



TRACES

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**The only
things
that matter**

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A photo by Elio Ciol of a brother with his sister in the Italian village of Castions di Zoppola in 1959.

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communion and liberation

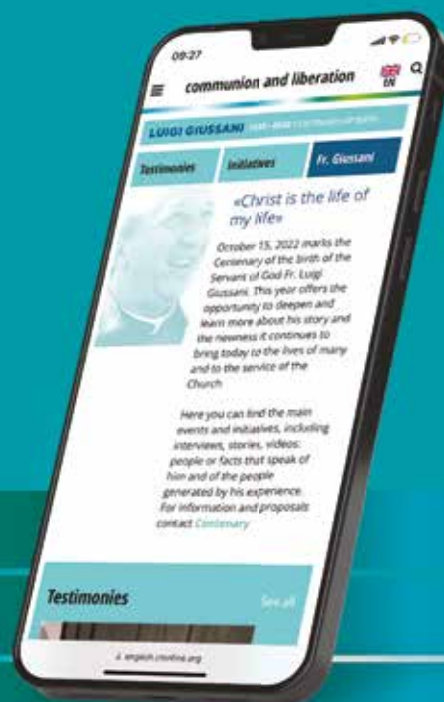
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Underground

During a recent interview, the Belarusian Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, reflecting on the war, asked herself what sparked the series of events that led up to this point; that is, what happened to the great “Russian soul,” to the incredible influence of the culture of a spiritual nation. Of this nation, today all we see are young soldiers looting and stealing from the dead, reflecting a barbaric decline in humanity. She wondered, “What happened to that soul?” and then she posed another striking question: “Why have we lost our humanity in such a short time?” According to Alexievich, the historic shift happened despite the fact that “we believed so much in the Nineties.” These beliefs did not last long because they lacked a strong foundation, because “freedom is built by people who have been set free.”

This provocation goes beyond the havoc being wreaked in this conflict. It is tied to what lies at the heart of everything—that is, man—and the possibility of a new life that does not fade away, that lasts. What kind of liberation stands the test of time and history?

We live as if we already know what is “necessary” for us and for the world, as Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, the general abbot of the Cistercian order, said recently at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation—the complete text will soon be published on the CL website—“You worry and get anxious over many things, but you only need one thing.” These words that Jesus spoke to Martha were the focal point of the Exercises, in which Lepori delved deeply into the relationship between Christ and Martha. In the encounter with Martha, He exposed her “deep, fundamental, total need.” And because she became aware of her need, she embraced the “answer to the fundamental desire of the heart and of life.” It was not an invitation to do or be something; rather, it was a personal presence, as ordinary as that dinner but also as extraordinary as “atomic energy,” said Lepori. It is a presence that can “penetrate all of the deepest underground recesses of Martha’s humanity.” She would have lost Him and herself had she not decided to begin a journey, to verify how unique that relationship was in every aspect of her life. “It is the presence of the One who fills the heart that is able to change our relationship with everything,” even with death.

This issue includes a few testimonies we have received following the Exercises, including one from a young mother from Kharkiv and another from a young man from Moscow, who continue to live in wonder because their lives are not determined by the ups and downs of history, but rather by a gaze through which they are born again.

How can this experience continue to happen so as to provide an answer to the question posed by Alexievich?

Letters

Marco, Giuseppe, Elisabetta, and Luca

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The Gold Medal

Even though Luigi and I rarely meet, our friendship is one of the truest and most intense relationships that I have. He is a high-level athlete and before he was my friend, he was one of my sports idols. He often told me of the struggle to always be at the top of his game, of spending days preoccupied with his performance, of the constant temptation to measure his own worth by medals won or lost, and, among many other things, of the difficulty of finding friends in his circle who could help him live his life. One evening, we were having dinner together. Stefano, his training partner and my other sports idol, fresh from a very important victory, was also there. We talked about various things, until Stefano interrupted me and asked, "But how did you and Luigi meet?" It was immediately clear to me that my answer would mean revealing my story, of my meeting CL at the university, and of my vocation. "I could tell him who I am, or give him a quick and banal answer. What could be of interest to him in this story?" While my mind was struggling with these considerations, the desire to tell him who I was won out. I began timidly to tell my story: from falling in love for the first time at the university, to my enthusiastic friendship with some of my fellow classmates, the encounter with a priest, the intuition of giving my life so that all can encounter and know Jesus, the *Memores Domini*... In his wide-eyed expression and insistent questions, I saw yet again the amazement of someone who was waiting for someone to tell him that it is possible to be happy.

The confirmation of this came sooner than I expected. "So what you're telling me is that you're happy? I'm afraid that life ends and nothing is left. To know that my accomplishments will be remembered does not give me peace, and even after this latest victory, after a short while the happiness will fade." He told me about his return from the sports venue to the hotel, that he was so happy he kept taking his medal out of his bag, and that when he got home, his family and friends were waiting for him. Then he added, "I thought before that maybe my happiness faded because my results weren't good enough, and that I would improve and receive a gold medal, which might be enough. But what if even that isn't enough?" In front of this last question, a certainty emerged in me that no, even this is not enough to satisfy all of the waiting that my heart and his are made for. I felt a great tenderness, perhaps the same tenderness that God feels for me when each day He sees my countless attempts to be content. I told him what, for me, is the "dissatisfaction" that always appears in my days, and how it changes my way of living relationships, of how one day I met Someone who told me He was the answer to all of my needs, and what it means for me to take this hypothesis seriously today. What my heart searches for exists: this was the most interesting and urgent thing I had to say. I returned home very happy because I realized, yet again, that everyone is waiting for Someone whom I have had the grace to meet. I understood again that in spite of our fragility and distraction, our vocation is to bring to the world that fascinating gaze that I ask to receive each day. It is possible for a company like ours to continue to exist and to generate only through a continual rehashing of Christ and this impossible but continual correspondence with my heart—nothing else. Stefano and Luigi gave to me again this precious awareness and reawakened all of my desire to be a witness.

Marco, Milan (Italy)

Expanding on the First Encounter

I am seventy-one years old, and I have never walked because of a serious disability I have had since birth. My mother took care of me until 2003, when she began to lose her strength. From then on, I've had a personal care attendant for all of my needs. Since 2014, Yaroslav, a Ukrainian, has been my attendant, and for the past few years, also his wife. They used to live in the periphery of Lviv. One day, his wife received a call from their niece, the mother of a fourteen-month-old child. After the invasion, she had left Lviv and gone to Poland, where she asked if it would be possible to come to Italy. I immediately said I would host them. She did not have the money for the bus, but I thought I wouldn't go bankrupt for 120 euros and so I paid for their trip. As soon as they arrived, they began to deal with the red tape: a declaration in the town offices that they were living with me, health certifications, vaccinations, etc. When I sent the mother to the pharmacy to get a COVID test, the pharmacist didn't want payment. In the meantime, friends gathered things for the child, from a crib to a stroller. Having these two people in my home has revived the encounter I had with people from the movement in 1969. That encounter changed my life, filling it with unimaginable fruit. I didn't even have an elementary school certificate (back then, disabled children were not integrated into school), but in 1979, thanks to help from my friends, I earned a degree in pedagogy from the University of Parma. The encounter I had with the movement through those people was for me an encounter with Christ, as Fr. Giussani used to tell us, and as Mons. Santoro repeats for us today. Even in my condition, I have visited most of the Alpine arch, from Courmayeurs to Canazei, and in 1980, I also traveled to Poland; all of this was an extension of this first encounter. Today, in a different way, I am getting to know Ukraine, and the impetus is still the same. It gives me joy to see the little child who is beginning to run through the house (something that naturally I have never done), who looks at me and smiles... It's like a small shoot sprouting from a plant. I wanted to write this letter to witness that God continues to act, not only two thousand years ago, but here and now.

Giuseppe, Roveleto (Italy)

On Campus, the Exhibit and Chiara

With a group of university students from the community of Bologna, we constructed the nineteenth edition of

Campus By Night. Through exhibits, performances, meetings, sports areas, and food, this event allows us to bring to the heart of the university campus what we find most interesting, fascinating, and thought-provoking about life. During this year's edition, we were struck by two things in particular. The first has to do with a friend, Chiara, who participated in the creation of the exhibit titled *Relationships*, which talks about the importance of relationships in our lives and deals with important themes like fragility and the benefits of opening ourselves to others. We were struck by the change we saw in her: timid, introverted, with so many questions and doubts about relationships, she explained the exhibit as if each phrase, each poem, and each picture had taken her by the hand to look at all of the drama of life. And of her wounds: from each point of pain and from each question she had, there came a positive hypothesis that had so taken root in her that it became urgent for her to speak about herself in front of friends and strangers as if this were natural to her. What is present in Campus By Night passes through the faces changed by an encounter with a company that forces you to look at all of reality. A quote from one of the panels of the exhibit read: "Mine is a struggle to make happen what I have seen, in order to affirm reality." This described Chiara and all of the young people who contributed to the exhibit: struggling always, but with a positive hypothesis and therefore with a road to follow. With the question (which was also the title of this edition of Campus by Night) "Are You Happy in This World?," our intent was not to provide an unequivocal answer, but to tell people about what has captured us, provoking those who pass by, like our two classmates with whom a relationship is growing, to face the question. We wanted to invite them to Campus, especially for a meeting on the conflict in Ukraine. When we didn't see them in the classroom, we went to look for them. We found them listening to a presentation on the exhibit, *And Now What? The Challenge of Success*, which talks about how having success in life doesn't automatically bring with it a person's fulfillment. There were various people witnessing to this who have "made it" in life, including Fabri Fibra. Our classmates were there, with their eyes wide open, captured by something that had undoubtedly provoked them. We can say that we have seen faces that witness to us that there is a road, and, inasmuch as reality imposes itself harshly in front of our eyes, the "solution" to the drama of life is not to censure it, but to look at ourselves through it. And this can only be done if we are accompanied.

Elisabetta and Luca, Bologna (Italy)

The life of the life that overcomes history

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From Moscow to Montréal, what follows are some contributions received after the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL. Preached by Father Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, the general abbot of the Cistercians, the Exercises were followed by communities all over the world.

RUSSIA

About thirty of us participated in the Fraternity Exercises, gathered near Moscow. I lived those days with a deep gratitude. Today's world seems to be in the midst of a storm whose waves reach us through the news. For some this storm is a real threat that destroys their homes, their families, their daily lives, their work. For some, like me, it is rather a stream of information, anger, emotions, and misunderstandings piercing every moment. And it seems that this storm is life, and that only by stopping its waves can we live safely.

The days of the Exercises proposed an amazing path to me: to discover what life and living really mean. Father Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori went so far as to touch upon the crucial question of my "I": What does it mean that I live? which is much deeper than the question of why I live. Lepori proposed that we discover the presence of this question in the experience of Martha and Mary, in the experience of Lazarus and Jesus. I am deeply convinced that looking at the Gospel texts in this way is only possible if you yourself have this question, if you yourself have had such an experience. Thanks to Lepori's proposal, I understood what memory means. Looking at Father Mauro, I saw that there



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is no difference between his experience and the experience of Martha, who lived two thousand years ago. Memory is the awareness that the source that was true yesterday, or twenty years ago, or two thousand years ago, is true today. The Exercises were also filled with an incredible experience of silence, not as a moment created by me, but as a place that created me. It was not a mystical experience; rather, it was a time for me to give the questions and judgments considered during the lessons a chance to hurt and correct me. A testimony of true friendship: that was my experience of the work of the team of secretaries and translators and all those who gave us the opportunity to experience this time together. The questions we were able to share with each other helped me to understand that we are not people seized individually by the charisma, but one people, seized by Another.

A song during the Spiritual Exercises of the CL Fraternity held from April 29th to May 1st



Vladimir, Russia.

6 The city we were in, Vladimir, has a very painful history. But at its center is the Dormition Cathedral, where there are scenes of the Last Judgment painted by Andrei Rublev. We went to look at the icons in the cathedral, the same that were shown as we entered the hall during the Exercises. The gazes of the angels, the sure and swift step of Peter dragging the Christian people behind him, Paul's call to conversion, the faces of the holy women, and the figure of Jesus—everything, literally everything, is pierced by mercy, is full of peace. Being there it is very easy to recognize that the storm and waves are not the life of the life that overcomes history. The cruelty of medieval Vladimir remains only in our memory, but the beauty that Andrei Rublev encountered looks back at me even today.

Kostia, Moscow

UGANDA

During the last few months, it has become increasingly clear that the mystery allows what my heart desires to happen as it wills and when it wills. I have seen this in various experiences. One of these was the Fraternity Exercises. Father Lepori and Davide Prosperi's introduction led me to ask once again, "But who are you, Jesus?" The emotion that captivated my heart and moved me cannot be the fruit of two men, but rather something that goes beyond them. It is a present event that forces you to pay attention and is able to move your heart because it says, "I have not lost you!"

I have always had a predilection for Mary, but thanks to Father Lepori, I came to identify with Martha. If everything that happens does not connect us with Him, we lose everything and ourselves, as I am learning in the School of Community, coming to the knowledge of what reality is made of, what things are made of, of what my existence is made. Everything must lead me to the question, the cry, asking what I am made of because the content of reality is the content of my self. The consciousness of being made

by Christ makes your heart tremble and makes you say "I." When looking at the beauty of a mountain, we know that it can never ask the question, "But who am I?" Rather, I can say that the beauty of the mountain is made of Christ, just as I am, just like Jesus was when He looked at the beauty of the flowers and understood that His Father was making them in that moment. God truly makes all things new and our task is to look at Him and participate in making things new with Him, and the first new being is me.

Rose, Kampala

SWITZERLAND

We followed the Exercises at the Shrine of Our Lady in Einsiedeln, both in person and online from home. The consequence of the Exercises for me was first and foremost gratitude. Father Mauro confronted me with my real need, insistently asking me to check whether the Lord really responds to this need. A friend told me that she was struck to hear the same method that fascinated her in her encounter with the movement: not a right answer, but the proposal of a path of verification. It seems almost naive to think that we can build and rest everything on an enthusiasm for this presence that responds to our need. But it is not naive!

A few days before the Exercises a friend called me to tell me about some major difficulties in his

marriage that keep him awake at night. Since he is retired, his wife had hoped to see him more often, but because of allox his various responsibilities and commitments, this has not happened. During a sleepless night of worry, he read a piece by Fr. Giussani that struck him because Giussani explains how, even if we do many things for the movement, Christ still may not be familiar to us, and so we merely drown in activities, as happened to Martha, who was worried about a thousand things. What companionship it was for me to be able to see his heart experiencing this yearning for Christ, who gives breath to his life! It strikes me how all of our humanity is a path to encountering Him. Just as Father Mauro spoke of the rich young man's possessions, which were given to him so he could encounter Christ, so my need, the wounds I have, are given to me so I can discover Him as a real and crucial presence. A few days ago I found out that I have melanoma. Fortunately, it is at an early stage, but even the good prognosis, even all the scientific certainty, is not enough for me to have certainty in life. I do not want to censor this wound, but instead, I wish for it to be inhabited by Another who calls my name twice. I am grateful that there is a place where I can verify this, so that I do not have to be afraid of reality and of my humanity.

Tommaso, Lugano

ITALY

I retired in 2020, at the height of the lockdown. At such a terrible time, I expected nothing good. Instead, what happened to me is that unknown people brought life to my life; for example, an invitation from a colleague of my husband's to pray the Rosary online. My husband and I had already participated in this meeting, but kept our camera off out of modesty and because we felt like intruders. Yet every night I hoped to be invited to that meeting. It was not just to pray; I was already doing that on my own. It was for those people who attracted me like magnets—they had something that struck my heart every time!

Dublin.



Bethlehem.



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What was different about them compared to all of our friends? Here I am on Sunday, May 1, after following the Spiritual Exercises with them. As I reread my notes, taken very quickly, a light illuminated my heart: “I am here because many years ago I had an encounter,” said Davide Prosperi. “I followed people whom God made me encounter. I do not follow because I have chosen to, but because I have been chosen.” The next day was my birthday, and I received a message from one of our friends, Beppe: “Hi, best wishes! A big hug.” I replied to him: “Thank you for your embrace, and I wholeheartedly return it, although hugging people has never been my forte, as you may have noticed. But one day I hope to be able to pass on what I feel to someone else—a life-giving embrace from the One who wanted me to be part of this life. There, at the Exercises, I perceived the meaning of all of the embraces I have received. I can no longer go without those embraces. I can no longer do without the people who make me feel this way. With my heart overflowing with emotions ranging from joy to sorrow, bewilderment to wonder and longing, all of which I cannot describe as well as I would like... I basically have a volcano within. Today is my birthday, I am sixty-two years old, and I have received the most beautiful gift of my life. Your embrace is the key that opened my heart.”

So why am I *here*? This is the question that has not left

me alone for two years. Only now do I understand that this question implies another, which has remained deep in my heart for a long time: to discover why I am here in this world.

Morena, Cremona

ENGLAND

For me, the Exercises were extremely clear about one question: Who is the love of my life? It is a simple and direct question that allows for no lies or turns of phrase. It strikes me because it has nontrivial implications for how we understand our togetherness, which is where the greatest ambiguities lie. We often understand our “companionship” as a coming together among ourselves to help each other, to think and organize nice gestures together, as a place where we feel less alone and where we perceive human warmth. Instead, Father Lepori has turned the tables. Unity comes from the extent to which I attach myself to the love of my life. And just as I can, so can you, and so by grace we are put together on this long and beautiful road, just as Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were. They discovered that they were more united because they had each made his or her own personal journey. And they constantly called each other back to it. This is true companionship.

I am reminded of what Carrón picked up on at the 2013 Beginning Day, quoting Fr. Giussani: “There is nothing

culturally more revolutionary than this conception of the person, whose meaning, whose substance is unity with Christ, with an Other, and through this, a unity with all those whom He seizes, with all those whom the Father puts into His hands.”

Giacomo, London

CANADA

For me, the Exercises were a surprising new beginning. Something that touched me deeply was how Father Mauro spoke about the rich young man. I understood how I live a moralism, even when I deny it. I always thought that the young man had done wrong because he wanted to safeguard his possessions, while Father Mauro explained that his mistake lay in not following the One who had struck him so much. A few evenings later, a friend from Cameroon, Mireille, came to dinner. It was so easy in her presence to understand that I do not have the problem

of safeguarding my ways of doing things, or of living, but I was simply allowing myself be struck by the Event as I perceived it that evening.

John, Montréal

ITALY

On Saturday morning before the lesson, a Salesian priest celebrated Mass for our little Fraternity group at the place where we were gathered. Reflecting on the Gospel of the day, which spoke of the apostles in the boat in the midst of the storm on Lake Tiberias, he said, “You too at this time are experiencing being in the midst of the storm, and the words that Jesus said to the disciples that evening apply to you as well: ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ You must not be afraid of the difficulties you are going through, because it is He who holds your boat up.” I remembered that Carrón had also said the same things to us, and I noted to myself that here was a man marked by the Salesian charism reminding me of what really matters. Shortly afterwards, I listened to Lepori recount his encounter with Christ in detail, remembering that the person speaking was someone who, after encountering the movement, had embraced the Benedictine charism to the point of becoming the general abbot of the Cistercians, finding there the fulfillment of his vocation. How astonishing it is that Giusani’s charism is not an enclosed space, a “boundary” that should not be surpassed, but something that is open to the universal. It is not exclusive, but inclusive; it does not define a sphere of relationships but the true form of every relationship, for it testifies that Christ can become everything in a person’s life, “the life of life.”

Giorgio, Milan ■

Other testimonies at clonline.org

Kampala, Uganda.



Close-up

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Irpin, near Kiev, May 3, 2022.

I meet Laly Liparteliani in a café in Brescia's Piazza Vittoria. Talking to a Ukrainian woman in a place with such a name in this period makes an impression. Victory is the most important word used in the propaganda of the Kiev government. There can be no victory in Ukraine other than a military victory. And all other victories, like the one at Eurovision, are in service of that victory. Laly, who fled Kharkiv, was a refugee in Lviv for two months and finally landed in Italy. She recounts the sense of injustice, fear, and uncertainty about the future that predominate in her and in the people of her country. She does not excuse the Russian invader, but the victory she tells us



Ukraine

Laly's victory

She is a mother from Kharkiv. For two months, as a refugee in Lviv, she lived in fear of the bombings. Then she arrived in Italy, where she participated in the Fraternity's Spiritual Exercises.



Luca Fiore

about is another kind entirely. And now that she has been able to attend the CL Fraternity Spiritual Exercises, she understands this better; she understands better what is happening to her.

“When we were forced to leave Kharkiv I felt that same feeling of rebellion as when, a year ago, Rostik,

my husband, died of a heart attack. No one ever asked me if I would be able to live without him. And now, within hours, I had had to pack up and run away. Again, no one asked me if I agreed. One night they called me and told me to get everything ready to leave. But what is *everything*? How do you carry your whole life in a suitcase? But I had to get my two children, Maria and Georgij, to safety, and I got in the car.”

Laly, along with Elena Mazzola and friends from Emmaus (the Kharkiv-based NGO that cares for disabled orphans), tried to cross the border in early March. But she didn't make it. Georgij, her eldest son, had just turned 18 and could not leave the

country under the martial law. She could have left her boy and run away with her youngest daughter. But she did not. “We survived my husband's death and were able to return to reality because we stayed together. Then I thought that Rostik would never make the choice to leave one of the kids behind. I didn't want to choose between my two children.” So while Elena and other friends went to Italy, she stayed in Lviv.

“The most terrible thing for people living in Ukraine today is picking up your cell phone in the morning. You immediately go to see your latest WhatsApp messages. After you determine that none of your relatives

or friends have died, you go back and read the messages from the beginning to see how many bombs have fallen in Kharkiv or Kiev. What has happened in Mariupol...” Laly speaks of how difficult it is to live in wartime even in a relatively safe city like Lviv. “You walk down the street and see sandbags protecting buildings and monuments from bombs. You notice this even in your church: the statues of Jesus and Our Lady are wrapped in white cloth like mummies. You know they are there, but you cannot see them. It doesn’t help to keep calm.” But the hardest thing to describe, she says, is what happens when you start hearing the sound of sirens. “They explain on television what to do in case of chemical attacks with chlorine or sarin. The moment the alarm starts, it’s like everything inside you shrinks. You are scared and feel a sense of helplessness. You know that in case of a chemical attack, you will not be able to protect yourself and your children. Every time I heard the siren I would go into shock. We lived like that for almost two months.”

Laly explains that she has never prayed so much in her life. “What helped me is what I had experienced with Rostik’s death: discovering that there really is Someone who is more than me and to whom I can ask for what I need. In the face of war I am so small... The only thing I can do in front of what happens is to welcome it. To understand that everything is possible for God and to cry out to Him, ‘If this is Your will, help me and my children, who are Your children.’” As the days went by, Laly began to look at things differently, began to see signs of humanity in small things. “A lady I met in the bunker, when she found out we were from Kharkiv, left me her phone number and told me to call her if I needed clothes or blankets. I became friends with another lady who was a street cleaner. They were people who, implicitly, I could ask to help me see what was still good and human inside all that evil.”

Then something resolved and a solution for leaving the country began to emerge. “I was praying that we would find a legal way to cross the border. They had proposed crossing in the woods at night, but if we were found out

Georgij would face 30 years in prison. Eventually we realized that he could enroll at a university here in Italy, and we started working on this solution.” Days and weeks went by. Bureaucracy is an ugly beast. Laly began to become disheartened. But one day she talked to an Orthodox priest who, quoting St. Ignatius of Loyola, told her, “Act as if everything depended on you; trust as if everything depended on God.” She was not discouraged; she persevered—and things went her way.

“Laura, a dear friend from Brescia who had been in Kharkiv to study warned me that on April 17 a friend of hers was coming to pick us up at the border. It was Catholic Easter Sunday. And I told her, ‘Laura, that day is Easter, who can pick us up on such a day? Only an atheist or a saint.’ Mark came, a saint... It was my Easter, the victory of life over death. The victory of love, of humanity over evil. I think of the way Mark looked at us.”

Two weeks later, Laly connected to the CL Fraternity Exercises and listened to Father Lepori’s meditation on Martha. “I am of Georgian descent, and we constantly have to take care of what’s on the table. There always has to be plenty to eat and we need to be able to recognize a guest’s needs by meeting his or her eyes: wine? bread? more food? This is how we were raised—we are always concerned that everything is okay. At Easter then... In my house we were all focused on food, but no one ever questioned what was really being celebrated. Martha is in my DNA...”

Before her husband’s death, she thought she knew what was the “necessary” good for her, what made her happy, and how things would have to be for her to be happy. “But after what happened to Rostik, I realized that I already had everything to be happy. On that occasion I experienced that if I give myself to Jesus, He takes my life and makes it beautiful. But it is as if every time I am caught in amnesia and I go back to doing things the way I think they should be done.” After the Exercises, she wondered how she could practice leaving space for the silence Father Lepori talked about. “I started giving thanks for all the little things. The other day I was reading the news from Ukraine. More



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death, more suffering. Again, I felt great anger within me, because someone who is sick has demanded to come and treat you. Someone who themselves needs to be liberated came and 'liberated' us, without bothering to ask us first if we wanted to be saved. He came and stole our lives. I thought about all these things, but after a minute I saw something else: Someone, in the very same way—without asking our permission, for no apparent reason—had come and given me all of his life.” Laly says that she is talking about concrete people. She thinks of Silvia and Ruben, who opened their home and their lives to her in Brescia. “Everything they had taken away from me with the war, I received back here. I could not see it. Yes, they took so much from me, but I am receiving so much. When I think about that, my faith in humanity returns.”

She recently read something that really struck her: evil, that which is bad, sticks like glue to our thoughts, while good slips away like on a nonstick pan and you can't hold it back. “I began to ask the Lord to be able to see what He gives us. And I am grateful for what is happening to me and for the fact that it is happening through the presence of friends. Today, when I wash the cutlery, I notice that there are spoons that I like very much. Silvia gave them to me, and every time I see them I think about how beautiful they are, and that I have to thank her for giving them to me. And Silvia is surprised every time because they are ordinary spoons. She says, 'Stop thanking me.' Yet they are so beautiful, I am glad I can use them.” ■

■
Laly Liparteliani.



The Abbey of Hauterive in Switzerland, which Fr. Lepori (born in 1959) entered in 1984 and of which he became abbot in 1994. In 2010 he was elected the abbot general of the Order of the Cistercians.

There are certain unforgettable dates in the curriculum vitae of a monk: when he perceives his vocation, when he is admitted into the monastery, and when he makes his final profession. In that of Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, the abbot general of the Order of Cistercians since 2010, there is another date that is “perhaps the most important one after the date of my birth,” he said on the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL, “because it is the date in which Christ came into my life and everything about me finally took on meaning.” It was February 25, 1976. He was 17 years old. He lived with his parents and two older brothers in Cannobbio, a small town in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. He went to high school and participated in the parish. “That evening I was invited, together with a small group of young people, by a family of Friulian immigrants from the CL Movement. There were Luciano, who was a carpenter, and Nella, a housewife, who took care of their three small children. Nothing out of the ordinary happened except for an encounter between my dissatisfied heart and a presence that told me, ‘Mauro, I am here, and I am here to fill your heart with joy.’”

Why did you go to their house that evening?

Luciano had invited a small group of young people from the parish to his home with the idea of organizing a Mass. It had been my mother, during a meeting, who pointed out that we needed to get involved in the parish

“Something I had never seen before”



Anna Leonardi

Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori shares his encounter with the Movement at the age of seventeen, what has happened since then, and the gazes that have fostered his growth.

more. So I went with my brother. It was a poor house, but there was something I had never seen before: the communion among them. I remained impressed by a small fact—before leaving, Luciano took out the Book of Hours and invited us to recite Compline. I was devout and usually prayed at church, so it was not so much the gesture that struck me, but his freedom. We were strangers, but he let us see all of himself.

And what happened afterward?

That evening I met not only Luciano and Nella, but a place of friendship that responded to the loneliness I felt at that time that was also looming over my future. I was seventeen; I had friends, I had a passion—almost an idolatry—for studying and

for hobbies. My loneliness was from not having encountered something that really filled my heart. There was an abyss of sadness that I knew well and to which I had often felt my life give way. But in that house I was surprised by another abyss, that of a joy that was not mine, that I could not have generated myself. And this was followed by the objectivity of duration, because then, for many weeks, I was happy. My first reflection on that first encounter was to go look for that little group I saw reciting Lauds in a classroom of my school. And then I began to follow up on the invitations of my religion teacher, Fr. Willy, who accompanied the experience of GS (Student Youth) in Canton Ticino. On Sundays we went to two Masses: that of the Movement in Lugano, and then

we hurried to Canobbio in Luciano’s small car to participate in a Mass organized by our small group in town.



How did you discover your vocation?

It was something that matured parallel to all of this. But here too there was a precise moment. It was in 1977, during a pilgrimage to Assisi. We were at the Portiuncula and, during the sermon, a friar said something about vocation. I don't even remember what, but in that instant the joy of that first encounter returned to me—it was the same phenomenon. Like when you meet the same person again. It was unmistakable; it was Christ who was calling me again. I had no idea how, but I knew I wanted to follow Him.

And in the meantime, you had enrolled in college...

Yes, I was attending the School of Philosophy with the prospect of becoming a secular priest. But then that joy came back to life and upset all my plans.

Where did this happen?

I went to prepare a demanding exam in the Cistercian Abbey of Hauterive, close to home. And again, in being there, I had the same experience of joy. It could have been a psychological suggestion, a feeling that meant everything and nothing. But what saved that experience was the fact that each time, together with the joy, I was given a companionship to whom this joy referred, with whom I could take steps.

What attracted you to St. Benedict? And how did the charism of the Movement open you up to the Cistercian charism?

I never had the impression that I had to choose between one charism and the other. There was a continuity. The charism is Christ who attracts you, who shows you the way. The Movement helped me because it never proposed a form to me; rather, it always educated me to the substance. Thanks to what I experienced in the Movement, I was able to look at and embrace the substance of the Benedictine Rule with an amplified sensitivity. Even though I understood this in the following years, I must say that even in the form that it took, the Movement is inspired by the Benedictine methodology as it affects conceptions of community, authority, prayer, culture, and silence.

Did your relationship with Fr. Giussani accompany you in this choice?

There were some dialogues between us, and I remember each word. But what I remember most is his gaze. He looked at you and made you grow. I perceived an esteem for me, which it was clear to me I did not deserve, but which arose from the gratuitousness with which he looked at every particle of reality. And then I was struck by the way he was the first to become a disciple, to become a son. In that moment with you, he wanted to learn everything. He hung on your every word, but without flattering you. He listened to you with total loyalty, and so he corrected you, even if only by a millimeter, if necessary. He did this without disheartening you—a “but...” was enough. When I met him after becoming an abbot, he dropped to his knees, and said to me, “Father, a blessing!”

Another decisive figure for you was Bishop Eugenio Corecco, a theologian and one of the leaders of the Movement in Switzerland...

From him I received the same gaze full of charity that I received from Giussani. When I was a college student, I had the grace to live with him for five years. As a university professor, he had wanted to open the doors of his large apartment to a group of students. It was a fountain of graces from which priests, bishops, cardinals, but also lay people engaged in the world and in the church have poured. It was almost normal to have Von Balthasar or Christoph Schönborn for dinner. It was a place of education without the pretense of being so. Paradoxically, I had very few personal conversations with Corecco, but there was the shared life and the meals together—where we brought up the issues of study, university life, and girlfriends. Corecco had only one concern: that we were aware of the things that happened to us and how we lived them. I remember going to bed in the evening with my heart bursting with gratitude for experience of freedom I was having. Admittedly, living there wasn't always easy; it wasn't a comfortable life. He had us experience also hardships and quarrels at that same level of intensity. So even my narrow-mindedness and my humanity had to come out for me to look at them and want to

Monks in Hauterive.



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change. And changing was always a grace.

At the Fraternity Exercises, you said that “the Gospel never ends,” because we are surrounded by a multitude of witnesses who show us that “Christ is the life of life.” Who are these witnesses for you?

There are witnesses that I carry inside and that I may have only met for a brief moment. Yet they are like fathers and mothers to me—my person can no longer express itself without having that relationship inside. I think of the eyes with which Mother Teresa looked at me or the meekness of Cardinal Van Thuân. I am describing an intensity of life that Christ, in becoming incarnate, places into even a single instant of our life. And I am reminded of the grandchild of a dear friend, born with a very serious malformation of the head and face...

Do share.

Right after he was born in 2000, he was entrusted to my prayers, but I had never had the opportunity to visit him. Then, one day, when I was in Switzerland for a wedding, my friend said to me, “Come visit Matteo, we are five minutes from there.” I had no escape. Those five minutes were the most intense of my life. I was afraid and I prayed a lot. But when I entered his room, approaching his little bed, I had the impression of coming from the dark and going toward the light. The fear and discomfort vanished. Matteo,

who was unable to speak, began clapping his hands and playing on the keys of the toy accordion he had next to him. I saw his extraordinary ability to relate. He was happy we were there with him. I have never had such a physical and evident encounter with Jesus Christ. A mysterious friendship began with Matteo. From then on, he has always been there for me. I returned to see him shortly before he died in 2016, on the Feast of the Guardian Angels.

What allows one to confront innocent pain? During the assembly of the Exercises, when a Ukrainian woman asked how it was possible to see the Father in the atrocities of war, you said that you feel this question to be some homework for you. What did you mean?

Our responsibility toward war, and toward all the wounds that afflict humanity, is to say our yes to Christ within the fragment of reality we encounter. This could even be collecting a piece of paper on the street. And what makes this possible? We must go back to where the encoun-

ter with Him became real, where He took possession of my heart, to those people we felt were the truest friends of all. It all hangs on our freedom. If there were someone in hell who said yes to Christ, hell would disappear. In a mysterious way, we give God permission to enter the world and to embrace it, generating a beauty that is impossible for us.

What were these Exercises for you?

A gift that I have received. Even the reflection on Martha was unexpected. I thought of using the Gospel episode only to introduce silence on the first evening. Instead, it happened that in the previous days, while I was preparing the texts, I was overwhelmed by my concern about the outcome of the Exercises, forcing me to go back to these words of Jesus: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing.” I had to realize that I had to understand that I didn’t need to do the Exercises well, but that I needed Christ to do them. This shift freed me so much that I had nothing else to offer you. ■

At the home of Martha and Mary

Stubbornness. And that orange blossom. The light, the tablecloth, the gestures and her “burning impetus” toward her brother Lazarus in one of the most intense details depicted in the history of art. The relationship between Jesus and the sisters of Bethany recounted, scene by scene, by the great masters.



Giuseppe Frangi

18

Prologue. Martha and Mary are arguing in their home, around the table. They are alone; we can imagine that Lazarus is probably at work. Jesus is certainly a well-known and familiar person because the two sisters are talking about something that concerns him. This is a frame that Caravaggio’s genius has given back to us with his striking ability to touch the heart of things and of human stories. Martha is disheveled for she is always on the go. Her cloak falls from her shoulders, her hair is tied up not out of habit but for greater functionality. Caravaggio paints her in shadow; her face is in semi-darkness, as if she were a prisoner of her stubbornness. She is the one speaking; she is giving her sister, a blissful do-nothing, a lecture. With her fingers she reminds her sister of the rules and urges her to fall in line. But her effort is in vain; Mary looks at her with affectionate pity. She is beautiful, elegant, and sensual, and Caravaggio gives her a regal pose. She holds an orange blossom in her hands, which is a sign of something that has happened and that has changed her life: that flower indicates an encounter and that a mystical

marriage with Jesus, that has taken place. Furthermore, with the index finger of her hand that is resting on a mirror, Mary points toward the reflected light of the window, indicating that she has found light. For Caravaggio, the figure of Mary of Bethany corresponds to the repentant sinner mentioned by Luke (Lk 7:36–50), who sprinkled Jesus’s feet with perfumed oils in the Pharisee’s house. Mary, too, would later perform that same gesture, but in her home in Bethany, some time after the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 12:1–8). This overlapping of identities explains why Caravaggio depicts a somewhat scantily dressed Mary and places vanity objects on the table: an ivory comb, a powder container with a sponge. Just recently the church set the record straight by distinguishing the two figures and establishing the feast of the three siblings from Bethany on the same day, July 29. Thus states the decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship of January 26, 2021: “The traditional uncertainty of the Latin Church about the identity of Mary—the Magdalene to whom Christ appeared after his resurrection, the sister of Martha, the sinner



whose sins the Lord had forgiven—which resulted in the inclusion of Martha alone on 29 July in the Roman Calendar, has been resolved in recent studies and times.... Therefore, the Supreme Pontiff Pope Francis, considering the important evangelical witness they offered in welcoming the Lord Jesus into their home, in listening to him attentively, in believing that he is the resurrection and the life, and accepting the proposal of this Dicastery, has decreed that 29 July be designated in the General Roman Calendar as the Memorial of Saints Martha, Mary and Lazarus.”

Scene one. The same house, the same protagonists. But this time a guest, a friend of the house, Jesus of Nazareth, has been added. It is Luke who documents what happened, and the great artist, Johannes Vermeer, who visually reconstructs the scene with absolute verisimilitude. We are around the year 1656, more than fifty years after Caravaggio, but the two images really seem to be scenes from the same film. Busy Martha is standing, preparing lunch, and carrying a basket with beautifully rendered bread, and has spread a neat white tablecloth over the precious tablecloth. She is the hostess; in fact, Luke tells us that Jesus had stopped at “Martha’s house.” Mary looks on; Martha on the other hand has said something and has a somewhat resentful expression on her face. That is why Jesus turns his head toward her, with a tone of reproach that is as firm as it is gentle. We all know what he said to her. Vermeer adds an

Caravaggio, *Martha and Mary Magdalene*
(c. 1598), Detroit Institute of Arts.



Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1656), Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery.

emotional depth to Jesus's gaze that is destined to leave its mark on Martha's heart. But the center of the painting is in that silent corner where Mary is crouched down. This time she is the one depicted in shadow, but her profile stands out, silhouetted against the radiant white of the tablecloth. With her face resting on her hand, she contemplates Jesus; she is all absorbed in him, in "what is best, [which] will not be taken away from her." Jesus himself points her out to Martha with a barely noticeable hand gesture, as if pointing to a horizon that overcomes her troubles. The triangular composition created by Vermeer is so immediately persuasive and compelling, to Martha first and foremost, that it needs no words. Looks and gestures say it all. Martha would treasure that moment, as a curious painting by the young Velázquez testifies—she is seen in the kitchen along with a poor servant exasperated by too much work to do. She points toward a small window, which could also be a painting that depicts the scene from that day with Jesus.

Scene two. Nicolas Froment is a French artist who was commissioned in 1461 by Francesco Coppini, the bishop of Prato and papal legate to Flanders, to produce a triptych depicting the resurrection of Lazarus. The main scene occupies the central compartment, while the artist has chosen to depict the immediate backstory in the left-hand compartment: Martha who, learning of Jesus's approach to Bethany, had run to him to tell him

the news of her brother's death. She is a different woman, who throws herself at Jesus's feet, her face streaked with tears. The apostles almost scowl at her, as if it were her fault that their master was exposing them to risk as they drew closer to Jerusalem, the city that was less than two miles away and that dominates the background with its grand architecture. In fact, for Martha, that presence, while much desired, had come as a surprise. As soon as she heard the news of Jesus's arrival, instead of worrying about arranging things around the house, she had run to him, spurred by an unprecedented burning inside, while Mary, as John narrates, stood paralyzed with grief. It would then be Martha, in an exchange of roles from a few months earlier, who would take the initiative and take her sister to Jesus: in Giotto's fresco in the Scrovegni chapel we see them together, prostrate at the Lord's feet, the very feet that Mary had washed with perfumes some time before, arousing Judas's sense of scandal, which was filled with hypocrisy.

Scene three. This is the climactic moment. Jesus has arrived in Bethany and, full of emotion, gone to his friend's tomb. Following Caravaggio, we are able to imagine the situation. There is so much excitement in front of that large dark cave, penetrated by a single stream of light that enters violently from the left. People crowd around, curious but also afraid of what is happening. Jesus stretches out his arm, replicating the gesture that is familiar

to us because it is the same gesture he used to call Matthew in the masterpiece painted nine years earlier in Rome. Here, on the other hand, he is in Sicily, in Messina, in a very different situation: Caravaggio is a genius continuously on the run for the crime he committed in 1606. As an eighteenth-century biographer, Francesco Susinno, wrote, "Fear hunted him from place to place." The excitement of the scene is thus also Caravaggio's excitement. Following Jesus's order, two men have lifted the heavy tomb slab; another has taken Lazarus into his arms, already freed from his bandages and spreading his arms out wide in a gesture of awakening that is like a new embrace of the world. And the two sisters? Caravaggio seems to be fully aware of what has happened, thanks to Jesus's visits to their home. Mary, as is customary, has her hair down, stands a step back and holds one of her brother's arms. Martha, on the other hand, in a poignant and unforgettable emotional outburst, leans over Lazarus's face with her mouth half open as if about to kiss him, in one of the most intense details in the entire history of art. She is the first witness to what has happened; she is the first to feel, on herself, the breath of her brother brought back to life. She is a humanly changed Martha who no longer plays it safe, who we see burning in her actions. The liberation of her heart in her encounter with Jesus was also a "resurrection" for her. ■

To Give One's Life for the Work of Another

LUIGI GIUSSANI

Edited by Julián Carrón

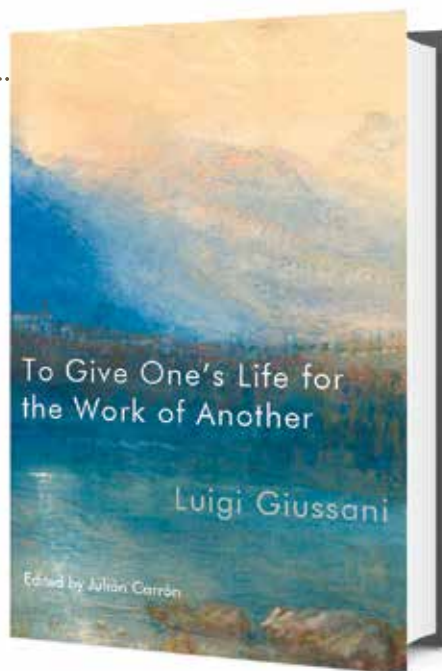
Some of Father Luigi Giussani's most poignant teachings, available in print for the first time.

Father Luigi Giussani engaged tirelessly in educational initiatives throughout the course of his life. Much of his thought was communicated through the richness and rhythm of oral discourse, preserved as audio and video recordings in the archive of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation in Milan.

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