture Award in Bassano del Grappa. I was there with my brother and some friends because of a series of circumstances that would take too long to describe. I met him one on one before the award ceremony and he invited me to his house. He told me he had been given a bottle of Barolo and asked if I liked wine; I said that I liked wine but I would like even more the opportunity to have lunch with him. He took me seriously and a month later invited me to his home in Gudo Gambaredo, where he lived together with members of *Memores Domini*. That was the beginning of a personal relationship that continued almost to the end of his life. I met him in person for the last time in 2003. I had wanted to meet him and had done everything to meet him because I had heard him speak for the first time at the Spiritual Exercises of the CL university students in December of 1994, where he gave that extraordinary lesson we showed in video at the 2015 Fraternity Spiritual Exercises, precisely because of the educative and emotional impact he had on so many young people. It was entitled “*Recognizing Christ*” and is available in “*A Presence within the Gaze: Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*” at <https://english.clonline.org/publications/other-texts/fraternity-exercises/a-presence-within-the-gaze-2015>). Fr. Giussani had started with an observation about the situation of today’s young people (it would be better to say modern women and men), quoting a Kafka line that said “There is a point of arrival, but no way to get there” (F. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks, 1917-1919*, edited by Max Brod, Exact Change, Boston, 2004.) The writer admitted that the human person as such acknowledges a destiny and the possibility of human striving toward self-fulfillment, but there is no accessible road for reaching it. Instead, that day Fr. Giussani convinced us that this road exists, and that it is a human road: a human history generated by destiny itself. Destiny made itself our travel companion on this road. Giussani’s description started with the encounter of those two who first met Jesus, John and Andrew. Then it became the telling of a story that continued all the way to us. I remember that he read a letter by a young man with AIDS, who died shortly thereafter. In that letter he said (I’m summarizing with my own words): I have thrown my life away but now my life has value because through this history, which I met through a friend, and through you, Fr. Giussani, who generated this history, I have encountered the purpose of the life of even a wretch like me, and for this reason I think that my life today can be useful, because through what I can testify, just as I am, I can help all women and men to recognize that Christ is the answer to human need (“*Recognizing Christ*” in “*A Presence within the Gaze: Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*”, 2015, page 76.) Well, for me Giussani generated this history through his simple openness. On the personal level, he also generated my history, because starting from that moment, my life changed. I’d like to add a final, very brief note. Even though from a young age I was entrusted with some responsibilities in the Movement, every time I met him personally, he never (or almost never, just once) asked me things about my responsibility in the community. We always talked about everything, the things that interested him or that interested me, even on a personal level. We talked about everything, music, etc. What struck me was his passion for everything, how he managed to appreciate and love every detail

that was given to him, precisely as a sign of something infinite; he was capable of seeing the infinite in anything. I want to live up to the stature of this humanity.

**Gerez.** *The title of this year's EncuentroMadrid is "Vivir apasionadamente la realidad," which comes from a statement in one of Fr. Giussani's books: "The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious [...] is to live always the real intensely" (The Religious Sense, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 108). What did "to live always the real intensely" mean for him, and what does it mean for being able to live Christianity today?*

**Proserpi.** I believe that the extraordinary newness of Christianity and thus of the Christian experience consists precisely in its concreteness, that is, in its capacity to read and interpret reality just as it is, without laying ideological frameworks over it. I learned this from Fr. Giussani, who always started from the datum of reality, from what happened, and ideas came to him from there. It was extraordinary to see how starting from things any person told him, even an insignificant person like me, he had intuitions that built up our entire companionship. Or he observed things that were happening, judged them and led us to take a step into deeper knowledge of that situation but also of all the rest. You will probably remember the massacre of the Italian Carabinieri in Nassirya in 2003. Fr. Giussani wrote a judgement speaking about the drama of war, and I believe these words are very pertinent today. He said that in front of so much evil and so much injustice, "If an education for the people existed, everyone would be better off" (quoted in A. Savorana *Life of Fr. Giussani*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2018, p. 1113). These words might have seemed of little pertinence in the immediate circumstances, but one understood right away that they were not merely formal words for the occasion. In fact, our problem today, the problem of world conflicts and the inability to communicate that generates conflict, and the evil that derives from it, are due to the lack of an education, that is, due to the inability to live one's freedom to the full. Education is education to freedom, so that women and men can be truly themselves. But for this to happen, there is a need for a human reality that looks reality full in the face, for what it is. Giussani wagered everything on the possibility that this complete gaze on reality can become a human history, a people.

**Gerez.** *You are a university professor and also the father of a large family, so I suppose education is a fundamental concern for you, given that you deal with it every day. In the October 15<sup>th</sup> audience, one of the points Pope Francis stressed was Giussani the educator. What would you highlight about Fr. Giussani as an educator? How is Fr. Giussani's proposal and what you learned from him useful for you in your responsibilities as leader, teacher and educator?*

**Proserpi.** I believe that the real novelty of Fr. Giussani's communication and his educative method is that, unlike many education theorists of past decades, but also of our time, who think that the main problem of education is to find a "strategy" that captures the interest of young people, he held that education is a communication of oneself, sharing one's life and whole experience. Education does not primarily mean the transfer of content and emotions. It means sharing the meaning of life. And in order to share the meaning of life, you have to share life. Well, I think on October 15<sup>th</sup>, Saint Peter's Square was full of people celebrating, celebrating in an orderly way, because this sharing of a life generated a people, women and men who want to live and share their own life in the same way. I believe this is the secret of Fr. Giussani, who, as he himself said, never sought to oblige people to follow the truth he followed, but always provoked those in front of him to take a proposal seriously, in order to be able to verify it in their own life (cf. L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2019, p. xxxi: "Since my first hour in the classroom I have always said: 'I am not here to make you adopt the ideas I will give you as your own, but to teach you a true method for judging the things I will say. And the things that I will say are an experience, which is the outcome of a long past: two thousand years'.") This verification is the indispensable condition of education and it is not just self-reflection, because

according to Fr. Giussani, verification is done in relationship with reality. You have to verify in your relationship with reality whether what I tell you is true. In this sense, Fr. Giussani's proposal is a wager on the freedom of the other. For this reason, it binds people together because clearly, people accompany each other in this verification; you do the verification together, you live it together. For this reason, Fr. Giussani's educative experience generated communities.

**Gerez.** For you personally, in your task as a professor, what challenge has this meant for you?

**Prosperi.** It's the same thing.

**Gerez.** I'm also interested in how it is for you as the father of a family; in this case the answer isn't so simple.

**Prosperi.** It's the same in this, too. Maybe the most immediate experience I had in the relationship with Fr. Giussani, and I imagine that those who knew him could say the same thing, was a preference. When you were with him you felt like you were the center of the universe. Not because he wanted to make you feel this way, but because he felt he was in front of the Mystery. I've often wondered what this preference is, and I remember that when my children were little (I have four children, a boy and three girls, very close in age, born in the arc of 5 years) I often dealt with the issue of preference, because at times you prefer one child for one thing and another for another thing: it's something you have inside and you can't explain the reason why. Well, this issue often emerged. Sometimes I wondered, a bit moralistically, whether this was wrong, thinking that it wasn't right that they didn't feel preferred, and that I should've treated them all in the same way. But the experience of preference in my life wasn't something wrong, because I realized that I myself wanted to be preferred. So, I realized that the problem is not that my children expect not to be less than the others. Each one wants to be preferred. Thus, the issue is not to prefer no one, but to learn to prefer everyone. You may feel an instinctive preference for one of them in a certain moment, because things change, at least for me they have changed many times. But the important thing is that this preference leads you to love with more truth all those who are given to you, that is, to prefer everyone. Otherwise, preference is an injustice. I've told you these things to explain this preference for my life that I experienced through the education I received in the relationship with Fr. Giussani, not only in the personal relationship with him, but also in the relationship with people in the Movement, a truer, deeper gaze on reality than the image of preference I had formed in the name of moral justice.

**Gerez.** *In the October 15th audience, the Pope praised Giussani's love and faithfulness, even tenderness (a precious word) for the Church. But it is also true that Giussani's life did not lack difficulties and misunderstandings in the institutional ecclesiastical sphere and with some Bishops. Where did this unconditional love for the Church come from? What does this love and affection for the Church tell us today?*

**Prosperi.** Here perhaps I should debunk a myth, in the sense that in his life and story, Giussani definitely had some difficulties in the relationship with some Bishops, with superiors in the ecclesiastical sphere, but I would like to clarify that on the basis of the knowledge I've gained about these facts in these years, above all in this last year when I've had to look more deeply into some aspects of our history, never in any moment of our history was there a persecution of Fr. Giussani. He was the victim, so to speak, of a misinterpretation or a will to counter him, but always in recognition of his value. Certainly, he was put to the test many times, sometimes because a superior could not understand his methods, but with the idea to verify him, to put him to the test. Cardinal Giovanni Colombo sent him away from Student Youth at a certain point, also because he had received some reports because as usual, envy can generate misunderstandings. But he esteemed Fr. Giussani very much as a theologian and also as an educator. In fact, he proposed that he go to the US to learn

the catechetical method in the parishes and to further his studies on American Protestantism. And yes, on Giussani's return he removed him from the leadership of Student Youth. But this should be viewed in the context of the times, above all in the light of the way Giussani lived this situation, because he did not have the least hesitation in obeying what was asked of him, and obeying cordially, even in the form, that is, not only leaving, but taking the request seriously and verifying it. I believe this is a very important aspect, because we can obey formally but without letting it lead us to an experience of real verification for ourselves, as if we think we know the truth and what is good for us, or for example, for the movement to which we belong. Well, through this verification Giussani returned to lead the Movement with more maturity and clarity, precisely because he had done this verification without exclusions. I believe this is a fundamental lesson for us, because the point is not to understand whether the Church is asking something right or wrong of us (who are we to say?) but to be true in the verification of the proposal made to us, in comparing it with the origin of what we have encountered.

**Gerez.** *Most of us here did not meet Fr. Giussani personally. We might tend to think that the context in which the first experience that gave rise to the movement of Communion and Liberation, which, as you said, was Student Youth in the 1950's, differed greatly from ours today, in every sense. In effect, in that era there was no lack of conflicts among nations: it was 1954, nine years after the end of World War II. That was obviously the situation. But looking at the climate of dissolution that today's society generates, we are led to think that the situation is very different. To what degree is Fr. Giussani's proposal of pertinence today?*

**Prosperi.** I believe that Fr. Giussani's proposal is just as pertinent today as it was then, when it began. In a certain sense, maybe it is even more so today. Many have spoken of Fr. Giussani as a prophetic figure, someone capable of reading the future through his gaze on the present time. Think of the way he began all his work, wagering on the education of young people in a moment when he could've had a brilliant career as a theologian. He did so because he had an intuition about the trajectory society would take, having realized that precisely in Catholic spheres there was an unconscious distancing from their own identity, from the knowledge of their Christian origins and lived faith. This was happening in the 1950's when the Church was perhaps was at her greatest splendor on the social level, with much more impact than today. On the political level, there was Christian Democracy, the party of reference for all Christians. The churches were full, and the parishes offered many proposals; they didn't know where to put all the young people. There were many priests and religious. And yet, Fr. Giussani had already glimpsed the seed of a new phenomenon that was emerging: de-Christianization, not so much in ethical values, because they were still affirmed and acknowledged, but in personal experience and in people's lives, and so there was a reduction in the capacity to have an influence as a real presence in society and the life of everyone. Giussani recognized that the cause of all this was ignorance, in the etymological sense of the word, the fact of no longer knowing the fundamentals of the faith, the content of experience of the Christian words. Losing the content of experience of the Christian words we use leads more than anything else to losing their meaning and with time also our affection for them. In this sense, Fr. Giussani was a prophet, and in some way, we are living in the time of this prophecy's fulfillment. So, he was a prophet, but at the October 15<sup>th</sup> audience Pope Francis used a stronger word: he said that Fr. Giussani was "a true apostle." Fr. Giussani saw that the awareness of the origin of the faith can continue to live and be renewed only in the integral proposal of a human experience that develops all the dimensions of living, just as they are born in the Christian experience. God's becoming man means that Christ continues to be present through a human story made up of those who acknowledge Him, tell about Him, make Him present in all the spheres of human life. Surely, today we are in an almost favorable situation, paradoxical as that may seem. We live in a world that is approaching the paganism of the time when Jesus came. Jesus came, walked along the roads of Galilee and met people, introducing them to a new way of looking at and treating things and people, generating a companionship that lived in this same way. This way was the expression of His relationship with the Father. Today there is a need for a radical life that shows why

it is humanly worthwhile to live one's own presence as a relationship with Christ, that is, as imitation of Christ's relationship with the Father.

**Gerez.** *In the letter you sent after the audience with the Pope, you wrote that this encounter was a true "new beginning." How can you talk about a new beginning after almost seventy years of history of the Movement? What did you mean? In substance, what horizons did the October 15<sup>th</sup> audience open?*

**Prosperi.** I have to say that we've used this expression many times in our history. Giussani used it various times because a "new beginning" means a realization that we can have, or rather, that from a certain point of view we are called to have in front of a newness that comes into our life, showing us anew the power of what originally seized us, that is, the power of the beginning. It is "new" because it concerns now, the present, and it is "beginning" because it is the same beginning that proposes itself to us again, happening anew today. We are in front of the same challenge that Fr. Giussani faced at the beginning of everything. We will have time to see it, understand it, and it is for this that the Pope told us that "the Church ... expects more, much more" from us (*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of Communion and Liberation*, Saint Peter's Square, October 15, 2022, available at: <https://english.clonline.org/cm-files/2022/11/07/audience-booklet-october15-english.pdf>) Saying that he expects more, he does not want to cage us in a framework he has in mind; he means that he is certain of the greatness of what we bear within (unworthily), that it must still develop in all its potential, that we must follow and serve this greatness with humility, as he told us, to the point of being open to correction from the leadership of the Church, in order to grow and become more and more that for which we are in the world. For me, a "new beginning" is related to the word *richiamo*, *call*. After the encounter with the Pope, many have said "We have been *richiamati*, called," speaking of the content of his speech to us. The word *richiamo* in its Italian etymology explains the meaning of this new beginning: *ri-chiamo* (call again) means to be called anew and therefore we are called once again by name, each of us seized one by one and seized as a people. Called to what? To become aware of our responsibility for the charism. The Pope said that after the death of the founder, every charism must be institutionalized. This expression may seem strange and difficult for many of us, because the word "institutionalization" sounds like a prison, a cage, a framework to be applied, while actually it is the safest and most secure thing because throughout Church history it has been the possible road so that, if God so wills, it may not end but can continue to bear fruit in history. Institutionalization of the charism means that it is necessary to give a form, therefore today a reform is asked of us. Reform does not mean breaking with the past; rather, it means the opposite, investing in the past in the light of the present. What has been given to us in the encounter with this history needs to become a form that ensures the road for the future as well. In this sense, as the Pope told us, the road is clear. It is not bound primarily to the exceptional nature of one particularly charismatic person or another. The road is our communion, a guided communion, inasmuch as the authority is the guarantee of this unity, but the authority is expression in leadership of a communion, not self-expression, expression of one's temperament or sensibility. The Pope stressed these points as a road for these years of building this form that the Church has asked us to realize.

**Gerez.** *Why did a father of a family, like many of us, with his children, his wife, his professional life, say yes to the proposal to be nominated President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation in a moment of the life of the Movement that is acknowledged to be somewhat turbulent?*

**Prosperi.** In effect, I truly don't know whether I'm the right person for this role, but I didn't make this decision. I am the person who was asked. So, I have to say that from a certain point of view, the reason I accepted is the reason I don't feel like the right person: I understand that having asked me, the Church is saying that the responsibility for the charism belongs to each of us. I am an ordinary person among many who live the experience of the Movement. So it is precisely in our communion

that the power and the continuity of this proposal is expressed. I say this sincerely, without any false modesty, because I believe that this is precisely part of the step forward in maturity that the Church is asking of us. We could have had a certain image of how the leader should be. I am a layperson, a father of a family, I have a job I'm continuing to do, and that certainly demands time and in some way obligates us to re-think the modality of the leader. If we trust the authority of the Church, maybe this is precisely what she is suggesting as a passage of awareness of what each of us bears and that all of us together preserve. In one of the many extraordinary passages from the Pope's October 15<sup>th</sup> audience, he said (I'll express it in my own words) that the charism is much greater than us, that in some way Fr. Giussani is not ours, but belongs to the Church and is the patrimony of all of humanity, but we are his children and for this reason are responsible for carrying forward the task our father took on for the Church and the world, not just for us. So over time we must expect the charism to generate things much greater than CL, the Fraternity, *Memoires Domini* and all that has arisen from this history. What struck me? The fact he told us what our responsibility is: the Fraternity of CL is the place that "preserves" the "precious gift" of our charism, because only in this way will the charism be able to make many vines "flourish" (*ibid.*) and generate much, much more than what we know and see today. There will always be a point of reference and authentic interpretation of the origin that generated this history, a point that is not primarily a person, but is our Fraternity, which certainly is guided by one person, but as the expression of our communion.

**Gerez.** *Infinite thanks, Davide.*