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Promises from the world

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n. 04

April 2021



Baghdad, Iraq.
A worker fixes the bell of St. Joseph's Church
before the arrival of Pope Francis.

01 Editorial

02 Letters

04 Close-up

A history that is happening now

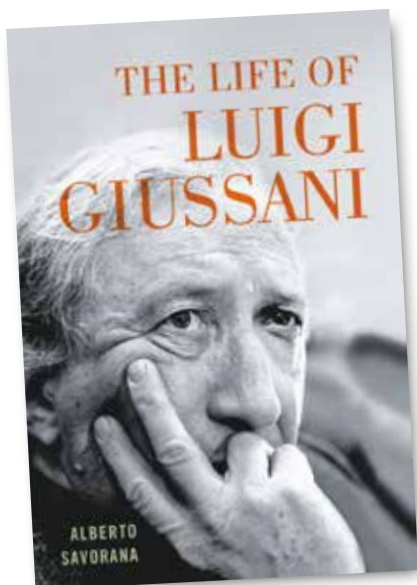
07 Just a presence

11 Honduras: In the eye of the hurricane

14 Sweden: The bridge

16 USA: Starting again in Atlanta

20 Canada: "I will go"



THE LIFE OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

by Alberto Savorana. Translated by Chris Bacich and Mariangela Sullivan

*A detailed account of the life and legacy
of the founder of the Communion
and Liberation movement.*

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The vaccine

“**H**ow do we react in situations that are not right?” Pope Francis asked at a certain point during his visit to Iraq. “In the face of adversity, there are always two temptations,” he said, “running away or getting angry,” neither of which achieves anything. “Jesus, on the other hand, changed history. How? With the humble power of love, with his patient witness. This is what we are called to do, and this is how God fulfils his promises.” Francis spoke of these promises that never disappoint and that are fulfilled in an unimaginable way—through our weaknesses—in the presence of the witnesses who were the reason for his journey: “Witnesses often overlooked by the news, yet precious in God’s eyes.” He looked at them, admired them, and placed them before the eyes of the world.

This is the reason we chose to dedicate space to his visit to the land of Abraham, to the words and gestures of those short but intense days in Baghdad, Erbil, Mosul, and Qaraqosh. In places where violence destroyed everything, the pope pointed to a reality still present: a people for whom evil and death do not have the last word because Christ is risen. The victory of familiarity with God upholds these men’s and women’s lives, which are lived out through forgiveness and specific histories and faces. He pointed to the Christian people, whom history seems to have defeated. They, through persecution, were stripped of everything but didn’t lose anything because they possess the treasure that is worth more than life itself: they are woven together in a relationship, in their belonging to Christ.

Stopping to look at them, as Francis did, can offer help for the situation we are all facing. “There will be moments when faith can waver, when it seems that God does not see or act,” he said. “This was true for you in the darkest days of the war, and it is true too in these days of global health crisis and great insecurity.” The problem, however, is not a question of resilience. It is under the pressures of life that we see more clearly who is up to the task and that we find people “who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence.” Those who, rather than running away, engage with reality, living life without being at the mercy of their circumstances, or of suffering, injustice, or the daily restrictions that exist at every level. You will see this in the stories in this issue that have come from CL communities, stories in which the “I” is reborn through an encounter with Christ, and in which a new perception of life generates real protagonists. “We know how easy it is to be infected by the virus of discouragement that at times seems to spread all around us,” we read in the pope’s speech in Baghdad. “Yet the Lord has given us an effective vaccine. It is hope.” It is the certainty that we are no longer alone. “Let us never forget that Christ is proclaimed above all by the witness of lives transformed by the joy of the Gospel. A living faith in Jesus is ‘contagious’; it can change the world.”

Letters

Norma, Viviana, Lucía

edited by
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The seed of hope

It is early morning. I'm the only one at school. I enter and I turn on the lights in the empty hallways. The window shades are down and the desks are waiting for no one. There is not even a hint of my colleagues, but someone may come in later. I go to the classroom of my seniors. We are in what has been classified as a "dark-orange" zone, and therefore the students are working remotely. Morale is low, and I ask myself, "How can I stay in front of those faces with hope in my eyes?" A WhatsApp group message bring me back to reality. Teresa, a friend from GS, asks "Should we say the Angelus together?" I don't have much desire. I feel more like complaining and being angry at the circumstances. When I leave the classroom awhile later, I see a group of colleagues in the hall talking with the principal. Some of them are smiling, others are joking around. They are at school, and they want to be here. I dwell on my bad mood, escaping from everything. My colleague, Caterina, smiles at me from behind her mask. "Should we say the Angelus with the kids?" I cannot say no. We enter a classroom and I log onto Zoom from my phone. Teresa is already there waiting for us. She teases me because the camera on my phone is really bad and Cate and I look like we're immersed in a sea of fog or in some shadowy light as if we were already in Paradise. Another couple of students log in, and even two colleagues who are out for a smoke before school starts. "I wanted to read you something before we pray," says the girl. "We can get up and face the day in the morning only if we are certain about something, and the most certain thing we have is a relationship. If it is there, we can stand straight and face all of reality. If it is not there, our sense of reality and

of who we are crash. We lose everything. It is like a dad saying to his three-year-old son, 'Go in the basement to get the wine.' The child would be afraid. If, on the other hand, the father says, 'Come with me to the basement to get the wine,' then the child would even go so far as to pull the devil's tail." We recite the Angelus. With that, the working day has begun. A seed of hope settles in me and starts working on my bad mood. That seed worked so much that the following day when I prayed with my ninth-grade students I read the same thing, since it helped me to not take for granted a gesture, so often a mechanical routine, with which we start our days. Often as a teacher I'm surprised at how a seventeen-year-old can be so profoundly adult in the way he faces the essential questions of life, even to the point that they call on us to do the same. I pray, pray often, I recite the Hours, go to Mass every day, many times mechanically, but fortunately "the Word became flesh." That day, God gave me Teresa so I could rediscover that without a relationship, not even having the students in school would be enough to live, that "in the dark sky of circumstances," we need Someone who takes our hand.

Norma, Milan (Italy)

Charitable work

An Argentinian woman called me; she is in economic difficulties, and she was asking to be helped with a food package. I reacted by sending her to the parish, but then I felt the need to call her back. I was provoked by a desire to know her better, and I set up an appointment at our Food Bank. She told me about herself and her problems; she is a seasonal worker waiting to get back to work. Her partner had just left her, and she was left with the mortgage to pay. We got to talking about me as well, of the Movement and of God. While we were talking I assembled the food box, and then I decided to accompany her home. As soon as we entered, she opened the box and was surprised by all the things it contained. "Don't mention it," I said, "It is

what we have and what we normally give away.” That is when she told me that she would like to be a part of this charitable gesture as a volunteer. I immediately gave her the two *Traces* in my car (January and February), and I told her about the magazine. I left full of joy, thinking about how good it is to see another person happy and with shining eyes. The Lord loves me and He uses everything, even my no to make me happy and more certain about Him. I was struck by the question in the article “Opening Up in a Closed World” in the February issue of *Traces*: “What makes it possible to recognize others as sisters and brothers?” I was struck, but I didn’t know how to respond. Today I understand that the Mystery became present within this encounter and that He gave me the answer I was looking for. When the person is standing in front of you, all mental games disappear, every barrier falls, and I find myself more alive and freer. In the following days I sent a text message to this new friend to see how she was doing and if she had had the opportunity to read *Traces*. She answered by sending a picture from the magazine with Giussani’s words: “The only hope I can find is the multiplication of these people who become a presence.” To think that I hadn’t even read the January *Traces*... I sent her the YouTube video of the meeting on *The Embrace* by Mikel Azurmendi in Spanish, her mother tongue.

Viviana, San Benedetto del Tronto (Italy)

“A joy no one can take away from me”

I’m fifty years old, and I have known the Movement for fifteen years. During this time, I have participated in the School of Community and in many other gestures and proposals of the movement, but I couldn’t make the decision to join the Fraternity. In the charism, in Giussani’s texts, and in various witnesses, I could recognize a journey that corresponded to me. I was, however, reluctant to join because I thought it would be like “joining a club.” In addition to CL, I have always been involved with the life of the diocesan church in various ways, and I was thinking that enrolling in the Movement would mean me giving something up. Furthermore, I was judging those who already belonged to CL and comparing myself to them. I was willing to contribute; I was in fact already doing that for certain proposals. So, what was holding me back? In reality it was my personal framework: I believed I was freer by being part of only the diocesan church. Then the pandemic came and, like everyone else, I stopped doing many of my activities, and what I missed the most were the events and meetings in the circles of the church. Many of these habitual activities “sustained” me in

my faith, and so there was a period when I felt abandoned and alone. However, like the coming of a gentle breeze, the School of Community started happening online. First it started in my city, and then the possibility to connect to the Madrid School of Community opened up—the Mystery has His ways. I wasn’t completely aware of this fact, but I couldn’t wait to participate every week. Then, a turning point came with the Advent retreat. We in our city gathered together to participate, with masks of course, and keeping the required distance. I was taking notes, I was writing faster and faster as my heart was finding a correspondence. There were words that I may have heard a thousand times, but that day, they really resounded in me. I felt a total correspondence when I heard what Fr. Giussani wrote in his “exile” in Varigotti in 1946. Shortly thereafter, Ignacio Carbajosa [the responsible for the Movement in Spain] explained that sadness and anxiety (something that overwhelms me every now and again and that I have always seen as something negative, something to avoid) is actually a sign of our need for the infinite, of our heart’s desire to recognize the Lord in the present, today. It is not something to avoid, but a path to follow, and it is there where I can recognize Him. This was a turning point—I recognized my resistance, and I finally accepted the way in which the Mystery has chosen to get closer to me. He, who knows me better than I know myself, knows the way most suitable for me. I decided to ask to be admitted to the Fraternity. It was almost a plea, and there was even a fear of being rejected. In the time following this decision, an immense gratitude has been born in me for all these years, for all I have received gratuitously. Paradoxically, as we read in the School of Community, the charism has opened to me many other realities (a prayer group for the children together with other mothers, moments of prayer in front of the Tabernacle). In the mist of the pandemic, when many of my colleagues are disappointed, sad, and angry, I’m still tired and at times stressed, but I have a joy no one can take away from me. Every week I feel grateful for the charism and the companionship that the Mystery has placed on my path. As Julián Carrón says in *The Radiance in Your Eyes*, “The root of the problem is the affirmation of oneself as the goal and ultimate horizon of action,” and “We put our hope in our projects.” I have been able to verify that to forget my personal framework, and to say yes to the way in which the Mystery makes Himself present to me today, now, has allowed me to experience the hundredfold here and now: a happiness and a paradoxical openness to everything that comes from Him through the church, lived within the charism of CL.

Lucía (Spain)

Close-up

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4

Mosul. The pope prays for the victims of war during his visit to Iraq, which took place March 5–8, 2021.

A history that is happening now

We reject what is happening and would like to cross it out. Defying that mentality, in the middle of the pandemic, the pope went to Iraq to show us witnesses. Because the issue in life is not resilience, it is “the response to a call” communicated through events that happen one after another.



Fernando De Haro

Let’s be honest. We could all relate, to some degree, to one of the latest covers of *Time* magazine. A white background with the year of the pandemic, 2020, crossed out in red. All of us, at some point, have wished that those months never happened, that we had not been shut inside our houses, that sickness had not come so close to us, that death would go back to being something hidden and far off and that the waves of angst had not been so unyielding. When those desires were not fulfilled, we felt defeated, incapable of living in a difficult time we never could have imagined; a time in which circumstances didn’t match the idea we had of how things should be. Our normal life wasn’t prepared for such a situation—which unfortunately means that our normal life was already in crisis.

Now the crisis has been brought to light. We men and women of the beginning of the twenty-first century deny history, deny the events and circumstances that do not fit our preconceived frameworks. Thirty

years ago, they told us that history was coming to perfection, that the triumph of liberal democracy, globalization, the internationalization of supply chains, and the creation of a worldwide market would satisfy almost all of our desires. We were told to love history because it would give us everything. Now, we have to cross it out, “cancel” it.

Jake Angeli woke up on January 6, dressed up in a buffalo horns, and went to assault the US Capitol because he could not accept a history in which Donald Trump was not the president of his country. He needed to erase Biden’s victory. Months before, in June, seven young people woke up in Miami scheming to erase not the present, but the past. Armed with red paint, they headed toward a statue of Christopher Columbus. They felt they were part of the great “cancel” movement.

In reality, “cancel culture” is not just a kind of protest that moved from social media into public life to boycott sexual predators and to attack statues of presumed or actual racists or

colonizers from previous centuries. Cancel culture is the expression of a weak self who does not know how to relate to history and the circumstances in which he or she lives. These are the same history and circumstances that stubbornly refuse to submit to the filters on our most popular apps.

It is not a problem of “resilience,” a popular concept right now. It is not that we do not know how to stoically endure what happens to us. If all we needed was character development, it would be easy. But the weakness of the self, the “I,” is not merely or fundamentally psychological. This weakness comes from not understanding that our “I” is vocation: a response to a call that uses the grammar and syntax of history, of events that follow one after another. The most unique and personal thing we possess, our “I,” can only develop and grow by responding freely and confidently to the mystery who summons us through particular circumstances and situations. We, however, conceive of history as an orphaned



Qaraqosh. The pope with Doha Sabah, the mother of a little boy killed by a bomb.

daughter because we cannot reduce it to our analyses. Consequently, we find it enigmatic, a succession of unfortunate events with no meaning.

6 It was in this context that the pope embarked on a trip to Iraq. This was an opportune trip for responding to cancel culture. With the pandemic not yet over, Francis wanted to travel to the place where God called Abraham, where the “I” clearly emerged as the response to a vocation that has the form of a history, of circumstances he did not choose. “It was here that Abraham heard God’s call; it was from here that he set out on a journey that would change history,” the pope said in Ur. He invited us to look at Abraham the patriarch. “God promised him a great offspring, but he and Sarah are now elderly and childless. Yet it is precisely in their patient and faithful old age that God works wonders and gives them a son.” Francis chose to meet with Ali al-Sistani, a Muslim cleric and son of the patriarch Abraham, leader of a Shiism that, unlike the Shiism that governs in Iran, has not abandoned the call that the mystery communicates through circumstances for ideological interpretations of a political theology.

Francis traveled to the place that was the epicenter of jihadism at the beginning of this century, where the desire to cancel history transformed into a violent nihilism with disturbing consequences. He traveled to the place where Iraqi Christians, the Christians of the Middle East, have offered a witness to the whole world of how a circumstance as negative as persecution can be an opportunity to affirm something positive: a victorious love. There, “so many *witnesses* have arisen in our own time, often over-

looked by the news, yet precious in God’s eyes. Witnesses who, by living the Beatitudes, are helping God to fulfill his promises of peace,” the pope said.

In Mosul, where not all that long ago the black flags of the deadly caliphate were still flying amidst the rubble, Francis remembered the “barbarous blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people forcibly displaced or killed.” He also directed our attention to the people who, in the midst of all of it, “thanked the Lord who has always filled you with joy, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.”

Again and again, the pope cited stories of particular people, convinced that “witness is the way to embody the wisdom of Jesus. That is how the world is changed: not by power and might, but by the Beatitudes.” He invited us to respond the same way as these witnesses, who show us that “terrorism and death never have the last word.”

Witness and circumstances: This is how a person, a strong “I” emerges, one aware of having received a patrimony and a belonging in life that are its source of strength. When life’s challenges put on pressure, and in Iraq there has been a lot of pressure, witnesses are needed. As the pope said in Baghdad, “How do we react to situations that are not right? In the face of adversity, there are always two temptations. The first is flight: we can run away, turn our backs, trying to keep aloof from it all. The second is to react with anger, with a show of force.” It is in those moments that what we truly need to live becomes clear. In Qaraqosh, Francis admitted being deeply moved in meeting Doha Sabah, a young woman who lost her son in the first attacks and who said that she believes “forgiveness is necessary to remain in love.” The pope said he was struck by “the testimony of Dawood and Hasan, a Christian and a Muslim who, undaunted by the differences between them, studied and worked together.” He also spoke of “Najy, from the Sabeen Mandaean community, who lost his life in an attempt to save the family of his Muslim neighbor.”

According to Francis, this is the method: only a life can set life in motion. “Let us never forget that Christ is proclaimed above all by the witness of lives transformed by the joy of the Gospel,” he underlined, going on to say, “As we see from the earliest history of the Church in these lands, a living faith in Jesus is ‘contagious’; it can change the world.” ■

Just a presence



Stefano Maria Paci

The pope's journey to the places of the Old Testament so that he could be close to the persecuted Christians in towns that were the bastions of ISIS. "They did not take up arms, the sign of another way of conceiving of life." The report of a Vaticanist.



Erbil. A Christian woman waiting for the pope in the Franso Hariri Stadium.

The tanks. What most struck me were the tanks. I counted fourteen on the twenty-minute drive from the Baghdad Airport to the presidential palace, once the residence of Saddam Hussein where the nation's wars were managed, and which now sees the Catholic pope meet the head of the nation and the political and civil authorities. "I felt it was my duty to come here," Francis had told us on the plane before walking through to greet one by one the journalists of the international press who were traveling with him. "A duty."

But why Iraq? Why during this moment of the pandemic? I ask these questions as the helicopters hover over our heads to protect the convoy, an enormous number of soldiers in full combat gear surveil the streets, armored vehicles with machine guns escort the motorcade, and drones keep watch from above. I think about the questions and I find a few explanations, but I perceive the real reason only when Francis enters Baghdad's Cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation, where, during a Mass on October 31, 2010, ISIS militants attacked and massacred forty-eight Christians, among them two priests. Now the pope is here, in this place of martyrdom. The church is built in the form of a ship that carries the believers on a sea, like the boat that carried Jesus and the disciples during the storm. While His friends feared they were

about to die, Jesus was there. "We are gathered in this Cathedral," Francis said, "hallowed by the blood of our brothers and sisters who here paid the ultimate price of their fidelity to the Lord and His Church." In that moment, I understood. For the pope, for every Christian, everything is bound to a presence. The discourses come later or intervene on a different level. Presence, only presence: being here, being physically here, in this cathedral, alongside the brethren in the places of their pain and suffering, in stormy moments as well as in times of joy, and paradoxically, I think, as Francis places flowers on the altar under a large painting of Our Lady and the child Jesus and prays in silence, it is the same whether one goes to school, to university, or to a workplace, or if one is pope and comes to Iraq: being present, immersion in reality, is the one criterion.

The dialogue with Islam, like that among Christian denominations, has traveled for decades on difficult, often abstract tracks. Now, on this journey, I saw it take on flesh and concreteness through a presence. The next day this presence traveled along a small road in Najaf, a city sacred to Shiite Islam because Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali, the first convert to Islam, is buried here. The pope enters a home, that of the Great Ayatollah Al-Sistani, for a "courtesy visit," the official name for an encounter

that was difficult to obtain, a name chosen to say that the pope was the one pay meek homage to the Islamic authority figure. But Francis had long before decided to be everything to everyone, humbly, if it would be useful, not to stress authority but authoritativeness, just as I had seen him do in Abu Dhabi when he and the Great Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the point of reference for the Sunnis, signed the Document on Human Fraternity, the inspiration for Francis's most recent encyclical, or in Sweden for the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's Reformation. "Many times one must risk, and I know that for these things some accuse me of being just a step from heresy," he told us without smiling on the return flight, "but these decisions are always made in prayer, in dialogue, asking for advice, in reflection. They are not a mere whim." When Bergoglio enters his home, Al Sistani surprises everyone by rising to his feet, something unheard of, something he never does, not even with presidents or the highest religious authorities.

It was a gesture of the maximum respect, which echoes throughout the Shiite world, even in nearby Iran. The humility of Francis, like that long ago of the saint of Assisi who went to the Sultan, has an immediately visible effect. And then there is the importance of the physical presence of the pope in the places of the Old Testament and alongside the persecuted



The pope travels the roads of Najaf to meet the Great Ayatollah Al-Sistani.

Next to the house surrounded by desert lands, the pope meets with the leaders of the other religions of the nation. It was here, in this physical place, in this land, while Abraham was at the entrance of his tent at the Oaks of Mamre, that God made His promise: I will give you descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give you a son. Leave everything, depart, and trust in me. A proposal, not an order, and God waited anxiously for Abraham's reply, the beginning of an alliance with man. Fr. Giussani said, "Abraham's mind, his consciousness, his heart must have been like a light, an undefined light, because it was like a great dawn that was breaking in the history of mankind, within the soul, through the soul of Abraham, since this is the place where the meaning of all the history of the world, the meaning of every man's existence, finds its communication. The event begins to communicate itself by which God becomes a factor within our lives, within the life of man, by which God becomes one of us, one of us, like us."

And yet Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed when she heard that she would bear a son, because both she and her husband were very old. Fr. Giussani continued: "When Sarah laughed, Yahweh observed her and rebuked her, but He did not, because of this, change the significance of His presence, His plan. The fact that Sarah laughed did not make Him change His plan." What consoling words: the subsequent history of Israel, but also the daily story of each of us, is in effect always divided between the attentive wonder of Abraham and the incredulous laughter of Sarah. But God is faithful; He joins man, "mixes in" with him and always keeps His promise of inseparable friendship, regardless of our answer. "Without this event, forgetting this event," Giussani wrote of the encounter of Abraham and God, "you are no longer anything. [...] Whoever has been marked, in his being, by God's involvement with him, whoever is marked by the sign of the risen Christ [...] can no longer deceive himself: [...] 'Cut off from me you can do nothing.' This is our value, this is the value of our face, the content of our person."

Christians of Mosul and Qaraqosh, towns that were the bastions of ISIS. This is the true goal of his journey: to bring the caress of the church to the Christians who suffered for the name of Christ, for their faith in Him.

It was a moving journey, in which we felt that in some incredible way we had entered a war film and at the same time the pages of the Bible and the Acts of the Martyrs. As we travel with Francis, the names of the Old Testament resound in my head: the Plain of Nineveh, Ur of the Chaldeans, the house of Abraham, where he lived, he who was the reference point of the three monotheistic religions and the father of us Christians. "Here, where Abraham our father lived, we seem to have returned home," Francis says. "We are the fruits of that call and that journey." Ur, where everything began, where Abraham hosted God under the form of three travelers, referred to in the singular in the Bible, as if they were one, a prefiguration of the mystery of the Trinity.



Qaraqosh. The visit to the community and to the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

10

The content of our person is the Nazarene. The Islamic State fighters painted or drew with a rock the letter *N*, for Nazarenes, on the doors of Christian homes to proclaim its religious dictatorship and to indicate that those who did not convert to Islam would be killed, enslaved, or forced to flee. That letter *N* was intended as a sign of shame, but instead it became a sign of glory. The glory of the martyrs.

To reach Mosul and Qaraqosh, we leave Baghdad very early. When we land in Erbil, we are met by helicopters and minibuses escorted by six armored vehicles. I watch the road attentively: it is the same one traveled on foot by 120,000 Christians in the course of only a few days as they fled their cities and villages conquered by ISIS, having had no time to take anything with them, their elderly not even having the time to take the medications they needed. They found refuge in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, but slept in the open, without food or extra clothing. In Mosul, which for three long years (from June 2014 to July 2017) was the capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Francis prays for the victims of the war in the center of the square bordered by four churches, all of them destroyed by terrorist attacks. The rest of the city had also been destroyed: it is a heap of rubble, as if a terrible earthquake had hit, but instead the devastation was man-made. Francis says that the tragic reduction of the numbers of the disciples of Christ here and throughout the Middle East has immeasurably harmed society. It is a way of saying that the faith and the Catholic Church are not European and Western: their roots are here, in the Middle East, in a land that continues to suffer.

Then we go to Qaraqosh, the city that had the greatest percentage of Christians in Iraq, 90 percent in an overwhelmingly Muslim nation. I wait for the pope in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, looking at the colorful traditional clothes worn by many women, and I think of what they have seen and suffered. This church, now rebuilt, had been burned and the pews set on fire. The walls, now covered in marble, had been blackened by smoke, the columns riddled with bullets, the sacred books destroyed, the statues broken. Here the Christians suffered evil and did not react. They did not take up arms, which was a sign of another way of conceiving of life. Despoiled of everything, even in their total poverty they had everything they needed to live: the very concrete companionship of Christ.

And I see the gaze, full of deeply moved emotion, with which they look upon the pope, sweet Christ on earth, come here for them, for those who died and those who survived, for those who have written with their blood and tears and with their hope a new page in the Acts of the Martyrs. The pope came here to bring the tender caress of Christ to His own, to those whose homes were marked by an *N*, His name, as a sign of contempt. Them. Us. *N*, as in Nazarenes. ■



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Honduras In the eye of the hurricane

The devastation caused by
Hurricane Eta last November.



Luca Fiore

*Life in the small communities of CL in a country where
two hurricanes hit in the middle of the health emergency.*

“**A**s soon the situation was beginning to return to normal, there were two hurricanes.” This has been how the year of pandemic has gone for Honduras: as soon as you thought that the worst had already happened, nature hit even harder. They called the storms “Iota” and “Eta,” and both left behind destruction and numerous victims. José, a Spaniard, has lived in this Central American country for 22 years now. And when he arrived in 1998 to work for a non-profit, Cesal, it was during one of the worst hurricanes in the history of the Atlantic Ocean, Mitch, which brought Honduras to its knees. He was supposed to stay for a year-and-a-half, but, as it happened, in 2006 he married Elly, a Honduran, had two children, and now calls Honduras his home.

12

José is part of the small community of CL in Honduras. There are about fifteen people. Some of them were baptized in the Catholic Church after their encounter with the Movement, which is quite a rare event in a nation that is more and more Evangelical. Honduras is also one of the poorest countries of Central America. Social inequality and drug trafficking causes extreme violence. Many decide to leave, and many from the community have decided to do just that.

“The situation that this time has imposed upon us,” José recounts, “is forcing me to look reality in the face. Many things happened during the lockdowns, and it was a great help to stay on top of and care for precise things: the journey of the School of Community, the Masses of the pope, virtual encounters with friends, praying Compline before bed... These were all gestures in which you realize that the Lord is with you.” Then the hurricanes came, both in the month of November. They brought with them gusts of winds that reached up to 260 km/hour; barracks were brushed away and dozens of people died. José, who for months had desired to return to traveling for his NGO, now did not want to do so because of the scale of the catastrophe. “It is really something to see the places that have been abandoned because of the flooding, which before had been full of

people and of life.” He says that he has found himself living a paradox: “When I returned home from traveling after the hurricanes, I was grateful for the trip because I rediscovered that I am not made for isolation, but to go out toward others, to look at their needs and see that they are the same as mine. This provokes great questions in me and makes me pay attention.”

José tells of how paying attention to the concrete needs of each person in the community even when he was in isolation was decisive for his growth. One such need was of a friend who discovered that she had a tumor and needed to be accompanied to her appointments; another was of a friend taking care of her father who was undergoing dialysis in the midst of COVID. Another occasion he recalls was one not only of need but of wonder: a friend surprised by the joyful countenance and “illogical happiness” of her grandmother, even though she was afflicted by a degenerative disease.

Elisa is an Italian married to Danny, a Honduran. They have a three-year-old girl and a baby boy. Together with a few mothers from the condominium in which they live, they began to coordinate mutual help for the care of their children so that they could play together while the parents worked online: “The relationship among these mothers became so intimate and intense that we began to meet in the evening to talk about the day and to share our worries and desires. Even today, these friendships remain for me a great gift.”

At the end of 2020, Elisa had gone to Italy for the birth of their second child. There, she began to ask herself and her husband if it was worth it to return to Honduras. “We spent a great deal of time calculating, in the most mathematical way possible, what were the pros and cons of life in the one and the other country.” She was worried about her daughter and the fact that they could not send her to preschool. They asked a friend who is a pediatrician for advice and this friend, in addition to giving them a medical opinion, began to ask them questions about their life in Honduras. “In order to respond, we were forced to look back and see all of the good things that had happened to us. It made us



think of our vocation, and experience in a new way the reasons that had brought us there, reasons we were forgetting.” Living life as vocation, Elisa explains, “is the most important thing for me. Otherwise, I fall into a calculating logic. And I recognize how important the Movement is because it is what helps me to live this way. For this reason, we returned to Honduras grateful for the presence of our friends in the community and full of the desire to take care of each person who is making this journey with us. And we were surprised to see how excited the families of our condominium were to see us again!”

Mariela, a teacher, tells the story of one of her students who, during the previous year, had usually been absent from class. Recently, however, this student’s mother died of cancer and, for a few weeks now, she has begun to reconnect to the classes. At the end of one of the classes, Mariela stopped to speak with her and the girl opened up and told her about the pain she was in. When they said good-bye, Mariela immediately asked her colleague who taught the next period to excuse the girl, who would have been late because Mariela had stopped her. “It surprised me that the other teacher told me that she was not expecting the girl to come to class. I felt sad for her. And I think that this reaction is born from the fact that I want someone to wait for me. I do not want to be stricken from a list because of my shortcomings. I desire that someone continue to have hope for me. Just as Christ waits for me, I too want to wait for my students.” ■

A vacation of the Honduran community before the pandemic.

Sweden

The bridge

Life with the link to Denmark closed, far away from friends with a new job... Valentina talks about what has changed in her daily life in Malmö.



Paola Ronconi

14



It is just twelve kilometers, but the pandemic is teaching us how even that can be an impassible distance. The high-tech bridge—an eight-kilometer suspension bridge connected to a four-kilometer underwater tunnel—that connects Sweden to Denmark has been closed since October. Valentina Battistoni has lived in Malmö since 2016. She came there from Rome with her husband, who is a professional trumpet player, and two children (a third was born on Scandinavian soil). The closest CL community is in Stockholm, about an eight-hour drive. Or in Copenhagen, on the other side of the bridge... Before the pandemic, she and her family crossed the strait twice a month to attend School of Community. The Italian family brought a bit of warmth to the cold region, regularly inviting Danish friends to their home on the other side of the bridge for a proper Italian pasta dinner and a glass of wine,



Valentina with her family.
Below, with their friends in the CL community.

something unfamiliar in these parts. “With these friends, like those in Italy, no question, wound, or discovery slips through the cracks. The community here is very young and you cannot get by with ready-made phrases,” Valentina says. “Not even now when everything is done by Zoom.”

Here the battle against the virus means no social visits, no Masses and no masks. It seems like a contradiction, but “they have faith in herd immunity. In Malmö, the churches have been closed since October. In Stockholm, they are open, and some priests celebrate up to fifteen Masses in a single day. We sorely miss being able to physically attend.” Still, without a doubt the situation forces you to look at what is essential—what makes you get out of bed in the morning.

In Italy, Valentina taught art history. She said her job was like a continual prayer “because the subject was beauty and because the students never give you a break; you always have to be sincere and transparent.” Here, too, she is a *lärare*, a teacher, but she teaches Italians who, in Sweden, have the right to retain their mother tongue.

Even before the pandemic, she had started going to a small town nearby to tutor two Albanian children who had moved from Italy. One is Marko, restless and fidgety like kids his age anywhere in the world. He gives one-word responses to questions, if any. “One Monday, he didn’t have any homework or tests to study for... his teacher hadn’t done much. And he broke down crying. He said he felt stupid, that he isn’t happy not doing anything, with no one following him. It struck me: he could have been happy doing nothing, but instead, he didn’t want to throw his time away, so he begged for help.” She could

have tried to console him, saying that next year he would change schools and teachers...but the day before that her friends in Copenhagen had come to her house for lunch after many meetings over Zoom. “We talked about work, played with our kids, and helped each other to see what it means to say yes to Christ in daily life. When I found myself there with Marko, that was my yes to Him: I ‘virtually’ introduced him to a number of teachers, friends of mine who had recorded lessons on YouTube, then we worked on some math and spoke about confirmation and about our being called to live here in Sweden... I told him that both of us were made for happiness.” She continues to help him because, as she says, “I want to see his eyes and face his questions.”

With COVID, there are fewer and fewer foreigners around so, to pick up an extra paycheck, Valentina found a job in a specialty Italian food store. “Finally an ‘ATM’ kind of job, I said to myself. One where you can go on autopilot, come home, put the kids to bed and relax on the couch.” That didn’t last long, though, because her colleagues, as well as her clients—Swedish people—noticed when she was on autopilot and asked, “Is everything okay?” Valentina started to understand how “checking out” was not good for her or for anyone. People come to the store to look for good salami, tomatoes, real pasta, and a bright face. In other words, “they want to see how you can relish life, and not just because they eat well in Italy...” One morning, a woman came in who “struggled to move her arms,” so Valentina helped her shop. A couple of months went by and the woman came back. Valentina was in the back

of the store, but came out when she saw her to ask if she could give her a hand. The other woman’s eyes opened wide: “You remember me?” She helped the woman navigate the store, packed bags that were not too heavy for her, and loaded the car for her. Nothing heroic, but something surprising. “Now she comes often. She also shops for other people from her little village outside the city. But if I am not fully there with all my questions and my need to see Jesus alive, I do not recognize what is happening.” This recognition was in evidence when a customer had packages shipped to a small town above the Arctic Circle and then sent a picture to thank her for how carefully the items were packed.

“I am learning that there are no limits to the fact that others are important for me,” even in the frigid homeland of Ikea where, when you try to exchange a word or two at the supermarket, the other person is taken aback. Or where, at getting a fifth *Hej*, hello in Swedish, after the thousands of greetings offered to others, the whole Battistoni household celebrated. This is something their children are learning, too. For years, they have made the same journey every day from the house to preschool. Tommaso, who was four when they moved to Sweden and struggles with language, even Italian, always said “Hej” to the hairdresser when they passed her shop without receiving a response. Valentina realized, though, that each time the woman was a little closer to the door. “Slowly, over the course of three months, she reached the point of replying to our greeting, and then one day, she stepped out of her shop, hugged Tommaso, and said, ‘I wait for you every morning.’” ■

USA

Starting again in Atlanta

In a city where “people are always passing through,” Marco lives a bond that never leaves him and has extended to others even in the midst of the pandemic, all the way to Alabama.



Anna Leonardi

16

Living in Atlanta is like living in a port city. A land that was once the territory of the Creeks and Cherokees and later the birthplace of Martin Luther King, is now home to prestigious universities and corporate behemoths like Coca Cola and CNN. “People here are always passing through. They stay for a few years for an internship or a master’s degree, and then move on. The nomadic life typical of America becomes macroscopic here in Georgia,” recounts Marco Saccaggi, a Milanese engineer who has been working in Atlanta for eleven years, having moved there after spending ten years in Dayton, Ohio. He arrived in the States in 2000 with his wife, children, and a two-year

contract. “It seemed to us like a nice opportunity, especially considering that at the time the children were of school age.” But after those two years, America became their home and the community of the Movement their main point of reference. “When we were in Dayton we used to go on the short vacations with the communities in nearby states: we’d drive fourteen hours straight to be together for four days. Then right after we arrived in Atlanta, the only people in the Movement left, and we found ourselves alone with our children grown and beginning to leave home for college.” Marco and his wife built bonds in their parish. In these ten years there have been many encounters.

Precisely because of this continual arrival and departure of people, the many people who meet them are often struck by the stable bonds that exist among people of the Movement. “They realize that in our life there’s something stronger than any move to another city, a river of relationships and bonds of affection that accompany us wherever we go and enable us to open ourselves to everyone.” Marco has always proposed doing School of Community with his new friends. Their living room in Atlanta has seen many small groups form and then over time, for various reasons, break up. But they do not talk about them as a series of false starts; rather, they are grateful for those with whom they



have shared part of the journey. They have the patience of those who know that life is a promise. “We have always followed what happened to us without having the project of building anything, beginning again every time. For us, these are the slow and mysterious steps of our journey.”

Then last April, the outbreak of the pandemic paradoxically became the occasion for new relationships to sprout. Marco was surprised by this in several places.

The first was at Georgia Tech, one of the most important universities in the state. There had never been a real CLU community there until Fr. Branson Hipp, a young diocesan priest who had met the Movement in the seminary, was assigned to be a chaplain there. “This new assignment, together with the health restrictions, had made our gatherings with Fr. Hipp less frequent,” recounts Marco. But instead of being the nth obstacle, it was the beginning of something new that all started in the campus cafeteria where Branson was having breakfast one morning. In front of him on the table were his waffle, a cup of coffee, and the text from the School of Community. At a certain point, he felt that someone was looking at him. He turned around and saw two students who looked a bit daunted; they nodded at him, and it turned out they were Italians who had arrived there for the semester. When they saw a priest

Atlanta, Georgia.



Marco Saccaggi, second from the right, and Father Branson, in the center.

18

reading a book by Fr. Giussani, they felt right at home. “That morning our ‘School of Waffle’ was born: half an hour of reading while we have breakfast. Over time, other students joined in too,” says Fr. Hipp.

The other front that opened up was in the bordering state of Alabama. At the end of August, Marco received an email from Sister Magdalene Marie of the Diocese of Birmingham, where Bishop Steven Raica had recently arrived. Sister Magdalene had told him about spending time with CL youth during her university years and he encouraged her to find a School of Community and renew the experience. But that was not all. He also asked her to extend the invitation to many others who served in the diocese. As Marco recounts, “So in September I started meeting weekly on Zoom with about fifteen people about whom I knew nothing and whom I might never meet in person. But the familiarity and honesty of our conversations were incredible. Many of them teach catechism so their recurring question is about how to communicate the faith to young people. Marco does not have simple recipes, but continues to invite them to all the Movement’s gestures, even if they are only online.

Some of them participated in a national meeting with Fr. Julián Carrón and were amazed by the freedom with which one can face every aspect of life. They asked Marco to continue that dialogue during their Monday meetings. “At the end of each meeting I always ask, ‘So, do we want to continue? Shall we see each other again next Monday?’ Nobody has ever skipped a meeting, and they ask for the text to work on and prepare questions for.”

Finally, the last front of this newness involves Marco’s small School of Community group with some young families they have met in recent years. “Because of COVID, we had to stop our Sunday afternoon School of Community followed by dinner, as well as all the other get-togethers.” During their most recent Zoom meeting, Emma, the mother of two small children, talked about how she had come to understand what Marco had been explaining since the beginning: “The convivial aspect of the Movement always fascinated me. We sing, play, and eat. Now I realize that the thing I truly desire from this friendship is for it to keep me attached to my humanity, to my questions. This is what has happened since Carrón asked us, ‘What saves us from nothingness?’ Who in the world had the courage to challenge us this way? Beginning to answer this question coincided with my bonding deeply with this place.” Not only Emma sees with this clarity. For the others as well, these months spent far from each other have marked a change of pace. Marco, who they see as the “veteran,” looks at everything as if he were the most recent arrival. “I find myself in front of a maturity that I’ve long waited for. I’m struck that it’s happening in such a complicated and unfavorable time. This fullness is not the outcome of our own activity, but rather, is something that God surprises us with when He wants.” ■

Close-up

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■
CN Tower in Toronto.

Canada

“I will go”

Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg... In a difficult year, surprise at a new vitality originating from the journey of School of Community.



Paola Bergamini

“No, I’m sorry, I’m not going.” This was the categorical reply from Kristina, a physiotherapist at St. Mary’s hospital in Montreal, when the hospital leadership asked her to go work in a nursing home. “Almost all of them have the virus. I don’t want to get sick. And I am not a nurse,” she thought. The situation got worse, with the number of personnel in the nursing home dropping, and a few days later the same request was directed to one of her colleagues, a mother with two children. The woman was afraid and in tears, and Kristina, almost without realizing what she was saying, said, “I will go.” She spent three weeks caring for the most basic needs of the residents at the assisted living facility. It was not her job, but “changing diapers was the most blessed thing that ever happened to me.” “Blessed” was the exact word she used in the online School of Community meeting. “I did not stop at the idea I had, but lived by giving all of myself, to the point of being in tears when I left. The experience surprised me; it is a new life whose origin is right here, right now.”

The “here,” is the encounter that is the School of Community. “Over the last year,” said John Zucchi, the leader of CL in Canada, “I have

seen a faithfulness and richness of experience in our community that has amazed me. Each person feels the urgent need to be here, to go to the bottom of his or her need in this very strange time. Those who came sporadically before now never miss the online meetings. The meaning of life is at stake. Every Friday, I feel like the apostles—there is so much expectation built up for what might happen.” This vitality generated a new way of living daily life, a heightened attention to one’s own humanity and that of the people one meets. You become—almost without realizing, it seems—transparent, witnessing to that “something more” given by an encounter with Christianity. Here, we have tried to paint the picture of that newness.

Cristiano, a *Memor Domini* and an oncologist, was caring for a Romanian woman who lived alone. When her cancer advanced and her physical pain was growing, Cristia-

no asked Paula, a member of the Fraternity of St. Joseph, to go visit her. “I’ll warn you: she has a touchy personality; sometimes she is even aggressive, but she needs someone to be with her,” he said. Every week, Paula showed up at the woman’s home. One day, she brought a thermos with coffee. Almost angrily, the woman asked her, “Why are you doing all this for me? Why are you like this?”

Another of Cristiano’s patients was Ernesta, an Italian who is an orthodox Jew. During one visit, the woman confided in him, “I have no relatives here in Canada. I know the end is getting near and I would like to be able to meet with a rabbi. If you happen to know one...” No, he did not know one himself, but among his friends in the CL community is a married couple, Joel and Nathaly, and he is Jewish. He called Joel that very evening to ask if they could get in contact with the woman. “Just to give her the name



Friends in the Montreal CL community say hello to each other from a distance.

Charitable work in Montreal.

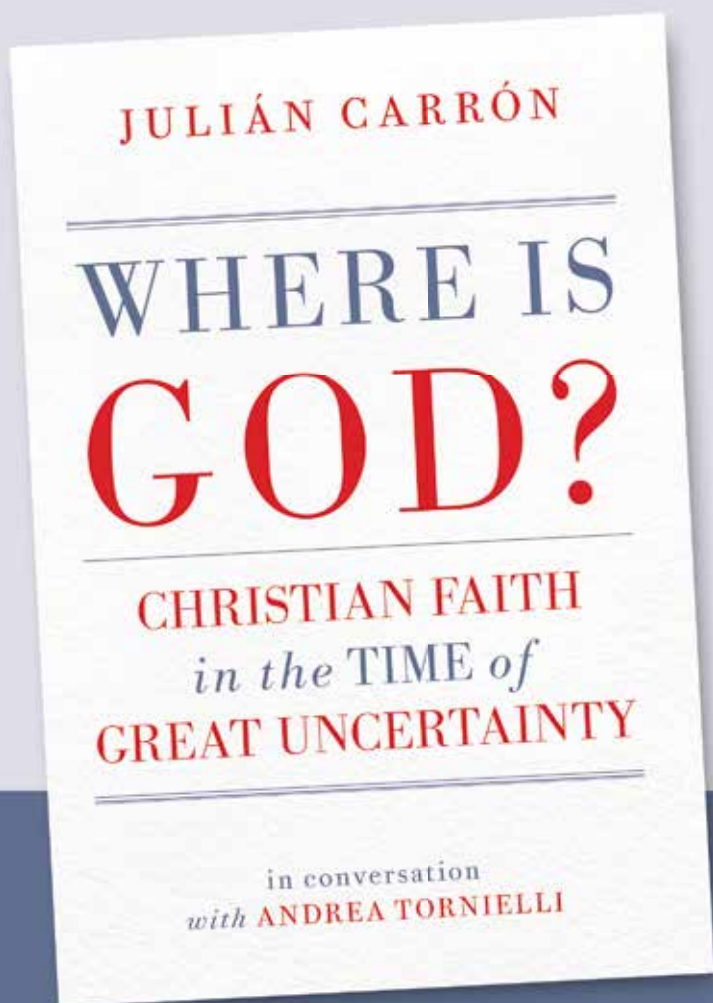
of a rabbi,” he said. But Joel didn’t stop there. When Ernesta’s health declined, he went to visit her with Annamaria, a *Memor Domini* who works in the hospital where she was being treated. A few days before she died, the woman told Annamaria and Joel, “The rabbi came. I am at peace. But there is one thing I feel I have to say to you: Paradise exists, and we will see each other again there.”

The recent initiatives can also be seen in Marco crouching down next to the man lying on the ground. He tapped him on his back to wake him up. “This is for you,” he said and handed him a steaming bag. Once a month, many of the adults and teens from the community visit the subway stations in Montreal and Toronto to deliver warm meals to the homeless people who seek refuge underground when the temperature falls well below freezing. Families prepare the food, which is packed into containers and assembled into bags with water, utensils, and a napkin. “This, too, is a fruit of the ‘life’ of School of Community,” Zucchi explains. “It started with a few people and now there are more than twenty of us.”

Fifteen years ago, Vicente and his wife moved to Canada from Paraguay, where he had encountered CL. First they lived on a little island in the Pacific, then in Toronto, and now in Winnipeg. There, it has always been just him and a friend, Mik, who came three years ago. “This year, he hasn’t missed a single call,” Vicente said. “I am always



moved by hearing what he has to say because he places his own need to live things deeply at the center of his life.” There are now five people who follow the Movement in Winnipeg. Zucchi says about this community, “It reminds me of my history with Giussani when I came back to Montreal from Italy and our community was made up of four people. We kept in contact by phone. I am reliving the same freshness of this beginning.” Standing on the sidewalk, stamping her feet to keep warm, Paula looks at her watch. It’s time. The door opens and Cecilia appears across the street. “Hello, how are you?” she says in a loud voice. They speak for ten minutes, as long as they can stand the cold. With the lockdown in Canada, you cannot visit the homes of friends and family unless they are older, alone, or sick. “Visiting your friends outside their houses seems like a small thing,” Zucchi affirms, “but it speaks of the new vitality emerging this year, the desire to share life, such a great desire that, even if you’re stuck on video all day long for work, you still connect for assemblies, your Fraternity group, or the School of Community with Carrón... It’s not a matter of hearing certain words; it’s life that demands it. And in this way, this life is communicated to the world around you.” ■



WHERE IS GOD?

CHRISTIAN FAITH
in the TIME of
GREAT UNCERTAINTY

Julián Carrón
in conversation with
Andrea Torielli

Should we battle a plural and relativistic society by raising barriers and walls, or should we accept the opportunity to announce the Gospel in a new way? This is the challenge Christians are facing today.

In an extended interview with Vatican expert Andrea Torielli, Julián Carrón examines the historical moment we are living through in order to revive the essential core of Christian faith. Starting from the realization that the world is experiencing an evolution in which the difficulty of finding shared values and natural morality makes sincere dialogue between believers and non-believers challenging, Carrón reflects on the possibility of communicating the essence of the Christian faith in a form that can inspire interest in modern times.

Addressing the central questions concerning the announcement of Christian faith in today's less regimented society, *Where Is God?* discovers and rediscovers the contents of Christianity and asks how they can be witnessed again in a society that is not yet post-Christian, but potentially headed in that direction.

Julián Carrón is President of the Fraternity of the lay Movement of Communion and Liberation and Professor of Theology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

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