



# THE RELIGIOUS SENSE: THE MOST IMPRESSIVE FACT IN HUMAN HISTORY

Notes from the presentation of *The Religious Sense*  
with Irene Elisei, Javier Prades and Davide Prospero

Milano, *Dal Verme* Theatre, May 2, 2023 and via video link from Italy and around the world



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### Davide Prospero

Good evening everyone, welcome. I greet and thank all of you here at the *Dal Verme* Theater in Milan and all the people connected from Italy and abroad. I know, from our friends who find themselves in the various venues where the remote viewings have been set up, that several personalities from the Church and civil society are taking part in this meeting, as well as many people who do not belong to the Communion and Liberation movement: thank you for your presence and I hope that this will be another opportunity to get to know each other better. We have just listened to Fr. Giussani introduce the theme of religious sense this way: “It is not only a fact, an event, but the most impressive and most ineradicable fact in human history” (Episode 1 of the *Il senso religioso* [*The Religious Sense*] podcast; min 5:13). The audio is taken from the podcast produced by *Choramedia* and available online, which covers all the contents of the book *The Religious Sense*, for the first time with Father Giussani’s own live voice.

Already in this excerpt, albeit brief, that we listened to, one grasps very well—I think—the intensity with which Fr Giussani introduced first of all young people, but also anyone he met, to the theme of religious sense, the vibrant passion with which he invited to take seriously with all one’s reason and all one’s humanity that desire for meaning, that tension towards the infinite that every man experiences and finds oneself in. On the other hand, this very conviction

of his has always fueled his untiring commitment to the education of young people. We recall a famous sentence of his from his book *Porta la speranza*: “We suffocate young people if we demand from them an enthusiasm towards limited things” (*Porta la speranza* [*Bring Hope*], Marietti 1820, Genoa 1997, p. 68). For Fr. Giussani, any proposal that is not aimed at opening one’s gaze, at introducing an experience of total meaning for existence, is limited.

As many of you already know, Fr Giussani gave accomplished form to the contents of those lectures, and of those he had given first at the Berchet High School in Milan and then at the Catholic University, in the 1986 edition of the book *The Religious Sense*, the best known of Fr Giussani’s books and the most widely translated in the world.

A new edition of this book published by BUR has just been made available. I take this opportunity to thank Rizzoli and the Mondadori Group—whose authoritative representatives are present here—for their fundamental and fruitful collaboration that has characterized our publishing initiatives for many years.

It was decided to produce this new edition because the communities of Communion and Liberation in Italy and around the world will return to use this text in School of Community meetings. I will allow myself at the end of the meeting to take a few minutes to explain more about what it is all about, since it is an open gesture to anyone who is interested in learning more about these issues, not just CL members.



Returning to the book, its republication has given us the opportunity to enrich it with a new preface [not present in the English version]. It is a speech that the then Archbishop of Buenos Aires Jorge Mario Bergoglio made in 1998 at a meeting to present *The Religious Sense* in Spanish. Once again, I thank the Holy Father for giving us his consent to once again propose this meditation of his.

The relevance of his words is truly impressive. For he said, “*The Religious Sense* is not a book exclusively for members of the movement, however, nor is it only for Christians or believers. It is a book for all human beings who take their humanity seriously. I dare say that 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”. (<https://english.conline.org/news/current-events/2023/05/05/bergoglio-the-religious-sense>).

It is also reacting to this text by the future Pope Francis that we thought of organizing this evening’s event: a public presentation, therefore open to all, of a book that we believe to be a very timely and fascinating provocation to man today.

We have invited Fr. Javier Prades, rector of the “San Dámaso” Ecclesiastical University in Madrid and full professor of Dogmatic Theology, to deepen and make this cue concrete. To him our sincere thanks

for his availability. I would also like to thank journalist Irene Elisei, whom we have asked to lead this evening’s dialogue.

Thank you, and to you the floor.

### **Irene Elisei**

Good evening everyone, I thank Davide Prospero, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation.

“The [objective] criterion [...] [of] that elementary experience with [which] mothers *in the same way* provide to their children [...]: the need for goodness, justice, truth, and happiness constitutes our ultimate identity, the profound energy with which human beings in all ages and of all races approach everything [...]. We are stirred as we read passages written thousands of years ago by ancient poets, and sense that their works apply to the present in a way that our day-to-day relations do not. [...] Why is this possible? Because this elementary experience, [...] is substantially the same in everyone, even if it will then be determined, translated, and realized in very different ways—so different, in fact, that they might seem opposed. (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2023, p. 10).

I wanted to start from these lines that Fr. Giussani writes in the very first pages of *The Religious Sense*, even if they are not, most likely, the best known or the most quoted, as they allow us all to start from the

same point; they recall something that we may have all experienced, even if it was only once during our school years, when we were particularly struck by the line of a poem, the title of a book, listening to a piece of classical music or the verse of a song. It is no coincidence that Fr. Giussani's *The Religious Sense* is rich in quotations. One of the authors he quotes most often is Giacomo Leopardi, and I was very struck (it strikes me every time I read it) by a poem he refers to, written almost two hundred years ago, the "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia". Giussani takes up these lines of the shepherd who questions himself: "[And when I] watch the stars that shine there in the sky, / Musing, I say within me: / 'Wherefore those many lights, / That boundless atmosphere, / And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning / Of this vast solitude? And what am I?'" ("Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia," XXIII, vv. 84–89). These are the existential questions, this is the character of the religious sense. But—we heard it a few moments ago from his own voice—Fr. Giussani speaks of the religious sense as "a fact," while we commonly understand it often as a matter of sensibility (I can be sensitive and I can ponder certain questions to a greater or lesser degree).

Can you help us understand what Fr. Giussani means by "a fact" when he talks about religious sense?

### Javier Prades

Good evening, Irene, first of all, good evening to everyone. I would like to begin by thanking Davide Prospero for his invitation to today's dialogue on this outstanding book by Fr. Giussani.

We have just heard it: the religious sense is an objective phenomenon, it is a real fact, it is a reality, it is not an idea, it is not a feeling. Then he adds, "It is the most impressive fact in human history." Why? We will find the full answer as we read the book together. But we can immediately recall another passage by Fr. Giussani: "We call 'religious sense' the 'heart' of man: the thirst for truth and happiness turns to the ultimate good, to the total meaning, which exceeds our

possibility of imagination and definition. And that too is the reason for all action: the religious sense is the summit of reason, because reason is awareness of reality according to the totality of its factors" (*L'io, il potere, le opere [The 'I', Power, Works]*, Marietti 1820, Genoa 2000, p. 92). Let's take these words: thirst for truth, thirst for happiness. We can already recognize them: they indicate the orientation to a total meaning, which exceeds my imagination and my faculty of definition. And yet they are the reason for my actions. This recalls his well-known definition of reason as "awareness of reality according to the totality of its factors." The religious sense as a thirst for truth, a thirst for happiness that I cannot imagine, that I cannot define, and yet that moves and directs all my actions. That is his concern. He adds that this is why the religious sense is "man's exact position towards his own destiny in terms of conscience and his attempt to live it in practical terms" (L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2001, p. 147).

Why does he speak of a powerful fact? Because within this correct position in terms of conscience and man's attempt to live it in practical terms, lies the whole of human living, of each of us individuals and societies, peoples, the whole of humanity. That is why it is a powerful fact.

**Elisei.** We will explore this further, but first I have a simple but essential question: why is it useful to put the religious sense back on the table today? In Milan, there is a lot of hurrying, I don't know about Madrid, but here we are always busy and it always seems to be a question that can be put off, somehow. You have to have good reasons for proposing to someone to read a book that revolves around questions, while the whole world around us is scrambling to provide answers as quickly as possible.

**Prades.** What is today's context? I'll define it with an efficient expression that Pope Francis made popular: we are in an "epochal change" (*Address of the*

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*Holy Father at the Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth National Convention of the Italian Church*, Florence, November 10, 2015). One can reduce it to a slogan to be quoted, then move on, but if it is taken seriously, it places all of us before a horizon of very profound changes in our societies, which some authors even point to as an anthropological revolution. The moment which we are in, for which this book is being proposed again, is a moment in which the magnitude of the changes really touches what human beings are, what human identity is. If we wanted to describe the phenomena that fall under this diagnosis, we would be carrying out work more suited for a conference of cultural inquiry. I will only make a few points this evening.

Let us consider the technological pole; to put it succinctly, it is the famous NBIC convergence (nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive technologies), which sums up a whole world that we can conjure up without too much difficulty as one of the dimensions of the horizon in which we find ourselves.

But there is another pole, there is another very present side to this change of era, which has to do more directly with the human: a growing self-assertion of individuals untethered from relationships. A self-determination understood more and more in terms of feelings. Let us think of the issue of narcissism in our societies; at this level, another horizon of questions could be opened (can and should be opened). Wanting to summarize, I take up a judgment of Pope Benedict XVI when he spoke of an “disequilibrium between technical capacities,” gigantic and in itself very useful for the well-being of our societies, “and moral energy.” And he added (this is interesting), “The security that we need as a basis for our freedom and dignity cannot, in the last analysis, come from technological systems of control, [it’s not systems that will make us safe] but can spring only from man’s moral strength. Where this strength is lacking, or is only inadequately present, man’s power will increasingly transform itself [inevitably and every day more] into a power of destruction.” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Europe in the Crisis of Cultures*, in *Communio*, No. 32.2 (Summer 2005), p. 346 <https://www.theway.org.uk/endeanweb/ratzinger32-2.pdf>). It may not necessarily be so; it may be.

In any case, what Benedict XVI calls “moral energy”—human stature taken in an integral sense, we might say—goes very well with the concern that Fr.

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suffer is yours!”*

Giussani had when he proposed the book and its educational journey. With a wording that is more familiar to some of us, he pointed out the loss of the sense of the self, that is, the loss of the moral energy that Benedict was talking about, of a complete, living understanding of the human, which can justly use power well or can be crushed by it. Fr. Giussani said, “Behind the word ‘I’ there is [...] great confusion, yet the understanding of what my *subject* is [in other words, what I am] is the first concern. Indeed, my subject is at the center, at the root of all my actions [...]. If one neglects one’s I, it is impossible for my relationship with life to be mine, for life itself (the sky, a woman, a friend, music) to be mine. [...] There is [he said this even then, a good few years ago] a very strong pressure from the world around us [mass media, school, politics] that [...] ends up cluttering [...] any attempt to become aware of one’s I. [...] If, on the other hand, our person is, as often it is, all crushed, literally suppressed or so intimidated to the point of becoming numbed, our I, this we quietly endure every day” (*Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Rizzoli, Milan 1995, pp. 9–10).

Here, Giussani does not want to leave us at peace regarding this. I am one of those people who easily succumb to being crushed in terms of my humanity, and Fr. Giussani nudges me from behind, from in front, from all sides as if to tell me, “Wake up! Because if you are not in it, nothing you say, do, propose, desire, dream, suffer is yours!”

I’ll add one last thing. In itself this would already be enough to be grateful. But Archbishop Bergoglio, in the *Preface*, insists on another dimension that is very interesting and very decisive for us: “For a man and woman who have forgotten or censored their fundamental “whys” and the burning desire of their hearts [if one is so numb, dormant, half-dead], talking to

them about God ends up being something abstract or esoteric or a push toward a devotion that has no effect on their lives” (<https://english.cnonline.org/news/current-events/2023/05/05/bergoglio-the-religious-sense>). Redeeming the human is the way to humanly reopen the question about God. If there is no question and no answer about God, all the risks we were talking about earlier will most likely lead toward that use of men’s power against men.

Therefore, let us return today to this “fact” that is the religious sense, understanding it with Fr. Giussani as “an invitation and an impulse to recover the simplicity, the authenticity of our nature” (L. Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro: 1986–1987 [The I is reborn from an Encounter: 1986–1987]*, Bur, Milan 2010, p. 162), the wonder of being human beings. Someone must give us back the wonder of being human!

**Elisei.** You just talked about the invitation of being human. *The Religious Sense*, which is surely Fr. Giussani’s most translated and best known text, is the first part of a journey that Giussani began to make with the young students he met at school, at the Berchet High School, in the mid-1950s, in whom he found a faith that was very tied to tradition but lacked solid foundations (he called them “adequate reasons”.) With them, therefore, he began an educational journey, starting with *The Religious Sense*, which would later be enriched by other books and was at the heart of Giussani’s novelty. Faced with young people whose faith was tied to tradition but lacked adequate reasons, to help them understand why it was worth believing, he started from the reasonableness of the original questions. A complete reversal, no? Rather than analyze the individual problem, I start at the root, and that seems revolutionary in itself. To those who never knew Giussani (I never got to meet him!), in the book a question is asked again and again, I felt like I was being asked it: but can man, especially modern man, reasonably ask himself these questions?

I ask if this use of reason and the religious sense is Giussani’s great innovation in dealing with the subject.

**Prades.** In the *Preface* to the later editions of *The Religious Sense*, he explains the purpose of his attempt, what he proposes to do; he says thus, “Man faces reality [the reality of everyone, of those

then, of today, of us and everyone; to understand, to understand life, to understand oneself, others, everything, man] with reason.” And this is already a very strong option, because there are so many alternatives around on the relationship with reality that do not depart precisely from reason, from an integral sense of reason, but from feeling or from pure irrationality, so there are no reasons, there is only the jolt of instinct or emotions, and God knows how many other things. Instead Giussani says, “*Reason is what makes us human.* Therefore, we must have a passion for reasonableness, and this passion is the thread that will lead us through this discussion. For just this reason, the first volume of the trilogy, *The Religious Sense*, opens with a three-fold methodological premise to help us to grasp the way the human conscience, by nature, reasons” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. xi).

Here it is very nice and very interesting to grasp, on the one hand, Fr. Giussani’s originality, the original, very original features, in my opinion, of his educational proposal to bring us into the totality of reality. And, on the other hand, on closer inspection, recognize that in doing so he is following the best Catholic tradition. For from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Newman there is no great mind in the history of faith and of the Church who, in trying to transmit the faith, did not ask the question about reason and did not argue in favor of reason. So, we can say that we are dealing with a person who prolongs this awareness to our times, this way of approaching reality and as an educational cue. And so, by reawakening reason (the questions, you said), the path that Giussani proposes can also encounter an objection that so many years ago Joseph Ratzinger glimpsed in Germany at that time (the early 1970s): in a very well-known book of his, he questioned why there is

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a failure in the passing on of the faith. Why is it no longer able to take root? He answered, “The crisis of Christian preaching, which we have been experiencing to an increasing extent for a century, depends in no small part on the fact that Christian answers neglected the questions of man; they were right and continued to remain so; however, they were not influential in that they did not start from the problem and were not developed within it” (*Dogma e predicazione [Dogma and Preaching]*, Queriniana, Brescia 2005, p. 75, our translation). It was not the clarity of our Christian answers that was lacking (he was talking about 1970s Germany, about which he knew quite a bit), so much as grasping the answers in relation to human questions.

With his proposal, Giussani impacted precisely on this difficulty which made him imagine two parallel worlds, whereby the answers could also be right (they were right, they could have also been right), yet by failing to meet the other, they either glossed over or stood beside life. Here, this having neglected the human drama, the questions, the passion for the reasonableness of living, in my opinion, is one of the elements of the situation we find ourselves in, for which we often cannot really find an explanation. The book begins with three premises of method: the first premise is about “realism,” the second is about “reasonableness,” and the third is about “the impact of morality on the dynamic of knowing.” We begin our inquiry with these premises. But what kind of inquiry do we want to undertake? Here, let us follow the steps. Realism: the object dictates the method. What is the object? The object is the person. Not the definition of a person, but the person who is me, who is you, who is each of us. So, what is the method of realistic inquiry, if it is to know what

a person is? Who am I? (Leopardi says, “And what am I?”). So, in my opinion, in the Italy of the 1950s, in Giussani one already found, before the times, the answer to Ratzinger’s question of the 1970s. These are somewhat daring historical comparisons that I make, however, it seems to me that they may lend themselves as useful. There is a way of proposing the true content, the right answers that come from the revealed Mystery, that has within it, carries with it the living interaction with oneself and with the other. And it is this that allows one to understand the content of what is proposed as relevant, as adequate and therefore as convenient for me and for all. Ratzinger posed the question about the situation and answered that what was missing was the *Mit-fragen*, that is, the wondering together with everyone: “Therefore it is an essential component of preaching itself to take part in man’s search, because only thus can word (*Wort*) become answer (*Ant-wort*)” (*ibid.*).

Therefore, let us recover our questions as an expression of reason’s openness to what it cannot imagine and what it cannot define. This seems to me one of the most original and powerful features of Giussani’s proposal.

**Elisei.** It seems to me that this has significance also from the point of view of dialogue: it is a method thanks to which you can really speak to everyone, since you do not propose only, as you said, a correct criterion, a correct reason, which in itself is not enough for you to encounter the other.

**Prades.** You risk first of all not being able to meet yourself! And that is much worse. It is very true, because you may think, “But I have spoken the truth, how come then this person does not then follow

me?” There can be so many reasons, for God’s sake, but the fact that there is no involvement at the level of the human drama, obscures, takes away the power of announcement that is a distinctive feature of Fr. Giussani’s proposal. In my own small way, I have seen that living your humanity with this hypothesis opens up many doors. Of course, an open door is just an open door, it doesn’t mean you have arrived, but the door has opened, then we’ll see. In the meantime, you start walking. Sometimes, the door is slammed in your face. This is always, always on the table. So, you start again. But the more you start again the more you are yourself, passionate about accomplishing the journey together with the other, because the other has within them something of yourself.

**Elisei.** You said it was worth proposing such a book. To stop and read it at this time, to devote hours, work to such a book, first of all allows you to recover yourself. You were also saying that in your answer to this last question. It’s a matter of awareness (I understand it’s also a matter of awareness, right?). At a certain point, you no longer feel life sliding away from you, but you can grasp the depth of it. And here we come to the concept of experience. On this I’ll give a very quick example. During the Easter holidays I was at my parents’ house and there was some classical music playing. While I was listening to the classical music and reading, I noticed that my daughters were laughing. They were laughing before as well, but at some point this touched me, it moved me profoundly. I would ask you how much this has to do with the experience that Giussani talks about, because it’s one of the concepts that he develops so much and—again—in a very different way from how we normally hear about experience on a daily basis. Here, how much does this have to do with perceiving the depth of a moment that you are experiencing and are a part of?

**Prades.** In my opinion, the category of “experience” is decisive for the overall structure of Fr. Giussani’s human and Christian position. In the book, he is careful to specify what he means by the word “experience,” for many reasons (including theological ones). He knew well how dubious this concept had been in the first 30–40 years of the 20th century for the authority of the Church. So, there was no joking about it; but especially because the lives of young people and the lives of everyone were at stake. That’s

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why he immediately wanted to clarify what is meant by the expression “experience.” Let me try to put it this way: to have an experience today means to try something out; but without a criterion of judgment there is no experience, the “trying something out” cannot be called “experience” in a fully human sense, without the comparison with criteria of judgment—as Giussani puts it—that allow one to clarify the factors involved, to the point of grasping the fullness of one’s needs and the verification of the evidences that constitute the heart of the experience itself. Experience—understood in a whole sense, having within it these criteria that make one capable of judgment—allows one to deal with the all-important issues of life by realizing that one is growing. This in my opinion is the hundredfold down here! One notices that one grows not in a particular area of human activity, in one or in many, but regarding the central question of life, that is, the meaning of existence. That I realize I am growing, as the years go by, about the meaning of life is the hundredfold down here; then will come eternal life.

Intelligence of reality, the passion for reasonableness, is not an exercise subject to decision-making, it cannot be. Decision-making is very important for some of us and decisive for our professional life, but such intelligence cannot be achieved through accurate decision-making by any of us, not even by those who depend on it for their profession. But it is gained—this intelligence of reality—from the comparison with reality. Let me give an example, forgive me if I sound somewhat trivial. I can write on the blackboard, “Moms are loved by children. Children are loved by mothers.” But for the child who is sitting



there, the sentence does not embrace him, does not console him; it is true, unbreakably true, but the child will grasp the content of intelligence of reality that the sentence expresses inasmuch as—being embraced by his mother—he really feels able to confirm, even without words, (if he could speak, he would shout!), “Mommy loves me!” Excuse the simple example, but it is also useful for what I have just said about the criteria that constitute the human heart: Giussani says that each of us is endowed with these criteria with which we can compare everything; they are given by nature, they are given in our condition, posited by the human condition or (to use an expression that is very much his) they are criteria immanent to the original structure of the person.

Let me dwell for a moment on this first dimension of criteria (without which we do not experience, do not grow) in relation to living, to the meaning of living: they are objective, the same for everyone, within us, but they are given to us; they are immanent to our human structure, but they are not available, in a deep sense, they are not manipulable by ourselves. But we must not agree with Giussani just because Giussani says so, and even less agree with me because I say so, for it is necessary to truly understand it, this! It is necessary to see it as the child, who can confirm the truth of the sentence about his/her mother. I will try to say how and where I see it.

A couple of years ago, while reading a Spanish contemporary poet, Karmelo C. Iribarren, I was struck by a two-line (two-line!) poem entitled *Madrid, subway, nighttime*: “Exhausted people with their eyes fixed on the ground, / wondering about life, real life... / because that can’t be all there is to it.” Eyes fixed on the ground, one wonders about life, real life, because that can’t be all there is to it. Ordinary people, working like crazy, coming home broken at night in the subway, exhausted, looking at the ground and thinking, “But what is life?” The poet is right in grasping, in reading the hearts of those people like that. The most impressive thing that strikes me is this: how do those people know that life cannot be just that? Who told them that? Nobody! Or did they? It’s not like you had a rich life first and then lost everything and you come home on the subway at night and say, “Gee, I had a chauffeur and a car, I miss that life,” no! You may never have had it, never have experienced any other life. Yet you know that this can’t be all there is to life. But then where does this certainty come from? Who cries out in me? What voice cries out in me this need

for true life? If you turn it around positively then, you could say, “All right, life can’t be just this. You are there, broken, shattered, on the subway. So, tell me what true life would be.” If you tried to act like the person on the subway, like any one of us (by the way, I’m a subway person myself!), and you began to ask yourself, “So what is life?”, life-life, as Augustine would put it. What is life-life? Start listing the ingredients and try to figure out where you would stop, where would you say, “That’s it, that’s life!” This is very interesting. When one sees this, one wonders, “Could there be anyone out there in the world who views himself as a slave, who works like a slave, and would not grasp this disparity with a life that would not be just that of a slave?” These are things we need to discover. This is a bit, shall we say, an overall consideration of the meaning of life, which emerges in so many incidents, perhaps even simpler ones.

I will tell you another very trivial example. I’m a lecturer, I’ve been teaching theology for a long time, and a few years ago I had a student who sat in the seat as far back as he could go, visibly disinterested in what I was saying (at least I thought so). When a lecturer sees someone like that, he honestly begins to think not too well of the guy in question. One day, it must have been spring more or less, I was in my faculty office receiving students. They ring. It’s that student, “Look, I usually never talk to lecturers. I also particularly dislike you.” “All right.” “Plus, I don’t like this Communion and Liberation.” “Then maybe you’ve come knocking on the wrong door, what should I tell you? How come you are here?” “Since before Christmas I’ve been struggling a lot and I’m thinking of dropping out. I’ve asked for help, I’ve been given advice, maybe even wise and good advice, but I just can’t move forward, nothing seems to be of use. But I realized that listening to you in class has been helping me.” Wow! At that moment I felt like saying, “Look, thank God for what has happened to you, because you have realized something that is so true that it has moved and cut through all your prejudices. You have been bound by the light and—Fr. Giussani said—by the cogency of truth, which does not bind you to me, dear friend (I have been an intermediary), but binds you to the experience of truth that you have had now, of which I have been the intermediary. If you dislike me, so be it, but all your life you will never again shake off the fact that you have caught the difference between things slipping away and the emergence of a relevant, cogent, transpar-



ent truth that sparks your responsibility. Now get on with it! I'm here, whenever you want me to be." He left. He came back once, he came back many other times, we became very close friends, now I think he is very intelligent, of course! He follows our beautiful company of the movement. I don't know if I helped him, but that episode helped me a lot, because truth is powerful. In a society like ours, which denies even the question of truth, I can insist on saying whatever I want, but if the acknowledged and judged truth emerges, we are reborn as individuals for everything! This student is now a very good priest.

**Elisei.** We understood the method by which Giussani approaches the religious sense, the starting point he indicates for looking at one's own religious sense. However, you mentioned, there are many layers of prejudices that one has about oneself. So where do we start from?

**Prades.** Before I answer that, there is one thing I would absolutely like to say. Because the other side of the coin of these criteria—which, as criteria, are objective, immanent and given—is that in their application we can and do make mistakes. Giussani used to give (I remember) the example of the office manager who falls in love with the secretary. He is married, has three children and says he is leaving home; in the name of what? He betrays in the name of what? Nobody cheats in the name of cheating! No one. One betrays in the name of an idea of happiness, an idea of love; yes, happiness or love. But the application can be wrong, very wrong; unfortunately, we all have negative examples very close to us. Think also of the need for justice. I don't think there is a stronger need in anyone's heart than that. All it takes

is for you to feel unjustly treated and all hell breaks loose! Put yourself in the opposite situation now, let's put ourselves in the opposite situation: you want act justly, for example, at home with your children, I'm not talking about when you don't want to act justly. We all know very well when we don't want act justly, but let's think about what happens when we do. You say, "I have two children, three children, I have employees, and I want to be just. With my own hands am I able to do justice? What does it mean to do justice?" It is an evidence: without justice I can't live, because I can't bear to live in injustice (and the wounds one carries from injustice suffered are tremendous). You say, "All right, I understand. So, since justice is a requirement of the heart, is my every move right?" It depends! There will always be the possibility of discovering that what I thought was justice can be compared to a more "just" criterion of justice, which makes me change and say, "I thought I had been just as far as I could; but my heart, with its need for justice, will continue to correct me; I can always rediscover that the immanent criterion, given, not placed by me, can correct my applications of it."

I come to the point you were asking: where do we start? One starts... let's see where Fr. Giussani starts from.

**Elisei.** A little bit of suspense...

**Prades.** For an existential inquiry like the one we are pursuing, the proposal is to start with the I. He says it clearly and it is a very very strong criterion. How many bets, how many choices Giussani makes, very strong ones, in the path of the book. So, we have to understand well in what sense he invites us to "[start] from oneself [and] observe our own move-

ments” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 36). In a context like today’s, in which narcissism and individualism are perhaps much stronger than fifty years ago, he says, “To use oneself as a starting point is realistic when we watch ourselves *in action*, in our daily experience” (*ibid*). Here, Giussani suggests a very interesting criterion of method. How can I watch myself? Where does one begin? One needs to identify the structure of the reaction that each of us has before reality. Not introspection, not isolation, but seeing myself in action, witnessing its impact.

That is why reality is healthy, because if it were not there, we would all be out of our minds! Reality is a principle of mental health. You see yourself in action, you see yourself in relationship with reality, in doing, in the affections you live, in working, in loving, in cultural, public, political engagement. Involvement with every aspect of life always gives you feedback that—if looked at according to the criteria mentioned earlier—is an inexhaustible source of tension to the full understanding of life. We do not need anything else. We do not lack life, and by not lacking reality that provokes us every day, the whole dynamism that allows us to grow by living out the criteria aptly is reawakened.

**Elisei.** The next question ties in with this. Sometimes we find ourselves or someone we meet with a heart that seems as if it were asleep. How does one awaken a dormant heart? In the *Preface* Bergoglio says, “You cannot start a discussion of God without first blowing away the ashes suffocating the burning embers of the fundamental whys” (<https://english.clonline.org/news/current-events/2023/05/05/bergoglio-the-religious-sense>). I have in mind a colleague who is dissatisfied with his love life, work life, in short in so many ways; yet, it almost seems as if one can be made content, one chooses to be content.

**Prades.** From the point of view of our education—for 12-year-olds, for 14-year-olds, for your children, for me being 62 years old—this question is very important. I have so much need for it. For our educational journey, for the communication of our experience, for the sharing of our experience, it is a radical question. How do you awaken these questions? How do you awaken a dormant heart? I go right away to that very famous page where Giussani answers precisely this concern of yours: what is the structure of the reaction provoked by reality, the first, the most

original reaction? He uses a very very original, very beautiful example: “Picture yourself being born, coming out of your mother’s womb at the age you are now at this very moment in terms of your development and consciousness. What would be the first, absolutely your initial reaction? If I were to open my eyes for the first time in this instant, emerging from my mother’s womb, I would be overpowered by the wonder and awe of things as a ‘presence’” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 105). If we could be born with the awareness of an adult, the structure of the reaction in front of the reality would be astonishment. “Things,” “thing,” reality itself.

The example is not fanciful, to me it seems very insightful, very profound. Certainly, it must be because we can all identify, as ordinary people, with this first experience of the structure of a stunned reaction, an astonishment in front of ordinary things. I was reminded of a book published many years ago with the testimonies of American astronauts and Russian cosmonauts who had returned to Earth. Rereading some of them, the thing that immediately emerges is a surprise full of contentment. For example, one said, “Coming out of the spacecraft I was seized with a strange feeling of happiness. The Earth smelled indescribably sweet and deep. What a pleasure to feel the wind after long days in space.” Another stated, “After getting off the spacecraft I was so happy to see the ground already covered with the first thin layer of autumn snow. I wanted to throw myself on the ground, hug it and press my cheeks against it” (See K. Kelley, ed., *The Home Planet*, Addison-Wesley, Reading-Ma, 1988). How many Russians in their lifetime have seen a finger of snow on the earth in autumn?

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All of them (except a few on the Black Sea!). There is nothing more mundane, more obvious than snow in Russia. But rediscovering that original gaze, makes you feel like throwing yourself on the ground full of happiness!

Fr. Giussani, however, does not give this example merely to inspire any particular emotions, as if to say, “The earth puts me in a good mood,” but instead interprets this experience, which can be replicated through so many other examples, as a sign of nothing less than the very depth of reality. That is, wonder is not just a feeling, but the road that leads to a “beyond” that is of the same nature as wonder. That which I cannot define and cannot imagine appears to me so correspondent as to arouse astonishment, wonder. Could it be a lie? Is it just an image? Fr. Giussani starts from wonder as a door, as a window, as an escape point to indicate the only thing that can reassure us: reality is good. Not only does it “appear,” but it gifts itself to me as it appears, as good. There is the certainty, there is the consistency.

Your colleague, I, and all of us can be asleep, until, by grace, the opportunity for an encounter that awakens wonder, that reawakens the human dynamism, puts us back into action. This is decisive, because of what you were saying at the beginning. Giussani emphasizes how profound the experience described by this example is. You go, go, go further, go inside this experience and at the end you realize nothing less than that at the origin of you there is something mysterious to which you cannot say anything but “You.” You cannot say less than “You” to this mysterious origin deep inside you (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, pp. 110–111). Thus, the way to God becomes much more realistically understood,

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existentially binding, when one hears the Christian proclamation. Fr. Giussani commented on the *Sevillanas del Adios*: “Algo se muere en el alma, / cuando un amigo se va... [...] El barco se hace pequeño / cuando se aleja en el mar...” (Something in the soul dies / when a friend goes away [...] the boat gets smaller and smaller as it drifts out to sea). Giussani says this is the noblest human experience. That vanishing point is lost on the horizon: “The *Sevillanas*, I was saying, is a symbol: the boat, the receding vessel becomes smaller and smaller as it enters the sea until it disappears.” Then he adds, “But while for the usual man that horizon line is the point where everything drowns, disappears—the *barquiño* of the song disappeared, was a point, a dot, and then disappeared—, for the Christian that horizon line is like the enigma, the mystery from which something must flow, something must flow before him, something must come to him: it is an unknown land, from which someone must come to him that will bring unimaginable wealth. [...] And, in fact, at a certain moment, a point appears on the horizon, on the horizon line: it is this boat. This *barquiño*, which is a dot, gets bigger and bigger; in the eyes of the attentive man who stares at it, it gets bigger and bigger, bigger and bigger, until it is outlined even in its internal factors and a man, the boatman, is seen sitting inside. The boat approaches the shore, the docks, and the man who was waiting embraces the arriving man” (*Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida [Reality and Youth. The Challenge]*, Bur, Milan 2018, pp. 98–100, 102). But who will ever understand to the point of trembling the statement: the Mystery has become man, if saying “Mystery” does not arouse the experience of the mysteriousness of unknowable good that pervades all the layers of life and whose name you do not know? You cannot say His name and He does not say your name, but the man who comes down to earth and embraces you (the Mystery made man), He has a name and He knows my name.

So, if you don’t go through the journey entirely, the most sacred words of our faith can slip away without even affecting people in the slightest. Instead, they are truly the door of salvation for those who ask themselves, “What am I doing here while not understanding anything about my life?” I may be asleep, but I can be reawakened when someone with the ability to embrace me passes me by.

**Elisei.** Something can amaze us, and that can reawaken us. Precisely because we are talking about



*There are no spectators here today. Did you come by chance? I don't know why you have come, but you are here. And you are not spectators. So let's leave the question open, "What does it mean to live reality intensely?" Who, among the people that I know by first and last name, can I say correspond to the words of the text, that is, live reality intensely?*

awe the next very quick question I will ask you stems from what another colleague asked me (I have as many as you want for more questions!). In the last few days, preparing for this evening's meeting, I had been keeping the book inside my bag. Evidently it was peeking out and a colleague who was curious pulled it out; after looking at the title, he looked at the back cover and read, "Living reality intensely." He came up to me and said, "But what does someone who lives reality intensely do?" I told him, "Come and listen to Prades and he will answer." Giussani says, "The formula of the itinerary to the ultimate meaning of reality is what? To live reality intensely." What does that mean?

**Prades.** Good! Here, I'll leave this question open to everyone. Really! It's not like there are actors on stage and spectators in the audience, sorry! There are no spectators here today. Did you come by chance? I don't know why you have come, but you are here. And you are not spectators. So, let's leave the question open, "What does it mean to live reality intensely?" Who, among the people that I know by first and last name, can I say correspond to the words of the text, that is, live reality intensely? Let us keep in mind what Charles Taylor says, "This is the age of authenticity" (C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, 2003). Indeed, listening to so many songs, for example: *I Want It All*, life sounds very intense, authentic. Or does it? And *I Want It now* (Queen, *I Want it All*, from *The Miracle*, 1989 Emi). Is that the way to live reality intensely? Is it perhaps a "let's get serious"? It is much better to cross paths with one whose life arouses in me the experience of a correspondence, of the intensity of reality as an itinerary to ultimate meaning. For this is the second part of the sentence, which should not be lost. "Living intensely" can be understood in so many ways—Fr. Giussani says it is to reach the "ultimate meaning." I am curious, in a few weeks, to have so many indications of people,

places, gestures where we live reality intensely, so that we are on the way to destiny.

**Elisei.** I would like to understand what interest reflecting on religiosity, on religious sense, might have for those who perhaps believe they have found an answer to these questions, for those who are already on a journey of faith. In short, why is it not a step backwards or a reiterating?

**Prades.** It is not only for "those who believe that they have found an answer," but also for "those who have found it"—because the Christian answer is very true. Giussani had once made this joke: "We wrote the religious sense"—we... him!—, "we Christians, we Catholics," that is, we who have encountered Jesus Christ, who from the encounter we have made have been able to recover humanity according to the depth, the richness, the precision, the fulfillment that is described in *The Religious Sense*. Giussani said this, but here I recall the expression that Julián Carrón used so many times: "The religious sense, verification of the faith" (*Traces*, No. 2/2011, pp. I–XII). Undertaking the journey of the religious sense as a verification of the Christian faith, that is what we want to do now. Otherwise, how will we, how will I, communicate the intensity, the zest, the passion for faith, if when I say, "Incarnation of the Word made man," everything I said before was lacking? And instead how different is it to be able to say to someone, "Come with me, let's go together, I'll come to you," when my faith is as if back-powered, supported and moved by this intelligence of the human that is triggered by faith! Here, I think a proposal like this allows (it is not mechanical, nothing is mechanical) to escape formalism, formalism in living faith as Christians. To the point of grasping the deep, existential connection between each of the proposals that Christianity makes to us, that the Lord we have encountered makes to us, and the human who seeks Him. On the other hand, if the religious sense cannot

find what it is moving towards, it usually lapses (this has been always true in history) into particulars that take the place of the totality, because without meaning one cannot live. If I cannot meet the meaning made near, made flesh, I will translate it according to my own image or definition. The only person who does not let the circle of the religious sense close is Christ. “Remoto Christo,” as the old theology used to say; without Christ the temptation to lock the problem into an image or definition is too strong.

**Elisei.** I would say to conclude only by mentioning that this was the presentation of the book, but it is also the proposal of a work on *The Religious Sense*, as a possibility of an in-depth study for all.

**Prades.** Very well said. Davide had mentioned it and you reminded it too; I will say it again very quickly. In the *Preface* Archbishop Bergoglio says that this book “is a book for everyone.” It is a book for all!

In itself, it is a masterpiece, but in my opinion it is not enough, because it was not born that way! Because of the very way it came into being, the most fascinating thing about this book is that it represents a dimension of a complete educational journey, for a deepening of the full Christian and human experience that each person has encountered and through which he or she also reached the book. Here, it is not a do-it-yourself, it is not a self-help manual (I don’t know how to say it), it is not that! It is an expression of an educational proposal that is part of a path, a journey that cannot generate interest if it does not reach you through some reality that arouses wonder in you and sets you in motion. Because of this and in this way the book gains its full weight.

Pope Francis had told us last October that “the Church—and I myself—expects more, much more” (Pope Francis, “Let this Holy Prophetic and Missionary Restlessness burn in your Hearts <https://>

[it.clonline.org/cm-files/2022/11/07/insertoudienza15ottobre-web-ing.pdf](https://it.clonline.org/cm-files/2022/11/07/insertoudienza15ottobre-web-ing.pdf)). I humbly think that one of the absolute most beautiful things about the educational journey we share and to which we can invite everyone is precisely this whole experience, this being part of a living place that looks at humanity in this way. This life, this reality, makes it possible to face all the challenges we talked about earlier, the huge ones and the everyday ones, and which Francis calls “epochal change.” In this sense, in my opinion, this book is a resource of exceptional educational, cultural, missionary value to be proposed to everyone, because it really benefits us.

**Elisei.** Let us invite Davide Prospero back for the conclusion. Thank you for your attention.

**Prospero.** I would like to conclude this meeting by following up on what Javier Prades has just said. It is not just (it certainly is, but not only) the presentation of a book, that of this evening, but the proposal of the beginning of a work, which we in Communion and Liberation are used to calling “School of Community.” The School of Community is a weekly or fortnightly gesture, usually led by one of the local leaders of the movement, which aims to deepen the proposed content through a close comparison between Fr. Giussani’s text and our own experience, as we have heard. It has a dialogical form and, as we said at the beginning, is open to all. No prerequisites of belonging, religious belief or cultural knowledge are necessary: it is enough to be open to listening, interested and engaged with one’s own humanity. In fact, this gesture was born out of the educational passion of Fr. Giussani, who, as we have heard, spent his entire life for education, guiding young and not-so-young people towards a free and serious gaze on themselves and on reality.

Let me read a few passages from different texts in which Fr. Giussani himself introduces the meaning and purpose of the School of Community. “The

*It is an expression of an educational proposal that is part of a path, a journey that cannot generate interest if it does not reach you through some reality that arouses wonder in you and sets you in motion.*



School of Community is first and foremost a work. It is work that builds, it is the human phenomenon whereby, shaping the created reality, the reality that surrounds us, something is erected that is organic, hospitable, useful, peaceful, human. [...] But I was wondering now: why the School of Community? Why did we create the School of Community all those years ago? Life has a purpose, and the fact that there are so many problems pressing into our days is precisely confirmation that life has a purpose, because if it did not have a purpose there would be no problems. This is what we wanted by establishing the School of Community: that there is no humanly felt problem in our lives that is not answered, answered adequately; the adequate answer to a problem is the constituent reasons for that problem. This gives life curiosity and flavor. Solving a problem in life, specific to life, brings curiosity and delight. But this was the discovery of the first hours of religion school that I did; I had to realize that faith has more reasons than can be found by human intelligence as such. Faith is more capable of answering human problems than reason itself. That is why we have loved it, this faith, because it has shown itself before our eyes as a greatness more fascinating than the greatness of our thinking as men and more welcoming than a generous human heart can be” (L. Giussani, *In cammino. 1992–1998* [*On the Way. 1992–1998*], Bur, Milan 2014, pp. 240–241).

Why, then, do School of Community on the book we presented tonight? *The Religious Sense* is the first of a trilogy of texts with which Fr. Giussani completed the journey of catechesis for people who encountered him or the experience of faith that arose from their encounter with him.

The other two texts are entitled *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* and *Why the Church* and deal respectively with the experience of encountering the figure of Christ, historically and existentially, and how this fact persists in history through the human companionship of the Church. The trilogy, of which *The Religious Sense* is the first step, has taken on in Fr. Giussani—with a play on words—the definition of *PerCorso*: a course that offers, precisely, the possibility of following a path. On several occasions Fr. Giussani himself referred to the value of this School of Community on *The Religious Sense*: “I had said, before we began the School of Community on *The Religious Sense*, that I had allowed myself to wish one thing to happen at the end of the work: that we would perceive, at least a little bit, that everything and anything concerning us depends on something greater than ourselves; greater not in the sense of exceeding our imagination, yet still of the same nature as what we can imagine, but rather in the sense of other, ‘totally other,’ as the Pope once reminded us, quoting a great Protestant theologian; our reason cannot achieve it: nothing can be comparable to God, we are a nothing before You. Now this Mystery—this is the second step: the first step is that the God of whom Christ spoke to us, who revealed Christ to us, because no one has ever seen Him except the One who came down from heaven, is Mystery—is a Mystery that enters history: God is a historical God. This is the intolerable truth of human culture of all times. So many, even Voltaire, even the men most hostile to the Church and Christianity, have come to the idea, the intuition that reality depends on something else. But that this Mystery had anything to do with history, that God became a historical God, this is not easily tolerated, because

it is not conceivable. Precisely because the Mystery is not conceivable by us, much less can we conceive how the Mystery can be with and within the misery of time and space, that misery that we feel upon us and that takes us from uncertain morning to weary evening, that makes us go through most moments in distracted and trivial ways, that makes us engage in attitudes that are normally so petty. God enters into these things, the mystery has entered into history, He is a historical God”, (L. Giussani, *La verità nasce dalla carne [Truth is born from the flesh]*, Bur, Milan 2019, pp. 190–191).

On another occasion, he says, “The present day man, who has this claim, has never accomplished such a mental enslavement and slavery of the heart as today, which is all the more tremendous the more he claims to make himself, the more he forgets his total and original dependence: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have had pity on your nothingness.’ A sentence that corresponds to what Christ said before he went to die, ‘Without me you can do nothing.’ It is necessary to have this awareness and feeling, which are given by the most disconcertingly obvious thing: we could not be in existence; we are not in existence because we had the right, because we had the strength or the ability to give ourselves life. What must therefore dominate is the feeling of one’s nature as created, of having been chosen to live, chosen to be: there was no reason for me to exist and others, endless others not to have existed. The Bible arises, is born, is entirely developed upon this profound feeling, this ultimate and primordial truth, this truth that cuts through every inch of our skin and every hair on our head, ‘even the hairs of your head have all been counted,’ and you cannot lift your stature—even if you wanted to—by a millimeter. The Bible starts from the primal, deep and ultimate consciousness and feeling of this total dependence” (*ibid.*, pp. 104–105).

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Herein, lies the fundamental content of the School of Community on *The Religious Sense*.

Today we see well that the pace of life, in the hectic succession of daily routines, often prompts us to act reactively, in a chase for results that respond quickly to stimuli external to our person. But precisely because of this we increasingly feel the need to have moments to ourselves, to pause and look passionately at the consistency of our “I”—as we heard this evening—without which all this frenzy would lead us toward a progressive absence of a sense of living. I believe that beginning a work like this is an opportunity to put our true selves back at the center of our focus and the possibility of continuously recovering a truly free relationship with reality: work, family, children, loves, passions, illness and loneliness, joys and sorrows. Everything can have meaning for those who do not resign themselves to living by giving up the search for meaning in existence.

I conclude with a short quote from Giussani: “My wish, therefore, is that you may experience how every problem is approachable with reasons that foretell or indicate the solution, and that faith corrects and completes all these indications. It is like when you get up at dawn when it is still dusk and you see nothing clearly except the last stars; you catch glimpses of the outlines of things, houses, trees, hills. At a certain point, something that seems normal and strange happens. It does not derive from the dusk, in fact afterwards it is clear that the dusk results from it: it is the phenomenon of the sun rising. Then the houses, trees and hills are defined according to their true nature, according to their true form, and everything is composed into a tranquility within which man is certain, begins to act with certainty. I wish that the School of Community be for you this sun rising from the dusky confusion of natural intuitions, of natural intelligence.” (L. Giussani, *In cammino. 1992–1998 [On the Way. 1992–1998]*, Bur, Milan 2014, p. 241.)

Therefore, we invite all of you to do this work together with us, without the claim of changing the world, but with the hope of beginning to change ourselves. Practically speaking, you can ask for information about the locations and times of the various School of Community meetings from the people who invited you tonight, or by writing to this email address of the CL secretariat: [info@clonline.org](mailto:info@clonline.org)

Thank you again to everyone, especially Fr. Prades and Irene Elisei. And have a good evening.



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