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02

Caring for life



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Editor (Direttore responsabile)
Alessandra Stoppa

Editorial Assistant
Anna Leonardi

Graphic design
Four In The Morning

Layout
Lorenzo Penna

Editorial office
Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano
Tel. + 39.02.92945400
E-mail: aleonardi@tracce.it
Web: english.clonline.org

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1953, France. Albert Nast, a blind physician, visiting a three-month-old baby.

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"Entirely myself"

GIUSSANI

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The end of life

As you will find well expressed by philosopher Francesco Botturi in the first article of this issue, the place given to *those who suffer*, and thus to those who care for life even in the most difficult situations, is the measure of a civilization's stature. The current technocratic paradigm has transformed every situation "into a 'problem' to solve rather than facing it as an enigma to which you respond." Pain, illness, and death challenge this superficiality and put to the test "the desire dwelling in the human heart" that life have meaning and that it not end.

The scientific, ethical, legal, and political issues that fragment the "end-of-life" debate, one of the most dramatic of our time, must take into consideration the individual, unique experience of the sick, their families, and those who care for them. Abstractions are not allowed, especially in the case of a patient's request to put an end to her or his condition. "Behind the desire for death, there is a feeling of uselessness and a sense that it is impossible to find any meaning for pain," as Davide Prosperi said recently in the context of a series of gatherings with physicians, nurses, bioethicists, and legal experts who deal with these themes daily and compare ideas and experiences in order to judge all the factors in play. Prosperi continued: "Medical, social services, and legal choices touch a need that life be useful, a need that cannot find an answer in these decisions. Christ did not eliminate the desert, but instead He became our companion on the journey through it. This judgment is grounded in a tradition, a vision of life, and we have the responsibility to offer it to people today, explaining our reasons, starting from experience."

The Close-up section of this issue describes the fruit of that work together, a presence that becomes companionship, through the stories of people in situations of suffering and sometimes incurable illness. A mostly hidden revolution emerges, one happening daily in homes and hospital rooms, silent but capable of dismantling any ideology that would eliminate suffering by removing humanity. "And it is what we secretly desire," said Cardinal Ratzinger in 1978. "Yes, we find it too difficult to be human beings." But "God did not take away our humanity: He shares it with us."

Care for life, for the great mystery of the person, in the dignity of every moment, is the only thing that allows space for questions, at times atrocious, or the silence in front of that which is unspeakable and sacred. What is freedom? What is the value of an existence? Who decides? What does it mean to honor life? To what point should we push? With death, does everything end in nothingness?

Entering into the very delicate questions that emerge in the field of the "right to die" first of all means answering the question about the meaning of life. "Nothing is more difficult for man than to accept and acknowledge the positive nature of life," wrote Fr. Giussani. "For this reason, euthanasia is a contemporary symbol of man's absolute despair that governs all of human culture [...]. A symbol of the despair in his response to living." This issue offers the story of a patient who, after great resistance, accepted treatment from just one physician because in him she saw someone for whom "the problem was not *not to die* but to live." This is about living even one's darkest or final moments by entering into the face of that love that gives life and breath, in that original companionship that is more radical than any solitude. When Fr. Giussani was gravely ill, he was asked whether he felt alone when he suffered greatly. He responded: "I never feel alone, because Christ is the indivisible companion of my 'I.'"

Gilberto, Letizia, Piergiorgio, and Emma

edited by
Paola Bergamini
pberga@tracce.it

Freedom behind bars

For a few months now, in response to the request of our city's prison chaplain, I've been teaching catechism to some inmates. At first there was only one, then he proposed it to some others, so now there are ten or so. One day, I was reading the gospel of Luke's account of Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus. At Christ's words, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house," I looked up and exchanged glances with one of the inmates who was clearly moved. I also paused for a moment and the other inmates were wondering what had unexpectedly happened to Zacchaeus, but no one dared to state the obvious. I was "full" of what I had seen in that inmate's eyes. Another episode revolved around Judas's betrayal. The first inmate came to the rescue of another by remembering that Peter had also betrayed Him more than once ("Those scoundrels!" they scoffed). But then they observed that while Judas takes justice into his own hands and hangs himself, Peter loses face but asks for forgiveness. At that point, I asked what trust is, and the first inmate said that Judas committed the grave sin of not believing in Jesus. From then on, he has asked a riddle to all of his new friends who come to catechism: "What is the sin of all sins?" And he explains that it is the sin of Judas: the absence of faith. One day, there was a heated discussion about the world's ills: war, epidemics, the death of innocent people. Here again, in front of general accusations of God's inaction, one of the inmates stopped everyone and, taking up the role of God almost as if God Himself were speaking, said, "I made you and now it's up to you to make a difference." I was left speechless; there, in

that place of nonfreedom, I heard a man in confinement give the simplest and greatest definition of freedom I had ever heard. What we heard at the Beginning Day becomes experience—that, barring His explicit manifestation, none of us can arrive at a certainty about Christ, about His divinity, without something happening first, "something that is grace, pure grace." This is what I saw happen before my eyes.

Gilberto

From a small yes, a great thank you

"Letizia, please stay home. I don't want you to waste your day off for me." This message was sent to me by the woman I deliver food to when I had asked her if she would be home that Saturday morning. Her answer struck me, forcing me to ask myself questions. In fact, mine is not an easy life. After my second pregnancy, with the excuse of having a small child, and because the woman was in the hospital, I had moved away from this charitable work. Then she told me that she was back home, so I invited her to reestablish her relationship with the Food Bank. But she answered that she couldn't go by herself to get her package as she had serious mobility issues. I decided to speak to my small Fraternity group about this because it had become difficult to manage this additional commitment by myself. We decided to add to her Food Bank package by buying some fresh, healthy food, given that she had various physical problems. So, going grocery shopping was added to the list of getting the package from the Food Bank and delivering it to the fourth floor (without an elevator). I kept asking myself, "What am I thinking? I already have a job and two small children. I'm always running around. How can I also do this?" That Saturday, in the end, I did the shop-

ping for her (but not for me) with the money collected from my friends. I brought everything to her, bringing along my two children who entertained themselves in the entryway, so it was rushed. But then I got this message: “I don’t know how to thank you. You brought everything I could have wanted: chicken, vegetables, Parmesan cheese, bread, and fruit. Truly I thank you from my heart. I would have asked you for olive oil, but I was embarrassed.... that’s okay, I’ll use vegetable oil. Sincerely, it’s been quite a while since I’ve eaten meat, so I can’t wait to cook it.” That day, I really didn’t feel up to it and I felt inadequate, but in the end, my small yes, even if rushed and unaware, served to make one person happy, and this thank you changed me and my day. Starting to do charitable work again helps me to love myself, my family, and my work more. The circumstances don’t change—I’m overwhelmed, rushed.... but I am not alone. The small Fraternity group that sustains this gesture and this woman who takes nothing for granted remind me to be grateful for what I receive.

Letizia, Bologna (Italy)

In the hospital

Dear Davide, my recent experience of surgery made me realize that it is truly the Lord who does everything. In those days, with the IVs, the anesthesia, stitches, and drainages, I found great consolation in seeing that my hospital room had a crucifix. I called it, perhaps a little shamelessly, a “catechesis of suffering.” That is to say, if He submitted voluntarily to crucifixion for our salvation, then perhaps I also could find the strength to face my via crucis of surgery. Or at least, He was there with me, to suffer with me and for me. And also vice versa—I was there to suffer with Him and to offer my suffering for Him. After spending three days on these reflections, you can’t imagine my joy on Sunday to see the chaplain appear in my room, and to be able to ask for confession and to receive the Eucharist. What I brought home is that my life is more and more tied to Christ because He is the only source of consolation and certain companionship that I can have in any life situation. Such an awareness is almost impossible if God doesn’t make Himself flesh, if He doesn’t enter into our lives with a real experience. I will always be grateful to the Movement for having given me this awareness of being pure

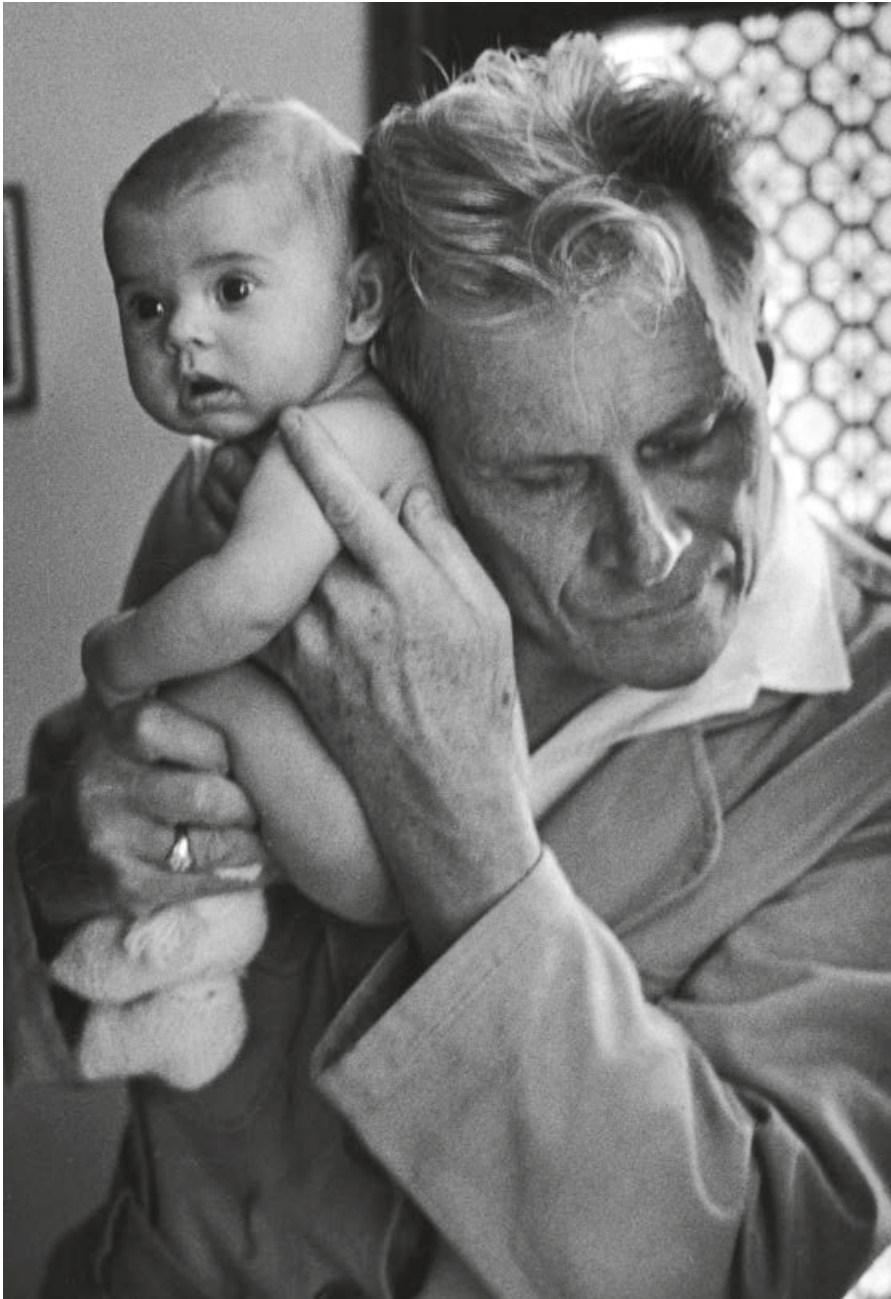
dependence. Although at present my following the movement is a little difficult, even today this awareness continues to educate me and to call me back.

Piorgio, Padua (Italy)

The future and the “right choice”

Since November, a group of friends who are graduating high school seniors from the Marche began meeting with some of our teachers for dinner once a month. During these meetings we have grappled with the theme of our future by discussing *The Unique Voice of the Ideal* by Fr. Julián Carrón. We started from the question, “Which choice is the best for me?” Many said they were confused, indecisive, almost lost. Some couldn’t understand how to reconcile their passions; others didn’t understand what they liked or what made them happy. There were also some who had already decided, but they still had some doubts. Through our discussions and reading of the text that quotes Fr. Giussani’s words, “Only in clarity and security can one find the energy for action,” we came to understand that, in reality, the correct question to ask ourselves isn’t above all “what to study,” but our vocation, the meaning of our lives, how we can be happy. We reflected on various criteria that we can use to make choices and to observe ourselves with greater clarity. Among them, in particular, we discussed the importance of paying attention to our natural inclinations, gifts from God that are put into practice in order to better serve the world and the church, and to the inevitable circumstances that are indications of the road to travel. According to these criteria, we realized that we can understand and see who we are only by observing ourselves in action, by living our decision without anxiety. And if we were to discover that the decision wasn’t the best? Then we would remember that there is something precious that comes prior to the choice: our worth is not in what we do but in who we are. This does not depend on our successes, but rather on a presence found in a friendship, a presence who loves us before everything. How we react in front of our failures or successes depends on this certainty. One of my friends from school who was invited for the first time wrote: “This evening, I felt less alone, and I understood that the doubts I have are the same as those of my peers. Even though I’ve become aware of my (or better yet, our) uncertainties, this encounter has given me so much hope.”

Emma, Pesaro (Italy)



The trial of desire



Francesco Botturi

From technological power to the ethic of care, the consistency of a civilization is measured by how it addresses suffering. What place do we give to what has no “solution” and to the cry that emerges?

Pain and technology

Suffering is not something that we can be placed before: suffering exists as it is experienced in the first person. The prevailing attitude toward suffering is, instead, to consider it as much as possible from a distance, supported by a *technological mentality* that tends to transform every situation into a “problem” to be solved rather than facing it as an enigma to be grappled with. The poverty of the interpretative symbols of suffering that characterize contemporary culture does not allow it to be approached with a broad and profound gaze in order to deal with it, that is, in personal terms. Rather, expectations with respect to the power of technology exacerbate the *intolerance for suffering*, which also becomes *resentment*

against it and, ultimately, resentment toward those who suffer: if suffering should not exist, the sufferer has no reason to exist either. If they are the bearer of a condition that causes them to suffer, it would be better for them not to have been born; and if born, it would be in their best interest to die.

Every affliction, on the other hand, contains the *reverberation of the universal experience of suffering*: this pain of mine raises a question of meaning that is common to the pains of today, of all time, of everyone. Precisely in this extension and depth, every single pain is part of the universal question of human suffering. This is why the lack of a culture capable of posing the problem of the meaning/meaninglessness of suffering is decisive for the life of a civilization. We must ask ourselves: In what conditions of life and experience does one find a civilization whose culture no longer knows how to integrate suffering into the whole of human experience and which no longer desires to elaborate the question of what role suffering plays in the fate of human desire?

This history of the West has been given two great visions of human suffering, the *tragic Greek* one and the *Judeo-Christian* one. In the Greek vision, “nature” is an antagonism between life and death: all of reality is characterized by a radical antithesis in which destruction is inseparable from generation and cruelty from happiness as an inevitable cosmic law, in the presence of which seeking consolation is vain, and whose unfathomable enigma it is wise to bear.

The Judeo-Christian vision, on the other hand, knows anguish and rebellion, but not tragedy, because man can always appeal to the hope offered by the God who is stronger than necessity, chance, and death. The human being is placed in a relationship of trust, howev-


er difficult, in a God who remains an ally even through the greatest trials. Christianity thus surprisingly fills these trials with the very presence of God, who no longer stands outside human suffering, but shares them from within. Suffering is transcended, becoming a place of sharing and reconciliation of the human. Christianity inaugurates an attitude of sensible acceptance and industrious sharing of pain and suffering.

In the face of these great horizons of suffering, the *spiritual condition of contemporary man* appears impoverished and lost. As a historical child of the Christian tradition, he retains its ideal of a reconciled existence, but he is now deprived of trust in his God, of the experience of his fatherhood and the gift of fraternity that flows from it. This is why he expands his trust in technical power without, however, being able to escape the predicament of a Sisyphus who, as he tries to free himself of his burden, experiences the inexorability of a suffering that pushes him back toward the fatalism and pessimism of old, but now deprived of their tragic tension and ability to convey cosmic wisdom. Thus, neither pagan nor Christian, contemporary man oscillates painfully between technological power and existential anguish, between the expectation of care and accompaniment and the celebration of the macabre freedom to end meaningless lives because the suffering is incurable.

Affliction and compassion

Is it possible to find the way back to a *humanism of suffering*? In contemporary medical ethics, there is a growing awareness of the broader scope of “curative” care, as opposed to strictly “therapeutic” care. It is clear that a greater scope for caring is already at play in therapy.

The reflexive expression of “taking care” is revealing of the fact that caring for others always brings one's self into play, that is, the carer cannot fail to recognize that he or she shares the problem of the “proper functioning” of human life as such with the person being cared for. An attitude of welcoming is therefore not a dimension added to competence, but is inherent to caring. Recognition of this commonality gives rise to an attitude of sharing, or better still, of *com-passion*: communal involvement in the condition of need, which cannot be objectified, but can only be shared by offering the sufferer a certificate of existence and value, of a good that is still possible.



Chelles, France, 1953. The physician Albert Nast (1884–1957) did not abandon his social and medical work despite being struck by total blindness in 1931.

Beyond that boundary

“The possession of a life that has no end”: if the human heart is made for this, then everything that happens, death itself, as the great Dutch historian Huizinga has already observed, is an event within and necessary to the definition of life. For the definition of life, all phenomena in which it coexists are necessary: death is a phenomenon of life, because death happens to a living person. It is paradoxical, but death happens to a living person. Therefore death enters into the definition of life. [...] However, if the heart is made for this, everything that happens is for happiness, and whoever looks at you without the desire for your happiness is an enemy, even if it is your mother. [...] For us—this is our good fortune or grace—a man has come who has no longer allowed us to think of ourselves and other men as a fleeting nothing, a fleeting breath or sigh; a man has come who has forced us to think that the most dramatic and imposing thing in life is this problem: that everything is made for happiness but man cannot find it in anything. Happiness is something that lies beyond the horizon that the human road sees, but the path is made necessary—before that, it is made rational; it is rational and, therefore, necessary—beyond that boundary. What man is made for is a promise that looms on the horizon and beyond it; it is something that is felt and not seen [...]. It is felt and not seen! Any affective, social, political relationship that forgets what man is, what any man, any son of a woman, is, any relationship that forgets this is the outcome of the scoundrelism that dominates the world of culture today and makes us all sick. No, many are not sick, because they have not yet suffered the first consequences. If all things are made for happiness, this represents the substantial and concise problem of our life, more than any calculation, more than any construction, more than any invention, more than anything of great longevity, and one denies nature—one denies nature!—if one denies the mystery of the answer.

(L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà* [The event of freedom] pp. 166–67)

Suffering and desire

The ethical sensibility of caring is a great thing; however, it is not yet a measure of the breadth and depth of human suffering, which is not content to be accompanied because it is inhabited by an even deeper question, that of Job and then of Christ: *lema*, “why”? (“My God, why have you forsaken me,” Psalm 21.) Suffering is so enveloping that it is a place of singular self-consciousness; it is also an experience of the invasion of a power that penetrates and dominates consciousness and will: in suffering, nothing seems to be in my possession any longer. The essence of suffering has to do with this dispossession, which disrupts human discourse (Simone Weil). This is why the language of suffering is ultimately that of the cry.

In this sense, *suffering is greater and other than pain*, if by pain we mean suffering, whether physical or psychic, light or severe, but definable in its causal links and its effects; even animals feel pain, but cannot properly suffer. Suffering is the *properly human dimension of affliction* because it is *the memory of the incompleteness of desire*, which is rekindled by everything that opposes it. Man suffers insofar as he desires and at the same time does not measure up to his desire; suffering is—according to the word’s etymology—finding oneself bearing the weight of this disproportion. This is why death remains the unsurpassable provocation of life, because it seems to definitively disprove the fulfillment of desire and casts a veil of suffering over the whole of existence.

The question that suffering brings with it is thus transferred to the desire that dwells in man’s heart, confronting him with a peremptory alternative: Is existence the denial of desire or is it a putting it to the test? Is existence like a game without a solution, a meaninglessness achieving nothing, or is it a path that is put to the test? Thus the experience of suffering makes clear that the concrete situation of human existence lies in the dramatic opposition between a *meaningless game* and a *testing of meaning*; between illusion and proof, proof of the doubt that



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Former professor of moral philosophy
at the Catholic University in Milan, Italy.

all experience is the object of an empty desire, “vanity of vanities,” smoke dispersed by the wind.

But, if suffering testifies to the disproportionality of our desire for a fulfilled life, and if an empty outcome does not account for our desire and suffering, then only one final possibility remains: perhaps a *gift* that responds to a desire that is too great for us. This is a reasonable hypothesis if we remember that everything that is most precious in existence comes not from our own doing, but instead comes to meet us: life itself, its fundamental gifts, the care given by those who welcome us, the friendship of those who accompany us, the love of those who love us. Perhaps only a gift can fulfill the promise that life itself is. This is the *religious hypothesis*, that at the fount of life is a good and personal power that is pleased to provide an origin and a meaning to human living.

Passio Christi passio hominis

But if this is so, why the trial of suffering? Why a gift continually embedded with suffering? The creator and redeemer God of the first Hebrew testament offers frequent messages about the trials that He Himself causes and which He Himself succors; but one would never have supposed that those were forewarnings of the extraordinary announcement that such trials would become the trials of God Himself. What is extraordinary about Christianity—come to think of it—is not that God takes care of man and provides for his happiness,

but that the trial of suffering becomes part of the path to happiness in an economy of salvation embodied in the Son in which nothing is wasted, not even the ocean of human suffering. The abyss of the Son’s suffering, the Son annihilated in powerlessness, is also the point at which total suffering coincides with total reliance on and total obedience to the gift of total life; that is, the risen life in which even the wounds of suffering remain, bearing witness to an eternal meaning that has made suffering its own. Therefore—henceforth—suffering is stripped of the curse of doubt and despair and becomes the place of trial where the purest obedience can be exercised, and in which the ultimate gift of fulfillment is granted. Suffering and death, places of distance from God, are revealed as privileged places of His nearness and communion. ■

*If suffering testifies
to the disproportionality
of our desire, then only one
possibility remains: a gift
that responds to a desire that
is too great for us.*

Without armor

8

Father **Vincent Nagle**, chaplain of the Maddalena Grassi Foundation, shares what he has discovered while accompanying sick patients.



Paola Ronconi

The Maddalena Grassi Foundation in Milan is a huge organization that was created to provide in-home care to AIDS patients in the early 90s. Today it has three locations—Vigevano, Seveso, and Concorezzo. In these places, you will find day care centers and communities of psychiatric and AIDS patients, as well as patients in a vegetative state. The foundation provides care for 1,300–1,400 patients (of whom 900 receive home care). These are places where sickness, pain, suffering, and death seem to dominate, where there is no hope for healing. At the same time, when the lives of patients are accompanied, cared for and loved in their most dramatic moments, the most unimaginable surprises are possible. The chaplain of the foundation, Father Vincent Nagle, has attempted to describe these surprises. He is an American priest from San Francisco who belongs to the Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo. Fr. Nagle holds degrees in sociology, classics, and Islamic studies and lived in Africa and the Middle East before being ordained a priest in 1992. He spends more than ten hours each day talking and listening, going from one place to another in the city of Milan and the surrounding area. He vi-



sits with patients and their families or friends, accompanying them in whatever capacity they allow. Sometimes they ask him for a particular kind of help—to end their life. These moments spark an agonizing tug-of-war between two freedoms; for example, the one between him and Fabiano Antoniani, known as DJ Fabo, who as a result of an accident became paralyzed and lost his sight. He sought to end his life and was euthanized in 2017. “It was like seeing a man starve in front of a table full of food,” wrote Nagle. In our conversation, we tried to delve deeper into that “table full of food” in order to discover a way to live that, mysteriously, is filled with beauty even in the pain.

Father Vincent, what does it mean to accompany a patient?

For me, over the years, the word *companionship* has acquired a very important role. There are at least three factors at play. The first: it is necessary to not censor anything. Friends, and often relatives, on behalf of their loved ones, say to me, “Come, so that she can be distracted.” But those who need this distraction more are the loved ones, not the patients,

because they are afraid and do not know how to accompany the patients. Without being willing to listen, see, “touch,” everything about a person, the relatives and friends cannot be companions because they cannot stay in front of the person. Can I tell you a story?

Of course.

This year one of my brothers passed away. He spent fourteen months in hospice, and when he entered they gave him six weeks to live. At the end of August, I Face-Timed him, but he was in so much pain, and he was not able to talk that day. He groaned and cried. Every fiber of my being wanted to end the call. It was hard for me to see him suffer, but I stayed on the line. Once in a while I would say something, share a memory or a song... A way to tell him that I was there. After fifteen minutes, which seemed like an eternity, he gained the strength to say, “And God said, ‘I am not finished with you yet.’” It is from a verse in the book of Deuteronomy where God tells the people of Israel that he will not abandon them. To me, that is what it means to be a companion. You cannot alleviate or change the situation, you cannot heal the person, but you are there and the value of simply being present is often underestimated.

So the one who needs to be accompanied first and foremost is the one staying with the patient?

The first step is to admit that you are afraid, that seeing the state that the other person is in is painful to watch, even though you love that person. My experience tells me that, for example, the purpose of assisted suicide is seen as a way not just to alleviate the suffering of the patient, to “free” him from an unbearable suffering, but also that seeing him in that condition is tough on others. In many cases it is done to take away the problem of being responsible for their loved one. It is like saying to the patient, “Here is the solution to your problem. Because you are a problem.” That is why you must not go through this alone, so rather than stop at the pain, you can ask for the courage to stay in front of it and embrace that harsh reality. The second factor at play is that the key to accompanying someone is having a “positive hypothesis.” But when I am with someone who is suffering, I cannot approach the situation with answers. I have to be vulnerable too. I must go to that person and allow myself to feel his or her fear, pain, and panic, but also ask Christ to show himself, and say to him, “Where are you? Come!”

And what happens?

He comes every time! And always in an unexpected way. God is generous and is willing to work with anyone who asks for his help, even if the question is vague or inarticulate or if you do not even realize that you are asking.

Can you give some examples?

I was visiting a tetraplegic who was very bitter and tired. Every time we met he yelled, “Stop, stop!” We had interesting conversations and sometimes he would be so angry that he would not speak. “I will do it, sooner or later I will do it...,” he said when he talked about committing suicide. But then he caught pneumonia. He asked me to hear his confession and bring him communion. Then he wanted to make amends with his family. He died, I dare say, a holy death, reconciled with God and with all. Let me give you another example. In the last few weeks, I have been visiting this man who is dying and wants to be euthanized. My relationship with him began with an ironic twist: he does not believe in God, but he claims he is not an atheist... He just cannot stand the God of the Bible. One day, we were having a conversation about how, years



Vincent Nagle.

ago, I had decided that I wanted to abandon any image I had of what my life was supposed to be like and live with the sole desire to see God manifest Himself. I went on and on. Suddenly, he stopped me and said, “I need to go to confession.” Now he looks forward to my visits and is a completely different person. What happened inside his heart? I also think about a 77-year-old woman with ALS who had had a stroke, was divorced, and had two children who refused to help her. She used to be a professor who had been a very active volunteer and was a very positive person... The first time I went to see her, which was four years ago, she showed me the document that gave her the power to request an end to life support at any time. Right away I asked, “Why haven’t you done it yet?” She stayed silent for a long time and then she wrote, “She loves me,” as she directed her gaze to her caregiver. She was her cleaning lady, but when the woman became ill, she decided to devote herself to taking care of her. “I am loved and I am not alone.”

And after that she abandoned the idea of wanting to end her life...

Yes. I can say for a fact that there have been dozens



of cases over the years in which people made the decision to be accompanied rather than taking that extreme action. I witnessed people starting to demand the meaning of what was happening to them; they began to open up to a positive impetus, and I saw God at work. Of course, having a living faith is a tremendous advantage. However, there are many Christians who, even though they have a strong faith, seem unable to ask God for this positive hypothesis. How many believers have confided in me, “Father, come on, wouldn’t it just be better to put an end to this suffering?”

Let us go back to the “companionship”—you said there was a third factor...

Before I became the chaplain here, I thought that the elements of Christian companionship were the good, truth, beauty, justice... Beautiful words, which are demonstrated powerfully in a shared life, because of an ideal that is alive among us. Now I realize more and more that at the heart of our companionship there is only one thing: mercy. Everything else comes from that. You can see truth in the flesh when you are not afraid of reality. It is revealed in an en-

counter without armor, reservations, or doubts, one that is guided by curiosity and the heart rather than fear. But how is this kind of encounter with reality possible? Only through mercy. And what is beauty, if not a collaboration with reality? This is the fruit of mercy.

You also visit patients with mental illness.

At first, the psychiatric patients made me very sad, so closed in their own world... During the first few visits, after spending two or three hours with them, I was worn out. Now, not so much. Staying with them, I came to understand that sooner or later God will show me the person behind the illness. And when that moment comes, and I “see” them, it makes me want to walk with them. They are in their own world and I try to be part of it. I know that God is part of it. Through something that they say or do not say, I realize that they “see” me, and they let me see their “I.”

What goes through your mind when you are about to enter the room of one of your patients?

I do not go in asking myself what I can do. I enter asking, “What will He do?” This reconciles me with reality, not only in front of my patients, but also in my life. ■

Is it worth facing this?

Cristiano Ferrario is an oncologist in Montréal, in Canada, where the law allows euthanasia. In the midst of diagnoses and treatments, the discovery of “a trust that sets people free even in illness.”

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Anna Leonardi

“**M**y work is truly beautiful because it helps me to remain alive.” The words of Cristian Ferrario, 47, an oncologist at the Jewish General Hospital of Montreal, are surprising. In the hospital he is famous for his powerful laughter during office visits with his patients, notwithstanding their grave diagnoses and awful treatments. But even in front of the anguish of the terminal phases, his work does not frighten him. He is often asked how he can detach from all that pain at the end of the day. He says: “Easy. I don’t detach. I bring my patients with me, with their questions and suffering, into my moments of silence, into conversations with friends, into the things I do. I allow them to continue challenging me and to keep the wound open. This helps me greatly in living my life.”

Being a physician in Canada has become a bit like moving on a highway interchange full of exits, ever since a 2016 law allowed access to euthanasia and assisted suicide for people whose death is “reasonably foreseeable.” If a patient meets the requisites, and after evaluation by two physicians, she or he can receive MAID (Medical Assistance in Dying) within a few days. In 2023 the law was broadened to include people with mental illness, encompassing those in a situation of particular vulnerability, such as the destitute, the disabled, and drug addicts. “In Quebec, seven out of one hundred deaths result from MAID,” Cristiano recounts. “These numbers show how endemic this phenomenon is; it has entered into the DNA of the country. We are the first in the world, even ahead of Belgium and



Holland.” The time between request and execution is brief, often shorter than the time needed to obtain other services, such as palliative care. “What happened to a patient of mine was a shock for me. Just five days from his request, he received MAID. He spent those last days closed in his room, without seeing anyone. It was impossible to understand whether he was in pain. He didn’t even speak with his wife anymore, because he wanted nothing to interfere with his decision. I still wonder how much he suffered ‘in order not to suffer.’”

However, many of his patients seek out a dialogue. Cristiano sees them for follow-up visits every three weeks. “This is a fundamental moment in their treatment, not something extra. We look at their exams and test results, evaluate their general condition, and also talk about all the needs that arise in their particular situations. One day a patient and her husband came to my office. Both were very anxious and burdened by the chemotherapy.

The oncologist Cristiano Ferrario with a patient at the Jewish General Hospital in Montréal.

The church of Saint Joseph, on the hill of Mount Royal in Montreal.



© Adrien Marchetti/Unsplash

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From the oncological point of view the situation was going well, but she was depressed and had begun to have doubts. ‘Doctor, is it worth facing all this? I don’t know if I want to continue. My husband can’t deal with it anymore, either.’ Cristiano was surprised by her question, and said, ‘You’re responding well and the illness still allows you to do many things. There’s a world of occasions that can still make you two happy.’ They spoke at length about how their days go, their children, their home. Then Cristiano added, ‘Certainly, some things have changed in the last few years. But we have to detach ourselves from all those images we have of ourselves. Don’t think about how you were. Let’s look at what you have now.’ He feels wonder in front of the sick. ‘Each time, I can either greet them thinking they are poor wretches who are victims of a sick joke, or be amazed they are there, waiting for our meeting to travel part of the road together.’

During one weekend when he was on call, a patient had unexpected complications. Ferrario did not know her clinical history well. He wanted to speak with her hus-

band and he put in a call to the physician who was caring for her. When he finally had them in front of him, he outlined the situation. Her husband, a practicing Muslim, interrupted him. ‘Doctor, God will take care of her. You do everything possible.’ Cristiano was uncomfortable. ‘We were at a fork in the road. We had to evaluate, in the interests of the patient, how far we should try to keep her alive, and at what cost.’ He gave her antibiotics and painkillers. But her condition had become so grave that he wondered whether it was truly useful to put her on a ventilator. ‘It’s a dizzying situation. You would like to have mathematical certainty, but it doesn’t exist. You have the protocols and years of clinical experience but are always aware of all of the risks of the available choices. You can only look attentively at each detail in order to understand what is happening in that life, and what you can do as a physician and a man.’

As the hours passed, Cristiano shared every action and reflection with the husband. The fact that her condition had deteriorated so rapidly gave them no

time to prepare. “I had to do with him what we usually do in months and months of appointments, where we prepare to face those moments without being trapped by feelings of guilt or by instinctive reactions.” The husband changed, passing from an interventionist stance to a softer one. In the evening it was decided not to intubate the patient. “The existence of God was no longer an axiom from which we, mechanically, had to wait for that life to be saved. Instead, God’s existence was the given fact that put us into the position of wanting to know what was happening to the patient and to serve it.”

This is the “gift” that illness almost always gives. “It strips away our false impression that we have everything under control. In fact, often after all the ‘battling,’ people who recover from cancer fall apart because they neither want to nor can return to the life they had before the illness, with the false illusion of having control over every aspect of life. Instead, some reach the point of desiring not to lose that trust with which they learned to look at things and that made them feel free, even in their illness.”

Marie received her initial diagnosis when she was only 27 years old. Following a devastating course of treatment, the tumor seemed to be in complete remission. But two years later, there was a recurrence. Marie refused to accept it and wanted no discussion of treatments. The physicians in her ward tried to encourage her with numbers and statistics, but she felt unable to face it all again, the hair loss, the nausea, the exhaustion, the swelling of her face caused by cortisone. Cristiano’s colleagues asked him to try to convince her. It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve when he entered her room. “I introduced myself and we chatted. From her window you could see the beautiful church of Saint Joseph, on the hill in the center of the city. I told her she was lucky to be able to see the prettiest church in the city. She smiled at me.” Cristiano returned to her every day, sometimes just sticking his head in the door or having a little chat with her mother. Then one day, Marie was the one to bring up the question of a treatment regime. “She wanted to understand the various options and their side effects. I listened to her fears and tried to encourage

her. I explained that if she were treated, she could return to walking. To make her laugh I said that if it went well, we would walk together up the hill to the church of Saint Joseph, and that I’d start training.” Marie decided she wanted to try again. The treatment worked, and she is better. After a few months, she and Cristiano climbed the steps up to the church on top of Mount Royal. Cristiano could not explain Marie’s change of heart. “Why did you say yes to me? After all, I proposed the same treatment my colleague had.” Marie said in no uncertain terms that it was “because I looked the other doctor in the eyes and saw he wasn’t happy. I couldn’t trust him. My fear was too great. In the hospital I scrutinized all the doctors who came to talk to me, until I met one for whom the problem was not dying, but living.” ■

God did not work this way

God did not work, as we would dream and then as Karl Marx cried loudly to the world, to eliminate pain and change the system, so there would no longer be need for consolation. This would mean taking away our humanity. This is what we desire, deep down, in secret. Yes, we find it too difficult to be human beings. But if our humanity were taken away, we would cease to be women and men and the world would become inhuman. God did not work this way. He chose a wiser way, more difficult from a certain point of view, but exactly for this reason, one that was better and more divine. He did not take away our humanity: He shares it with us. He entered into the solitude of destroyed love as someone who shares the pain, as consolation. This is the divine way of redemption. Perhaps we can better understand the Christian meaning of redemption starting from here: not a magical transformation of the world, not that our humanity is taken away from us, but that we are consoled, that God shares the weight of life with us and that by now the light of His sharing love and pain is forever in our midst.

Joseph Ratzinger, *Christmas Homily, 1978*

Close-up

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“It is not good that man should be alone”

Healing the sick by healing relationships. Excerpts from the message of Pope Francis on the XXXII World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2024.

“It is not good that man should be alone” (cf. *Gen 2:18*). From the beginning, God, who is love, created us for communion and endowed us with an innate capacity to enter into relationship with others. Our lives, reflecting in the image of the Trinity, are meant to attain fulfilment through a network of relationships, friendships and love, both given and received. We were created to be together, not alone. Precisely because this project of communion is so deeply rooted in the human heart, we see the experience of abandonment and solitude as something frightening, painful and even inhuman. This is all the more the case at times of vulnerability, uncertainty and insecurity, caused often by the onset of a serious illness. In this regard, I think of all those who found themselves terribly alone

Pope Francis at *Casa sollievo della Sofferenza* Hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, on March 17, 2018.

during the Covid-19 pandemic: the patients who could not receive visitors, but also the many nurses, physicians and support personnel overwhelmed by work and enclosed in isolation wards. Naturally, we cannot fail to recall all those persons who had to face the hour of their death alone, assisted by healthcare personnel, but far from their own families.

I share too in the pain, suffering and isolation felt by those who, because of war and its tragic consequences, are left without support and assistance. War is the most terrible of social diseases, and it takes its greatest toll on those who are most vulnerable.

[...] Even in countries that enjoy peace and greater resources, old age and sickness are frequently experienced in solitude and, at times, even in abandonment. This grim reality is mainly a consequence of the culture of individualism that exalts productivity at all costs, cultivates the myth of efficiency, and proves indifferent, even callous, when individuals no longer have the strength needed to keep pace. It then becomes a throw-away culture, in which “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor or disabled, ‘not yet useful’—like the unborn, or ‘no longer needed’—like the elderly” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 18). Sadly, this way of thinking also guides certain political decisions that are not focused on the dignity of the human person and his or her needs, and do

not always promote the strategies and resources needed to ensure that every human being enjoys the fundamental right to health and access to healthcare. The abandonment of the vulnerable and their isolation is favoured also by the reduction of healthcare merely to a provision of services, without these being accompanied by a “therapeutic covenant” between physicians, patients and family members.

We do well to listen once more to the words of the Bible: “It is not good for man to be alone!” God spoke those words at the beginning of creation and thus revealed to us the profound meaning of his project for humanity, but at the same time, the mortal wound of sin, which creeps in by generating suspicions, fractures, divisions and consequently isolation. Sin attacks persons and all their relationships: with God, with themselves, with others, with creation. Such isolation causes us to miss the meaning of our lives; it takes away the joy of love and makes us experience an oppressive sense of being alone at all the crucial passages of life. Brothers and sisters, the first form of care needed in any illness is compassionate and loving closeness. To care for the sick thus means above all to care for their relationships, all of them: with God, with others—family members, friends, healthcare workers—, with creation and with themselves. Can this be done? Yes, it can be done and all of us are called to ensure that it happens. Let us look to the icon of the Good Sa-

maritan (cf. *Lk* 10:25–37), to his ability to slow down and draw near to another person, to the tender love with which he cares for the wounds of a suffering brother.

Let us remember this central truth in life: we came into the world because someone welcomed us; we were made for love; and we are called to communion and fraternity. This aspect of our lives is what sustains us, above all at times of illness and vulnerability. It is also the first therapy that we must all adopt in order to heal the diseases of the society in which we live.

To those of you who experience illness, whether temporary or chronic, I would say this: Do not be ashamed of your longing for closeness and tenderness! Do not conceal it, and never think that you are a burden on others. The condition of the sick urges all of us to step back from the hectic pace of our lives in order to rediscover ourselves. At this time of epochal change, we Christians in particular are called to adopt the compassion-filled gaze of Jesus. Let us care for those who suffer and are alone, perhaps marginalized and cast aside. With the love for one another that Christ the Lord bestows on us in prayer, especially in the Eucharist, let us tend the wounds of solitude and isolation. In this way, we will cooperate in combating the culture of individualism, indifference and waste, and enable the growth of a culture of tenderness and compassion.[...] ■

Africa



“Entirely myself”

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The leaders of the African communities of CL recently gathered for three days of shared living in Uganda. We heard their stories of how the encounter with the Movement makes people new, even in the most difficult circumstances.



Paolo Perego

“**Y**our faces and gazes testify that it is not an illusion: life can begin anew every day,” says Davide Prospero. The hall of the Luigi Giussani Institute for Higher Education is packed with over two hundred people of all ages. The Ugandan community of Kampala has gathered together for an assembly with the leader of the Movement to conclude three days together with leaders from various African countries, a moment of shared living they call “The Source.” The first “Source” gathering, in 2016, was held on the shore of Lake Victoria, near the sources of the Nile. This year about sixty leaders of the Movement gathered in Entebbe, about 20 miles from Kampala, on February 23rd–25th. Some came from Uganda, others

from Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, Burundi, Kenya, Mozambique, Angola, and Italy. As soon as we landed on African soil, we were catapulted among those faces that Prospero would later speak of at the assembly three days later. The first of these faces were those of the hundreds of children joyfully greeting us from the balconies and classrooms of the high school and primary school named after Fr. Giussani. We met Fiona and Roger, whose faces bore the effects of the harsh slums where they grew up, but who recounted what they had encountered in the educational realities born from the presence of CL in Uganda, as well as their dreams, his to become a writer, hers to become the president of the Republic. Then there were the faces of “Rose’s

women,” at the Meeting Point. These AIDS victims, who have been written about many times in *Traces*, were the true originators of the two schools, springing from their desire for a place where their children could grow and encounter what had saved their mothers’ lives. And we saw the faces of the over sixty orphan children of the Welcoming House, where they live today, embraced and cared for after having been abandoned.

“Life can begin again. This is not an illusion.” You see it in all those faces and in those you meet at “The Source.” Cyprian from Kenya spoke one evening about his encounter with the Movement, his vocation to be a teacher, his eleven children, a life changed and full, a change that is still present today, as he dedicates himself to farming castor beans. There was Barbara, an Italian who has lived in Nigeria for years, and Michael, the principal of the Luigi Giusani High School, whose testimony you will find in these pages. Mireille from Cameroon spoke about her twenty-five years of marriage, blessed with many adopted children. And David, from Nigeria, did not hold back from a soccer challenge, Italy/Cameroon against “the rest of the world,” before boarding a boat for a visit to Pineapple Island in the middle of Lake Victoria. There were Maria Rita and Dario from South Africa, Jean Marie from Burundi, Atanasia and Lidia from Mozambique, and the students of the Ugandan CLU, captained by the “secretary” of the vacation, Marie Claire. In one way or another, between lunches and meetings, each one spoke about themselves and how the encounter with Christ in the Movement made them new people, “entirely myself,” one said. As Prospero stressed during the three days, up to the final assembly: “One’s personal unity is closely connected with the unity of which the pope spoke in his letter to the Movement. This ‘new person’ is the true newness that Christ introduces into history, into every circumstance, even in war. The miracle of unity is the first sign of the greater miracle, of the fact that Christ entered into the world.” ■



The thieves cannot steal my hope

Sarah, Kampala

When I was in my village, I suffered a lot, including the humiliation that my body emitted a bad odor. However, the Lord brought me here, to Kampala, where I met Rose at the Meeting Point International, and my encounter with her changed my life. I am not the same person as before. I used to look at myself and just cry: I couldn’t stop. I didn’t even have the strength to speak. Everyone asked me what was happening and I said I didn’t know. I even fooled myself by saying someone had cast a spell on me. But you can die even from thinking you are unlucky. I was losing everything, including hope. With Rose I began to find myself again, and I began to hope again. I realized I was of value, a value greater than anything you can possess. I have a little stand where I fry and sell cassava, but I am not “the cassava woman.” This is not everything for me. I am Sarah, not the cassava I sell. One day while I was at the Meeting Point with the other women, some men destroyed my home. When I returned my children told me: “Mamma, we don’t have anything; they even took the cassava.” I told them: “We are not our house. We are not the cassava we sell.” Slowly I succeeded in starting the stand again. But only for a short time, because thieves came and robbed me of all the cassava again. I was really hurt and sad, but I did not lose hope because what happens today is today. Tomorrow is something else. You have to begin again and not give up, because we are made to be happy, even if, as happened a few days later, other thieves came and stole my phone. It hardly worked and was half-broken, but they thought it was expensive. “Let them have it,” I thought. I didn’t even call for help. They left with that phone, with that little nothing. “I have all my value.” Now, even though I am facing a difficult situation, I am not afraid. I am here with you, and I hold my heart closely. ■



The companionship she sought was right there all along

Victoria, Nairobi

In recent months, three things have happened that have provoked me to reflection. While I was in Italy for vacation in December, I met up with a dear friend whom I hadn't seen for eleven years. All this time we had been long-distance companions, and it felt as if we had seen each other just the day before, such was the unexpected familiarity and affection. When I returned to Kenya, I tearfully told my husband and some friends about that encounter, and how it made me want to live such deep friendships also in Nairobi where I've lived for seventeen years, friendships that always go to the core of things, in a daily companionship that gives everything freer and fuller breath, always leading to Christ. It was something I was missing, that I didn't have or was unable to see. For days I thought about how to "recreate" that friendship. Then came the news of the death of Carras, one of the most important people in my life, followed by the letter from his wife Jone, the message of Davide Prosperi, and the funeral online. I was full of pain, but slowly it became evident that I was not alone at all. I heard everywhere that word that Carras had always insisted on—"companionship." Once again, my heart felt the reverberation and my wound opened even more. At the end of January, I ended up in the emergency room with semi-paralysis of the left side of my body, high blood pressure, and an intense headache. The doctors began conducting tests and giving me injections to ease the pain. They whispered "heart attack, stroke." I was frightened. I sought comfort in my husband, who told me, "Don't worry. Jesus is here. He

knows what is good for us." I only wanted to be able to move and to be free of the pain. I began praying because I was not ready for death or anything else "unplanned." I asked the help of Carras, telling him I was not ready like him to say yes. Notwithstanding years of life in the Movement, going to church and doing things with the community, my faith was really weak. Thanks be to God, in the end it was not a heart attack or stroke, but, by exercising a lot of patience, something more manageable. For three weeks I stayed home, leaving only to go to the doctor. I had passed from being a Wonder Woman with everything under control (home, work, and family) to someone almost entirely dependent on my husband. I was a beggar. As I watched my husband helping me, always with a smile, never complaining, I came to another realization: the intense friendship that I so earnestly sought was right there close by. It began with him, with us, with what Christ has always given me, ever since the first encounter, and that He continues to give me so as to remind me how much He loves me. So I even found the courage to call two friends who had not seen me for a while, and share with them not only the physical problem but all that I was experiencing.

And now the "Source" in Uganda. The physical pain is there, but every minute spent here is worthwhile, be it a song, a boat trip, a lunch, the testimonies of friends, or simple silence, in discovering the same desire for happiness among people I have never met before or whom I have not seen for years. Where is there another place like this? Before coming I talked to my doctor to be sure I could fly. My husband was worried. I asked him if he preferred that I stay home. "No, go. I'm certain that if it is something good for you, it will also be good for us." ■



The gaze waiting for me at school

Michael, *Kampala*

In these years, working at the Luigi Giussani High School has helped me to understand more deeply my vocation as a teacher. Today, my work is much more than something I do to earn a living. In this place, step by step, I have been educated since the beginning to look at myself and always ask, “Who am I?” Having close to me a person like Rose, who calls us to this question every time she speaks, has been fundamental. All this became even more evident when I began working with Matteo Severgnini and following the experience of the Movement through School of Community. Seeing the passion he brings to his work makes me desire the same for myself. In order to learn from him, I decided to follow him. We have become much more than simple colleagues: we have become friends. Now that he has returned to Italy, I continue to have the same experience with Alberto, his replacement, and with my other colleagues. Every morning I wake up with a great desire to go to school because I know that a gaze is waiting for me there, ready to welcome and support me. This same passion enables me in turn to welcome my students and colleagues, beginning the day full of gratitude because each day is a gift. Here I receive a continuous education in looking at my “whole” self. This in turn enables me to see my students as unique, with the meaning and potential of each. I know who I am and I allow myself to be educated. I can embrace my role as educator better and help my students discover themselves. Now my teaching is no longer one-way: it has beco-

me an exchange. I can’t educate without being educated myself. Every moment in front of the class is a learning moment for me. Also, I have discovered that I can’t be an educator without the companionship and collaboration of my students. As Rose always says when she comes to speak with us teachers, to be good educators we first of all have to be educated, including by the students. I’m not afraid of losing their respect by allowing this. I need to nourish myself and discover more of who I am in order to be able to give them my life. I’m certain that through an authentic relationship with me they can find a face to look at so they can find their road. As Fr. Giussani said, young people need an adult figure in front of them. I want to be that adult for them every day, traveling a piece of the road together. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

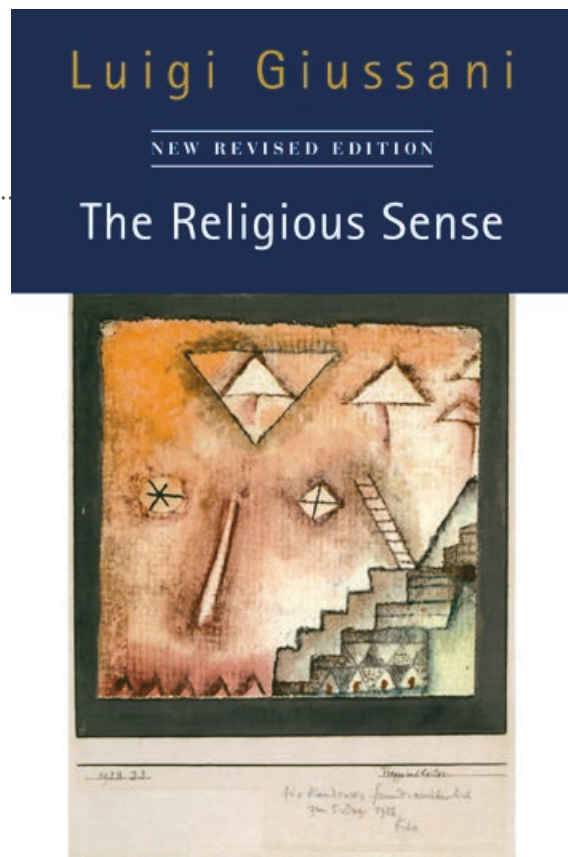
A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

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.

Giussani challenges us to penetrate the deepest levels of experience to discover our essential selves, breaking through the layers of opinions and judgments that have obscured our true needs. Asserting that all the tools necessary for self-discovery are inherent within us, he focuses primarily on reason, not as narrowly defined by modern philosophers, but as an openness to existence, a capacity to comprehend and affirm reality in all of its dimensions.

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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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