

TRACES

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03

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***And who am I?***

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## TRACES

Communion and Liberation International Magazine  
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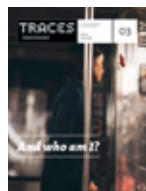
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# GIUSSANI

# 100

1922 - 2022  
ANNIVERSARY  
OF BIRTH

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## The mark

Just a few syllables. “*And who am I?*” Leopardi’s brief and boundless verse voices one of the fundamental questions of human life, in which Fr. Giussani identifies the “heart” of the human person, the ultimate, structural material of which we are made. It is not an emotion or a sentiment, but a “fact,” the most “powerful and ineradicable” fact about human life. Fr. Giussani named it and devoted to it an existential itinerary, *The Religious Sense*, which is the key to his proposal. In fact, he was deeply persuaded that to be free it is necessary to use the heart, “to come down and grasp our own original needs and ‘evidences,’” even though doing this work is “not popular especially when one comes face to face with oneself.” It is also necessary to use the heart to be open to recognizing the answer to those questions, which “are hidden or buried, that are perhaps almost dying but that nevertheless exist,” as Jorge Mario Bergoglio said in his 1998 presentation on *The Religious Sense*. His talk, which you will find on the CL website, forms the preface to the new edition of the book that will be used in the coming weeks with the resumption of the School of Community, the educational journey of the Movement.

**“Today the primary question we must face** is not so much the problem of God—the existence, the knowledge of God—but the problem of the human, of human knowledge and finding in humans themselves the mark that God has made, so as to be able to meet with Him.” Bergoglio stressed how more than ever, there is a need today to ask ourselves the “real questions about human meaning, of our existence” in front of “this tranquility offered at a low cost by the supermarket culture.” In this effort we have an unfailing ally: reality. The “heart” awakens in its impact with reality. We have seen this in the recent floods in the Romagna region of Italy, with all the drama they have brought and the gratuitous generosity of people’s responses. Testimonies posted on *clonline.org* describe the emergency and above all the need for an education, a living companionship, so that we do not lose the openness of the gaze that we have in certain moments when we truly see, when the depth of our need is awakened, in which all the power of humanity that emerges from the mud, mixed with pain, mercy, and goodness, is the beginning of a road of understanding of who we are, what remains standing, what life is, and the indelible “mark” that is present under tons of debris. “Who cries out in me? What voice in me cries out in this need for true life?”, asked the Spanish theologian Javier Prades in his dialogue on *The Religious Sense* in Milan. What journey makes it possible to live, breaking through the appearances of things, both an extreme situation and your daily subway commute? The question is open, the answer to be discovered.

## Stefano, Tania, Federica, Costanza

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
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### A wheelbarrow full of debris

For me, the flooding that hit Romagna deepened the question about where my consistency lies. It immediately became evident to me that the work that we've started to do in School of Community on *The Religious Sense* is truly important, because an event like that which has hit us has made all the existential questions explode again, but also the certainty that there is an answer. It's not that in these last few years my life hasn't been overwhelmed by other "floods." Was there also a need for a natural catastrophe? I can only answer, "no!" But I must recognize that this is again the road through which the Lord takes me, and that He chooses me and prefers me, asking of me an unconditional yes, a yes that every morning I am called to say to Him who continually manifests Himself. Such a docile belonging to Christ only holds if we belong and if we love the Movement; I couldn't make it on my own. The experience of the days of flooding and of what I saw have made me ever more grateful to Him who put me within this story. All of the generosity of the people of Cesena is so moving—that impetus, the "heart" that moves thousands of people, especially young people, to help. But even more moving was what Paolo, the responsible for our community, read before the Rosary, taking up the Letter of St. Paul: "If one member suffers, all members suffer together." This is what Carlo reminded us of at the start of a shift of volunteers: "To share our need in order to share the meaning of life"—it's important to give me a reason for what moves me to do things, so that my doing isn't a feeling and so that it can last over time. An episode from those days so full of signs explains this well.

One morning I went to clean out a basement in a place where at least thirty parking spots were full of people who, with water up to their knees, were clearing out the mess. There must have been at least 300 of us, and while I was carrying stuff away in a wheelbarrow, more than once I came across friends from the Movement. Without exchanging any words, just looking at each other was evidence of Christ who happens here and now. Or rather, of Christ who doesn't only happen in that moment, but who is always here; the flood emergency will end, but these friends remain. After my shift, I went to my job. I told Valeria, a close colleague but who is a little guarded about the Movement, about my morning. She asked if she could help with a shift the following day and she also invited a friend of hers, expressing the desire to shovel and to lend a hand along with me.

**Stefano**, Cesena (Italy)

### Letter of application

A year has passed since a dear friend asked me why I was thinking of joining the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation. I gave myself this time so I could verify if my desire was a true desire of the heart and not just an impulse sprung from emotion. And I must say that the desire and certainty have become stronger. During this year, I have thought many times about the words I would want to write in my "request" to join the Fraternity, but I understood that it's not worth waiting for the moment when I can succeed in writing a beautiful letter; it's enough to look at how my life is changing. After the second day of the Fraternity Exercises led by Fr. Lepori, listening to his words on the gift of faith that gives a form to life and on faith that burns like a fire, I understood that this is exactly what has been happening to me since I met the Movement, especially within this last year. It is the charism of the Movement, the proposals of the community, and especially my relationship with friends who today share life with me and change my outlook on myself, on the other, and above all, on Christ. I ask that my request to

join the Fraternity be accepted as a request to Christ, to His presence at the center of my life, as a recognition of Christ's living church, and as a recognition of the journey of my life and of following the charism of the Movement.

**Tania**, Moscow (Russia)

### **Birthday party**

While I was listening to the presentation of the new edition of *The Religious Sense*, I was inevitably surprised by a nexus with what I've been living in these past few weeks. A while ago, I was given a privileged relationship with a guy who doesn't belong to the Movement. From the beginning, I was struck by the seriousness with which he faces life and the choices he makes, taking seriously his need to give meaning to the questions he holds in his heart. A few days ago, I told him that the following Saturday I would be going to the birthday party of a friend of mine, and without my even proposing it to him he said, "I'm coming too. I'm curious. " Before meeting me, he had already met the Movement indirectly and the impression he had was not positive. As soon as we arrived at the party, I introduced him to some friends and it was clear that he felt welcomed and free to be himself. I was surprised by the serenity with which he chatted with people he had just met. At a certain point, a friend who will turn thirty soon told him that she'd love for him to come to her party, and even more moving, two friends decided to invite him to their wedding. "What would move you to invite someone you just met to participate in the most important moment of your life? How is this possible?" This is the question that, full of amazement, he asked me, and he decided that, even though he already had a commitment, he would rearrange things so he could be there. Our heart really is like a metal detector and, as we were reminded at the meeting on the presentation, it has within it an innate desire for goodness, justice, truth, and beauty, with which it compares everything that it experiences. This desire is the same for all men and women in all times.

**Federica**, Italy

### **Tobia's eyes**

I went for the first time to the intensive therapy of my nephew, Tobia. I went with his mom, my sister Veronica. When we got there, we found ourselves in front of a scene of four nurses who were working feverishly around his crib. Veronica, with a worried expression, rushed to enter the room, leaving me behind the glass. But there wasn't even any physical space for her, she couldn't take him in her arms. They were drawing a few small drops of blood for some tests. He was even more

fragile than I had expected. Rage and pain rose up in me seeing my sister standing there, powerless to help. My head filled again with thoughts that I had already thought so many times in these past weeks: How can you bet all your love on a baby who you don't know how long will be with us? While I was thinking these things from behind the glass, I saw Veronica press her face close to Tobia's. She talked to him, she caressed him, she kissed him. In this woman bent over her baby, I seemed to see the Madonna beneath the cross. Had she not perhaps already given everything to her son? She gave her yes to this child right away. I was behind the glass measuring, looking at this child using the criteria of the world, but the scene in front of me was not of this world because today if a child has Tobia's problems, he is discarded. When the situation calmed down, I also entered. Timidly I approached the crib and I finally met him. I was supposed to learn how to feed him, so we woke him up. His eyes opened and I saw that they were strange. I thought, "You looked better with your eyes closed." They were different; one was large and the other small and every once in a while, they rolled upward, to who knows where. While he had them closed, he seemed to me a little angel. Now that I could see his gaze, I was almost bothered. I struggled with the fact that he wasn't beautiful. I thought, "With you, we can't picture the future, we can't sneak up on you in anticipation because we will be disappointed right away. Perhaps I should protect myself, go gradually, maybe it would be better not to give all of myself to you right away because you are limitation in the flesh, you don't function if they take away these machines." I picked him up and in the gestures that I clumsily made, I had never given more care. After his feeding was finished, my sister escorted me out of the hospital. I was exhausted. I was grateful but an instant later, I was agitated, I wanted to go back, and then I thought I didn't want to go back for a long time. I realized that in my relationship with Tobia, I was unstable. And yet, there is a point of stability: my sister's love for him. Her giving of herself. The yes of his dad and mom. Being able to be with them each day is a grace because they are free. Often during this period, I look at them in disbelief, asking myself how they can be with this baby daily and seem calm, supported by something, by someone. Sustained. I cannot accept Tobia's limits if not through my sister's eyes. It's a love that is not of this world and I feel fortunate to have been in front of it. It makes me wonder if I accept that this love is also for me. There is a Father bent over my crib who does not leave me in front of all my limits.

**Costanza**, Milan (Italy)

## “The religious sense: the most impressive fact in human history”

4 **O**n the evening of May 2<sup>nd</sup> in San Mauro Pascoli, in a Romagna that had not yet experienced flooding, those attending the presentation of *The Religious Sense* in the Amici di Gigi cooperative were greeted with beer and porchetta. Not far away, in Rimini, at the end of the meeting a theater usher bought Fr. Giussani's book: "I was moved, I want to understand more." In this way, he also awakened the consciousness of the volunteers at the book stall, who had remained outside the hall and had not been able to attend the dialogue between Irene Elisei, Javier Prades, and Davide Prospero. In Tombelle, a hamlet of Saonara (Padua), parish priest Fr. Fabio had given notice of the evening at the end of all the masses: "We invited so many people," says Silvia; "It was an opportunity to tell so many whom we have met over these years working for the diocesan synod of the source of our faith and of that 'naive boldness' that characterizes us, and from where they are born and draw nourishment." The university students of the CLU in Ancona decided to meet the very next day "because of the need not to miss what had just happened. Sometimes it is easier to be content with what we have without asking ourselves the meaning of what we are doing or studying, but living in this way doesn't allow us to cherish the meaning of every action." In Taranto, with Archbishop Filippo Santoro, politicians, authorities, and representatives of other movements gathered. And then in Merano, Alcamo, Casalpusterlengo, Guglionesi, Calangianus... More than 350 locations from all over Italy, large and small, connected to the Dal Verme Theater in Milan. And then there were the foreign communities who gathered that same evening or in the following days. Thousands of people from around the world, in listening to Prades, were catapulted into the Madrid subway, sitting next to the poet Karmelo Iribarren, in the midst of people "with their eyes fixed on the ground" wondering "about life, real life... because it can't be that that's all it is." The Spanish poet's verses describe everyone's situation, the days laden with questions about what, according to Fr. Giussani, is the "most impressive and most inestimable fact of human history"—"the religious sense." It is the "event that poses, affirms, and searches for the horizon within which everything acquires meaning."

A dialogue with the theologian **Javier Prades** on Fr. Giussani's book was the invitation to the journey of School of Community. Some highlights from the evening that took place in hundreds of cities in Italy and around the world.



**Stefano Filippi**

Journalist Irene Elisei and theologian Javier Prades at the presentation of the new edition of *The Religious Sense* at the Dal Verme Theater in Milan on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.



© Pino Franchino/Fraternità CL

Present in Catania was Archbishop Luigi Renna, who was grateful the next day, talking about how he hopes to participate in the School of Community in the new year: “I read Bergoglio’s introduction: a glimpse of what education should be, that is, an accompaniment of the person toward wonder and faith.” The archbishop of Pesaro also expressed his desire to participate in the School of Community. After the meeting had finished, Monsignor Sandro Salvucci greeted and thanked those present in this way: “I will join as I can, but consider me part of your School of Community. The proposal of this text, presented in such a passionate, existential way, is characterized by an extraordinary modernity. What the Spirit stirred in Fr. Giussani, what it aroused in him as a need in the educational relationship with the young people of Milan in the 1950s is, I believe, a prophecy for the time we live

in. I deeply believe, like Fr. Giussani, that questions concerning the search for the meaning of one’s life are present within every person. These questions are irrepressible despite the cultural confusion—let’s call it that—in which we are immersed.... Even before we go out to meet the other person with the intention of arousing such questions in him or her and proposing ourselves as the bearers of answers, the attitude that is asked of us is to live these questions ourselves and to begin with them every morning, so that we can listen again and experience and recognize the presence of the One who is light for our path. And if this happened to me, why can’t it happen to you? And so go out to meet the other with the humility of putting ourselves in front of our common questions every day, not with the presumption of someone who already has the answer, but to undertake a common journey.” ■



Luca Fiore

# Be realists, ask for the impossible

The exaltation of desire and of a reason that is open. The great American theologian, **John Cavadini**, describes the “countercultural” value of Giussani’s book: “I am so moved just to know that my students have the chance to read a book like this.”

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**J**ohn Cavadini is a professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, the most prestigious Catholic university in the United States. He is an expert in patristic theology and its diffusion during the Middle Ages. He has written books on the thought of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, on the role of Mary in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and on the celibacy of priests. During Ratzinger’s papacy, he served as a member of the International Theological Commission. He is a husband and is tall, elegant, and kind. He is also generous with his smiles. We met him during this year’s New York Encounter, to which he had been invited to give a presentation on the new English edition of the *Religious Sense* by Luigi Giussani. He recalled that it was Paolo Carozza, a law professor at Notre Dame, who first suggested to him that he read this book by the Italian priest. It was during the

1990s. “Back then I was not teaching yet and today, after years of teaching students, this book seems even more extraordinary. I am so moved to know that my students have the chance to read a book like this.”

### Why?

Today’s students have grown up without being educated about the religious sense. I try to help them develop critical thinking, but I also realize that this is very challenging because for them the religious experience is something that is completely subjective. Their parents and teachers do not encourage them to ask about the meaning of life. The genius of this book is that it demonstrates that it is our reason that asks the questions about what we are living. We are not stones that do not question anything. The point is that becoming aware of our deepest questions is a form of realism. It is the opposite of what most people believe—that to be a realist

means to forget about these questions and focus on obtaining concrete results: relationships, career, success... Giussani says: No, rationality and reasonableness consist in listening to the cry for meaning in all of you, which is what reason is fundamentally. And it is reason that propels you toward awareness of an answer that is bigger than what reason can imagine.

### Giussani uses the word “mystery”

Yes, our culture has lost the meaning of mystery. Reason needs something that reveals itself without losing its mysterious nature. Our greatness lies in staying open to the hypothesis of revelation. Only this openness can allow us to access the Revelation with a capital “R.” One of the clearest examples of this is seen in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

**What do you mean by that? In what sense?**





This photo is from the project titled *Mystery Street* by Vasantha Yoganathan, which is comprised of photographs of kids in a New Orleans neighborhood (Louisiana).

© Vasantha Yoganathan – Courtesy the artist

She watched him die; she took him down from the cross. She looked on as the heavy stone covered the entrance to the sepulcher. He who had raised people from the dead lay dead in the tomb. The story ends. Yet, in each of these circumstances, Mary remained open. By being open her true self was revealed, even though from the outside it seemed that her identity had dissolved. Through her openness she showed herself to be the mother of us all. Then the impossible, that which no one could have foreseen, silently entered her life and brought it to fulfillment.

**So, you are saying that Mary teaches us the proper use of reason?**

Exactly. Think about the many times in our lives that we feel disappointed and that there is nothing more to be done. However, if we look back at episodes from Mary's life, it will become clear to us that we are in good company. The openness of her reason is a beacon of hope for all of us.

**Going back to Giussani's book: In essence, this text was conceived in the 50s. Is the language it uses still able to pique the interest of those who were born more than half a century later?**

The language in the book speaks especially to teachers, and gives them a method even though they may not need to teach the content that Gi-

The mystery announces a message to her that reason cannot conceive: "How can this be if I know not man?" And the angel replied, "Nothing is impossible for God." She stayed open to what remained a mystery and the mystery grows even after it had been announced to her: "Behold you will conceive and bear a son. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High." Everything that would fol-

low would not be easy. There is a popular devotion that has synthesized this experience in the image of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, a path that goes from bad to worse. Simeon announced to her that a sword would pierce her heart. Herod forced her to flee to Egypt. She had to look for her son who went missing during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Then she met him on the road to Calvary.



John Cavadini.

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Giussani proposes. When I teach, I do not talk about the religious sense, but I look for ways to awaken it in my students. Giussani taught at the Berchet High School in postwar Italy, when all religious language was rejected by the cultural elites. At that time, intellectuals were asking questions such as, How can Christians fight amongst themselves like this? Where did their hatred toward the Jews come from? Where was God at Auschwitz? This rejection has become more widespread and has become part of the dominant culture in which today's youth are being raised. It is true that among them there are still some practicing Catholics. But I think that almost half of them renounce the faith because they have been taught that religious language does not have an equivalent in reality, that Christianity is something that was made up, that it is a form of superstition. Therefore, the challenge, as Giussani put it, is to help them become aware that they have a heart, that having a religious sense is not something that is imposed on you from the outside; rather, it is intrinsic to your being. Otherwise, of course, the religious dimension would be reduced to power and seems to be a lie disguised as the truth. I believe that the more advanced students can easily pick up the book and read it. But for the younger ones it is necessary to "act it out," to show its meaning through other means.

**Giussani references many Italian poets and writers who in many cases are not known outside of Italy.**

I do not think this is a major issue. Other examples can be used. What matters is that he demonstrates *how* it is done. There is a lot of literature that helps cancel out the other images of the faith and the religious sense. The first thing that comes to mind are the stories of Flannery O'Connor about violence and grace. Or the novels by Walker Percy such as *The Moviegoer*, *Love in the Ruins*, and *Lost in the Cosmos*. I think that the youth can identify with the sense of feeling shipwrecked, that is, feeling abandoned and waiting to hear a message that never seems to come but is still worth waiting for.

**In the current polarized state of our culture, the questions that constitute the religious sense can be new territory to start from together.**

Many young people are tired of debates that seem to go nowhere. They are also tired because people reduce faith and the church to a collection of beliefs. Instead, I like to think of the title of a book by Flannery O'Connor called *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. If we start from the topics that divide us, we can argue and debate all we want without gaining anything, because those who are a-religious do not have a sense of the beauty of the faith and tradition; that is, the

*“Giussani calling us to have a reason that is open is decisive. This book provides the tools to say: No, the default position of today’s culture does not correspond to my heart because it is reasonable to be open to the intervention of grace.”*

point where everything that emerges converges. Our task is to show that the church’s teachings are not a list of restrictions, but something intrinsically fascinating, because He who has started this small group of followers, the Christians, was rich but became poor for our sake. This is something that is attractive if it is taken seriously because it is beautiful and sheds light on everything else. When this is understood, only then is it worth discussing with someone who thinks differently. But the point is that something must be communicated even before starting a debate.

**Which page of this book struck you the most?**

The last one. Can I read it?

**Of course.**

“The fundamental dogma of the Enlightenment is the impossibility of a revelation. This is the taboo preached by all liberal philosophy and its materialistic heirs.” This is the aim of universities today, even those who hide behind religious language. This is the consequence of Kant’s attempt to translate the terms of revelation into terms of pure reason. I love this book because it emphasizes how such a claim falls short. Giussani continues: “The affirmation of this impossibility is the extreme attempt that reason makes in order to dictate by

itself the measure of the real, and therefore, the measure of the possible and impossible in reality. But the hypothesis of Revelation cannot be destroyed by any preconception or option. It raises a factual issue to which the nature of the human heart is originally open. This openness must prevail if life is to be realized. The destiny of the ‘religious sense’ is totally tied to it.” Then the book concludes with a quote by Franz Kafka that moves me every time I read it: “This is the frontier of human dignity: ‘Even if salvation does not come, still I want to be worthy of it in every instant.’” For me, Giussani calling us to have a reason that is open is decisive. This book provides the tools to say: No, the default position of today’s culture does not correspond to my heart because it is reasonable to be open to the intervention of grace. In the English edition (in the end-notes) there is another quote by Kafka that is provoking.

**Will you read that also?**

“I try to be a true attendant upon grace. Perhaps it will come—perhaps it will not come. Perhaps this quiet yet unquiet waiting is the harbinger of grace or perhaps it is grace itself. I do not know. But that does not disturb me.” That’s incredible. It is the kind of spiritual advice that helps you rise above your problems. God is the one who can save us if He wants to. Our responsibility is to desire this even when it seems impossible. ■

# “It’s dark, but I’m singing”

From his studies during the military dictatorship to the discovery of a revolutionary method. **Miguel Mahfoud**, Brazilian psychologist, was a university student when he met Fr. Giussani, who challenged the dominant culture and his life.

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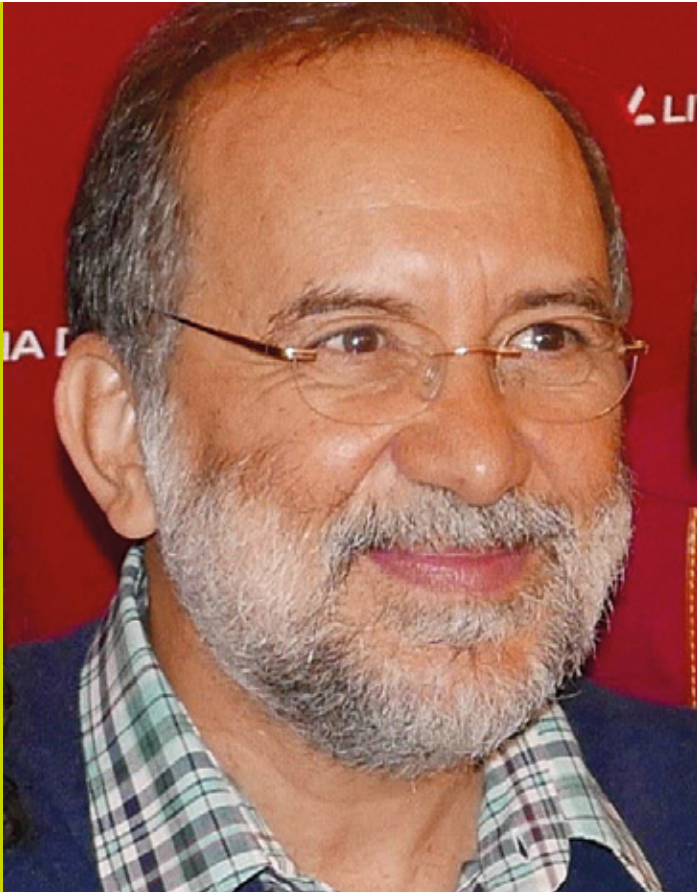
**M**iguel Mahfoud, 67, a Brazilian scholar and psychologist and the author of numerous essays, was a professor of psychology at the Minas Gerais Federal University from 1996 to 2016. His last name hints at his Lebanese origins, of which he is proud, though his heart belongs to Brazil. He studied social psychology at the University of Sao Paulo and later in Belo Horizonte, but his academic career and his entire existence have been shaped by his encounter with some CL students in the late 1970s at the university, lively young people who gathered to read mimeographed texts and compare ideas with those in *Traces of Christian Experience*, translated somewhat audaciously and imperfectly from the Italian. The adventure of CL in Brazil had begun a few years earlier. Fr. Giussani had already traveled to meet the emerging community and Miguel became curious about that priest, “so frank, cordial, and full of faith,” whom he later met in 1980.

This is the story of a friendship in which a challenge was issued and accepted. Beginning with an intense comparison of ideas with Fr. Giussani, Mahfoud set out on a journey of passionate academic inquiry into religion and psychology, which blossomed when it “crashed into” his reading of *The Religious Sense*. What does elementary experience, that is, every person’s need for justice, happiness, and truth, have to do with studies in psychology? Mahfoud has dedicated his entire life to this question.

“I met the first university students of CL in 1978. At the time, our country



Maria Acqua Simi



Miguel Mahfoud.

*“It was a wonder that Fr. Giussani evoked in us: he was a priest who sought to understand what human experience really is.”*

was still under a dictatorship, but in the universities, something was slowly beginning to change. In Sao Paulo, for example, pastoral activity among university students was starting again, and it was there that I began to attend the first Schools of Community. I was struck by the way they talked about the experience of faith and human experience. It was something totally new for me. What I heard in those meetings was revolutionary. So, my friend Edoardo and I began to judge how we were being taught psychology.” They lost no time in taking on established ideas.

In those years, the university used a classic text of sociology, *Asylums*, by the American Erving Goffman, which looked at mental hospitals, prisons, and monasteries. “We realized that it did not do justice to the experience of monasteries, which were compared to prisons and psychiatric institutions. We could say this because we had begun spending time at the Benedictine Monastery of Nossa Senhora de La Paz in Sao Paulo. We went there because through School of Community we had rediscovered the need for prayer. We wrote a pamphlet, *Saint Benedict: The Development and Integration of the Personality*, in which we quoted some of Fr. Giussani’s lessons on the importance of silence for the development of the ‘I.’ It was our way of challenging Goffman’s book.” A youthful and perhaps clumsy, but nonetheless audacious effort.



Miguel Mahfoud with Fr. Luigi Giussani  
in Italy, in a photo from the 1980s.

“Bit by bit, we were learning that our experience of faith is related to human experience, which led us to judge everything, including how culture and psychology affect life. It was an important experience, especially because in Brazil during those years ‘religious experience’ was not spoken of in psychology: it was forbidden.”

Mahfoud continued his studies and in 1986 chose to spend a year in Milan. “I enrolled in the Catholic University where Giussani taught, starting from *The Religious Sense*. I had the opportunity to hear everything from his own voice. He had an extraordinary capacity to challenge the dominant culture. He entered into relationship with everyone. I remember there was always absolute silence in that hall full of students. He sat there, with his notes, and in that moment was absolutely *present*; his entire person was there for us. Even if there were people or journalists waiting for him outside the door, he left hurriedly and preferred to have a coffee with students. He did so many times with me.” The last time was when Mahfoud was about to return to Belo Horizonte. “Saying goodbye, he told me, ‘Look, the challenge for Brazil is that the person be at the center of social issues.’”

**These words remained impressed** in the young psychologist’s memory and spurred his subsequent scientific research. In psychology it was revolutionary to say that fragility, limits, and certain emotions can be seen as positive because people cannot be reduced to these things; they are worth much more. “Personally experienced suffering can be an opening, as Fr. Giussani reminded us, so a person full of wounds is infinitely more human than a superficial person. Those who are wounded feel a deeper longing for fulfillment and so search for it: they set out on the road to find it.”

This led to a series of seminars, advanced courses, and meetings for students, professors, and psychologists in order to understand how this fact could illuminate the psychologist’s relationship with patients. “I began working a lot on *The Religious Sense*, particularly on the concept of ‘elementary experience.’ However, I ran up against a cultural misunderstanding of the concept of desire. If desire is understood only as ‘desire for something you lack,’ then once you find that thing you

should be fine. And if you don’t find it, it means that the answer simply doesn’t exist. Instead, Fr. Giussani said that desire relates to the lack of an infinite good and that the answer to it exists. The itinerary with our patients started from there. We all have deep questions that we need to pay attention to. None of us can become ourselves without passing through the provocation of circumstances and without at least trying to answer those questions. Doing so requires an initiative of freedom. Our work is to help this process.”

This method of inquiry became a book, *Elementary Experience in Psychology*, the fruit of a sincere comparison of ideas with *The Religious Sense*.

“The goodness of this itinerary was clear to me when I looked at my students: there was interest, surprise, and the discovery of a new possibility for psychology. I urged them to read *The Religious Sense*, and for their final assignment asked them to imagine a dialogue with Fr. Giussani, so that they would really engage with the book. At the end of a semester, some of them were very enthusiastic and asked me to go further in these lessons with them. I accepted.”

Thus, he developed new courses for recent graduates and graduate students, always beginning with the concept of “elementary experience” as described by Giussani. A frequent guest and speaker at these seminars was Fr. Pigi Bernareggi, a missionary of the Movement who spent his life in Belo Horizonte among the poor in the favelas and the students at the university.

“If asked why I did it, why we did it, I can say that it was due to the wonder that Fr. Giussani evoked in us: he was a priest who sought to understand what human experience really is and who did not remain silent about religious experience.”

Today Professor Mahfoud is retired, but his work continues through his ex-students who are teaching in Canada, Argentina, and various universities in Brazil. “This is very beautiful for me, because it is an itinerary that continues beyond me, but always together with Fr. Giussani. This whole road has been full of hope.” Just like in the beautiful Brazilian popular song, *Faz escuro mas eu canto*, which he particularly loves: “It’s dark, but I’m singing because the morning will arrive. My friend, come with me and watch the color of the world change... Those who suffer, stay awake, defending the heart.” ■



Luca Fiore

Sam Fontana lives in Lafayette, Louisiana. He came across *The Religious Sense* when he was a seminarian: "It helped me overcome the separation between faith and life."

# Me, Hemingway, and beauty

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“**R**eading *The Religious Sense* opened my eyes. It gave a name to my questions and anxieties. It was a turning point.” Sam Fontana is a priest from Lafayette, Louisiana, in the Deep South of the United States. He entered seminary right after high school, at age 18, and studied philosophy at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC. It was there that he first heard about Fr. Giussani and CL. “I had professors from the Movement and a classmate who went to School of Community. Every time he would come back enthusiastic and tell me all about it. But I never went.” After finishing his three years in Washington before landing at the Maryland Major Seminary, Sam entered a crisis. “I was not questioning my vocation to the priesthood but Christianity as such. Something wasn’t quite right with me. During those years it’s as if my humanity expanded. I was interested in philosophy, art, culture, even political engagement. But all of that

didn’t have much to do with the religious experience that was being proposed to me.” He spent a summer immersed in reading: Augustine, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Walker Percy. “They were months of deep loneliness. I had no reason to leave what I was doing. But, in fact, I became less and less happy.” Sam experienced a division: “On the one hand were the things I was passionate about, on the other hand were Jesus and Christianity. It was a feeling of fragmentation.” But during his first year of seminary, he met Gaurav, an Indian priest. There was a connection, and Sam entered into an intellectual dialogue with him. “One day he invited me to School of Community, and I decided to go.” There were four of them: him, Gaurav and two priests, Greg and Tim. The text they were working on was *The Religious Sense*. “It was what I was looking for. It was a continuous provocation. In Giussani’s pages, I saw a way to overcome the separation I was experiencing between faith and life.

I understood that the question beneath my discomfort was whether it was possible to be Christian and fully human. I had grown up with the idea that, after all, a choice had to be made between one and the other. Giussani described the experience I was having in a way I had never heard before.”

**Sam had read** *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway’s first novel, twice within a few months: “In it I found my own need for beauty and sadness, desires that were not satisfied. How could I be a Christian and not know whether beauty was possible in life? The same was true of the need for justice, a subject of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Giussani explained what I was feeling when he quoted Saint Thomas’s definition of sadness: “The desire for the absent good.” In *The Religious Sense*, the young seminarian met James Baldwin together with Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Macbeth. “I was most struck by the idea that the very existence of the question implies that





Sam Fontana, born 1987.

*“Giussani invited me to engage in the same gestures by paying attention to my experience, to what was happening in me. Everything became more interesting.”*

there is an answer. Reading this book made me realize that I wasn't strange, I wasn't crazy.”

**Those were years when Sam** felt “a longing for something more,” but the Christianity that was proposed to him, even in seminary, was focused more on renunciation. Coming up against what Giussani writes about the reasonableness of the ultimate questions opened wide a new horizon. “Vocation was no longer simply ‘making my contribution to the Church,’ but the way I lived my desire for beauty and justice. Any proposal that concerned my vocation could not fail to take into account this ‘wanting more.’ It would not have been a truly Christian proposal.”

There were aspects of the Italian priest's book that confirmed the approach he was looking for, but it was the third premise, on morality in knowing (whereby one must “love the truth more than oneself”) that unsettled him: “The point was not to reason about my vocation or the future of my life, what mattered was to commit myself to living it,” he explains. “The more one pays attention the more one knows. The more you know the more you learn to love. I grew in the knowledge of Christ more by paying attention to the Church and what Christ was making happen in my life than by assimilating theological ideas.” Seminary involves community life, communal prayer, and service to the poor,

but “for me it was an automatism. These were the ‘rules of the game.’ But Giussani invited me to engage in the same gestures by paying attention to my experience, to what was happening in me. Everything became more interesting.” At that time he was continuing to go to the School of Community, was invited to the New York Encounter for the first time, and read other books by Giussani. “When I came back to Lafayette, I wanted to invite some people to continue this work together. It was after two years of work that I contacted the responsible of CL in Houston to ask him for help. A great friendship was born. It seemed natural to me, shortly after my ordination, to join the Fraternity.” ■

# *Companionship with those far away*

16



Leaders of the Movement's communities in Europe gathered in Hungary. From Spain to Lithuania, the surprise of being "together" in the face of the same challenges.



**Maria Acqua Simi**

In these pages, a few moments from the meeting of CL community leaders in Europe, May 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> in Esztergom.

**E**sztergom is a Hungarian city on the banks of the Danube River. It is home to the Catholic archdiocese where the Primate of Hungary is based. It is here that last May 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> the diaconia of CL leaders from all over Europe was held: more than 140 people from 30 countries met to tell each other about what is happening in their communities and what they have discovered in the months since meeting with Pope Francis on October 15. The church is asking the movements to rediscover their missionary task. We discussed this during three intense days of dialogue, together with Davide Prosperi, the president of the Fraternity of CL, and Ettore Pezzuto, the Fraternity's regional leader for Europe, a summary of which you can find in the following pages. The topic of missionary work is pertinent for many, especially in countries that are now strongly de-Christianized. What should we do when we find ourselves alone?

**Valentina lives in Sweden** with her husband and two children after many years in Rome. "At first it was hard. The desire to get involved in the reality around us arose early, but it was always held back by the fear of performance..." This pattern broke when their parish priest invited them, along with adults from other church realities, to make themselves available to the parish. "In Malmö there are no proposals for families, so we organized a pizza party with movies. Forty-five people came and many asked to see us again soon. Look at how Jesus doesn't give a damn about our performance!" The educational crisis in families remains an open issue, but Valentina asked for help on this.

Fr. Riccardo, a missionary priest of the St. Charles Fraternity in Bonn, Germany, echoes her. "Facing the young people of my parish, I realize that it is fundamental to find new ways and languages to communicate Christ and Giussani's charism to them." They are young people, he says, who are totally estranged from the experience of faith, marked by the dominant mentality, with so many questions about sexuality and relationships. "If we don't take them seriously, they will end up being

educated by the internet." There is no other method, he says, than companionship, because "loneliness is the disease of our time. I find myself accompanying young people scattered over an immense territory. Some live close to other CL students, while others live alone. Once a week I take the train and travel maybe six hours to be with them for only two hours. But for me this is crucial, because the dialogue and time spent together are always intense. Not once have we not ended up talking about vocation. There is still room for Christ to conquer hearts." There were many interventions in the assembly. Elena from Athens said that she rediscovered the beauty of the charism in her relationship with people from other movements who highly valued the CL experience. Many documented the fruitfulness of a faith lived out publicly—such as the CL Way of the Cross in the park in Madrid or the birth in Germany of Kinderwochenende, moments of togetherness for parents and children initiated by some families of the movement. Of course, there is no lack of difficulties. Fr. Luca from Eastleigh, Britain, documented a particular "tiredness" in the missionary momentum of his community. How can it be revived?

**A first attempt at an answer** to this question came on Saturday afternoon with the two testimonies of Giacomo, who works in finance in Britain, and Enrique, who runs a school in Spain. "I have always struggled to accept myself as I am at work, in my family, and in the Movement. So the daily challenge is between measuring my worth by what I can do, or by the free and fascinating gaze of the One who loves me," said Giacomo. Enrique was also convinced: "Living to participate in Christ's work corresponds to us even if it involves restlessness and sacrifice, because His measure is never our measure. But if we accept this, our presence shapes the world where we are. One of our teachers, who is not a member of CL, once told me, 'The reasons you give for working, the starting point you propose for looking at your pupils, is determining the way I too look at my family and my child.'" If the fire burns, it spreads. ■

# “I just have this yes”

Notes from Stefano Alberto's (Fr. Pino's) summary at the Diaconia Europa. Esztergom, May 7, 2023.

18



**D**avide asked me to clarify some points among the many that have emerged in these days. I have identified four points, picking up on the suggestion Davide gave us yesterday during the assembly that pointed to that beautiful final prayer of Lauds on Saturday:

*“O God, who make the minds of the faithful to be of one will, grant unto Your people to love that thing which You command, to desire that which You promise, so that, amidst the vicissitudes of this world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are. Through Christ our Lord.”*

## **1. First point—“O God, who make the minds of the faithful to be of one will.”**

In a few hours each of us will return home. For many of us this means being in a condition of life that is not so much isolated but rather one of physical solitude: some in one place, others in another (Trondheim, Athens, Albania...). I am thinking particularly at this moment of two friends who, for at least ten days, return home to Ukraine to visit friends in the community who have been left in the midst of the war. Just think, they are a “refugee” community scattered over more than ten European countries!

What happened among us was the renewal (not just



the repetition, but the renewal) of an experience of unity lived as a gift, as evidence of a life of communion that has reached our existences. Therefore, the first loyalty to ourselves, to our friends, to the church, to the world is to recognize this gift: to recognize God's initiative that is communion, which restores every time we gather in His name this mysterious and real experience, so concrete, of being united in one will, of being chosen not because we are worthy, because we are capable, because we are up to something. We are chosen so that our faith may grow; we are chosen to be sent, so that our faith may be communicated within a web of life. The concrete modality of this unity, which always reoccurs as a gift in the life of each of us, as we know well, is called a "charism": a life that has impacted our own, in which each of us has clearly perceived a good, something beautiful and fascinating.

Here, then, is the first issue: to cherish with loyalty and humble certainty what we have seen and heard in these days, united in one will; that is, this unity desired by every man but impossible to realize if it were just the work of our own wills. Loyalty to what we have seen and heard in these days makes us certain; certain of God's initiative and of God's faithfulness in our lives, enabling our change, our conversion. As Davide emphasized, this certainty is not a psychological given; it

is a discovery. It is not a static fact, like a possession to be kept in certain images, but it is a journey, a journey of certainty within the drama of relationships that we experience with those who are closest and those furthest away, strangers. It is a certainty that grows by communicating it: "What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3).

## **2. Second point—"Grant Your people to love what You command."**

What we have received, what we continue to receive in these days, the gift of charism, the gift of that form of life and teaching to which Christ has delivered us, demands our response. Responsibility is not first and foremost a role, a function or an ability; it is, rather, recognizing the initiative of the One who chose us, chooses us and puts us together. Recognizing within and through the demanding voice of the church's paternity (how many times was it echoed on October 15<sup>th</sup> that what has reached us is not just for us; it is for the church and the world!) that the correction suggested to us, the changes that are demanded of us, the recapitulation (to use Pope Francis's very strong expression)—all of which implies a crisis, that is, a new judgment—with



all the effort, with all the pain, and with all the difficulty of the changes required, are the expression of a love.

What do you hold most dear? What do we hold most dear? To think that life for the church, for the world, passes through us—this, if taken seriously, leaves us with a great sense of disproportion, almost a bewilderment. Davide was reminding us yesterday, however, that a father, the Father, through the voice of the church, asks us for great things, much greater than us. He tests us not so as to send us to ruin, but so that our faith may grow. “Without me you can do nothing”; “With me all things are possible.” Do not waste time in gossip, Pope Francis has explicitly requested of us.

We realize that the many open questions in our personal stories and in the stories of our communities can become knots, wounds, fractures but also that they can be dissolved, burned in the fire of gratitude and yearning for what has touched our lives so that what has reached us can become hope, forgiveness, an experience of mercy for all. Missionary impetus is not agitation, it is not voluntarism, it is not “busy-ness.” I was very struck by Davide’s insistence yesterday on this poignancy, which brings us back to an elementary experience of every person’s life: when I see, when I encounter a beautiful thing, it is impossible for me to keep it for myself! If I keep it for myself, I lose it; this is true even if I hold it, thinking that I own it.

### 3. Third point—“Grant your people to desire that which You promise.”

Christianity always begins, like that afternoon at four o’clock, with this question, “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38). That is the great question that dominated the beginning of Fr. Giussani’s talk on May 30, 1998, which Davide reminded us will be celebrated in June on its twenty-fifth anniversary. Nobody, not even the tenderest of mothers, has ever dared to ask this question of another man—only Christ did. What good is it to gain the world, to take what you want, if you then lose yourself? What will you give in return for yourself?

If we are here, if we enjoy, through (not in spite of, but through) our limitations, this gift of unity and communion, it is because in the encounter we have sensed, more or less clearly, more or less confusedly, a great promise. The Lord did not promise us an easy life or a simple life, but a real life, a life—life, His life! Our life becomes, one of you recalled so well yesterday, His work, His life in ours and the continual breaking in of another measure. This continuous fact was mentioned, so well described, by one of the great permanent manifestos of our history, the comment of the great Josef Zvěřina, in the *Letter to the Christians of the West*, on the twelfth chapter of the epistle to the Romans: “Do not conform yourselves

to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

The first reaction to another life entering ours always challenges what we think we already understand or think we know, especially the influence of the world's patterns on our way of looking and thinking, of loving. Do not conform, but change the form. What we are promised is a real life. Perhaps we have remained, I am not saying the last, but among the few, who use the expression "hundred-fold." Do you understand how urgent the challenge is? We are not here to endure, to dignifiedly, slyly preserve something destined to end, but to realize this continual beginning of a new life in our lives, one that breaks the mold.

Of course, this promise implies work, for nothing happens without our freedom, nothing happens without sacrifice, that is, without making real what we have in our hands. How precious and continually to be rediscovered are the tools that our charism offers us for educating ourselves in the original dimensions of this new life, of this new way of conceiving, of looking at everything (culture), of this new affection whose apex is not calculation and instinct, but gratuitousness (charity) and a communicative and generative passion (mission).

A new culture, a new judgment, a new gratuitousness, a new generativity. Finding new languages, Davide told us yesterday, recalling the pope's invitation on October 15<sup>th</sup>, does not mean presuming to add something to what Giussani transmitted and communicated to us, but communicating it through a shared experience, a life in which nothing like the labor of childbirth is spared us in identifying times, ways, words, steps, so that this promise becomes a path for us and for those whom God entrusts to us. And then the urgency of cultural work, that is, of a faith that informs life, shapes life—how many attempts at this have we witnessed to each other! How many things are to be discovered within very great challenges! And within the pervasiveness of power, which now manages to no longer be perceived as an inhuman and totalizing claim on one's life.

**4. Fourth and final point—"That, amidst the vicissitudes of this world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are."**

Think of how many events we have to go through, from the war to the confusion in certain sectors of

the church to the cultural turns that come to threaten the very reality of the human being.

This strikes me in both this prayer and in today's topic, which takes up what was said at the Fraternity Exercises about the expression "fixed." "Fixed" our hearts, "fixed" our gaze. To remain in Him, to move with Him and for Him implies a place, that place to which He has delivered us in an encounter with the charism. I experience no growth unless I belong to a place. This place is a communion. And the condition of this communion, which is a gift, is our heartfelt, passionate awareness that without this place each of us loses (loses!) the wonder of the beginning.

What is asked of us as a responsibility, as a sharing of responsibility, is to remain; that is, to walk with our gaze fixed on the One who is the true joy, to remain with simplicity and cordiality in this place, in this guided companionship, guided to an ultimate point of reference who is Davide, because there is no Catholic communion without an ultimate point of reference. All of our collaboration, all of our desire to learn, to be educated, calls for an intelligent, simple, and heartfelt following of the one whom God gives us now as the ultimate point of reference.

From this perspective, we learn every day to follow and love the church, from those who lead it to its existence outside our doors, in our parishes, in the priests, in a people who are so often, as we have seen, tired and lost. I conclude with an observation that often comes to mind: how disproportionate we are to what is asked of us! What a disproportion in the face of the paternal and therefore demanding requests that the Holy Father makes of us! What a disproportion to the world's need for salvation! The magnitude of the task that is asked of each of us, of our guided communion, has the potential to make us distracted, superficial.

I am always reminded of how Giussani cut short those who, during a gathering in a *Memores* house, objected to not being like him: "Why do you object, talking about what you may not have and what I may have? Why, what do you think I have? I have this yes, that's all. It would not cost you an iota more than it costs me." (Luigi Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù* [The attraction of Jesus], Milan, Bur, 1999, p. 204). That "what I may have" more expresses an awareness of the grace of a gift that invests life, a gift that must be asked for, begged for, and acknowledged when it happens, every day.

My yes every day, every moment can only be said by me. Greatness and the mystery of our freedom that always needs to be liberated: Communion and Liberation. ■

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# The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

*With a new translation by John Zucchi*

A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

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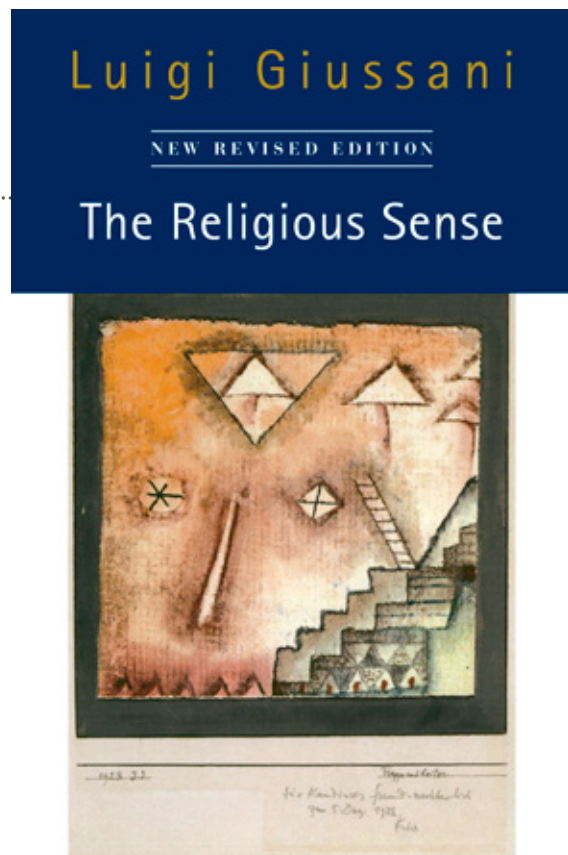
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Monsignor **Luigi Giussani** (1922–2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy. His works are available in over twenty languages and include the trilogy *The Religious Sense*, *At the Origin of the Christian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



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