


# TRACES

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03



*“To hope, my child,  
you would have received  
a great grace”*

## TRACES

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Vol. 26

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## June 2024



Concho, Arizona, 1940.

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# GIUSSANI

# 100

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## Little by little

**T**he Jubilee of 2025 will be dedicated to a matter that has become increasingly pertinent to everyone and to the everyday: hope. In the *Bull of Indiction* for the Jubilee, Pope Francis poses several questions: Where does our certainty lie? What is the foundation of our hope? What is happiness? What is the happiness that we await and desire? And he points us toward the lived experience of Saint Paul, who, he says, is by no means naive or deluded, but “a realist.” That is why the apostle’s certainty is surprising: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or the sword?” He can say this, continues the pope, because “Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint”; he can say this by virtue of a real experience of that love, which makes desire certain.

**In this sense Charles Péguy says that hope** “does not go by itself,” that to hope “one must be very happy, one must have obtained, received a great grace.” He is the author who gave the title to the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL, and who accompanied the path undertaken during those days (the texts will soon be available at [english.clonline.org](http://english.clonline.org)). This issue collects some testimonies on the theme addressed during those days, on the trust that is rekindled in the heart of the person, against all odds, because of the newness of life that comes from an encounter with Christ. This is what is happening today, in Cuba, Chile, and Qatar.

**“What surprises me, says God,** is hope.” Péguy empathizes with God’s being surprised by the person who hopes, by that “little hope that seems like nothing at all.” It is like God’s own method, His way of acting “gently,” as Benedict XVI described it: “He only gradually builds up his history within the great history of mankind (...) He continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to him.” And so to wonder, to hope.

## Edoardo, Anna, Roberto, and Francesco

edited by  
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### The scientist of life

At Easter, my wife, our daughters, and I went to Paris with a group of families from Milan. This trip was meant as a pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of the Miraculous Medal to give thanks for a grace received by a friend of ours. Our family was recently touched by the loss of an unborn daughter affected by trisomy. Some friends of ours had also been affected by this type of condition. And so was born a desire to understand more deeply the life of Venerable Jérôme Lejeune, who discovered the cause of trisomy and who is buried near Paris. Through the passion of some friends, the exhibit at the Meeting in 2012, and encounters and books, we came to know the story of this extraordinary scientist. We were able to contact his eldest daughter, asking her if she could accompany us to the cemetery. We were struck by her availability: not only did she ask her husband to come along, but she invited us to their home in the countryside to see the small bedroom and study in which Lejeune spent his weekends working and making small rosaries to give away. This sparse room helped us to understand how much this man was attentive to the essential: love for God and for his patients. Our conversation touched on the theme of suffering, so urgent for us and for our doctor friends who were accompanying us. Three considerations struck us: the only thing that can sustain the battle against illness and love for the patient is the freedom of the doctor himself, his conscious choice of witnessing the love for God. When Lejeune would talk to a mother of a child with Down Syndrome, he wanted the child to be in her arms, precisely so that she could remember that the truest way of staying in front of an illness is

a love for the person. Also, St. John Paul II, who had a special relationship with the Lejeune family, when he went through the drama of his long illness, shared his suffering with his friends, without having an answer about what he should do. It was very freeing to discover that in front of suffering, even a pope (and a saint) faced the difficulty of not having all the answers.

**Edoardo**, Milan

### Fr. Giussani and our children

As soon as I returned from the Fraternity Exercises, I stopped by to see my parents. My mom immediately asked how everything had gone, and I told her about the news that the Informative Process would begin for Fr. Giussani's beatification. Here I must clarify that my three siblings and I met CL during the 80s through a group of Scouts from Varese that was started by some people from the movement. Even though my parents didn't know that it was a group tied to CL, they understood that this proposal was a way of living the Christian experience within a beautiful friendship. In time, it became the road that has guided our life and all our decisions up to the present. My parents, who have never participated in the movement, never blocked or impeded us, but they always invited us to consider CL's proposals with a critical spirit. Now in their eighties, they have eighteen grandchildren and also great-grandchildren. They have never stopped educating us with their presence and their example. Getting back to my visit with my mother, I explained that the Informative Process includes a series of interviews with various people: not only with those who knew Fr. Giussani directly, but also, for example, with young people who have met him thanks to the testimony of others. At this point, my mom said to me, "Well then, I also can give testimony! Fr. Giussani has been the person who has educated our children much better than your father and I could have."

**Anna**, Italy

## Unforeseeable company

For the last fifteen years, my wife, Nadia, has been affected by a neurodegenerative illness and needs around-the-clock care. The journey of these years has not been simple, and we have lived many dramatic moments. But Jesus has made grow between Nadia and me a tenderness that only the unforeseeability of His Presence can make possible. He has done this through the faces of so many friends in the company of the movement, who make us feel loved and embraced. Three years ago, we had the grace of meeting Fr. Eugenio and the Quadratini. From the very beginning, especially for Nadia, this has been and continues to be a great help. Today, she herself is a resource to look to for me, for our children, and for our friends who don't let go of us. With the passage of time, the company of the Quadratini has become for us the possibility of walking together with friends, with whom, in yet again an unforeseeable way, an ever-greater affection has grown. Day after day, they witness to us that Christ prevails within every circumstance. Recently we were given the gift of participating in the meeting between the Archbishop of Milan, Msgr. Mario Delpini, and around sixty Quadratini. It was a very warm and moving moment during which the archbishop gave us a directive: to learn to see in the other that which is not apparent, that which we cannot see. This meeting highlighted another beautiful aspect of how the Church is embracing this company and how this company helps me and the hundreds of ill people who are part of it and everyone they meet along the way, including those who are not ill, to love Jesus and His Church more and more.

**Roberto**, Italy

## The youngest among us

At the end of April, I was in Lithuania to visit our friends from the Movement. We met at Kaišiadorys for the Community Assembly. Participating in that moment of dialogue were two Schools of Community along with a small group of young people from GS. The topic was the letter the pope had sent to Davide Prospero in January. One of us opened the assembly with the honest and sincere question: "In our community, I seem to see this unity. We live in a historical and political context marked by division. Perhaps the pope is inviting us to something dee-

per. In what way does this call to unity affect us?" Another friend had a different take on this matter, because his perception was that the letter referred to problems of the Movement In Italy, and that it reflected a situation foreign to life in Lithuania. I was struck to see two young people exchange glances, wanting to say something. Alma and Saulius are sister and brother and had attended the GS Triduum in Rimini. Sixteen-year-old Saulius began: "Last year when my sister Alma returned from the Triduum, she spoke of those days as a miracle, and I thought she was exaggerating. But something convinced me to accept her invitation to go together this year. We joined the GS community from Bergamo. Already during the bus trip, I was struck by the way in which so many young people were together. While we listened to Fr. Francesco's witness, I felt that we were all happy and we were going through the same experience. Thousands of young people in silence. I experienced that miracle of unity that my sister had talked about." Then Alma spoke. "I experienced unity in everything we lived and sang, in the words we listened to, in the meeting with the others we had met. I felt part of them, like a family. And I felt a unity with myself. Even now that I'm back here, I think of the faces of my friends who live thousands of kilometers away." These two contributions, made by the youngest of the company, generated amazed reactions by others. One friend in particular spoke of nostalgia in front of what Alma and Saulius had said: "In them is an experience that is young and alive. There is something that cannot be reduced to youthful enthusiasm, and I miss that." And he added a request: "I need true friends, who live seriously the School of Community, to witness to us the novelty of the Movement." Those who spoke after him reacted to this invitation. In that moment it was easy to recognize the unity that Christ generates among us, the unity of which we are always in need. But this dynamic generated a friend's question: "This unity that today we've seen happen again, what does it ask of us? The pope asks us to take care of it." Our task is to look for it, ask for it, and take care of it, recognizing that an Other makes it, but He needs us to desire it, to affirm it, to live it. The dinner and the evening with song, so simple and dominated by joy, were the expression of what had just happened in the assembly.

**Francesco**, Italy



Anna Leonardi and Davide Perillo

# Surprised by Hope

Iverson and Paula, Giambattista, Enzo. Three stories in which certainty about life arises only from the fact that Christ is present.

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“**T**o hope, you have to be very happy, you have to have received a great grace.” Among the things heard at the Fraternity Exercises, Charles Péguy’s phrase is the one that most makes him think of his entire story, from the time he was sixteen years old. “The great grace I received, I have no doubt, is my encounter with the Movement,” said Iverson Machado, a forty-six-year-old Brazilian, who met a teacher of Communion and Liberation in high school. “By being with these new friends, my life was finally beginning to discover its meaning. Today I can say the word ‘hope’ without feeling naïve about this experience of faith that has become more and more

filled with events and people.” Seven years ago, Iverson moved from São Paulo to Santiago, Chile, where he looked for a new job and learned a new language so he could be with Paula. They met at an assembly of CL leaders from Latin America in 2016. One evening she had sung Mina’s *La mente torna* (The mind returns). He was struck. There was something about Paula’s voice that made him want to get to know her. At lunch the following day, they are sat at the same table. It is there that Iverson discovered that the woman has an inoperable tumor in the pituitary gland and an autoimmune disease, which causes her crippling pain. Paula talked, she cried a little and laughed a little, but it was not the illness that domina-

ted her—there was joy in looking at her life as it was. “I immediately fell in love with her because of the trust she had inside. I said to myself, ‘I want to be with her, because I want what she has.’” So after a few months of video calls, Iverson decided to join her in Chile.

“We got married in 2020. The years that we were dating were the time when I had to undergo several surgeries,” she said: “It was tiring for both of us, but it was a chance to really get to know what our hearts were looking for. Illness can close you off, make you feel hopeless, or it can help you look at yourself as you are, at all the desire you have to be happy. And this always makes me rediscover my relationship with God, because only when I



discover that I belong to Him am I truly at peace.”

Coming out from the operating room, after one of her many surgeries during that period, still a little groggy from the sedation, Paula saw Iverson and some friends in the hallway of the ward waiting for her. She woke up completely and tried to greet them with all the voice and smiles she could muster. Once in her room, the nurse who had accompanied her asked her how much pain she was in on a scale of 1 to 10. “Eight.” The nurse shakes her head, “Strange. No one with such pain should have smiles.” Iverson said that at that moment he was reminded of some lines by Vinícius

de Moraes: “A woman must have something more than beauty. A nostalgia. It’s the beauty that comes from sadness.”

Today the couple is expecting a baby girl. Her name will be Isabelle and the due date is June 10. For the doctors treating Paula, even for the most skeptical ones, it is a *milagrato*, a small miracle, because it was rather unlikely. Iverson and Paula feel they are faced with a great mystery, and sometimes the fear of not knowing how it will be, how things will turn out, prevails. But then something always happens that causes Iverson to regain “the rhythm of his heart,” as he explains: “A few days ago, a friend brought

us a cradle as a gift. We, for a thousand reasons, had kept putting off buying one. We assembled it and put it in the baby’s room. It was a small gesture that took our worries off our shoulders. It surprised us a lot because the good that is to come always has the face of someone who is present.” ■

**F**rom the first evening, Giambattista asked if he could be admitted into the hall so he could listen to the lessons given at the Exercises. And then, without really knowing what the Fraternity was—without worrying too much about the formalities related to his entrance pass—he attended the

next two days, always sitting at the back of the pavilion. The topic had appealed him much more than the usual chatting with his colleagues in the bus parking lots. Giambattista Rebuzzi is sixty-two years old and, after early retirement from the printing industry where he worked for years, he has reinvented himself as a bus driver. He has driven several groups around Italy, but from the time he accompanied GS students to the Triduum a year ago, he has not been able to keep his curiosity at bay. "Seeing those young people experience Easter this way and hearing words like 'knowledge,' 'truth,' and 'meaning,' was the encounter that reopened the rusty lock of my past," he says. "I was in seminary until I was twenty-two. I left when I realized it was not my path. I had a lot of questions and that seemed to be a problem if I wanted to become a priest." That was a difficult moment in his life, because he had to come to terms not only with delusion but also with the sense of lacking something that he felt and made him feel incomplete. "I got married and had three children. I always tried to live my faith, but when during the Exercises Bishop Msgr. Paccosi quoted Fr. Giussani talking about the human person as a beggar for total fulfillment, I finally felt that the knot I had long been carrying inside was being untied." Giambattista went to confession during the Exercises; as penance, the priest advised him to experience those days intensely, identify-

ing himself with what he would listen to. Leopardi, Dante, Pavese, the songs he listened to sparked within him a sympathy for that restlessness he had always wanted to extinguish: "I realized that living this way is not the result of a fault. Quite the contrary. Perhaps it is precisely what makes me curious about everything that happens. I was really amazed to hear about desire as the engine that drives my life toward God and not as something I have to solve." The freshness of his eyes did not take long to win over the about fifty passengers he drove back and forth on the way from the exhibition center to the hotel. For some of them it was almost love at first sight: in just a few hours, a friendship was born in which everything could be said. Though he says that what impressed him most was the discretion of the people he met. "Through my work I have driven many pilgrims and religious groups around. Here I have seen people who are very discreet but open, with an uncommon respect for the other's journey." On the last evening of the Exercises, Giambattista's bus broke down and would not start. It was getting dark, and they were standing still in the exhibition center's parking lots. "I was upset; we were the only ones left in the middle of that huge clearing. As I was trying to fix the breakdown, one of them came up and gave me a caress. I noticed that no one was complaining or getting impatient." When the bus finally star-

ted again, Giambattista connected that fact to the hope he had heard about all day: "You can see it even in such circumstances when, instead of impatience, you are surprised by tenderness." ■

**I**t was something they didn't really expect. Not like this, at least. But when Enzo's child—twelve years old, with a genetic disease that had been forcing him to undergo countless injections, blood tests, and a cocktail of drugs he had to take twice a day—said, "enough is enough, I can't take it anymore," for Enzo, it was all about choosing. "I took him aside, and I let him sit on my lap. Then I explained the situation properly: the disease, the medications dissolved in the fruit juice, why his sight is poor..." He looked at him without saying a word and went to the other room. In those endless moments, Enzo Roccaforte, fifty years old, a police officer, and his wife Alida, forty-eight, a teacher, felt exhausted. How did he take it? What could such words say to the dreams and expectations of that cheerful little boy, who used to laugh often and played soccer and didn't care if he only saw the ball coming toward him at the last second? "That was just an instant. Then he came close to me again. He said, 'All right, I understand.' He gave a kiss to me and one to his mother. Then he went back to play by himself, peacefully." He was not afraid. He was not angry. "He was himself, free."



*“To hear talking about the human person as a beggar for total fulfillment, I finally felt that the knot I had long been carrying inside was being untied.”*

That is the reason that when Enzo is asked about the Exercises and hope, he starts precisely from there, from the peacefulness of his child. And from his desire “to be just like him, with the same immediacy: hope for me is what we saw there.” You are certain of the good because you are before someone who loves you, even when your efforts may seem meaningless.

These are not obvious words; they never are, and even less so in a home that has experienced so many struggles over the years. Their first child died when he was only a few weeks old, due to a heart problem. Their second son is affected by the same disease as the twelve-year-old, but in a more serious form. “Today he is twenty-three years old,” says Enzo, and “we had decided not to have children after him. We were exhausted; there was a risk that the problem would recur.” But their openness came with time, step by step. “And it grew out of the fact that we were the ones who had changed. We could perceive all the good we were continually being given, nonstop.” Enzo tells the story of a life spent in constant motion: Padua, Genoa,

Lecco, then returning home to Agrigento. “Every time in a new place, but always embraced. We were not alone. We had to face trials, but we also had someone there to help us.” Until, simply, “we realized that we are there. We are standing on our own two feet. We can laugh, we can perceive things that others can’t even see. Though struggling, our son was enjoying life. And we asked ourselves: What are we missing? We are missing nothing.” He calls it “the miracle of a mature faith. Realizing that all we are given is a gift. And being certain that good comes from the Lord.”

It was through this reopening that their little one arrived, with his load of struggles, both present and future. (“He wants to be a policeman when he grows up, and I didn’t know how to tell him it’s going to be hard.”) We can see the cheerfulness with which he plays tennis or simply asks, in front of a book, “Dad, will you please read it to me, as I can’t see?” “He is peaceful. But he is so because he knows we are. And this strikes me.”

Here we are then, being surprised by hope. That unexpected dialogue

about illness came two days before the Spiritual Exercises. Enzo went to the Exercises for Adults and Young Workers (taking turns with Alida). “Fr. Paolo Prosperi was speaking, and what had happened became crystal clear to me. Understanding what hope is was helpful, because I had perceived it in my son. He experiences this dependence in everything, in part because or maybe *by virtue* of his need. But this happens to us as well.”

He often comes across desperate people at work, “maybe regretting they have given birth to children who are now driving them crazy. So I speak my piece. I can understand them because I too have children who are not exactly as a parent would picture them to be. But I can say that we are happy, that good can also come out of what looks like rubble. Alida and I have both witnessed this: we have been given a hundredfold when we did not expect it. So why not them?” What about them? “Almost always, as they come out of the police station, they say ‘thank you’ to me because they have seen a glimmer of light. It does not depend on us, but it’s there.” ■

# Cuba. I will stay

The crisis that worsens, the decline in births. The exodus of the youth. Why stay on the island? The testimony of Laura, a psychologist in Havana.

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**O**n the picturesque streets of Havana, the capital of Cuba, you will pass by pick-up trucks full of people and murals celebrating the *revolución*, but also, in the last few weeks, people protesting due to the country's challenging economic situation. The local bishops constantly make appeals, and the people are struggling. Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Most Reverend Dionisio Guillermo García Ibáñez, described the current situation to Agensir in this way: "People must be treated in a way that enables them to take responsibility for their future and their lives. Otherwise, there is a risk that everything will collapse. We cannot just sit by passively and do nothing. We cannot continue like this when the talented and the young continue to emigrate, to leave the country."

Not everyone. Among those who have decided to stay is Laura, twenty-five, a psychologist and the current leader of the movement of

Communion and Liberation in Havana. We met in São Paulo, Brazil, during the Assembly of Latin American Leaders of Communion and Liberation. She has a clean, beautiful face, typically Cuban: black hair, olive skin, dark deep-set eyes. For some time, she has been at a clinic working with pregnant women who have received a prenatal diagnosis of a malformation or genetic disorder for the baby. In most cases, these women choose to have an abortion. Cuban healthcare, which is free and regarded as exceptional by the world's standards, has suffered some major blows in the last few years. Thousands of doctors have left the country. Consequently, the government had to reintroduce more restrictive measures on emigration and the hospitals are overcrowded. "My job," said Laura, "mainly consists in accompanying the families when they receive a diagnosis of a genetic disorder or congenital malformation of the fetus. This also



**Maria Acqua Simi**





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means staying beside women who choose to terminate the pregnancy. That is definitely the most difficult part for me. Abortion goes against everything I stand for, against my belief in the baby's right to life. At first, living with this contradiction was burdensome, but in time, through prayer and living to the fullest every day, I understood that if God wanted me—precisely me—in that place, there had to be a reason. I started to look at those women in a new way, not because of what they were doing. I realized that their choice involved tremendous suffering, and there are not many people who are interested in or have the time to stay in front of that pain and sadness.”

**Laura claimed that what allowed her to approach** these women with a different perspective was her faith. “Looking at this world of suffering with Christ’s gaze makes the difference. Otherwise, I would also end up feeling apathetic and indifferent, as often happens to people who work

A street in Havana.



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in healthcare services in Cuba. Every day I recognize more and more that God has put me in this place to be present in the lives of these women with my fragile humanity. That is why I request that I be allowed to stay with them even during admission to the hospital on the day of the abortion procedure, which is not easy and often complicated, since most women come from the eastern provinces and they are not familiar with the process and the steps. The time that I spend with them is precious. It gives me the chance to get to know more about their lives, some of which are extremely hard.”

**Since 1970, the birth rate in Cuba** has been in decline. The country has the oldest population in all of Latin America and the number of abortions is continuously rising, especially among younger women. On the UN’s list of the top ten countries with the highest abortion rate, Cuba ranks fifth. According to the World Population Review, “The birth rate has decreased drastically in the last few decades, and now it is one of the lowest birth

rates in the Western hemisphere with 9.88 births for every 1,000 inhabitants. This is mostly due to the easy access to abortion and the widespread use of contraceptives, estimated to be used by 79% of women... The birth rate is expected to reach zero by 2028.”

In such a complex situation, someone like Laura stands out. She is an anomaly. “A few months ago, something happened that moved me. A pregnant teen, only sixteen years old, came to end her pregnancy because her baby had been diagnosed with intestinal atresia. When the doctor performed the ultrasound before the procedure, he noticed that the blockage was so minor that it could have been just a perforated anus. When she noticed the doctor’s hesitation, she immediately asked me what was going on. I tried to reassure her and then I asked her, ‘If the doctors told you that your baby has something that can be fixed with a simple operation, what would you do?’ She blurted out, ‘I would do the operation myself!’ That morning, contrary to all expectations,

*“I pray a Glory Be every time a woman comes for an abortion. My prayer and my presence there are born from a reawakened conscience, kept alert by my friends, the sacraments, and the School of Community.”*

there was no abortion. When I came home, I was the happiest I had ever been in my life and I gave thanks to God for saving that life.”

**What happens, though, when things** go in another direction? “I pray a Glory Be every time a woman comes for an abortion.” It is not something sentimental or an act of piety. “My prayer and my presence there are born from a reawakened conscience. And what keeps my conscience alert is staying faithful to my friends in the Movement, to the sacraments, to reading the Gospel, and to School of Community, which is never a formality. This company of friends sustains me along the way and helps me to know myself when I am faced with challenges. The greatest treasure I have ever received was when, at fifteen years old, I met Alejandro from Matanzas and his wife by chance at the parish. They spoke to me about Father Giussani and invited me to a presentation of one of his books and to the vacation and other gestures of the movement. At first, I did not un-

derstand, but I was attracted to the way people talked about Christ and the Church in such a profound way. I had never heard anyone speak like that about those things before. After all, I do not come from a practicing Christian family.” Through this friendship “that I could never have imagined,” Laura matured. The community of the movement in Cuba today is made up of about twenty-five people in Havana and Matanzas. Every two weeks, the group that lives around the capital meets for School of Community at Our Lady of Charity Church. “We look forward to meeting together and we would like to do it more frequently, but certain challenges and the cost of transportation do not make that possible. I learn something from each of these friends.” What do you learn? “Charity. And faithfulness, like that of Marta, who is more than seventy years old and walks over an hour to be with us, having already read the text, and is always prepared and full of questions. My family still does not fully understand what I am living, but now they recognize that it is good for me, something positive. That is another reason I stay.” ■

# To the ends of the earth

The testimony of **Loredana and Renato Casiraghi**, a couple who have been married for many years and who now live in Qatar, where he designed Doha's first Catholic church.

**I** have been married to Renato for more than fifty years. I got to know the Movement and Fr. Giussani in the early days of Gioventù Studentesca in Milan. The encounter that changed my life was offered to me by my high school religion teacher, Father Manuel (Emmanuel Braghini), who was very famous then for his unique way of engaging with his students. He had such an energy, and you either loved him or hated him. He had bumped into Fr. Giussani on the tram and, after a few exchanges of opinions, they had combined their explosive personalities, giving rise to everything that came after.

My classmates and I, who attended an artistic lyceum, were busy doing a thousand things in the GS secretariat, and my free time was spent between Varigotti, Rimini, Assisi, the Bassa, the Ray... My youth was permeated by almost daily "encounters": my studio, my work, were full, positive. When I started teaching and joined CL, which had just been born, I felt I had already obtained everything from the life of faith, that I lacked nothing. Yet, something was missing.

**Then I met Renato**, who was not from the Movement. It was quite strange because almost all my friends had connected with young men from CL, while he was the exact opposite of the young people I hung out with every day. This put me in crisis, because I did not understand what the future might hold for me. For a year I lived in a state of constant questioning and prayer for clarification.... Until one day, I realized that everything I had received could not remain closed in on itself, but that the joy I had been given was to be shared with everyone. In 1972, after not even a year of marriage, we moved to Argentina for Renato's work and from there our full immersion in the world began. I could hear these words resounding: "Be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."

In those years, the movement was not yet present in Argentina, so I felt at a loss, without points of reference. But Renato had, and still has, a total openness toward people, so we began to open our home, and each person became an "encounter." I had emerged from my nest. I was finally making Fr. Emmanuel's words my own, when he told us: "You will no longer be the same... the encounter of faith changes you... if He is within you, you must recognize Him in everyone else, you must always carry forward the message you have received. Faith must be cultivated, enriched, it is a torch that must not be left under a bushel."



Thus I have always lived through life's many vicissitudes with the Christian's "optimism," an optimism given by hope, by the faith that is in us and that is transformed into charity toward our neighbor. It has not been easy, but God's grace has always intervened in the many dark moments. Then, Qatar. In 1975, it was *at the ends of the earth*. Not only far away, unknown, a Muslim land.... but also without a church! And yet, we rose to the challenge with great enthusiasm. Many considered us reckless to bring a three-year-old child, and then another newborn child, to a place where the necessary foundations for them to grow up were absent, at least from the point of view of Europeans... Argentina had been an adventure in this sense, but Qatar was in every sense of the word.

**A church was missing there**, but the *Church* was there. And we met it. It was an *underground* Church, as in the days of the first Christians: semi-clandestine meetings, Masses organized over the phone, baptisms, first communions, confirmations, catechism... everything took place in homes. There

The church dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary in Qatar designed by Renato Casiraghi.



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were so many people of various nationalities, with different rites, songs, expressions. And it was all in English, which was really difficult for me at first. But everything took place with spontaneity, and above all with a desire that we be together to “make” the Church.

**Our children were growing up**, and the matter of their religious education became increasingly urgent. A deep yearning was born in me to dedicate myself to catechism. That was perhaps the choice that has most filled me to this day. When Bishop Bernardo Gremoli came to Doha, he would always hearten us and keep his multiform flock united with love and dedication. At some point around 1993, he commissioned my husband to oversee the process of building the first church in Qatar, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. We felt privileged. And when Renato thanked him for his trust, he presciently warned us that it would be a cross to bear. So it was, but it was a cross that was so sweet and full of meaning that it still fills us with joy today. As time went by, everything happened and came to fruition, even the church, whose architecture rose somewhat disguised as an Arab building, without a bell tower or cross, but welcoming like the Virgin’s mantle which covers all of her children on earth, and mystically decorated by the blue of the interior paintings. At its inauguration in 2008, more than sixty nationalities were present, and it was a ceremony that will remain indelibly in my memory. Over the years, little by little, the Italian communi-

ty, which was almost nonexistent before, has also grown, and so we have dedicated ourselves to the newcomers to make them feel at home through the house of God. We began to feel that we were a point of reference for many, opening our home to many “temporary singles” who live here alone, having left their families in Italy. And this continues to this day. At a certain point in my life, from being a gift jealously kept in reserve, faith has become a light that involves the whole of everyday life, the salt of everyday experiences. ■

**Loredana**

**W**hen I met Loredana, I was very far from the faith. Like a good Milanese, work was all that mattered in my life. I came from a poor family. My father was disabled and I don’t know how my mother managed to raise us. The fridge was always empty and I decided I would work hard so that I would never see it like that again. But after meeting Loredana, with her lively presence, I began to wonder, because despite all my efforts I was not happy. I wanted more... At the time, I just worked harder, but then I realized that it wasn’t the answer. When I looked at her, I thought, “Why? What’s so special about her?” At the beginning I also felt a bit envious, because she had gone to high school and I had to settle for taking night classes at





On the left, the interior of the church in Doha. Here, Loredana and Renato Casiraghi.

a technical school. I worked eight hours a day and spent another four hours studying every evening to earn my diploma as a surveyor.

My journey began with pure curiosity about Loredana's life, which sowed seeds in the "fertile soil" of the Christian education I had received in my family. Almost immediately in our life together, challenges arose, some of them quite unnerving. I don't know when the Lord gave me the first sign: whether it was when I was kidnapped in Argentina or when Loredana had a difficult delivery for our firstborn, or other chilling moments, but I still didn't understand... But when we arrived in Qatar, I was surprised to observe our Muslim brothers praying five times a day. And I asked myself, "Why don't I pray? Do I think that I don't need it?" Good questions and terrible answers came naturally to me. But I didn't want to simply recite prayers. I wanted to be in the prayer. More years passed and other events happened. We returned to Italy in 1985, thinking we would forget Qatar. But then unimaginable things happened, so even though it wasn't in our plans, I accepted an offer that I could not pass up: to collaborate in the design and construction of the palace of His Highness the Emir. This was an adventure riddled with very hard challenges, in which I discovered the extraordinary power of prayer. Not the kind of prayer that asks for favors, but the kind that comes from the heart, a prayer of love, love for the Passion of Christ. At a certain point I understood His

suffering through mine, and I said to myself, "Who am I to demand attention when He who was innocent suffered the most terrible martyrdom without any comforts?" Then I cried and prayed... I am not ashamed to say it: I fell in love with Him. He had always been close to me, but I hadn't looked at Him.

**A short time after this**, everything was resolved and my journey began, from the Emir's palace to meeting the beloved Bishop Bernard, who entrusted me with the design and construction of a church in Qatar. Everything made sense. All I had to do was listen, see the signs, and do His will. He was the driver and I was the engine. However, the road was fraught with difficulties, because we were trying to create the first Catholic church in a country where the dominant religion was Islam, but also Wahhabi Islam, the most radical interpretation.

Many obstacles made the journey complicated, but little by little we were helped. The solutions that addressed the most difficult problems were not the result of my efforts, which were not lacking. Instead, something unexpected always happened. It was like being on a train that no one dared or could stop. I sensed a powerful yet gentle will that said to me, "Do not be afraid, I am with you. Build my church and do what I have called you to do." Feeling this gentle strength showing me the way is the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to me; it made me understand that the Son of God was right there beside me and how sweet it is to abandon yourself into His arms.

It took fifteen years between finding the land and obtaining the necessary permits, but then the church started to be built and we finished it in just eighteen months. Even today, when I enter the church, I feel moved, but also inspired, because of the many graces that the faithful have received. One in particular, which I was astonished to witness, is the healing of the painter Valentino Vago, who was told he had three months to live, and still ornamented the whole church. It is he who called the ceiling the "Cloak of the Virgin." ■



Luca Della Robbia, *Visitation*,  
San Giovanni Fuorcivitas,  
Pistoia (Italy).

## Living hope



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*The invention of a technique that created “earthen works that were almost imperishable.” The art of Luca Della Robbia and his **Visitation**, chosen as the image of the Fraternity Exercises. A sculpture in which Mary emanates “the tender light of the sky mirrored in a spring.”*



Giuseppe Frangi

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**A**mong the many factors, from an artistic point of view, that made fifteenth-century Italy, and Florence in particular, a period with few rivals in history, one factor has not been sufficiently taken into account: the capacity for technological innovation and the exploration of the potential of materials. It is thanks to this resourcefulness that Brunelleschi was able to raise a dome above the transept of Flor-

ence Cathedral that was fifty-four meters in diameter. And it was thanks to a novel technical solution of which, as Giorgio Vasari wrote, not even the Romans had been capable, that Luca Della Robbia, a Florentine sculptor born in the 1400s, was able to introduce a technique of extraordinary impact and success: “glazed” ceramics, which have become a distinctive and identifying feature of the Tuscan urban landscape.

The story is simple and emblematic: less skilled in marble and bronze than his master Donatello, Luca had turned to working with terracotta. But he faced a problem: the fragility of terracotta compared to competing materials and the fact that he could not produce works for outdoor use, because terracotta cannot withstand the elements. However, as Vasari recounts, Luca “found a method of protecting these works from the ravages of

time. Hence, after experimenting with many materials, he discovered that by coating them with a glaze composed of tin, lead oxide, antimony, and other minerals and compounds, which was baked in the fire of a special furnace, he produced a very handsome effect and created earthen works that were almost imperishable.”

The invention of glazed ceramics involved earthenware that was immersed in a bath of stanniferous enamel and given a shiny, sharp, and resistant patina. Vasari had judged it a “beautiful technique of his, which was so pleasing and useful.” It was undoubtedly novel, and it was certainly useful because it could be adapted to many situations, as can be seen in the case of the marvelous roundels with newborn babies on the façade of the Ospedale degli Innocenti designed by Brunelleschi. It was beautiful because it was able to enchant the eye with its simplicity and immediacy, as is evident in the *Visitation*, the masterpiece that served as the guiding image for the recent Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity.

**Very early on, Della Robbia** realized that glazed ceramics could be used not only for bas-reliefs, but also for freestanding sculpture, and thus could truly compete with marble or bronze. There was an additional competitive advantage: the works were fired in several blocks and then assembled at their destination, making transportation much easier. Thus, it was around 1445 that a load of shiny white glazed ceramic blocks left the large, new

house-workshop that Luca shared with his brother Giovanni for the church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia. Once they arrived at their destination, Luca reassembled them into a unique sculpture, destined to leave everyone amazed, fellow artists as well as the faithful. The joints between the various blocks had been designed so as to disappear under the folds of the robes of the two protagonists, giving the impression of a unified whole. The subject was the Visitation.

**At this point it might be useful** to give space to our imagination. The church in Pistoia was a marvelous building, bridging the gap between the Romanesque and Gothic, with a single, very wide nave and no side chapels. It can still be admired substantially in its original form. Della Robbia’s work was intended to be placed on an altar along the right-hand wall. Aware of this, the artist devised an ingenious visual strategy: the optimal viewpoint from which to view the sculpture was naturally in front of the altar, with the two figures thus appearing in profile, emphasizing their coming together. But Luca had also conceived of another strategic vantage point: that of those who, upon entering the church, were immediately attracted by the shining figure of Mary on the right, which was oriented toward the entrance and towered over the kneeling figure of her cousin. In that position, she immediately drew the viewer’s gaze, with her enameled and luminous whiteness. She is a young Mary, beautiful and of a radiant purity. As Margherita Gui-

dacci wrote in a poem dedicated to this sculpture, she emanates “the tender light of the sky mirrored in a spring.” Mary immediately revealed herself to the faithful entering the church, her presence so clear because she was so persuasively full of hope, a real, objective, living hope. Mary, with an attitude full of tenderness and care, turns toward her elderly cousin prostrate before her. With this work, Della Robbia had in fact introduced an unusual and even daring variation on the iconography of the Visitation that would later be adopted by other artists. Elisabeth’s old age is emphasized by the many wrinkles that heavily furrow her face. This is why her gesture of kneeling before her young cousin takes on a dimension of moving humility.

It is as if the awareness that determines their relationship is made manifest by the luminous clarity of the ceramic. Their gazes meet in the sharing of this awareness; Della Robbia has emphasized this exchange by painting their pupils with a touch of blue, the only color that interrupts the sculpture’s white continuity. In the division of the blocks of which the work is composed, the hands of Mary and Elizabeth have been worked together with the body parts upon which they rest. They were then attached to the figure to which they belong, as can still be seen at Mary’s right wrist. This was thus a technical necessity that served to make the relationship linking the two cousins even more real and intense, in the conscious sharing of the great hope that invested them. ■



# *Infinite dignity*



Paola Bergamini

*A dialogue with theologian **Javier Prades** on the recent Vatican Declaration: “A judgment on the present and a meeting point for those who share the value of the person proposed by the church.”*

**T**he definitive drafting of *Dignitas Infinita* by the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith took five years of work and much revision in light of the papal magisterium of the last decade. As is written at the end of the “Presentation” section: “This Declaration aims to offer some points for reflection that can help us maintain an awareness of human dignity amid the complex moment in which we are living. This is so that we may not lose our way and open ourselves up to more wounds and profound sufferings amid the numerous concerns and anxieties of our time.” We spoke about this with Fr. Javier Prades, theologian and rector of the San Damaso Ecclesiastical University in Madrid.

#### **How important is this declaration today?**

At every historical juncture, the church expresses judgments on the reality it is facing, which on the one hand have the capacity to illuminate situations, and on the other to reinvigorate the reasonableness of faith. This document moves in this direction, that is, to encourage a judgment on the present. What is our present? I find Pope Francis’s formula on the “epoch of changes” extremely topical, and I would say that there are two important factors to reflect on concerning what the human is today. The first is the unparalleled technological development in which we are immersed, and the second is a direct consequence of that: the new possibilities acquired become rights.

#### **An example of this?**

Surgical and biochemical technology, which makes it possible to think about gender transition, immediately becomes a right. It is no longer a possibility, but something I am entitled to. This mentality, especially characteristic of the Western world, claims to relate to every aspect of life as a subjective right.

#### **A negative meaning of right, then.**

First of all, an absolute meaning in the etymological

sense: unrelated to anything other than one’s own self-determination. One of the reasons for speaking of the dignity of the person, according to the categories proposed in the document, is to emphasize that rights—a very important category in the evolution of society in its social and juridical dimension—can be deformed into a subjectivist exasperation that does not respect all the factors and has the effect of reducing the person’s true stature. In this sense it is negative.

#### **What novelty does this declaration represent or introduce with respect to the judgments and concerns of the church?**

There is always a dimension of continuity, as is emphasized in the first chapter, in which the text summarizes the view that the Bible and the magisterium of the church have always had on the dignity of the human being. A new aspect is certainly the significant presence of references to the magisterium of Pope Francis.

**In the introduction and in the first three chapters, a number of key points are set out. First of all, the “ontological dignity of the person” is spoken of, followed by moral, social, and existential dignity. The document states: “The dignity of others is to be respected in all circumstances, not because that dignity is something we have invented or imagined, but because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent situations. This requires that they be treated differently.”**

Here, we get to the heart of the document. “Ontological dignity” may sound like an abstract expression, but it rests on the fact that we are creatures who have received participation in the highest dignity—our relationship with God. We are made by God and are oriented toward God through the unfolding of our lives. Dignity has an ontological foundation in our being a person, it has a value intrinsic to human nature, unassailable and indestructible in any circumstance or situation. This ontological dignity then has moral, social, and existential implications.



### **Can you explain this further?**

Every human life must be recognized in its meaning, in its value as an existential position, social fulfillment, and moral behavior. Only if these three dimensions originate from what we have called “ontological dignity” can one look at human experience in its entirety and unity. No economic, social, or health difficulties can diminish the judgment of people’s dignity. The declaration speaks precisely of unconditional respect for “human” dignity, not just “personal” dignity, because there is a risk that a person is understood only as “one who is capable of reasoning,” so that a disabled person, an unborn child—to offer just a couple of examples offered at the end of the declaration—could not be a bearer of dignity. This avoids serious misunderstandings.

### **The word dignity is accompanied by the adjective “infinite.”**

Originating from God’s creaturely gesture, it is not measurable: we are created for infinity and no human power can take the place of this infinity.

### **In fact, the declaration delves into the relationship between dignity and freedom.**

Ontological dignity is freely realized in the time and space of life. This speaks of the dramatic nature of the human condition of becoming what one can and must become. But it is only a freedom that rests on dignity as a relationship with the Mystery that cannot be subjugated to the powers of the world and does not succumb to the subjectivist drift of rights, which we have already alluded to. In this sense, another element comes into play: responsibility, that is, exercising my freedom in such a way that my dignity matures and becomes a good for me and for others.

### **This is where the theme of peace comes in.**

The first peace is with oneself and is possible through a recognition of dignity as gift. To the extent that this becomes a human experience, encompassing every aspect and circumstance of life, one can think of a civilization of love, a building of peace, as the declaration calls for. The condition for peace is that

Javier Prades, theologian and rector  
of the San Damaso Ecclesiastical  
University in Madrid.

there are people at peace in search of the meaning of life. The alternative is violence, because people tend to impose their conception of rights.

**We speak of peace while we are surrounded by war.**

In war, the value of coexistence is destroyed and a predefined idea of coexistence is imposed that does not have the dignity of the other person or people in mind. The church cries “no” to war. Benedict XV for the First World War, Pius XII for the Second World War, John Paul II for the Gulf War, then Benedict XVI’s, and today Pope Francis’s, appeals also to move in this direction.

**On April 11<sup>th</sup>, the European Parliament voted in favor of including the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Just a few days after, this declaration reaffirmed that abortion is among the most serious violations of human dignity. In the final part, it urges that “respect for the dignity of the human person beyond all circumstances be placed at the center of the commitment to the common good and at the center of every legal system.” Almost an appeal to states...**

As far as the juridical-political institutions of our Western world are concerned, I believe we are going through a moment of great difficulty, and I do not expect much from the European institutions. With regard to abortion, like other issues—surrogacy, gender theory, and migrants, for example—a subjectivist understanding of rights is favored. I would, therefore, like to emphasize the value of and capacity that this text represents for a dialogue with social actors who may not share the church’s anthropological out-

look, but with whom we can identify regarding some points. I am thinking in particular of certain currents of Western feminism that identify with the denunciation of the trafficking of women, sexual abuse, gender theory, and surrogate motherhood. The meeting point is a view of the human that, on the one hand, brings out the reasonableness of the Christian position and, on the other, allows action to be taken to promote change at the political and legal levels. But other examples can be given.

**Which ones?**

I am thinking of the associations for the rights of the disabled, who will find comfort in the declaration. I know so many parents, even nonbelievers, who, despite the difficulties, know how to appreciate their children with disabilities by first of all recognizing that they are human and, therefore, have their own infinite dignity. They come to see their child in the light of his or her ontology. It is always a path fraught with difficulties, but when a disabled person is accepted in his or her being, a unity is generated with those around him or her, and he or she becomes a point of humanity for others. We can say that the human becomes humanized. It is certainly not a process that is concluded once and for all. Let me give another example, concerning the drama of euthanasia. How many people ask for the “end of life” out of a sense of loneliness or fear of suffering? Loneliness and fear obscure the meaning of life. But that is not what they really want—their deepest desire is not to be alone, not to suffer, and to be welcomed. This text points out a path, not only theoretical, but practical, on which the church as the teacher of humanity unveils the human and sustains the proper focus of the human. ■

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# The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

*With a new translation by John Zucchi*

A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

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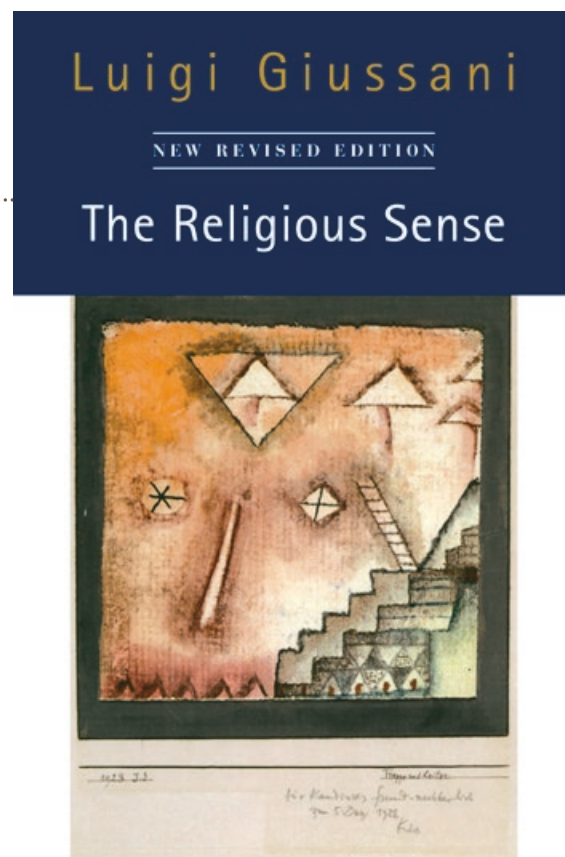
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