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**“And He
had pity
on them”**



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The image of the CL Christmas poster. *Adoration of the Magi*, 14th century. Subiaco, Sacro Speco Monastery.

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GIUSSANI

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Here, now

“**N**o explosion, wherever it may resound, over the earth, under the earth, or in the boundless spaces of the cosmos, can ever deafen the heart of those who have heard these electrifying words of the Gospel: ‘The Word became flesh.’” The man who wrote these words, Fr. Vsevolod Špillar, an Orthodox priest under the Soviet regime, knew persecution, ideological fury, and “that tendency to the extreme” which, as sociologist Sergio Belardinelli says in this issue, “is manifesting itself on a planetary scale,” and of which “terroristic violence is only the most eloquent manifestation.” Yet Špillar was certain of an event more powerful than any other: the annunciation of God who becomes man. Today power and evil have other faces, and the tenderness of the coming Christmas would be an unbearable nothingness if it were not an outrageous fact, a love full of mercy that is more needed than air.

In these pages, Gabriel Romanelli, the parish priest of the Catholic church of Gaza, speaks of how the lived faith of his people makes their hearts unassailable even when everything around them is inhuman. The news of the fact of Christmas may seem to be overwhelmed by history, but it silently continues to change people’s way of living no matter what happens: “Far from divorcing us from reality, our faith (...) enables us to grasp reality’s deepest meaning; a new way of seeing opens up,” as the pope says in the lines quoted in the CL Christmas poster.

So “peace” is not a silencer of pain, but the seed of a new experience that allows us to stay in the ruins of homes and lives, to ask ourselves questions and understand what responds, looking full in the face both death and the evil that has reopened very deep traumas and wounds in whole peoples, like the evil that explodes in many families.

In this number we report on the gaze of some witnesses who do not want to turn away, from Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, to Maria Ruiz, a young woman in Jerusalem who, in the darkest hour, has said her yes to Christ as her contribution to the world.

Fr. Giussani reminded us in other years, faced by different wars: “When society reaches certain crucial passages, the true problem is that the judgment of praise or condemnation should first of all take into consideration the need for education of youth and adults; that is, of all women and men, because they are normal people who have the need to activate their own capacities for judgment and goodness. If humanity does not educate to a true esteem of the human being, and thus to real justice, it cannot be free from the disasters that humanity itself procures.” He added that “the true drama of current humanity” is the lack of “an education that matches up to the greatness and depth of the struggle among human beings.”

This means being educated as only those who have a father can be. In the current dramatic situation, it is clearer than ever that we all need to be reborn, as we have been reminded by the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who has never felt as called as he does now to “a higher level of fatherhood. A father is one who generates life. And here, now, there is great need to generate new life.”

Alessandra, Ida, Marco, Elisa

edited by
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“What’s the use of my sacrifice for the war?”

We were motivated by the invitation of Cardinal Pizzaballa to conduct moments of prayer, fasting, and reflection for the dramatic situation in Israel, and so, with some students from the private high school where I teach, on Tuesday, October 17th we read together the article published on the CL website, “Israel: The Possible Path of Unity,” which was centered on the possibility of dialogue between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This unleashed a barrage of questions and observations that amazed and moved me. “But, Prof, I pray, too, and if I can, I’ll try to fast, but I have the impression that all of this is a little abstract: How can my sacrifice concretely help those who are there or even change the situation by one iota?” “Prof, I’m only eating carrots because my friend, Fr. Sergio, is fasting today and in friendship asked me to do the same. I think that if we do this together, this sacrifice might be worth more.” “Prof, but if it’s God who permits things to happen, if He hadn’t wanted the war, he would have prevented it. So what good does it do for us to pray?” “Prof, in your opinion, those little kids in the elementary school who were reciting the Hail Marys in their sing-song way without knowing what it meant, does that do any good?” At this last question, one of the most distracted and seemingly disengaged students during this dialogue raised his head from his cellphone and exclaimed, “Of course it does! Don’t you know that children are the most innocent? They’re certainly holier than we are! Obviously, God listens to them.” Struck

by the seriousness and the integrity with which they had asked themselves about the reasons for the proposed gesture of prayer and sacrifice, I didn’t try to give any exhaustive answers to their questions. I only pointed out that you’re only willing to work hard if you understand why, and this also goes for your studies. Their position of questioning put me more seriously in front of what I was doing: I needed to provide reasons and to explain the usefulness of this gesture with the concreteness they demanded. I had them reflect that already the dialogue that was happening among us in a miniscule classroom, in a miniscule school on a small dot in the universe, thousands of kilometers away from where the war is taking place, was the sign of a change of humanity. That everything begins with us, with me, with how we look at and treat each other. I pointed out some attitudes of a new humanity that I had glimpsed in them the previous week when they had consoled the tears of a classmate who was going through a tough time.... Noticing how you move and judging small events is the beginning of change.

Alessandra, Milan (Italy)

Sustaining hope

I was struck by two things from Davide Proserpi’s contribution about the affair of little Indi Gregory. The first is that, taking up again the words of popes Benedict XVI and Francis, he described the position that silently and unexpectedly I have taken regarding the family of my little grandson, Riccardo, who has been fighting an incurable tumor for two years. What courage is needed to maintain the hope of men and women! In Riccardo’s case, it is clear that I can do nothing, and dramatically, neither can his parents. The doctors had said that, according to

the statistics, he would hold on for no more than a year. But he's not a number, and mysteriously, he is still here and continues to fight. I am only present, trying to be with them as much as possible to share their days and moments. And I've never been alone! If I look at myself, I recognize that above all, it is my hope that is sustained by faces and moments, by my family and friends. The second thing that struck me is that Davide places Indi's suffering in relation to the world. What a breath of fresh air it is to indicate that the suffering of a single individual is not without meaning and doesn't stand alone! I, too, desire such an attitude that is able to give a name to the mystery of pain. "You children imitate Jesus. Do not imitate him. You are child Jesuses. Without realizing it, without knowing it, without seeing it." (Charles Péguy)

Ida

Dinner with my colleagues and my daughter

In Milan for work, I ended the evening at dinner with my colleagues. As 9:00 approached, I informed them that I had a meeting on Zoom so I needed to go. All of them started giving my boss a hard time about my working so late. He looked at them smiling and said, "I have nothing to do with it! As far as I'm concerned, he can stay." I felt overcome by a freedom that wasn't mine and I told the truth. "I'm going to pray with some friends to entrust the baby girl we're expecting and who the doctors have said has some problems to the Lord." When I got back from reciting the Rosary, the dialogue turned to what I had just shared: none of them is a believer, but all of them switched away from business and work and began to talk about their children. They asked me more questions... The next day, the one-to-one dialogue continued: one person told me that he doesn't believe and doesn't pray, but he cares about me; someone else will ask his mom or grandmother to pray for us. There was a string of other episodes like this. What we are living has hit us so hard that it cannot be separated from our life. For example, you find yourself at the job site, telling your story to the workers, asking them to entrust your baby girl to the Lord. You find someone who talks to you about similar dramas and what helped her to face it, someone who

gives you advice without being asked, but by which you are provoked: What kind of life do you hope to give to this child? At the Beginning Day, Davide Prospero read these words of Fr. Giussani's: "Man's freedom is summed up in the entreaty, 'Accepting that all is grace, I ask You for grace.'" For my wife and me, these weeks have been about living this grace within a drama and an uncertainty that I wouldn't wish on anyone. And yet, I experience that there is something in store for us now. God is giving us this struggle so we might understand just a little more how much He loves us. The words of Fr. Giussani continue to come back to me, words that Fr. Carrón never tired of repeating to us in CLU: "Expect a path, not a miracle that allows you to elude your responsibilities, that removes your struggles, that makes your freedom mechanical." What is happening to us is the greatest gift of this period, after that of our daughter; it is constantly challenging the unity of my I. I cannot disconnect what is happening to me from the man that I am at work, at home, in my relationships... Everything is invaded by this event that entered in the most unexpected and surely the least desired way because I desire that my daughter be healthy. We continue to ask for the grace of healing, thankful to have a place like the Fraternity and the work of the School of Community to judge what we are living.

Marco, Padua (Italy)

Surprise party

Some friends organized a surprise party for my fiftieth birthday. Through their faces, I truly experienced that the Mystery is near. I say this because a few years ago I became a widow, alone with my eight children, and the reality has been very difficult for us, including financially. It is in this reality that the face of my friends as His attentive companionship, attentive down to the details, has been revealed. A few days later, a friend gave me a small sum of money that hadn't been used for the party. I immediately had the desire to make a small, extra donation to the Fraternity, so small it would make you smile... But for me, it is a lot. It is everything. I do this because I owe everything to the Movement, which is the way that was given to me to live in gladness with Christ and to be able to shout it out to everyone.

Elisa

What Unites

Vatican diplomacy faces the test of a “third world war fought in piecemeal.” The task of Christians and the radical crisis of trust. In conversation with Cardinal **Pietro Parolin**, Secretary of State of the Holy See.



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Stefano Filippi

The conflict between Hamas and Israel has added a tragic piece to the “third world war fought in piecemeal” that Pope Francis has been denouncing for years. Armed violence is rampant and people are increasingly unable to recognize the good that is the other. What makes it possible to escape the spiral of violence that engulfs us? And what is the task of Christians? Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, who is committed—with the entire Church—to mending the many wounds that lacerate the world, answers.

Today there are many theatres of war and in many of them it seems that, with respect to diplomatic activity, the only achievable possible objective is a slowing down of hostilities rather than a true path to reconciliation. What peace is the Church building, including the actions of the Vatican Secretariat of State?

Diplomacy is the international community’s instrument for seeking a peaceful solution to conflicts, through dialogue and negotiation between the parties involved. Of course, like any human endeavor, it has its limits and sometimes, unfortunately, fails in its intent. But I would say that already a slowing down and, even more so, a cessation of hostilities is a



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positive result, not to be underestimated. It is a first step, necessary but not sufficient, to be followed by starting down a path of reconciliation aimed at building a just and lasting peace. The Church, which adopted it very early on as one of the means of its mission in the world, continues to trust in diplomacy. What would be the point otherwise of meetings with political leaders, heads of state, and government and other authorities after an audience with the Holy Father, meetings that take up much space in the work of the Secretariat of State? What is the purpose of the trips to the various capitals, the participation in international bodies?

What do you ask of the leaders when you meet with them?

All we do is remind them, adapting to local situations, of the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church on peace, which draw abundantly on the conciliar and pontifical magisterium. I am thinking, for example, of numbers 77 et seq. of *Gaudium et Spes*, the document of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on the Church in the contemporary world (“Peace is not an absence of war...”); of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Saint John XXIII, which founds the edifice of peace on the four pillars of truth, justice, freedom, and love; of Saint Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio*;

Jerusalem, November 7, 2023. Israelis await news of Hamas hostages.

“All tensions and conflicts in the world arise from a profound imbalance in the human heart.”

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and of the rich teaching of Pope Francis, summarized in *Fratelli Tutti*. Points on which we insist on a lot, following the current pope, are disarmament, overcoming injustice and inequality, forgiveness, and fraternity. This is the “weak power” of the word! But we believe it is necessary to sow, to reap when and how the Lord wills, and to never lose hope. The offer of our availability, according to the nature of the Holy See and within the limits of its possibilities, to actively contribute with the means of diplomacy, to activate concrete paths of reconciliation and peace, is never absent from the mentioned political meetings.

Pope Francis repeats that “war is always a defeat,” so are there no “just wars,” not even when one is attacked? Every war is a defeat, since they all sow death and destruction, fueling feelings of revenge and vengeance. Therefore, there are no right and wrong wars. The negative judgment on war does not, however, preclude the right to legitimate defense of the aggrieved party in a conflict. On the other hand, the Catechism of the Catholic Church recalls that “the defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm” and provides that “those who legitimately

hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility” (CCC 2265). However, we must remember that the right to self-defense must be aimed first and foremost at safeguarding the life of the aggressor and must always be proportionate to the offense received.

The Church’s unceasing invitation is to not stop praying, asking God to touch the hearts and minds of the combatants and their leaders. There have been those who have denounced the risk that prayer will become an alibi for establishing an “inappropriate equidistance” or erasing moral judgments. Why is this not the case for a Christian? What is your experience? And where do you see hope in the face of everything that is happening?

Speaking of prayer, the famous words of St John Chrysostom come to mind: “The man who prays holds the helm of history in his hand.” Prayer, therefore, is an active force that contributes to the transformation of history, in the sense of bringing it ever closer to the Kingdom of Heaven that the Lord Jesus came to establish on earth, which, however, will have



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its consummation after his glorious return at the end of time. Therefore, I cannot share the mentioned view that prayer would be an alibi “to establish an inappropriate equidistance, to cancel out moral evaluations.” Prayer is always a stance: a stance in favor of goodness, justice, love, and against evil, injustice, hatred, in whatever form they present themselves. It is interesting, for example, to note that at certain moments in history and in certain parts of the world, it is even forbidden to remember people and situations in prayer because this simple fact is perceived as subversive of a certain order or system. I would then stress the efficacy of prayer and, therefore, its necessity because, as the Second Vatican Council recalls, all tensions and conflicts in the world arise from a profound imbalance in the human heart, an imbalance that is linked to the first sin, disobedience to God, and is deepened by our personal sins. And who can intervene to cure man’s heart, to heal it, to pacify it, if not God Himself? He is the physician who works in the depths! And He has willed that the work of His grace be untiringly invoked through prayer. I have faith in diplomacy, but, at least for us, only if it is accompanied by prayer. This is where hope is found-

Gaza, November 8, 2023. Palestinians displaced during bombing in the Strip.

ed: “What is impossible for human beings is possible for God” (*Lk 18:27*).

For the Middle East, since the 1940s, the Holy See has advocated a “two peoples-two states” solution with a special status for Jerusalem, a course of action followed in the 1993 Oslo Accords and that has been reiterated even in these tragic days. Is this solution still viable?

As has been reaffirmed several times by the Holy See in these days, the “two peoples-two states” solution is the most urgent political solution to be pursued as soon as conditions permit because it responds to the legitimate aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians: to have their own nation and live side by side in peace, security, and stability. Furthermore, an internationally guaranteed special status for the holy city of Jerusalem will allow the faithful of the three monotheistic religions to have equal rights and equal duties and access to their respective holy

places be respected, according to the status quo where it applies. Of course, this cannot be improvised. There is a need both for a clear legal framework that both sides must respect, as the Oslo Accords also sought to promote, but also for mutual trust, which unfortunately is now at an all-time low, if not completely at zero. Indeed, these days we are witnessing a change—unexpected and brutal—in the course of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The terrorist attack of October 7th by Hamas and other organizations against the population in Israel, which was absolutely unjustifiable and inhuman, has generated a great deal of suffering among Israelis that will take a long time to heal. We think of the twelve hundred people barbarically killed, the hundreds of wounded, the 240 or so taken hostage, the thousands of Israelis who had to leave their homes because they were close to the conflict zones. I often think of the desperation of the families of the hostages, including the elderly and children, even infants, and I pray and hope that they will be freed immediately, as the Holy Father has reiterated several times. It will also take a long time to overcome the suffering of the Palestinians following the military response of the Israeli army in Gaza. Think of the more than ten thousand dead, the hundreds of thousands injured, the one million Palestinians displaced to the south of Gaza. Here too, children, the elderly, and civilians are bearing the brunt of it. The humanitarian situation that has been created is extremely serious. Schools, places of worship, and even hospitals are not safe environments because of the tragic logic of war that cannot spare them. I am truly concerned about the need for the people in Gaza to receive all the humanitarian aid they need to survive. Now, more than ever, the release of all the hostages and a ceasefire could help to ensure that the situation does not escalate further, averting a widening of the conflict that would make it even more unacceptable. This great suffering will certainly make any negotiations, any solution, very difficult. But if we could start again from the concept of the sacredness of life, then we could recover a sense of humanity and the necessary fraternity.

A “logic of sides” prevails in our societies. In public debates and demonstrations, there seems to be no al-

ternative to division, or at least to reducing everything to “right and wrong,” a position that deepens the lacerations. How do we get out of this spiral that poisons everyone?

Unfortunately this is the case. We live in a polarized world, in a society that is increasingly divided and opposed to the other. Pope John used to say that we must seek more what unites than what divides. This remains true even in the current situation. So many commendable efforts have gone this direction. We must not forget this, lest we fall into a destructive pessimism unable to see the much good that, despite everything, flourishes around us. But the evil that undermines the root of our living, the relations between people, between groups, between nations, is, in my opinion, the lack of trust. We no longer trust one another, so we erect barriers to defend ourselves, to secure ourselves, to protect ourselves. We no longer recognize good faith and right intention in others. All this has resulted and is resulting, at the international level, in the crisis of multilateralism. The pope would tell us that the antidote to this situation, which I would dare to call “tragic” because it generates and fuels conflict, is encounter and dialogue. Avoid simplifying, avoid falling into Manichaeism, unilateral propaganda, warlike hysteria, lies! Practice openness to the other, regarded as a brother (this is the theme of *Fratelli Tutti!*) and not as an adversary to be crushed or prevailed over at any cost. Be open to the other’s reasons; try to understand them. Take on the pain of the other and of others. Make it your own. Feel it in your own flesh. This was the invitation that Cardinal Martini expressed after his stay in Jerusalem in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have seen that this appeal has been taken up in recent days. I am glad because, in my opinion also, it is the right way to start getting out of the tricky situations in which we find ourselves. After all, the redemption of the human race began precisely by the sharing of human pain and suffering by the Son of God—and thus by God himself—who assumed everything of us into himself, except sin. We Christians have no choice but to confidently follow the path traced by our Master and Lord. ■



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An invisible minority that takes care of everyone and a faith that “is not an emotion.” What are the Christians of Gaza experiencing today? **Fr. Gabriel Romanelli**, the parish priest of the one Catholic church in Gaza, speaks about their lives today, from their hospitality to the displaced to the daily companionship of the pope.

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That unassailable “grace”



Maria Acqua Simi

In the bare Holy Family Church in Gaza, the one Catholic parish in the whole of the Gaza Strip, children’s voices alternate with the scream of missiles. Every morning they are on their knees, raising their prayers to Jesus, with the total trust unique to little ones, says their parish priest, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli. And the adults look at them—these are their parents, who want to make them feel safe but are

powerless to do so, the catechists, the nuns, the vicar Fr. Youssef Asaad, the over seven hundred displaced people hosted within those walls, and the pope. “Every day since the beginning of this war, the Holy Father has joined us on a video call to pray together and give us his blessing. We have no strength other than the celebration of daily Mass: our certainty lies there because for us faith is a certainty, not an emotion. For us, faith is the



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli. On the previous page, a home in Gaza, November 3, 2023.

certainty that if God is permitting this, it is for a greater good, one we do not see immediately because our eyes are blurred with tears. At times perhaps we cannot perceive right away what the Holy Spirit is whispering to us because the explosions of the bombs and the screams seem louder. But in online or telephone conversations with my people, I can assure you that hatred never emerges. Even the children know these truths: they are afraid, yes, but they know Who to entrust that fear to. Our concrete hope is in Christ who was born, who chose us to be friends, and who died for us." Fr. Gabriel speaks with a tired but constant smile during this interview, which should have lasted a few minutes but by grace was extended to over an hour, by the patience of a priest who has nothing to offer "but every moment the Good Lord grants me to live." He is speaking from Jerusalem, because he has not been allowed to return to Gaza, but is in constant contact with his people.

He recounts that a year ago, at Christmas, a census of Christians in the Gaza Strip revealed "there were 1,017 of us. After the explosion of the conflict, 999 remained. We have all lost someone we know. In a mysterious way, we have all been asked to stay in front of pain and death, in front of the questions that inevitably arise at the suffering of the innocent, those who are not to blame." He is speaking of the children who attend the schools run by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the couples he

joined in marriage and whom he has watched over the years as they formed families, the elderly and the many disabled people (including a substantial number of children) cared for and followed by the Sisters of Mother Teresa. "Disability is not a secondary problem," he explains, "because if you are confined to a territory from which it is very difficult to enter or leave, often there are marriages between people who are related, with easily imaginable consequences."

The Latin parish is small, 135 Catholics in all, but very united and active. Their presence is made concrete in the territory through three Catholic schools open to anyone, ten parish groups, and numerous activities at the service of the entire population of Gaza, from healthcare assistance for the elderly and disabled to distribution of food and basic necessities to the care of so-called "butterfly children," affected by epidermolysis bullosa, a rare genetic disease that provokes serious lesions of the skin. Because of this charitable work, the Christian community, though an invisible minority, is esteemed by everyone.

Fr. Gabriel, too, is well known in the Holy Land, where he served first as a teacher at the Patriarchate Seminary, and then as a parish priest in Gaza, together with his friend Fr. Youssef and two sisters of the Servants of the Lord of the Virgin of Matarà. "They are twins from Peru, consecrated thirty years ago and for the first time serving together in the same mission." His call to the priesthood came early, when he was twelve years old. "I was living in Buenos Aires. In our parish and in our family, we prayed daily for the people suffering under the oppression of the Soviet Union. We did the Way of the Cross every Friday, and each station was offered for a nation or group of nations where Christians were persecuted. This child-

“The pain is enormous, and we are called to go through it and live it. Sooner or later it is asked of everyone, in every circumstance.”

hood experience kindled my desire to be a missionary. When I was eighteen, I entered the seminary of the Congregation of the Incarnate Word in San Rafael. After some time, I offered to serve in a country of the former Soviet Union or in China, but my superiors proposed Palestine to me, the land of Jesus. I was surprised, thinking it was a destination for more expert priests: after all, I was only twenty-five years old. But my superior had called then patriarch Michel Sabbah to tell him that our order had no material help to offer, but having received by the goodness of God the gift of some new vocations, could offer those people in the service of what John Paul II had called ‘the Mother Church of Jerusalem.’”

Twenty-eight years later, the priest is still there. He has seen tensions ignite in alternating phases, has known the wrongs and rights of all the parties involved, but above all, has observed the flowering of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, even now: “It seems like a contradiction, I know. For many of us, the violence in these weeks has taken our loved ones, our homes and businesses. The bombings have not even spared the churches, including the parish facili-

ities which hosted hundreds of displaced people close to the historic Church of Saint Porphyry. The people wander the streets in fear; there are no bomb shelters here and often there is no electricity or water. But hatred has not cut into the hearts of my parishioners. It did not happen before and it is not happening now. This is why the Christian presence is so precious. They affirm a logic, that of the cross, which is the one thing capable of giving hope. The cross must be embraced, however it comes to us.” What does this mean? How is it possible to embrace the cold body of your murdered son and forgive? The questions arise insistently, with irritation. His answer is placid. “The pain is enormous, and we are called to go through it and live it. Sooner or later it is asked of everyone, in every circumstance. Jesus, too, was alone in Gethsemane. He, too, was afraid and wept and felt alone. But in His Passion, He offered everything for the good of the world. ‘Not my will, but Yours.’ This is the revolution! Our ways of thinking do not save us. In order to make our faith grow, so that we can endure even when everything seems dark, God offered us a friendship. He was born to share with us. He ate with fishermen, walked with the poor, and spoke with the children. He offered companionship and this brought goodness. Two thousand years



later, using the identical method, we can know Him and recognize when He is calling us to love, to forgive, and to serve. It is not difficult to imagine how easily we could experience hatred here, or the rejection of certain people. Instead, something miraculous happens: we do not give space to hatred, but to God. We, who live in communion with Him, have an hour of adoration every day; we go to confession and celebrate Mass, and this gives us strength so we can continue to be at the service of all, be they Muslim, Druze, Jewish.... When we welcome someone, we know we are welcoming Jesus in His mysterious presence. Today we are hosting over seven hundred displaced people, and it is no different: it is Jesus, who never fails to come be with us."

Forgiveness, he continues, is something revolutionary, the fruit of a deeply rooted faith. "If our faith were only pure emotion, we could not forgive or hope today; we would fall prey to desperation. The pain is so great, but I have never heard one of my parishioners curse God. Never. A few days ago, an Orthodox Christian teacher at

one of our schools wrote a striking letter. Her mother and father were killed in a bombing and she was injured; now she is being cared for by us in the parish. At the end of her letter, she asked God to be her light, to help her not give way to anger. She closed by saying, 'Give me Your mercy. And thanks.' She thanked God. This does not mean being a people that is resigned or crazy. We ask for concrete solutions, like the opening of humanitarian channels and the end of the war. We continue to support, together with the pope, the solution of 'two peoples, two nations,' and a special status for Jerusalem, even though we know at the moment it is unlikely that this proposal could be realized. We are suffering because we love so much. The greater the love, the greater the pain. But Calvary isn't the end. The consolation we experience is stronger because Calvary leads us close to the burial of Christ, draws us closer to His Resurrection. We feel embraced by Christ, and as Cardinal Pizzaballa said, we pray and fast together with you, so that we can return this embrace and never lose it." ■



Jerusalem, November 1, 2023.
Maria Ruiz on the day of her
consecration.




Paola Bergamini

The prophecy of a “yes”

November first. “The Gospel does not call us to be heroes, but saints. Christ invites us to follow Him,” says Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa in the Cathedral of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Just sixty miles away the sky is lit by the fires of war and marked by the deafening wail of sirens and the sinister screams of Israeli and Palestinian bombs. Here, the vaults of the cathedral echo with songs in Arabic and psalms in Hebrew. Beyond the doors are

the hatred and terror of a destroyed humanity. Lying on the floor with her eyes on the tiling in front of the altar is a young Spanish woman, Maria Ruiz, who today is receiving from the hands of the patriarch her consecration into the Ordo Virginum, a form of dedication that arose in the first centuries of Christianity. Many bishops and priests have arrived for the celebration and the church is crowded with religious, Christians of Arab and Jewish expression, Muslims and observant Jews, all friends of Maria’s. Some

In the cathedral of Jerusalem, friends of different religions and cultures gather “to praise God for a small woman who is offering Him her life.” The story of **Maria Ruiz**, who was consecrated by Cardinal Pizzaballa in the darkest of days.



A moment during the celebration presided over by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa.

are outside the front door of the church because there is no room inside. Some of those called to serve in the army have requested special permission to come to the function. “The encounter with Christ illuminates our lives to bring the light of the Easter Lamb, symbol of the Resurrection. This is the mission of all consecrated people, of those who for love have given their life to Christ. It is not an impossible mission but a marvelous one, because nothing is impossible for God, above all in our Church today, so deeply wounded and suffering, and yet so fervent and full of Grace,” continues the patriarch in his homily. A few days later, a friend of Maria’s said, “Within this hell, that afternoon was a moment of light.”

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Maria arrived in the Holy Land in 2018 on the advice of a Jesuit priest to pursue a journey of vocational discernment. She worked as a volunteer in Bethlehem and other cities in centers for the disabled and migrants managed by religious orders. But her great passion is iconographic art, to which she dedicated over twenty years of study in Spain, guided by important teachers. In 2021 the Latin Patriarchate asked her to place her art at the service of the church by doing paintings to accompany liturgical books. “It is a privilege for me to serve the Church as an artist. Last year a missal was published with twenty-two of my works. There are many projects for the future,” she says during a videocall. Projects for the future at a time that seems defined only by bombs and the decisions of the “great”? I’m stunned. But as she talks about what she is going through now, I understand the WhatsApp message I recently received from a friend who lives in the Holy Land: “The meek shall inherit the earth. The Lord has always shown Himself to be trustworthy. We can only believe Him.”

Maria is part of a Catholic community of Jewish expression and participates in the life of the small parish nearby, the majority of whose parishioners are Arab. This is the particular nature of the *Ordo Virginum*: a vow of chastity

and active membership in the local church. She speaks about the day of her consecration and the tension in carefully preparing each detail so as to avoid offending anyone, knowing that there would be Palestinian and Israeli Christians and that each knew the other would be there. “It was a moment of communion; I would say prophetic. They were all there to praise God for a little woman who was offering Him her life. It empowered people to see that in front of God we can gather. Maybe many of them were not entirely aware of it, but I was told by some that ‘I experienced God.’” When the war broke out, Maria saw friends leave for the front. She saw hatred and fear take the consciences of people who live close by. She was asked which side she was on or to justify their actions. “Everyone sees only their own pain, and not that of the others. But for me, now is not the time to judge or argue. My task now is to listen to both sides because today people need to “carry” their pain to someone. We suffer, but like Christ on the cross, with open arms; He did not separate the good from the bad. He died for everyone. Listening and praying, trying to turn gazes to Christ and the Gospel so we can find the road for living this situation. The fact that I’m a “foreigner” allows me to have impossible encounters.” People of every religion have come by her home: rabbis, Coptic and Syrian monks, observant Jews, Christian Arabs, and atheist Israelis. “And many young people, with the desire to draw close to God, the need to feel His presence. It is not by chance that they ask this of me because I am consecrated.”

On October 29th there was the annual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady Queen of Palestine in Deir Rafat, halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a gesture that has always seen thousands of faithful arrive from all over the Holy Land, Jews and Muslims among them as well. This year, because of the war, only the



© Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

inhabitants of Jerusalem and its environs were able to reach the sanctuary where Patriarch Pizzaballa reconsecrated the Holy Land to Our Lady. “There were many more people than expected because they felt the need to be together under the gaze of Mary and also to hear the words of life of the cardinal, who is a father for everyone,” recounts Maria, who adds, smiling, “But I think the first to convene the gathering was Our Lady.”

As we write, life in Jerusalem seems to have returned to a certain normality. Schools and kindergartens have reopened, but streets are patrolled by the police. “It’s a pretend normality, because tensions are very high. Even nonobservant Jews do not go into the Old City, an unfounded fear, I say, because I often go and nothing has ever happened to me. For that matter, I have Arab physician friends who work in Israeli hospitals and are terrified of violent reactions from fundamentalists. Fear of the other reigns complete.” Then there is the life of fellow Christians living in Palestine. “They have a lot of difficulty, and we must support them with our prayers.” A dear friend who works in

Ramallah, in the West Bank, could not come to the consecration and on the phone confided that she fears the threats of the settlers, and at the same time is frightened of her colleagues because some may be Hamas members. One day she asked Maria, “What is our future here?” “She is a woman with strong faith but her heart is wounded by what the Israelis have done and she has no trust in the Palestinian Authority, and if Hamas takes power she does not believe Christians will have a better life. But I think back to the words of the patriarch’s letter: ‘Christ has won.’ We do not know how this war will end, but the hope of our life does not change. I communicate this to those I meet. How? First of all, by preserving a serene heart in that peace that only comes from Christ. Not giving in to the strong temptation to say, ‘There’s nothing more to be done.’ The power of the Gospel is able to regenerate every reality, and we Christians know this because we have had a vital experience of it. If the others are not a threat, but instead people, you can meet them, go for a walk together, pray together. They seem like little things, but starting from these gestures societies carry on and in our case can be raised up again.” For her consecration, she was given an easel for doing new paintings. ■

“I am here to live with you”

After thirty years in Russia, today Jean-François Thiry lives in Aleppo, Syria. A journey to places where the word “peace” seems unpronounceable.



Anna Leonardi

From hostile Siberia to tormented Syria, with a “calm” of thirty years in Moscow. This rather brief summary condenses the unforeseeable journey of Jean-François Thiry, who was born in a tranquil little town in Belgium fifty-seven years ago, and today has landed in Aleppo, Syria, where the conflict that began in 2011 seems over only for the mass media. “Almost every evening we hear the bombing of the nearby airport or the zones still controlled by the rebels. Drones regularly fly over the city, which is marked not only by the wounds of war but also those from last February’s earthquake,” says Jean-François, who has arrived here to coordinate the projects of Pro Terra Sancta, the association that supports the works of the Franciscans of the Holy Land.

The steps that brought him here began far away. The first was in 1991, in the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fresh from receiving his undergraduate degree in Russian, he received an invitation from the University of Novosibirsk to teach a course on ethics. The second step, two years later, was when he moved to Moscow, where he witnessed the long and toilsome rebirth of Russia, up to the outbreak of the conflict with Ukraine. This moment was dramatic not only for the country, but

for Jean-François as well, marking a fracture in his personal story after thirty years there.

He had never thought of leaving Russia. It was not a part of his plans. In fact, when the war broke out, while many were leaving the country, he understood that he had to stay. He decided to apply for citizenship, a difficult choice. He spoke about it with friends in the *Memores Domini* house where he lived. “We asked each other what use there was in remaining, knowing that we’d have to be cautious in expressing judgments. What kept me there was a friendship with a people I had seen form over these years. I couldn’t add more pain, another separation, to what I already saw spreading around us.” In Moscow, Jean-François and Giovanna Parravicini had been among the founding souls of the Library of the Spirit, which was initially a publishing house and then a cultural center, and since 1993 has continued the work of Christian Russia and begun printing religious publications and promoting an encounter with the Orthodox world. Jean-François continues: “In these years we have hosted debates, film discussions, and concerts. We have offered a platform that was and remains a place where anyone can feel at ease in dealing with universal themes. There



Aleppo, February 8, 2023.
Two days after the earthquake.

has been an intertwining of bonds that have given life to real ecumenism. One of these relationships is with the metropolitan of Minsk, Filaret, whose friendship was such that he accepted an invitation to speak at the Meeting of Rimini.”

In February of 2022, the outbreak of the war fractured all of the equilibriums. The day after what was called the “military operation,” Jean-François went to work in his office in downtown Moscow, passing the security guards at the building entrance as he did every morning. “I’d known them for years. They’re ex-military and I knew what they were thinking about what was happening. That morning I walked straight ahead, didn’t even look them in the face.” It took him a few days to understand that this attitude

was beginning to destroy him. “If I, too, gave space to hatred, I would begin to eliminate what was around me. I had to recognize in them, and in all those whose judgments were irreconcilable with mine, the same attempt at a journey as mine, even though it takes different roads and ways.” The same thing happened when they had to evaluate the wisdom of inviting speakers who took very controversial positions. “I thought the point was to effectively prepare a valid contradictory opinion. But it wasn’t that.” He understood this in a conversation with Paolo Pezzi, archbishop of the Mother of God in Moscow. “Others are a good for me, not because they think the way I do, but precisely because they are other than me. This obliges me to examine my own reasoning more deeply.” This position also enhances freedom within the community of the Movement, where discussions often sprang

Jean-François with
his friend Soulaiman.



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up. “The risk is always that you are speaking in order to convince the others that they are wrong, but in this way, you do nothing more than produce argumentations upon argumentations without anyone taking a step. Instead, when you start from the others, from the respect you have for their journey, anything can happen, because there is nothing more to defend but the space for reality to show what analyses are unable to.” This is how he saw the birth of peace, even in places where it seemed an unpronounceable word. “You begin to pronounce it when you realize you are the first to need it, and that the other has the same urgent need to have this experience.”

Almost a year had passed from the beginning of the conflict when Jean-François received a letter in his mailbox at home from the Ministry of Domestic Affairs saying that his citizenship application had bogged down and reached a dead end and that he had to leave the country. He had three days to say good-bye to his friends and pack up thirty years of life. “I was crushed. There were many tears. But maybe for the first time I truly understood what it means to live poverty. We think that things belong to us, our job, friends, home, and decisions, but instead in a moment I had to leave everything. I had to

ask myself, ‘Now who am I?’” This dizzying question helped him identify the most appropriate job among the many opportunities offered. “Syria did not come out of nowhere. I had been there in 2017, invited by the Franciscan brothers, who wanted to create a cultural center in Damascus. War destroys not only buildings and roads, but also bonds among people and aspirations for beauty. They wanted to rebuild a place where people could once again gather together, hungry for beauty and friendship.” Actually, the tie that binds him to Syria is even deeper. Years before, a Syrian physician and Orthodox Christian, Soulaiman, had shown up at his Moscow office, directed there by friends they shared in common. “After more than an hour of him speaking to me in his limited English, I asked him, ‘What can I do for you? Shall I help you find a job?’ Soulaiman started laughing. ‘No, I have a job. I’m looking for someone to help me walk toward God.’ I had never encountered anyone who asked me for such a radical thing. We became friends.” Today, Soulaiman is back in Syria and lives with his family in Damascus. He and Jean-François are the CL community in this land with a millenia-long history. They are not able to meet often, since Aleppo is a four-hour

“We think that things belong to us, our job, friends, home, and decisions, but instead in a moment I had to leave everything. I had to ask myself, ‘Now who am I?’”

drive and there is no gas. “Here, everything is scarce. You have to buy generators if you want electricity to charge your phone or run the washing machine. But this reminds me that the value of life does not depend on its quality, but on the meaning you discover. This was the case for me in Siberia, where life is very hard, but I discovered my vocation there, seeing the priests of the Saint Charles order and other *Memoires Domini* who did not want to live anywhere else in the world.”

In Syria, his task has not changed. Here, where the people oscillate between the dream of leaving and hatred of the West, you must have the courage to look at the beautiful things that are present, “because there is no peace without the experience of fullness and joy. For me, following the various projects means recognizing another logic that breaks the logic of evil we have become accustomed to through the war.” Pro Terra Sancta activities range from cultural and educational efforts to those that try to restore artisanal activities halted by war. Jean-François has been struck by the center to help women in the Muslim part of the city, which has set up reading and writing lessons. He met a woman pregnant with her fifth

child. She had married at the age of thirteen and had not finished school. “She felt humiliated that she couldn’t help her children with their homework. She learned to read with us and then passed the exams, following the same program as her children.” Today her girlish face, framed by her hijab, is full of hope. It is similar to the faces of the many elderly who line up for a hot meal every day at the Franciscan soup kitchen. They live alone because their children have left. While they wait for their turn, Jean-François keeps them company, exchanging a few words in French. “There are about fifteen hundred people a day. The first time they saw me, they surrounded me and asked, ‘Are you here to help us?’ I answered instinctively, ‘No, I’m here to live with you.’ The need is too great to feel truly useful, but I can tell these people that there is someone who will not abandon them.” He learned that this is enough to support the hope of the people when he was still in Moscow. There, a few weeks after the conflict began, a pianist who had performed some concerts at the Library of the Spirit came dashing into their office. “He was amazed that we were all at our desks. He said, ‘Thank you for being here. This is the sign that all this will pass. I am certain of a good that will overcome all despair.’” ■

Restorative justice, the origin of hatred, and what prevents the “thingification” of the person. Criminologist **Adolfo Ceretti** looks at what is happening in that “strip of land where lies the meaning of all humanity.”

In the name of the other



Paola Bergamini

For over thirty years, Adolfo Ceretti, a professor of criminology and victim-offender mediation at the University of Milan-Bicocca, has been looking evil in the face, even the evil that leads to the most heinous crimes. At the same time, he is one of the protagonists of the long journey of working with the victims and perpetrators of the armed struggle that took place in Italy in the seventies. He is an important figure in Italy advocating for restorative justice, which, thanks to his collaboration as a scholar and expert in the field, entered organically into legislation in the recent reform. Starting from his experience with these apparently irreconcilable realities, we had a dialogue about what triggers feelings of hatred and what enables reconciliation.

During a recent meeting, you said that “the legitimization of hatred always occurs within seconds; that is, in order to affirm my reasons for acting, I transfer the origin of evil to otherness, in the sense of something different from me.” What does this mean in relation to the conflict in the Holy Land?

The acts that have been committed in Israel is the greatest violation of human rights of the 21st century. There has been a breakdown of the sense of belonging to humanity that the parties to all wars bring about. But let us return to hatred. If the other is identified with absolute evil because of a specific fact—think of the Hamas attack—one is legitimized to think that they must be annihilated.

There is another aspect to the conflict between two peoples: it is very difficult to trace the initial cause that triggered the chain of hatred. This is true of all wars. Each side identifies this “origin” in order to justify hatred and the consequent violent reaction. Let me add something else: from a phenomenological point of view, hatred erases the other before knowing him, unlike love, which opens up to knowledge of the other.

Can you elaborate on this?

Let me provide an example. The origin of hatred in those who undertook the armed struggle in Italy can certainly be traced back to their revolutionary faith, which accepted political violence as a tool to “overthrow power relations,” but at the same time to the erasure of otherness. In this erasure, which is also part of the difference between just and unjust, there is an absence of empathy and therefore of the recognition of otherness. It is what I and many others call “thingification”; i.e., a process of dehumanization that opens the door to the commission of extreme acts. A barrier is erected that prevents one from seeing the person as such and at the same time defines them as belonging to a universal. The enemy has no name—they are “fascists,” or “democrats,” and referring to the war in the Holy Land, one does not kill Amos or Ahmed, but the “Israelis,” the “Palestinians.”

What does this entail?

Creating a universal opens up the possibility of taking sides, belonging to one community in opposition to another, and of annihilating the complexity of an

Eilat, October 17, 2023.
Two women survivors of the Hamas attack
on a kibbutz near the Gaza border.



© Artis Messinis/Getty Images

interpersonal relationship, of looking at the other as a human being, as the pope insists on. The periphrasis “you are blinded by hatred” gets the message across: you do not see the identity of the other, but only a class of individuals. This often happens in everyday life too, without, of course, necessarily leading to acts of violence. To the umpteenth beggar you meet on the street begging for alms, you are inclined to respond badly, to think, “They are all the same, they do nothing...,” but if you stop even for a fraction of a second to look at his face, the bad words stop in your throat.

As was the case in Mandela’s South Africa and today in Colombia, a country that asked for your assistance, restorative justice has taken on an important role.

In Colombia in 2016, after fifty-two years of civil war with millions dead and displaced, a peace agreement was signed between the FARC and other components of civil society. For this, the government of the time set up a truth commission. Together with Roberto Cornelli, a colleague from the University of Milan, we have been working for five years on the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, training mediators in restorative justice, which has its focal point in third-party status.

Try to explain further.

Restorative justice can work if all of the people involved in a conflict recognize a third party in whom they identify the authority and authoritativeness to play an impartial role that I would define *equiproximate*, which is different from the *equidistant* role assumed by judges. Becoming *equiproximate* means acquiring the ability to approach both parties to help them manage the destructive effects of a conflict, ac-

companying them in the search for their personal truth. This takes a long time—the search for peace always entails a long path.

Can we call it a path of reconciliation?

The term that I think is more correct is “reconstruction.” Reconciliation happens when it is the participants who offer it, as happened between brigade members and the victims of terrorism who, in some cases, became friends. But social reconstruction can also take place; i.e., the cessation of destructive behavior. It is the re-humanization of the other. The justice of an encounter restores the dignity of human beings to both parties and in this mutual recognition the effect of erasing the other is nullified.

Is hatred transformed?

In the sense that it is given a face, a voice. As long as one does not look up, one remains indeed blinded. Looking at the other and listening to them means that recognizing otherness is possible. In processes of reconstruction, impartiality plays a decisive role. But this is precisely what is missing today in the Holy Land. This is the ongoing tragedy: there is no third party that can be accorded the same trust by the two peoples, Israeli and Palestinian. A further layer of complexity can be added to this.

Which is?

This war involves a relatively small number of people, yet the eyes of the world are on that small strip of land, for in that place lies the meaning of all humanity, involving as it does the sacred places of the world’s three most passionately held religious identities: Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

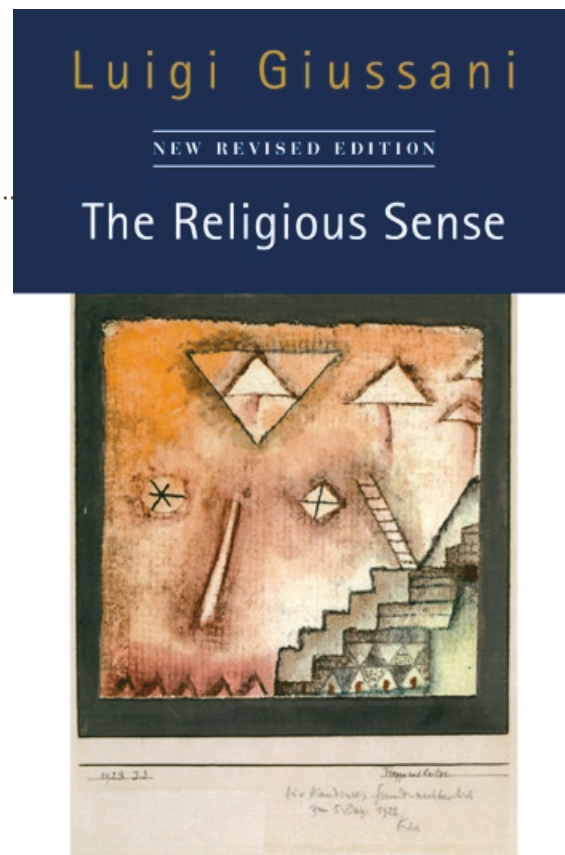
A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

The Religious Sense, the fruit of many years of dialogue with students, is an exploration of the search for meaning in life. Luigi Giussani shows that the nature of reason expresses itself in the ultimate need for truth, goodness, and beauty. These needs constitute the fabric of the religious sense, which is evident in every human being everywhere and in all times. So strong is this sense that it leads one to desire that the answer to life's mystery might reveal itself in some way.

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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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