



First Annual Crossroads Cultural Center
Advisory Board Meeting

October 13, 2007

The Mertz Gilmore Foundation

Key Note Address by Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, Chairman

**“The Relationship between Reason, Faith, and Culture in the Context of
Contemporary American Society”**

Welcome and introductory remarks – Angelo Sala, President of Crossroads

Good afternoon and welcome to the First Annual Crossroads Advisory Board Meeting.. Crossroads was born almost exactly 3 years ago at the Starbucks coffee shop on the corner of Third Avenue and 44th Street here in Manhattan. But its true, deepest, origin goes back several years, and lies in the encounter that each one of the 4 people who started meeting at Starbucks had with the charism of Communion and Liberation, at different times and in different circumstances of life.

At the deepest level, we can say that Crossroads was born from the experience that belonging to the living body of Christ opened us to all of reality in a profound new way. It made it possible to look for the truth of everything, behind the appearances, and to recognize in every particular the “vanishing point” that gives perspective, profundity and substance to everything; it provided a new point of view that allows, finally, seeing things in their full dimension. In other words, far from closing us in a privileged but also reclusive and arrogant citadel (or, as is sometimes described, a “ghetto”, the “catholic ghetto”) Christianity, by disclosing the ultimate meaning of reality, has launched us with an open, curious, and cordial spirit in that adventure that is common and proper to every human being: the adventure of knowledge. And knowledge is not a hobby for intellectuals: it is indispensable in order to face, and possibly satisfy, the urgent and unquenchable thirst for meaning and truth that makes us human (which is well described by Rilke's poem). This thirst is tied up with a specific task and a specific power granted to every human being at the very moment of creation: the task and the power to name and have dominion over things, or, we could say, to recognize their meaning (in fact, we truly possess things only when we recognize their meaning). Fr. Giussani often expressed this in a way that summarizes very well the dizzying greatness of the human condition: the person, I, you, is the only point in the entire universe in which the cosmos becomes aware of itself. In this sense, Christianity has enabled us to be ourselves. We can look square in the face, with no fear and embarrassment, at this thirst that we share with everyone else.

For this reason, in establishing a cultural center (that wanted to be well aware of its roots) nothing was more foreign to us than to focus on a predetermined subset of issues, people or ideas that fall under the ‘Catholic’ label. On the contrary, to us being a Catholic cultural center means precisely the opposite, that is, to be interested in everything, at a 360 degree angle, and to have the ability, or at least the desire, to encounter people from all walks of life, and to look for and give value to everything that is true, good and worthy in the various expressions of human life. Saint Paul’s suggestion, “Test everything, retain what is good” – which Fr. Giussani considered the synthesis of the Catholic idea of

culture - sums up the ideal of Crossroads. It is also one of the peculiar characteristics of Crossroads that has struck many people we have met.

And there is more: we have said that Christianity, by proposing to us a hypothesis that discloses the ultimate meaning of reality, has launched us with a greater curiosity, openness and energy into the adventure of knowledge. But what have we discovered? We have been progressively discovering that, deep down, “Amore, amore, omne cosa conclama” in the words of Jacopone da Todi, a great Christian figure of the Middle-Ages. This could be translated as follows: “Each and every thing, by itself and all together, speaks about and cries out for one thing: Love.” The discovery of this common thread hidden in the fabric of our everyday life is what makes us feel sympathetic toward ANY expression of human creativity, and interested in EVERY development in social life. Thus, we can meet and have a dialog with everybody on any topic, without fear of losing our identity. In all the events we have organized, in every speaker we have invited, we have been looking for hints of that Love (capital L), echoed in whatever our guests loved. And this recognition of a shared love is also the beginning, the seed, of friendship. How many times have we had to admit that the most beautiful moments of a Crossroads event were after the event itself, at dinner, when, around the table, we got to know more deeply the love and passion that moved our guests in doing what they were doing, and we recognized that what was moving them was also moving us. And here is the second peculiarity of our cultural center: the desire, the hope, of a friendship with whomever we have met or will meet along the way. The presence of each one of you here today is a witness to this friendship, which is certainly the fruit of our work for which we are most grateful.

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Finally after my encounter with Fr. Giussani and his world, I thought I should look at that reason for why I am here; that is to say, this is not normally what I would do on a Saturday afternoon, this companionship is not normally the people that would surround me. For some reason, all of us have changed our schedule for today and we are here. Why? I can think of two reasons. I can first think of the bad ones like duty. I mean, if you have to show up, you have to show up, but it's not much fun. It's some kind of obligation. Justice—these people have been so nice to me, I might as well show up. Both of these are possible, but I wonder really if any one of them would have been strong enough to get me up on a Saturday afternoon. But, on the other side, I'm here because it's interesting, something worthwhile. It is worthwhile. It has a value. I can invest something in it—time, energy—because it is worth it. It is something that is good. This is what interests us.

You know, I go around the past couple of years visiting many people interested, both of Catholic persuasion and others. For the past year I've been meeting a lot of priests. I've just come back from a priest's retreat in Orlando. The most amazing thing everyone finds about what I propose is that Christ is interesting. That nothing but sheer response to something interesting moves us in the direction of Christ. I'm telling you, I'm always amazed. The acceptance, the simplicity to it. But it is interesting. It is worthwhile because it is interesting, because of duty, because of who he is, all the reasons are there, and fine, but just out of sheer interest, curiosity, it's found very strange.

I'll save for later the next step which is the fact that anything is interesting because of Christ. The very reason we get up in the morning is because of Christ.

These are the two things that I've learned with the life of our friendship, with our movement. Very, very simple. Things that I thought I knew.

I guess for me, when I finally arrived at the lab, some of you do lab work here—some of you may have trouble imagining me in a lab except as a specimen of their investigations—I was interested in finding out things. I was in a laboratory, and I was the only one there who claimed any belief in transcendence, not to mention Christianity, not to mention Catholicism. And after a while, nobody cared. And there began to be a point when they began to think I wasn't that bad at all as a worker, as someone dedicated to the cause, and I was asked how I could explain that I could apparently enthusiastically, with interest and dedication follow the scientific investigation of life and believe that a man who was dead popped out of the dead three or two and a half days later—whatever it was...I was out of town. "You must be two different people," they said, "or one or the other is not true, is not the real you. You cannot both be the real you because these two dedications of the heart are incompatible." Notice how it was put. What's incompatible is the dedication of the heart, the worthwhile-ness of it. You cannot devote yourself, act out of this interest in this area and the other one equally. What you have to be is schizophrenic; you have to be a duelist.

Another aside, most of us are duelists. Most believers, most religious people, most Christians, most Catholics today are duelists. The overcoming of this duelism is another gift that I have found from the companionship of Fr. Giussani. The part of interest and the elimination of this destructive and crippling and really mentally pathological duelism—because it is true that you cannot be two things that are radically opposed to you—so I thought that I was the one who had to answer the question. Fortunately I was not the only one having it. The Catholic Church was because this coincided with the Second Vatican Council, so I decided to see how the Church answered this question, and concentrate, of all the things in the Council mostly on that which touched directly on the encounter between the Church and the modern world, the Church and contemporary culture. That is how I came to the subject of culture.

When we talk about the dedication of the heart, in a sense, I understood that what they were bringing up is a conflict between two cultures—the scientific culture following its *logos* and that of the faith following its rationality. Again it is right there at the heart of it that the conflict occurs. So I became interested in the question of faith and culture. Vatican II led me to its own constitution on the matter, *Gaudium et Spes*, and that led me to the anthropological dimension of the problem. This apparent conflict could be resolved only by an adequate view of what the human person is. Because, for example, I had not felt this conflict. Either I'm weird and different, or deceiving myself. Is this conflict inherent in our humanity or indeed are we made for a reality that goes beyond the possibilities of the scientific method as understood today? Are we made for it?

The question of an adequate anthropology, as John Paul II was going to call it many years later using that very word "adequate" had realized that the anthropology that I had learned with my faith was faulty or at least too weak to support this.

Gaudium et Spes concludes its analysis with a statement that was going to be the favorite Vatican II quote of John Paul II, number 22, where it says that human beings exist so that Christ may exist, and that Christ exists so that human beings may exist. You don't recognize it putting it this way, but this is what it says. When you remove the philosophical and theological language, that only the Mystery of Christ and the Father revealed by this Mystery can reveal to us what the mystery of man is—this is what it says. It sounds beautiful, mystical if you leave it like that. But if you put it in a more blunt way—the only reason that human beings exist, the only reason I exist, is so that Christ might exist—St. Paul says, “So that he might be the first among many,”—and the only reason Christ exists, the only reason there is an incarnation, by Christ I mean Jesus, not the eternal logos—the only reason there is a Jesus is so that we might exist.

By agreeing to that, how do these come together in practical terms? In what I just said to you, that everything human that is interesting can lead me to Christ. Any manifestation of humanity, when it is authentic, human works, human relationships, human dreams, human fears, and excuse me, even human sins, when humanity is engaged, you will be linked to Jesus Christ because there is no human reality without Christ, and it shows itself in the happy fusion of interests, how the interest in the human, in the real, in the world we build and the one in which we live that was described so well by Angelo, that is a path, THE path of the human heart to Jesus Christ. The link is between Jesus and the real. This is the last word in this staircase. It is about what is real because as this is occurring in my own life, I find on the other side the same thing that's occurring in the opposite direction. Now no one knows what is real.

Fr. Giussani, me, Benedict XVI. This is his speech at Aparecida in Brazil just a few months ago to the Latin American Bishops Conference. You must understand the drama of the occasion. In Latin America, the inability of faith to generate a culture that reflected the Christian reality was obvious. It was obvious way back, before, during the Council, and it became, under Paul VI, the whole issue of “the evangelization of culture.” The term in Catholicism was used in response to the Latin American drama, and Mario here can denounce or agree with this. The idea was the desperate need to change that culture that sustained, structurally sustained the scandals, separation gap between abysmal poverty and riches, structurally sustained. If Christianity not only had nothing to do, to offer against this, or at worst it was somehow tied to it, then it had to go. So the Church faced quite an issue.

You know, in some respects, it's not unlike Fr. Giussani in '54 when he realized that the Catholic claim in Italy, the reconstruction of that post-war culture was not generating anything in spite of apparent triumph in numbers. Only the Communists seemed to, and the Hedonists (the party that I was associated with at the time). It's not the same but it's the same. Namely, what does Christianity bring to this world? Bring to life? Bring to culture? What does it matter? Does it matter? What happens in this world where Christianity is lived?

Now, liberation theology was an attempt to answer that question, and it proposed an analysis of a situation and a method to deal with it and a link with Christ. It's beautiful, exactly what was needed. But then it met a Roman resistance, led by, of all people, by John Paul II, but through the ministry of Joseph Ratzinger. And now Joseph Ratzinger, as Pope, was going to Latin America. I just wanted to set up the drama of the moment, okay? I mean it's not the kind of thing where he would say to someone, “Whip me out a speech. Throw in the usual stuff.” It is something he must have thought

about with great care, again and again and again, because beyond that problem he was also aware that there were many people who honestly and truly would be confused, especially many people there who had risked their lives and were risking their lives for something that did not appear to have the support of the Church. I think now Joey Ratzinger the Pope was at work, not the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, but the father. Anyway, it's funny what he chose to say. You can listen to it.

The question...What does Christ actually give to us? You know, I like that question. It's the same question from the lab days. It's THE question of today. We don't know how to deal with this question. And if the answer we give to it is not attractive and interesting, forget it! There are better things to do on a Saturday afternoon, I assure you. It's 2000 years later. We've only had 2000 years to answer it. What does Christ actually give us? Why would we want to be disciples of Christ? "The answer is," says the Pope, "What does Christ actually give us? Why do we want to be disciples of Christ? The answer is: because, in communion with him, we hope to find life, the true life that is worthy of the name, and thus we want to make him known to others, to communicate to them the gift that we have found in him."

Well, that's very nice, and I agree with that, but still, something bothers me. It's not enough..."to find life"—what does that mean? What does it say about how I experience life today? So he asks, "Is it really so? Are we really convinced that Christ is the way, the truth and the life? In the face of the priority of faith in Christ, and of life 'in him'," (meaning the sense that Christianity proposes that everything can be left behind. Everything. Absolutely everything, including your own life, and put in Christ's hands, and you will not lose it.) In the face of this "a further question could arise: could this priority not perhaps be a flight towards emotionalism, towards religious individualism, an abandonment of the urgent reality of the great economic, social and political problems of Latin America and the world, and a flight from reality towards a spiritual world? As a first step, we can respond to this question with another: what is this 'reality'?"

He has landed in the same spot we have landed. "What is real? Are only material goods, social, economic and political problems 'reality'? This was precisely the great error of the dominant tendencies of the last century, a most destructive error, as we can see from the results of both Marxist and capitalist systems. They falsify the notion of reality by detaching it from the foundational and decisive reality which is God. Anyone who excludes God from his horizons falsifies the notion of 'reality' and, in consequence, can only end up in blind alleys or with recipes for destruction."

"The first basic point to affirm, then, is the following: only those who recognize God know reality and are able to respond to it adequately and in a truly human manner....Yet here a further question immediately arises: who knows God? How can we know him? We cannot enter here into a complex discussion of this fundamental issue. For a Christian, the nucleus of the reply is simple: only God knows God, only his Son who is God from God, true God, knows him. And he 'who is nearest to the Father's heart has made him known' (*Jn* 1:18). Hence the unique and irreplaceable importance of Christ for us, for humanity. If we do not know God in and with Christ, all of reality is transformed into an indecipherable enigma; there is no way, and without a way, there is neither life nor truth."

Later on, following almost exactly Fr. Giussani's treatment of this, the Pope underlines that this waking up of our hearts to reality is what salvation means. To be saved is to know the real. That certainly includes the drama of our sins and its consequences, and of our redemption from sin. That includes it, but it's so much broader. Usually we restrict Christianity to just that drama. I have seen how salvation is basically just salvation from hell. Well, again, nobody is denying this. But it is restricted. Salvation is the awareness of the heart to the real; therefore, it's part of the drama of creation, independent of how it is shaped by the power of sin, once again, therefore, linking Jesus and the real.

Moving right along to page two...remember, what I have just finished is a discourse. What kind of reaction would I hope you would have to these words? If one has proposed something understandable and interesting, one would hope illuminating, pleasing in that sense as an intellectual banquet...Before I met Fr. Giussani, I lived in that "banquet world." The fathers of the Church, the Pope, they were all saying this stuff. It was so clear. Then again, I wouldn't have put it in terms of Christ and the real, that's where I was headed and would have headed there, Giussani or no Giussani, just following the Pope it would have brought me to this point—that the real issue we face is the relation between Christ and the real. But it still would've just been just a bunch of words, a discourse.

There is one overwhelming question missing. It's not enough to end where I've just ended—Christ and the real. Ta dah! The question is, so now what? Where is this Christ? Where does this happen? What the hell are you talking about? There's only one thing we are looking for. If there is a connection between Christ and the real, and they are inseparable, then any increase in one leads to the other. We'll put it that way. An experience of the presence of Christ will make you passionately fascinated by what is real—by the little flower, by the cosmos, by the macrocosm, the microcosm, and all that weird stuff you study, even accounting at Merrill Lynch. If you know that, the path will lead you to Christ. Pursuing that path of your interest will lead you to Christ. That's the claim, so the question is: How is it verified?

Here we arrive at the second point which scandalizes many of my listeners, especially the priests. (You wanna recall Christianity is interesting which means they were all along thinking they were devoted to the most boring proposition there is.) The second one is that it can and should be verified. The Christian claim can and should be verified, not to be afraid to acknowledge that. "Be prepared," St. Peter said, "to give an account of the hope that is in you." It is not a presumption or an outrage to want to verify this claim. Too much is at stake.

That introduces, of course, a question: Is Christianity reasonable? Which is the other wing of where the Pope is taking us. The discussion about Christ and the real, and the discussion about faith and reason, that's how these are related.

Anyway, how to verify them? Again, we go back to the claim. Just put it in terms that could verify them and make sure you put it correctly in those terms. It seems to me that among the things to look for, one is precisely the one I just mentioned. An encounter with Christ will lead to an interest and a passion and a love for reality that will surprise us because that thirst is what defines the human heart, and that doesn't age. When it encounters Christ, it comes out from within you in the same force that it could've had at 15 years old, only you're now 66. It doesn't change. It's the link with eternity. All of

those are activated. The religious sense, to put it in Giussani's terms, is jump-started and headed in the right direction and it shows itself again in its interest in all that exists.

There are other signs, but to me that one is fundamental, and especially in the way we face the culture. The culture is defined in terms of how we look at reality, how we look at and experience reality. I propose to you that the real choice is between a culture that is closed to reality in all its dimensions and aspects and one that is open to it, so at this level, the level of the encounter between our experience and culture, I think this openness is the path to go on. It would be disastrous if we were to go in the opposite direction. That is why some people here who, as Angelo said, are not out there to show off a Catholic genius or to engage in a battle. We are here to give witness to our faith, yes, but also to really to live with the confidence that that same faith gives us, to understand what is real, what is being seen, what is being lived. Again, this awakens interest, and with interest, light. This is the only way.

All of this is sustained by the grace of the encounter with Christ. It's unexpected, but it isn't a purely mental operation, or purely spiritual. It occurs through someone in a given place, at a given time. Fidelity to that particularity is essential because that keeps us within the orbit of the encounter, sustaining our approach to the real. That is why, at the heart of Crossroads, like the movement from which it springs, it is the expression of a preferential friendship. That is why we yearn to have something like this advisory board. Not because we were running out of ideas or anything like that, but precisely because of the same impetus that moves the reality of Crossroads—the desire to look at reality from the experience of a network of friends who have had this foundational experience. That's why I think this is not just an administrative or organizational moment. It kind of looks nice to have an advisory board, but part of the miracle itself that is from Crossroads. Thank you.