

CULTURE AT THE
CROSSROADS
of
REALITY AND REASON

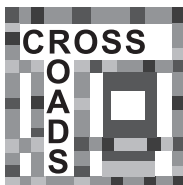


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A COLLECTION OF
MSGR. LORENZO ALBACETE'S TALKS
TO THE
CROSSROADS ADVISORY BOARD MEETINGS

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OF REALITY AND REASON**

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Crossroads Cultural Center

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

This booklet collects the transcripts of the keynote addresses that Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete gave at the annual meetings of the Crossroads Advisory Board from 2007 through 2014 in his position as Chairman. Not only did these addresses serve as stepping stones for the journey of our cultural center, they also represent a powerful and brilliant synthesis of how culture is born and interacts with religiosity, reason, and freedom.

Here below is the introduction that was delivered by one of Crossroads' co-founders at the beginning of the first meeting of the advisory board on October 13, 2007. It provides some insights into the origin, ideals, and method of Crossroads, which may help, in turn, to clarify the context of these talks.

Crossroads was born almost exactly three 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 four people who started meeting at Starbucks had with the charisma 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 opens us up to all of reality in a profound new way. It makes it possible to look, behind the appearances, for the truth of everything and to recognize in every particular the “vanishing point” that gives perspective, profundity, and substance to everything; it provides a new point of view that allows us, finally, to see things in their full dimension. In other words, by revealing the ultimate meaning of reality, Christianity, far from closing us in a privileged but also reclusive and arrogant citadel (or, as is sometimes described, a “ghetto” — the “Catholic ghetto”), 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 "Das Stundebuch," *Poems from the Book of Hours*, that you can read on the homepage of our website).

This thirst is tied up in 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, this thirst that we share with everyone else.

For this reason, in establishing a cultural center (with a healthy awareness 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, looking for and giving value to everything that is true, good, and worthwhile 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 a hypothesis that reveals the ultimate meaning of reality, has launched within us 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 collectively, 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 dialogue 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 signs of that Love (with a 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 and for which we are most grateful.

The Relationship Between Reason, Faith, and Culture in Contemporary American Society

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.

* Given October 13, 2007 at the Mertz Gilmore Foundation

2007

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 dualist.

Another aside, most of us are dualists. Most believers, most religious people, most Christians, most Catholics today are dualists. The overcoming of this dualism 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 dualism—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.

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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:

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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

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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.

Comments on Pope Benedict XVI's Address to Representatives of Other Religions in Washington, DC

The encounter between faith and culture has been the topic of intense discussion since the Second Vatican Council. History shows that faith can indeed refashion or generate an entirely new culture, but how precisely does this happen? I believe that the recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States offers us a good example of how our faith interacts with culture. The key to this interaction is the method of dialogue. It is thus important to understand what dialogue means for us.

The point of departure of our dialogue with other Christians, with non-Christians, and non-believers must be our faith itself. An authentic dialogue occurs when it is motivated by the love for truth awakened in us by our faith in Christ. Our participation in the dialogue is a way of witnessing to what faith in Christ has allowed us to experience. Otherwise, the dialogue would be an inconclusive discussion that at best will end with a kind of “holding back” in order to make a compromise possible. This may be necessary in a political discussion, but it is not the way to advance together in the pursuit of truth. A true encounter between faith and culture occurs only when our participation in a dialogue is motivated by our faith.

The purpose of a dialogue motivated by faith is not the discovery of a “common ground” between different or conflicting opinions. Rather the purpose is the common love for truth and the deepening of the bonds of solidarity that this devotion to reality creates. The first moment of such a dialogue is an affirmation of the value of the quest itself. This was clear in the Pope’s speeches and in his actions during his visit to the United States.

In his meeting with followers of different religious traditions at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, DC, the Holy Father praised the United States for its respect of religious pluralism. Religious pluralism, religiosity in its many forms, is not a problem to be overcome; it is a reality in the human quest for truth. From this perspective, dialogue expresses the conviction that such a pluralism does not mean that there is no ultimate

* Given June 28, 2008 at the Mertz Gilmore Foundation

2008

truth or that we will never be able to know it with certainty. Dialogue requires confidence in its success!

Indeed, faith in Christ is a form of knowledge that comes to know truth in Him, and we who have encountered Truth welcome and affirm all paths of reason that can serve as the ground for receiving the seed of faith. Faith allows us to recognize Christ as the Incarnate Truth, and it inspires us to seek to know Him more and more. It's like falling in love with someone—you seek to discover the one you love in the contacts he or she has with other people. We have encountered the truth in Christ but, precisely because of this certainty, there is so much we want to know. So the encounter with the truth in Christ doesn't restrict our range of interest in human reality. On the contrary, it expands it to infinity! The Holy Father spoke about the ardor with which faith propels our passion in reason's quest for truth. This determination not to give up in the search for truth is one of our main contributions to the dialogue. This was the main point of the Holy Father's never-delivered speech at La Sapienza, which, after discussing what he as Pope could contribute to the University's mission, asserted that the Church's main contribution today is precisely to urge all not to surrender to relativism and to have confidence in our reasoning ability, in our capacity of encountering truth. This is what the Pope calls "the broadening of reason."

So, I believe that the truly fruitful encounter between faith and culture is a dialogue that broadens reason and sustains the confidence that truth can be encountered.

Such a dialogue, insisted the Holy Father, is urgent today. We desperately need a dialogue that will help us discover common ethical values to which we can appeal to sustain a global system of laws that will protect human rights.

In his own dialogue with Jürgen Habermas on January 19, 2004, the then-Cardinal Ratzinger put it this way: "How can cultures encountering one another find ethical basis to guide their relationships on the path that would permit them to build up a common structure that tames power and imposes a legally responsible order on the exercise of power?"

This touches another area where a dialogue is very important today, namely, the encounter between faith and scientific research. In that dialogue with

Habermas, the Holy Father acknowledges the difficulties for agreement on a kind of “natural law” to be the basis of a global ethics. Many of the sciences today, especially studies of evolution, no longer believe that there is meaning and purpose to be discovered in nature. As a result, the capacity of reason to deal with questions of meaning and purpose is denied.

In that connection, the Pope brings up the importance of education, seeing Catholic education as a “diaconia of truth.”

According to the Holy Father, “spiritual leaders have a special duty, and we might say competence, to place the deeper questions at the forefront of human consciousness, to reawaken mankind to the mystery of human existence, and to make space in a frenetic world for reflection and prayer. . . . Confronted with these deeper questions concerning the origin and destiny of mankind, Christianity proposes Jesus of Nazareth. He, we believe, is the eternal *Logos* who became flesh in order to reconcile man to God and reveal the underlying reason of all things. It is He whom we bring to the forum of interreligious dialogue. The ardent desire to follow in His footsteps spurs Christians to open their minds and hearts in dialogue (cf. *Lk* 10:25–37; *Jn* 4:7–26).”

All of this is possible, remember, if our participation in a faith/culture dialogue is motivated by our encounter with Christ. To this end, the Pope observed that “in our attempt to discover points of commonality, perhaps we have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity. While always uniting our hearts and minds in the call for peace, we must also listen attentively to the voice of truth. In this way, our dialogue will not stop at identifying a common set of values, but go on to probe their ultimate foundation. We have no reason to fear, for the truth unveils for us the essential relationship between the world and God. We are able to perceive that peace is a ‘heavenly gift’ that calls us to conform human history to the divine order. Herein lies ‘the truth of peace.’”

Comments on Pope Benedict XVI's Address at the Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris

I read this address the next day after it was given. As you know, it is a speech given by the Pope to the men and women of culture in France during his visit to France, and even I thought that it could have something that we could use, material that we could steal, so I read it and I liked it, and that's that. Since then I think I may have read it ten times and I have come to the conclusion that this is one of the most important addresses to come from a pope at any time within modern times. Perhaps Pope Leo's letter on Chalcedon was a little bit more important. But since then because it is, once you get through the words which may be unfamiliar, what this presents to you is a method, a way of life that defines Christianity. What the Pope has been able to offer here is that, is what defines Christianity, what it means to be a Christian for all times. It is defined by a method of reacting to the real, a method of looking at reality. That is at the heart of Fr. Giussani's work and charism, and one of the uses I have made of this is precisely to give a few talks comparing both methods, arguing that it is only the one method, or comparing both languages—the one used by the Pope and the one used by Fr. Giussani. It's not of interest to us here, but every time I become more convinced that this is the defining reality of Christianity. The application of this to people who are concerned about the relation between our faith and culture, which I guess defines us in a broad sense, is crucial. After all, the original audience were people of culture and I think therefore there is no time to do justice to this text. I hope to underline the most important parts and points, and then I do hope you read it for yourselves.

For example it contains the papal response to the most recent disputes

* Given April 25, 2009 at the American Bible Society

2009

Paolo has been facing, and we have all been facing, with the President's visit to Notre Dame University for the graduation. What is a Catholic university? What is a Christian university? What is the point of departure? How do we judge these events? I think this offers to you a method which is, in fact, *the* Christian method.

Based on that, here we go. The first point, the Pope says, he's going to claim now that the way the monastic culture was born, the way the monasteries were put together in the Middle Ages, is revealing of how Christianity is defined. They obviously were responding to their own set of circumstances. We have a different particular set, although we have the same underlying background, and that is what? The collapse of certainties. These people are brought together by the experience of the confusion that is experienced in the cultural atmosphere of the time. And the first thing that moves them is: How do you live through this? What is the way of facing and dealing with this ideological and cultural confusion?

Another way of seeing it is that they are in this context motivated by what we would call a desire for truth. Not long ago, to say that would have made this obsolete because the desire for truth is not a popular thing; in the dominant culture, relativism is. But yet if you just watch, for example, the present discussion on torture. I just sit there watching the news, and it is an amazing thing this dispute, pro and con, as to the need to know the truth. This is not an abstract truth; this is the truth of what happened and in a sense both sides are pursuing the same ideology, but I am not willing to say that the question of desire for truth is that obsolete. I think people can still respond to this desire in the human heart.

In any case, in the midst of this confusion, what can you depend on? The underlying experience is whatever gives rise to that question. And he insists upon this, its intension. First of all, therefore, what is occurring is what Fr. Giussani would call "the formation of a movement." The beginning of a monastic culture has the shape today of a movement, of people coming together to pursue this, the search together. In any case, the intention is not to create a new culture. The moment you start with that point of view you have detached yourself from the method that defines Christianity. At the end you will be lead to nothing. Nothing really serious can be created

that way. So when you are active in the area of faith and culture, as we are, I think the first point to learn is that we watch out that we don't fall into this temptation to create a culture that will substitute the present one.

“Their intention was not to create a new culture,” says the Pope, “nor even to preserve a culture from the past.” Both ends of the spectrum are rejected—to be involved to create a new culture or to protect the one that seems to be collapsing. “Its motivation,” says the Pope, “is much more elementary.” I love that word! Its motivation is a human need; it's “elementary.” Namely their goal was: *quaerere Deum*—to search for God. The search for God, the danger with that term is that it may appear pious or escapist. So the Pope says, “What does it mean to search for God?” I think these words of his in reply are fantastic:

Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. It is sometimes said that they were “eschatologically” oriented. But this is not to be understood in a temporal sense, as if they were looking ahead to the end of the world or to their own death, but in an existential sense: they were seeking the definitive behind the provisional.

In the midst of confusion in which everything is falling down, these guys sought the essential, namely that which has value and remains, that you could trust enough, something whose value you can experience and that remains there. It's not going to go away. What is trustworthy, what is important in the midst of these confusing circumstances, is to find life, life itself. What is life? Human life. So looking for God was not a pious goal or to somehow escape into the unchanging mystery that offers protection from the waves of confusion around us; it was rather to enter into these waves of confusion and there find out what remains, what survives, what has value, what is worthwhile to live for, etc.. This the Pope calls, following the tradition, an eschatological orientation. But the problem with that term

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is that eschatology had come to mean *after the end, the end or after*. First the end of the world or the end of one's individual lifetime. The Pope says, these guys in no way were interested in that. They were interested in their lives now, not after death, not after the end of the world. They were looking for (and I love this phrase) "the definitive in the midst of the provisional."

Reading this I can see this point. This is a good way to describe what we are doing together here, why we do what we do is, in a sense, our version in today's situation of what was these guys there. They could have started a cultural center, if you wish. Instead they started monasteries. We are not going to do that. I don't know if Angelo has any intention of putting on some kind of habit, but what I want to underline is that we are responding to the same thing that these people responded to, so we want to see how they responded so that we can follow the same method or path today in our terms.

The first point is interesting. Though they are motivated by this search, by this experience of unrest, this desire for truth, their point of departure is not this experience. This experience motivates them, but they are Christians, says the Pope. They believe that God has revealed the method to find Him, and cleared the path to Him. So the first search is to understand revelation well, to understand well the faith, their faith. They arrive at this end, deal with this as people of faith. To the degree their faith is weak, they will attempt to look for alternate methods, but they are convinced that the faith is true, only they want to see what it implies, what it means in terms of how they are to judge the present situation in which they live, and how to respond to it.

For them, this faith is centered on the Word, the Logos. Important point to update this view—the Logos is not at all merely an intellectual concept, but a word, namely like "hi." It is a reality that catches your attention, that is addressed to you. It is, in Fr. Giussani's term, an encounter. So this is very important. It is a call; it is therefore a vocation. Human life itself, experienced as a call, as a word, as a response to a word addressed to you—human words. The question is now: What is it revealing to you? How do you respond to this encounter experience with the Word—the recognition of it is faith? How do you respond to that? You need to

establish what he calls “a culture of the word”; that is to say, revelation occurs through communication among humans. So therefore you want to study that reality known as human communication. In this case, how do human beings use words? If the Divine Word is experienced as coming through human words, how are human words used? Do you understand the point? So they studied as best they could with the knowledge of the time human language—the words human beings speak in narratives, in poetry, in myths, in all kinds of things. They want to study that, to study, the Pope says, “the secret of language,” the structure of human language, the models, the modes of expression that human beings have. I would expand it further beyond language to communication because it’s not just a question of language. And even further they become interested in the human reality as such, the understanding of what humanity means because unless they do that they will not be able to recognize the impact of the presence of the Divine Logos and how it is that it is speaking to them and what it is saying. Understood?

He has a lovely expression in French that if everything else fails today, you can take home and stun people by speaking of *L’amour des lettres*, love for letters. It kind of has a little sexy tone. You can write little memos like, “Dear Cynthia, Meet me at the Cafe Des Artistes, the usual table. We will discuss *L’amour des lettres*. Ercole.” And then you have justified coming here today because this will be of great use. The culture of the word, *L’amour des lettres*, love for the human—let’s put it in those terms.

Letters here stands for everything. The reason *letters* is being used is because revelation is seen in terms of words. For Fr. Giussani, for example, revelation is seen in terms of a different kind of humanity. You encounter a diverse humanity. It starts with that. In the midst of your search for meaning, big or small, suddenly something occurs that strikes you. This diverse humanity is a word, a logos. For that reason you are curious. In what does this diversity consist? Hey, what’s going on here? What does it mean to be human?, etc... It’s exactly the same thing here. We should not restrict it to just words. The reason it’s in those terms is because of the logos, the point of departure.

Therefore this creates a need to know the human sciences. Again these

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people did not have the technology, the studies, the advantages that we have. But as best they could they studied what sciences were saying about what it means to be human. Another reality that springs from it—a library. You collect as much of the written wisdom as you can. What would be the equivalent of it today? Well certainly a library too. But can you imagine today? Well you have the human sciences, the study of communication and a library, what you have established is, in a certain sense, a school. The monastic movement becomes a school of God's service-- *dominici servitii schola*. A school in which you are taught how to find the truth in the midst of confusion, how to find the truth of life. The school serves what was called *eruditio*. Perhaps this is the best expression of all—it was a matter of a school for the formation of reason. Again, for those of us who follow Fr. Giussani, it is not unrelated to the School of Community because again and again this task of searching for how it is that the Divine Logos is present through the human logos, how that is possible and what it implies is for these people a task of reason, absolutely.

This search started with an unexpected personal provocation. Today we would say an encounter with Christ, but while it remains always intensely personal because in the end you are trying to make sense of life, of your own existence, while it remains that way, the Word, the Logos when it enters into human words, into the human reality, the word that is being sought will point you towards a community; that is to say, this is, if you wish, the first consequence of following this method. You understand this aspect about the word—it is going to say that the rest of your search has to be conducted within a community, not by yourself. That is the very nature of the word. The Holy Father's words are: "The word [logos] does not lead to a purely individual path of mystical immersion, but introduces us to a communion with those walking by faith, to the pilgrim fellowship of faith." This is because of the very reality—for those who care, behind it all is the question of the Trinity and of the secret life of the mystery being love, etc., so it is not surprising that no further progress in recognizing the word, the logos in human words can be made except by entering into this community.

Another point that's interesting, to set you up now, so you have to say, where do I find an expression of this community? Where is it? What is it?

Well, for these people obviously it was the Church without any problem. But what does it mean? Where is the Church present? You have all those questions to deal with.

Here's another hint. This search cannot be purely intellectual. It requires what the Pope calls "corporal acts." It's an amazing thing. Here I suppose, at least in my case, is where we find perhaps one of the most offensive statements or claims that Christianity is like this because I would prefer if it was intellectual. This little corporal acts...what the heck's going on? What should I do? Well, it can get as silly as standing, sitting, walking. A mental operation is not enough. He says, look at the rabbinic schools. Then the Pope zeros in on two such corporal works—writing, and then his favorite, singing. Of course that immediately excludes me from any further discovery of the truth if I have to go around singing, and it can be in poor taste, which is actually if you saw the Easter Vigil sermon this year of the Pope, it was an astounding thing. He says the resurrection, trying to figure out what that means, communicates its reality through liturgical symbols. There is no other way because it is an event that surpasses the categories in which it could be explained, so therefore it can only come to you through an engagement with a symbol. You see the idea of corporal acts. And he says, there are three here right now in this liturgy. Number one, the Easter candle. So he discusses candles and what they are made of, how they give light by dying, the meaning of light. He's appealing all the time to your total involvement of experience by an Easter candle sitting there; you're not imagining it, so therefore if you're in a nice parish, you should not have a cheap Easter candle because it weakens your awareness of the resurrection, and I mean it. You can see the harm done by our liturgical cheapness. It weakens the understanding of what the resurrection means.

The second one was the baptismal water, and you can go on forever with water—the sea, the river's death, new life, freshness, thirst—and he goes on. He's in heaven himself because he loves all that stuff. But you cannot baptize someone by saying, "Imagine that you are sinking in that water," and standing up. Why do I have to do it? At one point he says the Church requires pure spring water for baptism otherwise the baptism was not done. Unless you have that kind of water, because of its symbolic...I mean it just goes on like that.

Again, we don't really believe this. At least in my case this is the most serious difficulty with the Christian reality because what does it matter? God can do whatever he wants. What does it matter whether I jump in there or not? It seems to be a nice thing, but we tend to move away to an intellectual path. Instead we have to be engaged with ritual, if you wish.

You know the origin of this is right in Judaism. I was reading this book by Abraham Joshua Heschel, given to me by one of our friends here, one of our most promising...Dr. Pollack at Columbia University. I was astounded reading this kind of thing and how these people live, the search for the logos in their own terms through gestures. We tend to look down at the enslavement to the instruction that says, "Put on the left shoe first." All of these things in the law we tend to think, thank God we are free from that! Just like we can eat food sacrificed to idols because idols don't exist. Well remember how in early Christianity this was a problem of St. Paul and how did he deal with it? What did it mean to be beyond the law? In any case, here you see that this isn't just a matter of blind following of meaningless gestures. That's our problem. Here, for these people, these gestures had a very specific appeal to their experience of what we would call revelation.

The third one is singing. Again, I tried it in my parish and Jesus went back into the tomb. But the concern about singing, about singing correctly, about the beauty of song has to be there, it has to be there. This is not optional. The word teaches us how to speak with God and for them the paradigm of this was the Psalms, and remember the Psalms begin with singing instructions. These singing instructions are not arbitrary, says the Pope, to the meaning of the Psalm. We can dismiss it. We might not even be in the...from where we get the Psalms, but not here. The music is required to pray, to converse with the Word of God. Pronouncing it is not sufficient. What can that mean for us today? The monks had the time to worry about this in their monastery. What do we do? It's interesting but we do promote ourselves activities with music, and beauty in general because it moves on to that. That really is the ultimate point here—the dimension of beauty. And he goes wild about the Christian liturgy, the Gloria, the angels singing, the Sanctus, the Seraphim, and we join them in the Eucharist. "In the presence of the angels, I will sing for you, O Lord." (Psalm 138). "The earthly community is therefore a presence of the

celestial court.” This goes on and on. It’s good stuff, only obviously the man has not been in my parish on Sunday. Most of our angels leave.

The confusion outside now, remember the one that is the underlying motivation, if you wish, (remember point one), this confusion is seen as a disharmony. Music is important because it conveys the experience of harmony which is something that allows you to escape or to see better the disharmony around you. He quotes St. Augustine who speaks of his life before his conversion as “living in the region of disharmony.” In this case redemption is experienced as the reestablishment of harmony. Culture of singing, culture of being, beauty, etc... The big thing is to learn how to (this is good stuff) sing along with the music of creation itself. This is good material! I mean, right there you’re there with all the big names—Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem the Syrian dealing with the blind.

The underlying problem here is always creation. It always is. Here is where it all comes together at that level because revelation is the restoration of the harmony of creation. And as you know in Scripture itself, and in the Fathers, this extends even to nature. You think this is something we make up? Listen to this statement. This is from *The Life of the Eastern European Jews*:

Even the landscape became Jewish. In the month of Elul, during the penitential season, the fish of the streams trembled. On Lag Ba’Omer, the scholars’ festival in the spring, all the trees rejoiced. When holiday came, even the horses and dogs felt it, and the crow, perched on a branch, looked from a distance as though it were wearing a white prayer shawl with dark blue stripes in front, and it sways and bends as it prays, and it lowers its head in intense supplication.

Harmony, the song of creation. Again, what does this experience indicate, especially when we go way beyond the knowledge of the logos to the knowledge of Christ and the Trinity, etc...?

Now these were the tools to be applied to the text of Scripture because that indeed is the source of the proclamation of what, in this case, Christianity

is all about. These are the tools that will allow you to make sense of what otherwise appears an impossible problem, namely to find the principle of unity in the Scriptures themselves because you are dealing with texts that are a thousand years in the making. Each book in the Scriptures is difficult to relate to some kind of interior...relate one to the other. Is there an interior unity among them? In what does it lie? What about the path from the Old Testament to the New Testament? What is the principle of unity that somehow or other does not destroy the discontinuity between the two? Again this is a serious search of reason. This is the point. It is of reason, armed by all the community, the gestures, the singing, etc... helping reason along to make sense of this because reason is trying to find out the presence of the Divine in the human. And then listen to these observations: "The divine dimension of the word and the human words is not naturally obvious." This is the crucial part: "The unity of the biblical books and the divine character of their words cannot be grasped by purely historical methods." You cannot just sit there and create this unity or in these ways—looking for it in purely historical terms or in terms of human communication because human communications are human communications. How can the divine be present in human communication? "The historical element is seen in the multiplicity and the humanity." And that's all you grasp. You cannot grasp the divine presence that way. "The letter indicates the facts and events," says St. Augustine. The message, "what you have to believe is indicated by allegory," by immersion into a world of symbols. It's amazing. The Christological and pneumatological dimension of Scripture can be discovered only after an adequate "exegesis," an interpretation, a work of reason, and for this the community is essential because you must operate from within the community in which this was formed. A community was formed precisely by the word within the words, and it's by you entering this community that allows you, gives you, releases the capacity of your reason to do an adequate exegesis because what the divine word does when it enters the world of human words is to create this community. Christianity, therefore, he says, is not a religion of the book. Christianity captures the Word, the Logos in the words, captures the Logos itself, to spread this mystery only through this multiplicity, only the reality of a human history, the history of this community. In that sense the structure of the Bible is a challenge to each generation. This is the answer against the reason why any fundamentalism is not allowed, is not

a solution. Another way of saying it is the Word is not already present in the literalness of the Bible. You just read the text, study the text, apply the text—ain't no Divine Word in there! It is not already kind of locked in there so that just reading it releases it. To reach it, he says, a transcending process of comprehension is necessary, guided by an interior movement, a process of living. "Only within the dynamic unity of the whole are the many books really *one* book." The method includes the text, the words, the community, its history, how it has lived this revelation. Without this we will not grasp the Word, the logos, and therefore will miss what we were looking for to begin with—the valuable, the trustworthy, the essential, etc...

Finally, all of this is the first component. The second really starts as a second one, but it ends up as an expansion of part of the first, namely work, the famous "ora" and "labora" of monasticism. In a sense, work is an essential part of this search (this is point one). "Unless you are working you cannot find God." That is as radical as that, okay? Obviously...which is itself an astounding thing. The Greek world view of manual labor was in exactly the opposite direction. The truly free person was the one who detaches from labor to have time to devote himself to the things of the spirit. The Greco-Roman world had no creator God making of the world with the cooperation of human work. The creation of the world was done by a demiurge. The Christian God is the Creator who in Christ "enters personally into the laborious work of history." He cannot be found outside of this. "Creation is not yet finished. Human work gives us a special resemblance to God; it is a share in God's activity as creator." The realization of this aspect goes to create now "a culture of work."

There's more stuff, but you can read it yourselves. Again, I believe that we embark on this in our own way. What the hell! It seemed like a good thing to do and here we are. You listen to the email that Angelo read and you can see an unrest that this creates, a positive one. Whoever this person is right there at the center of the total confusion and disharmony suddenly responds just by looking at a Web page. He hasn't even attended one of our events. Just seeing the breadth of interest... In my opinion that is happening because we, in our own stupid, ignorant way, have been following this method. And those of us who learned it...again I have another routine in which I compare this using now only the language of

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Fr. Giussani so you can see it's exactly the same thing, but here we use the language of the Pope, and I think it outlines a path, it explains, I think I understand better our own interest, why we have done what we have done; it guides us in selecting where to go to make sure we are following our own version of this path, but still this path because any other path would be fruitless; we would miss the presence of the Logos, the definitive, the worthwhile, the valuable, in the midst of this disharmony. That's all I have to say.

Comments on "Reality, Experience, Knowledge: the Heart of the Matter," by Msgr. Luigi Giussani

Usually this moment in our meetings is a moment to go to the beginning, to the point of departure. We are a cultural center, and wherever we are, we have a public face. We do things in public—public gestures—meetings, discussions, interviews, etc...Usually we have conversations with people who are not related to us in any way—people who are in the news, people who have very interesting responsibilities and jobs—because we are curious about everything. I would say that more immediately what animates all of our public gestures is curiosity, interest in what's going on. A predecessor of this cultural center, (something I've hoped we could have in the States) years ago was in Turin; it was called Solomon's Portico. (Recall that's the public place where the apostles went right after the resurrection of Christ, and they belonged to that world. That was really the Times Square, the center. And there they told the story of what had happened to them, and the Christian people began to be gathered that way.) And I used to attend. I was happy to get a gig of talking at a number of activities of Solomon's Portico. And I remember on one occasion the guest was the head of air traffic control at Malpensa Airport in Milan, and his presentation was just how it works, what do they do, what are the big problems...it was fascinating! At no time was there any kind of religious thread, or message, it was just sheer—what motivated this meeting—was entire curiosity, because it's kind of an interesting job, and so I would say that this is the first thing. We have public gestures, and then let's go back and see the point of departure. The first step back is a great curiosity. We find many, many, many things interesting, and we like to listen to people involved in these things that we're interested in. And we're interested in them, in what they do, and how they live this interesting reality. Where does this interest come from? This is the next step back. It comes from some kind of experience of the world, of reality, the world in which we

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live, as interesting. The particular interest in subject number 1, for example, is itself a reflection of a broader interest in which we are interested in what exists in reality, in this world. We look at it with a certain wonder, curiosity, as I mentioned. What's behind it? What's going on? We notice existence. We are awakened to it. I remember in the thought about his death, Pope Paul VI wrote his magnificent last will and testament statement. I was furious when it came out because I was hoping to write mine that way! Now I'll just have to copy it, just put it in quotes. Anyway, in one part, and it really struck me reading it, he talked about how as he saw the end, and the end comes, it comes...the guy was a great poet, and as he saw it one of the things that impacted him the most is all the things he missed looking at...the skies, nature, children...all of that was going on, and he said, "I didn't see it; I wasn't looking at it. I had such a narrow field of interests that I was not able to escape from it." He realizes that now. He may have been able to escape now and then, but certainly not enough, and in the conviction that death was imminent, the interest missing was heightened to him, the sensibility.

So the question is again we are interested because we find reality interesting. In fact, reality is that which interests us. If it doesn't produce any interest, it's not real. We've come to that conclusion. It doesn't exist. If you're not interested in something, it doesn't exist for you. So the interest is a measure of how open one is to reality, to what exists, and there we run into the first interesting confrontation, if you wish, and that is that we have discovered, those of us whose interest in reality has been awakened, that we are in a cultural atmosphere that moves in the opposite direction, that sustains itself by diminishing the scope of the interesting, by eliminating things, and by helping us concentrate only on certain particulars. You may wonder, well, that's quite an accusation. Is it not the opposite? Are we not living in a cultural situation whose banner is openness, not restriction? Indeed that is its banner, but for reasons to be examined later, we have come to see that this is false. This openness does not exist. It is a cover-up for restriction, for diminishment, and we are suffering from that, and it grows, and to the degree that it grows, the field of interest narrows more and more, and things become serious, we have a serious problem with that.

If I were to just stop now at this point, in a sense I would have said enough. If all that we get from this meeting is this, (I'm talking now to the Advisory Board. These other people don't exist, I guess. I'm not interested!) if we get

that we can recognize and say “yes” to this proposal that what is real is interesting, and the fact that we live in a culture that diminishes the field of the interesting, and therefore distorts the real, that alone would be a great achievement. I find myself that I have to keep coming back to that again and again and again. My coming together with you like this and participating in a discussion about it, by reading texts like what we have by Fr. Giussani, or Fr. Julián Carrón, or whoever, (I have a lot of resources, perhaps too many), and in order to revive in me this recognition that this is true, that I really do think that we really are living in this culture of closed minds, and that this is very dangerous, how that came to be, these are interesting subjects that one could look at—how we came to live in such a culture and how can one get out of it, what allowed us to see these things, to see it this way, while other people don’t, or might see it the opposite way, as an “open” culture—all of these are interesting subjects, and I find myself constantly going back to these sources that awaken me to this situation. “Awakening” is a good term. Suddenly things are there that were not there before because I didn’t find them interesting.

Now, this problem, the problem of identifying the culture in which we live, has become relevant within the culture itself. That has been my own experience now, in the past year, year and a half, and that is the following, let me explain this: There is a great concern, there are many people concerned, that our present situation is dangerous, very dangerous for the survival of our humanity, and there is a need to establish a kind of global ethics that everybody in the world can adhere to, that will protect us from the great dangers of mistakes in areas such as biotechnology or the treatment of life issues, all the way to the climate—all of those subjects that are so debated today. The question is, can a point be found, a space created, of global agreement, so that at the very least measures can be taken that will guide us through these activities in a way that will minimize the possible disasters that are the results of experiments or of policies in these areas? And many people are interested in this, and among them, Joseph Ratzinger, who now has become Pope.

About a month before he became Pope, he had a public encounter with this philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, the father, if you wish, of contemporary European secularism who had in fact developed an entire philosophy; he called it The Theory of Communicative Action, as to how the secular state, without appealing to anything transcendent can indeed be able to create

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a sense of moral obligation that is needed in order for a society to survive, not to mention the world now. There is also the project associated with Hans Küng. I don't know what his canonical status is these days, but he was a Catholic priest, I guess he is a Catholic priest, but he has made it his life project now, the development of this global ethics, if you wish, to find a basis for it. Our own president is constantly talking about the need to find a kind of a common ground or a point. And many people see this in economics, in science, in everything, even the crisis recently with the situation in Greece and the effects around the world. All of that is related. Can one find in this global age a common space that people can adhere to?

In this discussion, Ratzinger presented the problem, and at the end, frankly, came to the conclusion that at the present time it seemed impossible to do this, and that what should be done is to create opportunities for dialogue and conversations among, say, people of good will, people aware of the problem (let's put it this way), people who share this concern, and see what happens. And he even suggests how such a dialogue might be structured to create spaces where people can come together for this. It's a fascinating essay and you can find it; it's published in the book called *The Dialectics of Secularism* by Ignatius Press, of course. And there you see Habermas's proposal and Ratzinger's statement.

Since then, there has been a follow-up in which Ratzinger has not been able to participate because he's busy with other things. And now part two of the book is available, too. Here it is. It's called *An Awareness of What Is Missing* by, of course, Jürgen Habermas, [et.al.](#) Who are the *et. al.*? Members of the faculty at a university in Munich, mostly Jesuits, engaged in this discussion with Habermas as he moves forward, becomes more explicit and even more concerned about the role of religion, which he thinks secularism, by ignoring, has effectively led to this possible disaster, that it is necessary to find a secularist view of the role of religion that is not negative as it is generally in secularist ideology—something to be overcome. Habermas now holds it cannot be overcome, and in fact, it is not an obstacle, but a plus in what has to be done today in the search for this common humanity-type basis.

Now the reason I mention all of this again is because I want to underline that we in our own way, independent of these... When I read these things—this book, and the first one, and so forth, I feel great because I think, well,

that corresponds to what we've been learning ourselves among ourselves based on the proposal, the method that we have learned from Fr. Giussani, who advises that if we follow this method, indeed what it will do is it will open us up more rather than closing us down. It will increase our field of interest, of vision and interest, and that other people will perceive that. They will perceive the difference between a gesture motivated by that that we might put forth, and one, say, devoted to a discussion of controversial issues just as we have all over the place. Again imagine that these people [observers of the meeting] are not here, I think that is an experience of the Advisory Board. Angelo just mentioned how surprised we are at the acceptance that has been given and the enthusiasm shown to our public gestures. That, for us anyway, is a confirmation at least of being on the right path in our own reflection on what has happened, let's put it that way.

Finally, another book that I want to recommend is by our friend John Waters, a completely insane man! On U-tube there is an interview with him. It's outrageous. John Waters has written a book called *Beyond Consolation*, and excerpts from his last chapter were in fact published in the latest issue of *Traces* in English. Of course he's written the book in English. And it is mostly in two parts: his own argument as to why the cultural situation today is one that diminishes our scope of human existence, and how it works. He goes into detail as to how this cultural poisoning, if you wish, (it's like a virus) works, and how it works in all of us in such a way that you cannot step out of your house. You don't even want to step out of your house; it's in your house too, even in your most private world. It's something you breathe. How it works. And it's a fascinating proposal. Again I have areas of disagreement with him. You may find him too negative, or maybe too positive, or whatever, or, well, that may be so in Ireland, but not here, whatever. I'm not sure myself how much I agree with him in everything, but I certainly found it absolutely fascinating and again recommend it to you. His proposal is that the means through which this culture works its diminishment is the use of language, of words. That reminds me of the observation of Walker Percy, remember, in *The Thanatos Syndrome* about how words have lost their meaning, how they are re-defined, how the original experience that gave birth to a certain word, or that was described by means of that word, has been either lost or in fact replaced it by its very opposite. Again these are not crazy little people designing this out of malice. It is something that affects us all. We contribute to this. And so, as a writer, a journalist and a writer, too, John Waters is concerned about

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this question of the word, of course which leads him to depict a way out to the prologue of St. John's Gospel about the Word. "In the beginning was the Word..." And about the logos and all that kind of stuff that lands him right on the lap of the Pope who has been following the same path as it is underlined in the latest book of Habermas. So everything like that ends up coming together, and I think it's a wonderful moment of opportunity for us to go over that. The text that we have will guide us and assist us.

If this judgment of the contemporary culture is correct, if we can say "yes" to this proposal that we are in a cultural situation that somehow restricts where our humanity wants to expand to take us, be it through words or the control of what is interesting and what is not, all of that, if that is so, the question arises, How come we can see that? And second, can what allowed us to see it not help us get out of it, escape such an enslavement? Do you understand? And in vulgar terms, one would say, I would say, that you can almost see that if there's to be a solution to this, to this awakening, it has to be by means of a shock. In a sense we are shocked out of it by something that happens. In fact, what's fascinating about John Water's book is that an entire book was motivated by an interview of this Irish writer, feminist leader, secularist par excellence, poetess, Nuala O'Faolain. And she was discovered to have terminal cancer, and as the end approached she gave an interview on Irish TV, which was later published in all the newspapers, and in it is the most amazing thing. Clearly she has been shocked out of everything she held before. Out, for a moment, of the very culture that she created; she was one of the great promoters of this contemporary culture, and a fighter for it. So the death sentence and the knowledge that this was true, that she didn't have much time left, shocked her out of it. And when she was able to see the result of being shocked out of it, the first result is despair. And she expresses this despair in brutally honest and shocking words. It doesn't lead her to a solid conversion. Maybe suddenly all this talk of eternal life might be interesting after all. Not so. She never gets to that point. As far as we know, she died, and the last thing anybody ever saw was indeed this despair about her sudden coming nonexistence..., except for an interesting remark. I can't think of the exact words, but I can think of what it made me think of which is of course *West Side Story*. You see, my sources are a little bit more earthy than the great authors. I think of *The Golden Girls* and Betty White. We should have an encounter with her. Anyway, in *West Side Story*, there is a line which is indeed shocking after the murders have taken place and all that. One of the Jets finds another one crying and so

forth, Baby John, and says to him, “I wish it was yesterday.” And suddenly you realize that everything you have seen, which is over half the show, has presumably taken place in the same day. It’s not day after day that has passed. The day before, Maria and Tony had not met. Their meeting, all the way to the deaths that it eventually led to, all took place within the same day. And this kid experiences that and in a sense wants time to go back. “I wish it was yesterday.” I wish I could have foreseen this yesterday. At least yesterday this did not happen. Well, Nuala O’Faolain says something like that in her interview. “I wish it was the past,” or something like that, when it was possible to believe in an afterlife. At the present time she felt it would be dishonest to suddenly seek refuge in such a consolation. The title of John Water’s book is *Beyond Consolation*.

So John and all of us who, in a sense, have for a moment at least broken through this cultural situation, and encounter not despair but something else suddenly like beauty, like interesting things, ask ourselves, what was the original shock? What changed, what happened in our lives that allowed this that was missing (at least as far as we know) in this lady’s last moments. As far as I know, no one here has been told that they have five or six months left of life. That kind of thing tends to awaken you. But look at this...and for us I propose to you, this is what we learn, this is what I’ve been asked to judge, the proposal of Fr. Giussani in my life certainly is... meeting him, meeting the other people in the movement, but knowing very well that at the origin of all of this is Jesus Christ, an encounter with Christ, living Christ. An encounter with Christ is a shock, if I put it that way, that awakens us, and for the moment, at least for a moment, allows us to go beyond the limitations imposed by the dominant culture into the world of interest, of wonder, of fidelity, of certainty, even.

Now the problem is again (again I’m talking as if this culture were self-designed, as if there were evil people doing this—it’s not so. It’s all together.) The culture recognizes this danger and will therefore act in an intelligent way in trying to neutralize the encounter with Christ. The culture would be open to Christ-talk. No problem. In this way it hopes to distract you from the real shock. And again this is very well discussed in the *Traces* summary of the last chapter of his book, reducing Christ to the name we give to, now think whatever you want—something that inspires us, that offers us moral guidance, something that explains life to us...it is not an historical figure.

In an interview on television, John Waters said that the people who were reading it from the dominant culture had no problem until suddenly he mentioned that for 2,000 years an escape from this has been possible, an obvious reference to Christianity. At that moment, he said, he could see the mechanism alert itself and suddenly Christianity became a non-threat to the culture. It has been watered down. For example, people ask you, What does faith in Christ mean to you? And you tell them the story of how it guides your life and how in moments of despair, say in moments of death, illness or whatever, it consoles you, it has given you hope, especially hope is a big concern, and it has kept you going and so forth. You see these people on TV in disasters. "It was a miracle!" Their whole neighborhood has been devastated and their house is destroyed, they don't have anything, and suddenly, "It's a miracle." I'm sorry, but I'm too much of a skeptic. My question would be, well why didn't God just avoid the whole damn thing? Fine. You can only look at this with respect. I don't want to say anymore.

But that Christ that's being mentioned there, is it the son of Mary? Is it the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth? Or is it the name that can be given to a consoling memory or a consoling reality, inspiration, such that other people who are not Christians would have other names for it. Christ is *your* name. I remember there was a meeting of university students a few years ago on one of those interminable vacations that we go to, there was this young Jewish woman who was completely happy and amazed at what she had experienced during that vacation together with our people, and she came to see me and said, "Well now what do I do? When I ask these people what I do, they mention Jesus, but I am a Jew. What is my Jesus?" Do you understand the question? What in my life can take the place of Jesus so that the Jesus that she saw the other people mentioning was a function of Jesus. Who is my Jesus? Moses? Abraham? The Torah? Who is the Jesus of the Moslem person that may have been impacted by being with us a week? Jesus becomes a name, an abstraction. And this the dominant culture has no problem with because he is not a menace. The menace is to insist that the Jesus you're talking about is in fact the one who, as Fr. Giussani says, may be the center of history and the universe, but in reality he began as a blob in the womb of a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl. A presence within our world, within history, but of a reality that is of another world.

We will see in the text the reference to infinity, for example, how the culture

sees infinity in a scientific way as an endless finity instead of something totally different. Infinity has never been finite. Our words are redefined like this. It's how it happens.

At this point, I just want to barely touch on this. I found among the thousands of things that I have that make it difficult for me to get to and out of bed. Most of them are already in the bed, not to mention on the floor on the way out. This essay by Fr. Giussani, *On the Cultural Dignity of Christ's Company* defines very well that point of departure, what this encounter with Christ is that allows you to break through the enslavement to the diminishing culture, again avoiding the manipulation of language. It tells the Gospel story of Jesus at that synagogue as he reads from the Prophet Isaiah and everybody sits down and he sits down to comment on it and says, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing." All the promises that were made by the prophet are being fulfilled in my being here. Now we read something like that and it may be, at the very least, inspiring. But really not many of us, I don't think anybody on the Board is Jewish, not many of us really care about the fulfillment of promises made to Abraham and to all these guys in the past. Who are these people anyway? Already scripture scholarship has fragmented all of that and you don't really seem to have a cohesive unity even among Jewish people on these matters. You kind of pick your own rabbi and follow that. Christ making the claim today, "These prophecies are being fulfilled in my being here," doesn't shock us. So Fr. Giussani suggests that in order to recapture the shock that this implies, for example, suppose you over there or all of you here, I'm sitting here, I'm reading this text, and I were to tell you that I, in fact, am the reason that anything exists? I would tell you that. This is the meaning of life. This is the meaning of your life. That's why you exist. That's how you exist. This is where you're meant to go. This is how you grow as a human person. This is it, and I tell you, but I'm not just telling you about it, I am it! The reason you exist, the reason the universe is there is me. Now you would have to come to the conclusion that I am completely insane, and how nice, and then cart me off some place where I can keep saying this, or how could anyone really say, "Yes, I agree. Maybe it's true."? How could you say, "Maybe it's true."? I propose to you that unless you are aware of that difficulty, we haven't begun to take seriously the Christian proposal and therefore have no chance of breaking through the dominant culture's restriction of our humanity or finding that which has Küng and Habermas and these people wanting to find there's a global ethics.

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Here in this text Giussani quotes St. Paul repeatedly making the same point: “I know nothing but Christ and Christ crucified. Everything else I’ve come to consider trash,” and yet this is not a guy who tells you, “Close your mind to everything else.” The opposite! “Sift through everything, test it, and keep what is good.” Steal the material from whatever you find. If it corresponds to this original experience of yours so that you have been able to get struck, disturbed by Christ, keep it. The rest you can discard. It’s already been ruined. Perhaps, Angelo, this is something that one could send to the Board members, the text of this on Christ and culture.

Now, our text. Three pages, extremely simple, it only makes the point I’ve made. Actually, I not only read it, but I went back, not trusting Angelo, and dug out the Italian version of it to see what he had decided to cut out. The best parts are out. In fact, the very beginning, there’s something in the Italian text that’s not at the very beginning of the English text. This is a question he asks: “Philosophically, that is from the point of view of reason [this is how he defines ‘philosophically’] from the point of view of what is and seems and can be held to be reasonable, from that point of view, where is the position of the movement Communion and Liberation? In what way is it different from other groups, other coming-togethers within the Catholic world? What different point of view do we have about our eyes of reason about what we can observe? What is a defining attitude behind this charism?”

And then the answer given is what Angelo put here, the very first sentence: “The heart of the matter, for us, lies in the fact that *reality becomes evident in experience*.” That is an answer to the question, What defines our approach? What makes Communion and Liberation distinctive? Not better or anything like that. We’re just trying to understand ourselves. There are many paths. The Spirit blows where He wills, but for ourselves, because it makes sense, it is reasonable that if something has come to you in a particular way, you stay within there in order to continue being guided by it, to grow with it, to have this experience to say, meeting fruits of Fr. Giussani’s charism, and then to suddenly say, “I got this out of it, that’s fine, now let me try someplace else.” It doesn’t make any sense. It’s not reasonable. Not because we’re any better, but because if you have noticed something that has come to you through this, it makes sense to stay there and explore it further. That’s the reasonable thing. But anyway, he seeks to answer that by saying, “What defines us, what we claim, is the fact that

reality becomes evident in experience. What interests us is reality.” Well here’s the whole discourse I gave you on what is interesting. “If it is real, it is interesting. If it doesn’t exist, it’s not interesting.” The amazing thing is that in my own experience, when Fr. Giussani says these little jewels, that are so incredible and astoundingly obvious that you (in my case I tend to use vulgarity, “Why didn’t I say this before?”), I mean, what’s the big deal? It’s absolutely true! Something that is not interesting doesn’t exist for me. Or something that doesn’t exist cannot be that interesting because it doesn’t exist! So the question is, I can detect what is real by seeing if it’s interesting. If it interests me, if it has a suggestion of interest, I can say, well, maybe this is real. If it doesn’t, if it’s something that makes me say, “Who the hell cares,” it doesn’t change me in any way, it doesn’t change my attitude to life, the way I see things, the way I stand before the world, the way I do things that matter to me, if it had no impact on that, then it’s not interesting, and why waste my time? But if it is, then I can look and see what lies behind it. This entire paragraph is that way.

Experience. Now you can look for “experience” and “Fr. Giussani” and find on the Internet alone billions of stuff! We keep going back to experience. As someone said at a meeting I was at, “But we’ve already done that.” Don’t worry, they also refer that way to the resurrection of Christ. Come on, let’s do bottom line here! I mean we’re not philosophers at this point. I’m sixty-nine years old, forget it! What is this experience? And I find my *West Side Story* about experience. The experience that he’s talking about, when something is experienced, is something that I really care about, that is important to me, that moves me, I don’t think in a sentimental way. Actually, it may even be an unpleasant movement, but it moves me because I am aware of a need to account for this. There is something in me so that when this reality enters my radar scope, something in me is awakened by it, it recognizes that it has to look into this. Even if I don’t look into it, even if I keep postponing it again and again and again because I may be afraid of it or because it’s still not strong enough, I am aware that I am doing that. I am aware that I am postponing it, that I am failing, that I am maybe afraid of staying looking at it, but it’s there. If something doesn’t awaken this interest and move me to look at it, then it’s not an experience. It has to awaken me against all other possibilities. That is to say, it means that emotionally I may not find it a satisfying thing immediately. Something that satisfies me psychologically, or religiously, you better watch out, because I could be creating that myself. This reality that does this to me

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is interesting precisely because it is totally other than me. It's something I would have never thought of. In my own case, I wonder, you know, I found, very depressing, a diary that I kept in the early 80s somewhere, and even yesterday I found the notes for the Meeting in Rimini in 2007. You know what? It was all there. Nothing has been said that's new from there, and it wasn't new because I had thought of it before I even met the movement. And I said, "Oh my God! What happened this year? At what point did it begin to happen that suddenly this thing began to matter, to be real, so that I can look at concrete things, so that I don't look at a beautiful theological concept or a spiritual consolation, using *spiritual* that way, so that I look at a reality that has entered my field where my humanity is. This is again, as I say, for me it is easier to identify this when its effects are scary or negative, than when they are nice. Do you understand what I mean? In this particular case, in my own case, it has been that. About a year ago something occurred that is not over yet, but that really I realized that all my theology and all my everything was totally useless in dealing with this, and that something had entered that I cannot but have to say, forced to say by evidence that is beyond the possibilities of my creating it in my mind or anything else. I've been shocked out of this sleep.

Now the link between that and the person of Christ is discussed. The reality of awakening to something that has entered your range of experience is described by Giussani in the classic 10th Chapter of *The Religious Sense*. Here he refers to it, too, and I have that underlined. Notice that the text ends with those three questions that more or less very, very, very insufficiently but truly define the path that one must take in order to safeguard our awareness of this reality that has entered our life, and you can read them yourself. "What is reality made of?" If you look at these words even philosophically, technically, you're lost. What is it made of? What is the stuff of reality? These words carry, bear, are valid because they are trying to capture an experience. You can take someone you love really passionately and you tend to say things like, "You are everything." And you ask that person, "What is everything made of?" "Samantha." That makes sense. In the world I'm talking about, that makes sense. I know that this is not made of Samantha. So the same here, when you say, what is reality made of, you don't really want to give a chemical or whatever explanation. You want him saying it to you! When you encounter this, what meaning does it have? How much is it important in your life? If it's all-important,

then reality is made of it! That's what we have to keep asking ourselves, the first question.

The second question is based on the proposal that reality is made up of Christ. Once again, we're not crazy. The fact that it's made up of Christ, not only does it mean that everything is some kind of cloudish mush; on the contrary, things grow in their uniqueness and distinction to the degree that he is the stuff of which reality is made. It has to do with a Trinitarian love, and that is an amazing thing, a claim.

Third and finally though, well, that's all very nice, but where is Christ today? And here you have to watch out because you have to point out to me something really concrete if he has entered my experience. I have no experience of what lies beyond in eternity or anything like that. I experience things like this watch, this water, this coffee, etc... Is Christ one of those? If I can't encounter him, as I in a strange way encounter this bottle, nothing happens. Now that is the most difficult part to me of the proposal because I guess as an intellectual I tend to be satisfied with beautiful theology, but also with science, whatever it is. But the idea seems almost idolatry. This is not Christ! But in a sense... unless he is present to me in the same kind of concreteness that this is, then how can I say that I have experienced it? Where can we have that experience? Fr. Giussani's answer is the Church. In the life of the Church. I might say that he mentions Scripture, the sacraments, apostolic succession, the ongoing magisterium—all of these are concrete things. The man with my link to the apostles in this city has a face, a nose, and it is that man and not another one. The Scripture I read, the Old and New Testament, canonically recognized as such by the Church, the sacraments I receive. Baptism is not more powerful because I could be baptized by champagne; I have to use water. This concreteness is perhaps the most difficult part of the proposal to swallow, but if that is your initial reaction, stay with it because suddenly, in a real moment, you will swallow it, and it tastes magnificent, and you realize that that is what really corresponds to who you really are. That is what gives sense to your humanity. Christ is the unifying reality between all of these things, and somewhere in these endless books Cardinal Ratzinger or the Pope (I don't know which job he had at the time) said the biggest problem confronting the Church today is our inability to grasp the unifying reality within Scripture so that the Old Testament and for us what we call the New Testament, all of this, they come together, we don't fragment it. We

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grasp the unity behind it—the Word which is both a sense, a logos, reason, but also a personal address to us. How to capture that? That alone brings everything together.

“Our task,” says the Pope, “the most difficult one is to bring together the sacraments, apostolic succession...and the Scripture...The New Testament within itself, Old Testament together, all these things into one unifying reality.” And when that happens you will see what Fr. Giussani calls “correspondence with how we are made, our humanity.” As that is experienced it moves us. To live this in all the areas of life, and that begins to create the public gestures which we offer to people as a cultural fruit of this point of departure. Any other point of departure will be maybe initially impressive or satisfying, but in the end will change nothing. It doesn’t have the strength to overcome the corroding influences of the dominant culture.

What is Essential to Our Humanity?

The origin of today's reflections, thoughts, suggestions, provocations, is a comment, a reference I made at the last board meeting when Fr. Julián Carrón was here about American nihilism based on an article that I had read back in 2007 in *Harper's Magazine* by Curtis White, and I read a little bit of it, and it apparently provoked an interest, and I was asked to continue to expand that view suggested by Mr. White to describe the general condition of American Christianity in terms of its effect on the culture around us, the dominant culture, and so I thought, well, let's start with that. And then after that I intend to see the same concern expressed by Fr. Giussani in the article that you have on Chernobyl that was sent out for you to read if you were able to, and after that I would like to finish with the Pope's application of all of this to the pursuit of a new culture. That's more or less what I intend to do; whether I'll do it, I have no idea.

First, the nihilism quote—this comes from *Harper's Magazine*, December 2007. He says he wants to talk about the Gnostic character of the soup we call Christianity in the United States today. The article's subtitle is "Hot Air Gods," a reference to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah who speak of the pagan idols as "hot air gods."

When we assert, "This is my belief," says White, we are invoking our right to have our own private conviction, no matter how ridiculous, not only tolerated politically, but respected by others. It says, "I've invested a lot of emotional energy in this belief, and in a way I've staked the credibility of my life on it. So if you ridicule it, you can expect a fight."

In this kind of culture, says White, "Yahweh and Baal - my God and yours - stroll arm-in-arm, as if to do so were the model of virtue itself." In this kind of culture, Baal stands for everything that was considered idolatrous by the Jews in the pagan world, and Yahweh, the one and only true God. In this kind of culture, Yahweh and Baal get along very well. And they "stroll arm-in-arm" showing that they are not hurting each other, and that this itself is what is seen as virtue. This is the ideal situation. Later on you'll tell

* Given May 14, 2011 at the American Bible Society

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me whether you think he's right or not.

“What we require of belief is not that it make sense but that it be sincere. This is so even for our more secular convictions... Clearly, this is not the spirituality of a centralized orthodoxy. It is a sort of workshop spirituality that you can get with a cereal-box top and five dollars. And yet in our culture, to suggest that such belief is not deserving of respect makes people anxious, an anxiety that expresses itself in the desperate sincerity with which we deliver life's little lessons... There is an obvious problem with this form of spirituality: it takes place in isolation. Each of us sits at our computer terminal tapping out our convictions... Consequently, it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that our truest belief is the credo of heresy itself. It is heresy without an orthodoxy. It is heresy as an orthodoxy.”

Now as I understand it, the claim here expands on what he has already said. Given this getting along between Yahweh and Baal, given that this is seen as the very essence of virtue, he says this actually leads to a spiritual life “in isolation.” The first thing it makes impossible is a community, a real authentic community of people sharing these original insights that give meaning to their lives. A community may appear, but it is a community of isolated individuals; that is to say, it is a community sustained by the very same reality that communities are meant to break through. I hope I've made it clear. That isolation is there, and it becomes the orthodoxy, the fact that there is no unifying set of convictions, but each one has his or her own, but bringing them together, making sure they don't hurt each other, is a community built on heresy, an orthodoxy built on heresy, he says. In fact, “it is heresy as orthodoxy.”

When the political freedom of religion has been broadened to the dogma that “everyone is free to believe whatever he likes,” says White, there is no real shared conviction at all, and hence no church and certainly no community. Strangely, our freedom to believe has achieved the condition that Nietzsche called nihilism, but by a route he never imagined.” While European nihilists just denied God, “American nihilism is something different. Our nihilism is our capacity to believe in everything and anything all at once. It's all good!”

“We would prefer to be left alone, warmed by our beliefs-that-make-no-sense, whether they are the quotidian platitudes of ordinary Americans,

the mystical thinking of New Age Gnostics, the teary-eyed patriotism of social conservatives, or the perfervid loyalty of the rich to their free-market Mammon. We are thus the congregation of the Church of the Infinitely Fractured, splendidly alone together. And apparently that's how we like it. Our pluralism of belief says both to ourselves and to others, 'Keep your distance'." "And yet isn't this all strangely familiar? Aren't these the false gods that Isaiah and Jeremiah confronted, the cults of the 'hot air gods'? The gods that couldn't scare birds from a cucumber patch? Belief of every kind and cult, self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement of every degree, all flourish. And yet God is abandoned."

These are the reflections of a non-Christian which he calls "Christ-less Christianity."

Reading this, two things have occurred to me: First, does it reflect what I experience living, seeking to live at peace, in today's cultural atmosphere? This is a cultural center and its public activities should all be reflected of how the environmental culture that surrounds you, on a judgment about it, of, a description of it. We need to understand well the cultural environment in which we operate, without initial prejudices, based most of all on our own experiences of seeking to adhere to our Catholic belief in such a culture because the first thing we have, I'm sure, I don't even apologize; all of us here have this problem—Can our belief be sustained not in a purely intellectual way, but in an experiential way? Can the freedom that we say the Catholic orthodoxy, the Catholic truth, makes possible, can that persist, can that be done living in this culture? Or should we just try to separate from the dominant culture and try to recreate something that we liked better in the past, or just build walls around it, and wait to see what happens in the future, and now and then sniff out to see if the situation has improved, and then send agents out to infiltrate or something like that? What exactly is the experience of the surrounding culture that animates, that gives birth to the activities that we promote? I believe each one of them and its usefulness and even having them should be judged from this perspective. If they contribute nothing, we are wasting time. We are adding to the problem.

Number two, if this view is true, either totally or partially, how do we get out of this situation? What is the best response to a culture as described by White? He has his own; after all, the man is a nonbeliever. At the end

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of the article, he proposes how one makes sense of this and breaks out of it. The translation of language, of the old cultural situation to the present time and back and forth, etc...You can read it yourself: <http://billtotten.blogspot.com/2008/02/hot-air-gods.html>

But what do we say about this? How do we get out of this? What do we propose to everyone? To the Church, especially to our brothers and sisters in the Church, what do we propose in order that we be set free from being captured by this kind of cultural reduction?

One of the false responses to it, but which you see a lot, is the version of Christianity that is a source of ethics. One of the ways that we respond to this according to this point of view is to help society recall the values upon which the ethics that came to us once together was built, a kind of moralism, but then again moralism is already a word that sounds negative. We don't like isms. But I ask you to take it in the best possible way. Is the proper response here an ethical one? Is it presenting the society with an ethical proposal that we believe will bring everyone together? Michael S. Horton writes that

“this attitude.....typically moralizes or allegorizes these stories, we are taught by Jesus himself to understand these passages in light of their place in the unfolding drama of redemption that leads to Christ. Moralistic preaching, the bane of conservatives and liberals alike, assumes that we're not really not helpless sinners that need to be rescued, but decent folks who just need a few good examples, exhortations, and instructions.

However, Goldsworthy continues, “we are not saved by our changed lives, the changed life is the result of being saved and not the basis of it. The basis of salvation is the perfection in the life and death of Christ presented in our place. By reverting to either allegorical interpretation on the one hand or to prophetic literalism on the other some Evangelicals have thrown away the hermeneutical gains of the Reformers in favor of a Medieval approach to the Bible. Evangelicals have had a reputation for taking the Bible seriously,” Grahame Goldsworthy concludes, “but even they have traditionally propagated the idea of the short devotional reading from which a blessing from the Lord must be rested...The pivotal point of turning in Evangelical thinking which demands close attention is the change that has taken place from the Protestant emphasis...to the

Medieval emphasis on the inner life.”

How do we get out of this? That’s where we were before I read this. The reduction of the proposal to ethics, to an ethical way of life, is one possibility. This author says the problem with that is that it’s not Christianity. Christianity begins with the experience of being saved, and then seeks to live that experience in the surrounding culture in all its defining points—at work, in human relations, in politics, in economics, etc...It’s not the other way around; you don’t reform those areas in order to be saved, but you give witness to being saved. The saving initiative of God in Christ comes first. That is to say, what save us are the facts of the life of Christ and of His death and resurrection, not the ethical consequences of it by the right wing or left wing. This was the heart of the Protestant Reformation, and basically it has been lost by the vast majority of Protestants, as seen in the interpretation of the Bible as basically an inspiring source of moral behavior, again, both for left wing or right wing purposes. So that is this man’s criticism to the moralistic solution of how to deal with the dominant culture.

Now, it is interesting that this man arguing on behalf of the purity of the Reformation says that the problem is that the moralistic people have emphasized the inner life or life as it is, and guilty of that is the Catholic Church. That is to say, just when you think that he is on the verge of giving a Catholic criticism of this view, it turns out the Catholic Church is as guilty of it as he sees the mainstream Protestant churches and the Evangelical Fundamentalists. The accusation here is that at a certain point the Catholic Church, around the Middle Ages, began to emphasize the inner life, and progress in faith became identified with progress in one’s inner life. This he sees, as a real Protestant should, as a great error that demands reformation. So the whole idea of reformation was to make sure that the point of departure of the Christian life are the events that brought about our salvation. By ourselves we do not have the inner strength or the various degrees, the inclination, because of original sin. The Catholic Church holds exactly the same thing, but here it is accused of actually leading the corruption of Christian thought and Christian life.

Is this criticism of the Catholic Church valid? Does it account with what we know or with what we experience today? For that matter, we weren’t alive back in the Middle Ages, so the question for us is—is this criticism of the Catholic Church valid today? Is the Catholic Church today

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substituting inner life experiences to the facts of history that brought about our salvation? Is the Catholic Church today responding to the original nihilistic culture? Is the Catholic Church today, in that response, insisting that the Christian events are first in the life of Christ, and this leads to a changed life? Or is it saying that, but in applying the results of this event, it sees it only in terms of spiritual perfection? What do we think about that? Because that also will affect the tone or shade of what we choose to do in public as a cultural center. If we agree on these basic points, then the question is: How does the proposal for this particular activity reflect this conviction? Otherwise we're just people who have free time and nothing else to do.

If the criticism is correct, what do we propose instead? If it is not correct, what do we propose anyway? Basically the version of the approach that we are experiencing begins to show itself, the symptoms that we should look at begin to show themselves in our attitude, in our interpretation of the Bible because indeed Christianity exists because that initiative was taken by God, and the only source, it seems to be to the Protestant, is the Bible. The Catholic Church recognizes that and says, "Indeed the Bible is the Word of God"; that is to say, through the reading of the Bible, the proclamation of the Bible, we are being spoken to by God. The Word of God is not information about God; it is a call from God. The Word is a call from God. Therefore, our view of how the Bible is the Word of God is a crucial symptom to look at to see what our view of the dominant culture is, and our response to it as a cultural center. We cannot avoid this point. It is not, therefore, a lucky chance that we're offered a place like the American Bible Society to have our meeting, and I think this is a sign in itself that we come here. Again, nobody thought of it as a sign; it was just available, but that's how signs happen, and here we are. If we cannot reach an agreement on how we interpret the Bible as the Word of God, then we won't be able to go much further than this to go to the next point.

For those of you who are intellectually or theologically inclined, I recommend an article in the last issue of *Communio* on the interpretation of the Bible according to Pope Benedict XVI based on his two books on Jesus. In there he suggests there is a slight problem that can't really be fixed because the language doesn't allow it, with the word used by the Pope that when translated to English shows less than what the original German word uses. The word is *gestalt*. The Pope says that the purpose

of his study, the purpose of Biblical hermeneutics of interpretation is to discover more and more how the unifying reality that makes the Bible with all its diversity and even contradictions that makes it the Word of God, that unifying principle is the gestalt of Jesus Christ. And a Catholic way he proposes of approaching the Bible is to read it in the light of the desire to know, to discover more, to see more clearly the gestalt of Jesus of Nazareth. The translation says, "The figure of Jesus of Nazareth." But, as this article insists, and it's true, gestalt means much more than just the figure; it's like the weight—you see the Johannine words we use—the glory, the power of the presence, the characteristics; your gestalt is you, but it includes things like, do early morning noises bother you, or not? And if you find out, I know people very well for whom early morning noises define the whole day, and it characterizes everything for the rest of the day. My brother is like that, so I spend the night praying for a quiet morning because I know it will take up our whole day. It's ridiculously ordinary as that. The gestalt is the shape of the personality, taste, etc...; it's not just the figure; it's not just an image; it is a powerful presence. I like to use the words glory and light and weight. These are Johannine terms.

For example, when I saw Mother Teresa and I was able to have lunch with her and a bunch of very beautiful-looking cardinals, and the Blessed Pope John Paul II—when I first met him he was having breakfast and stuffing himself with Corn Flakes. He was a very powerful presence, and yet without any of the props. He had a weight of a presence and it was not produced by show business. You could get any Mickey Mouse to come out on a balcony in white and look impressive. Well, he didn't need this. His humanity had that weight. That was his gestalt. The same for Mother Teresa, when she came into the room all of these other dignitaries shrank in size like mad. She who physically was a little thing, showed a tremendous weight of presence which I experienced.

This is what we look for concerning Jesus, the weight of his presence when we read Sacred Scripture, when we interpret it. He calls it a "Christocentric Hermeneutic." This powerful way of reading, that reveals more and more of the gestalt of Christ, is what should guide us, is what he calls what creates the canon of Sacred Scripture. Jesus Christ, His power of presence, is the interpretation of Scripture. As St. John says when Jesus says, "I Am the grammar of Moses."

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At this point, our activities should express the desire that we and others that come to us will have a perception, deeper or perhaps for the first time, of the attraction of the gestalt of Jesus as it shows itself, not in sermons or preaching, but in the very activities and interest we show because there are two symptoms that indicate progress in the experience of discovering the gestalt of Jesus: One is a certain joy. And the other one is an expanding range of interests, an interest in the human and its expressions, as it is today in the life of the presence of the gestalt of Jesus. That is one point. The other is the joy—a joy which is completely compatible and, in fact, so often tied to suffering and pain and emotional disgust even at the injustices we have to look at. And even initial provocation of the things that happen, certainly natural disasters. I'm thinking of the earthquake in Spain. I don't know how many ancient churches fell. Thank God they didn't kill anyone like they did in Haiti where they killed the archbishop. You begin to say, "Hey, what's going on?" When you refuse to not look away, but to face that, and I see in there the gestalt of Jesus. And the answer is, yes, I will experience something, for lack of a better word, that we call a joy. Totally compatible with the disgust at the injustice. You see it in Christ Himself confronting the death of Lazarus, and His reaction to the son of the widow of Naim. First he cries. There's no question He's disgusted by what He sees, and yet He works a miracle that shows the power of His presence.

So the promotion of the growing range of interests from the perspective of what it tells us about the presence of Christ today, of the Risen Christ, is a test, I believe, in judging what we do as a Catholic cultural center.

My opinion is that this commentary on Wright and his criticism, his view of American nihilism, of the Christianity that characterizes the majority of Americans today, at least the culturally acceptable, is basically correct. I think his secular solution to it is, of course, incorrect. I didn't even print it out. The Protestant response, the criticism made by the Protestants who agree with Wright is basically true. That is to say, the inner life, the spiritual life, has taken the place of the event, to use Giussani's terms. The power of Christianity that makes present the gestalt of Jesus has been lost because we have fallen back to the religious sense. Those words are even a more radical criticism of the incorrect Catholic response to the cultural challenge that Horton gives here with his view of the betrayal of the Reformation. But in as far as he goes in the criticism of what has happened—the reform of the reform, as far as he goes, he is correct. What is missing? What is missing

that we find in Giussani that makes up, that hits the nail on the head? You can also see it in the speeches and writings of Pope Benedict XVI. What is missing here? What is missing in the Protestant solution of the need to reform the Reformation, of the Protestant concern that it has been turned into a matter of spirituality and not obedience to a salvific event in the life of Jesus. What is missing? What is missing is that this still remains a discourse. The criticism may be intellectually correct and brilliant, and I think it is, it may indicate the way to respond to this, but it doesn't move you; it doesn't give you power to do so; it remains something that gets you excited when you read about it. You say, "Oh man, yeah, he's so right." And for how long does that last? What is missing is when Giussani says, "The experience of Jesus is a saving event here and now, in my life, at this moment, at this place. Because if that is not present, then everything really remains an abstraction about the past. Jesus is a museum figure. Or, as Fr. Giussani says, "Jesus will have failed."

So I see the point of Protestants who call for a reform of the Reformation; I see that it applies to a lot of the Catholic catechesis or teachings, etc...and that we have to also be removed from this reduction to the religious sense, but to me the response, how to do it, the Protestant is missing the aspect of here and now. What does one call the aspect of here and now? Can we find a shorter word? A word that should remind us of a here and now because it's a vehicle that makes it possible? And that word is *sacrament*. What is missing is a sacramental view of reality and therefore the Church, because it is through the sacrament that the here and now occurs within the life of the Church. Before it narrows further to particular charisms, like the one that animates us—Communion and Liberation, it is first, as Fr. Giussani insists again and again, for us the charism, the community that keeps us together, the interest, emotion, whatever keeps us together, is a way of living the sacramental nature of the Church. This, of course, is totally missing from the Protestant interpretation, even the good one here, whereas for us it is the key.

We had a retreat for priests, whoever wanted to go. Maybe some were fake priests; I don't know. We have it every Easter week. It was made possible by the Knights of Columbus. Anyway, one priest at the retreat said to me, "Thank you, because I have one a bet. I had bet fifty bucks that you could not get through this retreat without making a reference to the Collège des Bernardins. You might wonder, what the heck is that? Right now I'm

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thinking, well, it's really something; we are at the American Bible Society. I would have thought that to be disuse of Protestantism, but it was a total misjudgment. Actually, it is a sign of where we are to go, to the Word of God. "It's emblematic," as the Pope says. But Collège des Bernardins is a place in France where Pope Benedict XVI addressed the world of culture. Why can't I get to address the world of culture? I mean, that is real class. First of all, everything was in French. Even though *gestalt* is a German word, the French words for it are much more beautiful. Le Collège des Bernardins is a place where monastic life began to shape the European culture, and the Pope went to visit it and addressed the world of culture today. Certainly, yes, in Europe, but in the whole West and in a certain sense, as he makes clear in his book, the interview with the German guy, even in those areas of the world like Africa and Asia and Latin America where the situation seems to be much more positive than it is up north, even in that area you can see the virus of the problem. We need to see how faith encounters culture and the particular recommendation the Pope makes, which I second, is that we study very well and frequently the talk that he gave at Collège des Bernardins. So I would like to conclude with a very brief summary of that. Again, you can find it in the Internet: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_pariji-cultura_en.html

By the way, Msgr. Giussani's view of the cultural pollution, if you wish, is in the article on Chernobyl. This cultural pollution has squeezed out this virus that spreads, has squeezed out experiential content and thus abandoned the Christian faith and Christian proposal to manipulation by power. It's exactly the same, but perhaps a clearer and more powerful criticism. But then again, it leads to the question: How do we respond to it? One way is we don't respond to it by having cultural meetings. Alright Angelo, let's shut this whole damn thing down! It's right here. Well, you'll figure out what it means; you have the text.

In Le Collège des Bernardins address, the Pope reflects, These people who came together in the monastic community, what were they looking for? What was the purpose of this behavior? Was it to withdraw from the decaying cultural atmosphere which dominated at that time? No. They had no intention of withdrawing from anything. In fact, one wonder whether one can withdraw. Second, they were not concerned about transforming any culture or giving birth to a new culture. Rather, they were concerned

with an attitude that they expressed much better because they expressed it in Latin, *quaerere Deum*, to look for God. Now that already sounds intimidating, and you hate to run into someone and say, “How are you doing?” And he answers, “I’m looking for God.” I like to think of it in terms of my old school, vulgar hermeneutics, *What in hell’s name is going on?*— I want to know what’s happening. Hey! What’s happening here in this cultural atmosphere of relativism, secularism, moralism? Can anyone explain to me what’s going on? That is why these guys got together, says the Pope in a much more fancy way—to find what is essential. Essential to what? Essential to our humanity, to a fully human life? And to have the basis of hope that what we desire, what makes us happy is possible. Essential for that. In the end, as Giussani insists, we need to awaken. The Chernobyl Effect has put our experience of the “I” to sleep. We need something to awaken it, and care about ourselves. These guys had that. They cared about themselves, so they wanted to find out how to remain this way. What was essential? To find the essential, to separate it in some way, at least to see it through the ephemeral.

I will have you know that my very body lives this search. You see my hands shaking? I thought it was Parkinson’s disease. I was prepared to cast myself at the mercy of Blessed John Paul II, although he’s already done a Parkinson’s miracle. But in any case, the doctor told me, “You don’t have Parkinson’s; you have something called *Essential tremors*. I was so relieved they were essential because I would hate to have ephemeral tremors.

In describing the atmosphere, Fr. Giussani says that you must come together, set free by this power of the presence of Christ here and now. Going back to the Pope, these guys came together with no cultural agenda, but because they were interested in what is essential.

Now, us, right now, We’re not off running to a monastery, to monastic life, but we must be doing the same thing. We must be interested in everything to find out from the experiences of others what is essential to our humanity. What if somebody asked you as a Crossroads Cultural Center member of the board, what do you think is in danger of being lost that is essential if our humanity is to survive and indeed reach its potential, reach its destiny, reach the satisfaction of its desire? What is missing? What makes it essential? Maybe some of you can run out to some kind of monastery, but most of us won’t, so this is the kind of thing we should do together.

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And now the Pope goes into a fantastic summary of how this proceeds. Guided, empowered by this need to know what is essential, as Christians they realize that the answer lies in understanding what the heck the Word of God means. We repeat again, *word* is not just informational word, but a word that calls you; it is something that addresses you. So what does that mean? What does the Word of God say? Where do we find it? We will find (a word is a word, after all) the Word of God is expressed in human language. So suddenly we have to become interested in human language because if we don't understand how it works, then we won't be able to distinguish or recognize the Word of God that comes through it. Today perhaps you would not say *human language*. You would say *communications*. Unless we understand how the people of this culture communicate, we have no vehicle with which to let them hear the communication, the Word, the call of God himself.

So, the Pope says, again guided by this desire for the essential, these people turn to language; they establish a library. Well the library can't just sit there; it should be used. Well, they did. They put it to use. How? They established a school. The task now of finding an expressive voice essential to our humanity, becomes one of education.

There is another interesting observation which goes on for quite a time. The Pope says that another symptom that we are in the right way or in the wrong way, there is nothing there, and that is (get a hold of this!) music, singing. Well, I guess that sends me to hell. And the Pope recognizes that there's a funny aspect—those who can't really sing should shut up. But here the argument is not just the private tastes of this pope, or even traditional, but an insight; what is it? What is this insight? What does singing express in a way that nothing else can about what is happening, about the presence of anyone, of a word if it's there? The answer is harmony, unity, solidarity, so much so that Saint Augustine described his view of things before his conversion as experiencing living in a *region of dissimilarity*. The enslavement to original sin was an inability to get out of this region of dissimilarity. And some of the leading monastic authors like Saint Bernard used that phrase in their commentary concerning the singing of the monks and the need to create a zone of similarity. And this is only one aspect of what these guys were doing that we have to, in a sense, update with our current situation.

The other aspect of the monastic experience, inseparable from this one,

is the expression of all of this in the area of work—*ora et labora*. Totally inseparable. Why? Because our work is an expression of our faith in God as the Creator. This year's Easter vigil homily of the Pope was entirely dedicated (this is on the resurrection) to the need that without any experience of our responsibility for creation, we will never encounter the risen Christ. We will be totally on the wrong path. It is absolutely necessary to have the same initial point of departure in the sense of responsibility because in the Book of Genesis, this is what defines the human. Before anything else, this is what defines the image and likeness of God, the mission of developing the creation. Creation is not over. It's taking place now. Unless work is seen in those terms, whatever it is that we do, whatever area of the human adventure we work, if we don't see it this way, we're going to miss everything else because the experience of it is the expression that everything else is, so to speak, right, that our orientation to reality is one that in the end will allow through sheer Grace and love of God the gestalt of Jesus to appear today, here and now, in this world of ours, and dispel the doubts that obscure.

The Foundations of Knowledge and Culture

I see on my schedule here that I have 30-35 minutes. I only need around 4. First of all, in light of the dramatic description of our present cultural situation, out there and in here and within us, where there exists, (and people experience it to different degrees of intensity), a kind of virus that is hostile to Christianity. Let's be even more precise—it is hostile to the reality of an Incarnation; that is, hostile to the reality of a God that is present in history, within history, while remaining the God of history. This we all the time experience a clash, except those of us who are watching old *I Love Lucy* reruns, or something like that. No matter how strong it seems, or how weak and just getting there this situation seems to be, (and it varies), no matter how negative, how strong, the forces appear that threaten to crush this awareness in us of this Mysterious Presence, no matter what, that cultural battle has already been won. We cannot proceed from the perspective of a battle that has not already been won. All our cultural activities, whatever form, shape, topic they take, should have as a point of departure our own conviction, our own certainty that the cultural battle, if I may put it that way, has already been won by Christ.

If we just but remember that this meeting, for example, is being held just at the Octave of Easter, if Easter has any meaning, as the Pope keeps repeating again and again, and this year I recommend you read the Easter Vigil Mass Homily on the New Creation; it's online:

(http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120407_veglia-pasquale_en.html),

or the message on Easter Sunday on Christ as the only source of hope—

(<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/on-easter-morning-pope-proclaims-christ-as-source-of-hope-amid-suffering/>).

If this is in any way, shape or form, true, (and again we are in the midst of a season that proclaims its truth everywhere), then what are we afraid

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of? We are not engaged in any cultural battle because that battle has been won. All we have to do is give witness to that victory. But we cannot give convincing witness unless we experience the reality of that victory within our own lives and heart. Otherwise it is just words, and our cultural efforts will degenerate into a moral reform movement. That's all. Nothing more need be said.

The real struggle begins in the heart, and so we must ask ourselves the question: Am I prepared to say before the evidence of my own heart that this is true, that Christ has indeed conquered? That the new life that He has made possible, totally unimaginable and unforeseen, is a reality? That I can have certain access to it? That it doesn't depend on my moods and emotions, but that there are objective moments in space and time called the Sacraments in which I come into contact with this new way of life, new way of thinking, new way of making judgments, new experiences of what is real? That that is not left to my intellectual efforts or capacities, but that it is pointed out to me in a simple baptism by the Church? That every Mass and any Sacrament is like the sign at the house of Mary in Nazareth that has the well-known proclamation of the Gospel, *Verbum caro factum est*, "the Word became flesh," but in that place there's one little word added to it that's different—*hic*, namely "here." "Here the Word became flesh." "Here."

I was once accused of heresy, which made me very happy because I thought my books would sell more. And the heresy that I apparently had given birth to, and I kept hoping, again, that it would be known by the name "Albacetism," was that I was told to have said at a priest's retreat, not here, someplace else, that I did not believe God was everywhere. Now, I don't know very much about that. Never mind. I said to the inquisition, to the judges, "No, if you want I will sign any statement that affirms that I believe that God is everywhere." I have no problem with that. My problem is that everybody that I know, everybody that I care about, I have found is always somewhere in some place at some time. I can say, "Here." If they are everywhere, I don't know how to handle it. If you know exactly where they are and at what time...I used to carry two watches; one was a time someplace else, one was the current time here in New York because there are times at which I don't even know how to add or subtract, but it doesn't matter. Whenever I wanted to know where so-and-so was at that moment, what they were doing, (I would sometimes think about Fr.

Giussani himself), I didn't have to calculate anything—not that this was a major calculation, okay? But I would just look, and my watch would have the same time as his watch. And that made me happy. Little things like that make you happy. When you're in love with someone, the same thing. So these people have always been someplace, and that's the way I like it. I don't like people who are everywhere!

So if we are prepared to say of our own flesh and our own hearts, “HERE the Word has become flesh,” then we have nothing to worry or fear about. We just give witness to that. All we have to be, instead of the Crossroads Cultural Center, change names; don't call it Crossroads; call it *Hic—Hic Cultural Center*. What do you stand for? We stand for *Hic*! You'll also have the advantage of confusing people which will give you time to formulate a more serious response—a trick used by Our Lord Himself. When asked difficult questions, He would say, “The problem is that I am from above and you are from below. So shut up.” After that the apostles were afraid to ask Him any more questions.

So really the point I want to make is that the guiding light of all the activities we undertake in terms of subjects, frequency, invited guests—everything, the guiding light to make it really something contemporary and not a response to situations that are past or have not even arrived yet, the guiding reality I recommend is to make present the consequence, the reality of this *hic*, and its consequences. We can measure the usefulness or validity of what we are considering doing or not doing by what contribution it makes to making this *hic* a reality.

And in so doing, SECOND POINT, how do we know that it is really making this *hic*, giving authentic witness to it? I want to go further to say that the mission of the cultural center and all its activities is to give witness to the *hic* of Christ's victory, of a new way of judging reality; to say that is exactly what we need to say, but is there a hint, is there some kind of evidence that will help me be a little bit more sure that I am giving witness to this *hic*, and that what I have experienced is, in fact, a taste of this *hic* of Christ's victory? Is there anything that I can appeal to that can serve also, therefore, as a measure for the value of our activities as a cultural center? I would say in answer to that question, that there is, and that is when the *hic* is really experienced, for the first time or for the umpteenth time, its power to attract is stunning; you are shocked, in a pleasant way. We read

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again and again the manifestation of Jesus' reality to his disciples even before His death and resurrection. What kind of effect did His Presence have? His look? His gestures? Amazement. Amazement that such a thing is possible. Profound curiosity begins to appear: "Tell me more"...or... "I don't understand, but this is interesting."

You see, part of the success of the dominant secularist culture is to try to succeed in hiding how interesting the Christian claim is, how beautiful, but above all, how interesting. And how does it do it? By killing anything that's interesting, by deciding itself what is interesting, by diminishing the reality of interesting, especially in our youth. In the end, nothing really interests you enough to change your life so that you can fix your attention at least to investigate further. The capacity to be interested in anything has to be weakened if it cannot be destroyed (and it cannot, thank God!), but it can be so weakened that nothing is interesting, and this is the way to block the infinite interest-ness associated with the Christian *hic*. So, for example, translated to things we do as a cultural center, we do interesting things, things that express what we have become interested in, and things that we hope or have reason to imagine will be interesting to people we invite.

I remember the first time I came across a cultural center; it was not in Milan where there is a tremendous one, but in Turin. I don't even know if it exists anymore, but it was called Solomon's Portico. You recall Solomon's Portico was where the Jews, apostles included, used to hang around, like in a public square; it was part of the temple. It was where a discussion would take place. You hang around. It was packed with beggars asking for money. We just ran into it this week if you were able to participate in Mass and listen to the reading. It's the cure of this crippled man by Peter (Acts 3). This crippled man was a beggar who used to hang around Solomon's Portico. Well that was the name of this cultural center in Turin, like a public square, although it didn't meet in the public square, but in a real fancy building. But I would be amazed, looking at the program. I remember one in particular in which the invited speaker and the responders were all people in air traffic control. And one of them, the main speaker, was a director of the ATC operations at Malpensa Airport. I am a big aviation freak; I have no problem becoming interested in that. But that Solomon's Portico Catholic cultural center was sponsoring an evening dedicated to air traffic control, I just couldn't imagine. And I asked, "Why are you doing this?" And I got the response quickly, "Because it's interesting." Most people who had come

to these things fly around. It's interesting to figure out what your chances are of crashing or of running into another airplane! Because it's interesting.

And why should a Catholic cultural center be promoting things just because they are interesting? Because this is our redemption, salvation. This is what Christ has come to do—to revive, to give life to our interest so that we can recognize His victory, and therefore our victory, over those forces that diminish us, that reduce the experience of our dignity, that reduce even the range of our reason and of our desires. The only thing that can break through that shell constructed around our inner selves, our heart, by this culture of death, the only way to break through is with the power of the interesting.

That is why for Fr. Giussani, at this point, today, the most important thing to realize and somehow grasp with your own heart, is that Christianity is an event. It is something that happens. It is a *hic* that is fascinatingly interesting that can break through any shell that diminishes our heart. So we look for interesting things. I asked the guys about the air traffic control, yes, but how did they know that this somehow or other leads you to Christ? Why are they just not attending an interesting lecture on air traffic control, period? They said, “Well, we have desks everywhere with *Tracce* [Communion and Liberation's magazine] and we sell the material of our movement. They know who it is who is sponsoring. They know who's behind Solomon's Portico, and everyone will pick up a little thing here, a little thing there from Fr. Giussani.” Not all are about air traffic control. There were ones that dealt directly with the cultural problem, with great issues of the day, etc...

I remember attending a discussion right before the invasion of Iraq, and the whole dispute was going back and forth. The cultural center was there and had an evening that lasted forever because it was interesting. It was interesting because the life of many of the people there was going to be touched and I was the only American. Suddenly I had to bear the whole burden of explaining how the American feels about the invasion of Iraq. How the hell did I know? Watch CNN or something like that. I don't know. But it was a fascinating lesson. I may not have understood it; the people there may not have seen right then the link, but it was clear that all this was possible because Christ had rescued my capacity to be interested, above all the capacity to be interested in myself.

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Because to say that our first interest is in our own destiny, and if that is not there, there is no way we can be interested in anything beyond that. To say that, the accusation, the fear will immediately grow in us that I am being selfish. I should first take care of the needs of other people; I should care first more about other people, and then about me. But you cannot care about anyone else unless you care about yourself. That's where the clash occurs, in the power of the dominant culture to weaken and try to extinguish our interest in ourselves. Christ presents Himself as our redeemer because he rescues, strengthens, safeguards this interest in our destiny. All we need to do is be faithful to that, to express as best we can with our own weaknesses the presence of this reality, and period! The rest is not for us to worry about. But that will be the biggest challenge that this dominant culture will have to face. And we know from the sequence of the Easter day Mass, we know that it has faced it. That it lost the battle. "Death and life were engaged in a fierce battle," says the sequence, "Life won." That's all we have to give witness to, that "life won."

There is this amazing comment by Fr. Giussani that Olivetta yesterday brought to my attention which was a good thing to do because this is what we have to discuss at the Meeting of the House [weekly meeting for the consecrated group of Communion and Liberation, *Memores Domini*], and sometimes it helps to have read in advance what we're discussing! The comment is from a speech given by Fr. Carrón to the Responsibles of Communion and Liberation in Verona, Italy on March 4, 2012. In it there is an extensive quote from Fr. Giussani which is what really interested me and I saw that it immediately applied to what I was going to tell you today.

We're going to start with Psalm 46. We are at the American Bible Society, so you must cover yourself totally. You have no idea what Psalm 46 is all about. People in this building are probably people who know what Psalm 46 is. I only remember Psalm 8, "What is man...?" But anyway, why should you remember the numbers because they keep changing! Suddenly there'll be another universal convention of Scripture scholars which is fine in itself because it keeps them off the streets and employed. And you'll have 3 numbers—Psalm 50, 51 and 49. Forget it! Just know them by key words. Well, this Psalm is one of my favorites. Why? Because it is extremely depressing. For a long, long time, verse after verse after verse, it describes the situation of the Psalmist in the most dire, horrible conditions you can imagine—the flood waters reach here, I can't breathe, the earth

is shaking out of control, fire is coming out of volcanoes, gigantic fish are appearing eating each other. You figure, what did this man have to drink? Since that is basically the mood in which I find myself most of the time, I love that Psalm. As a good Hispanic, the part I don't like is its happy ending! But anyway, look at Psalm 46 and you can see the condition of this man. Well, in front of his condition there is suddenly a change and he starts singing songs of victory and praising God "because you are my rock, my shelter." There's a whole list, the whole list of protective terms. There's such a dramatic switch between this anguished, almost disappearing into nothingness, and suddenly this strength of life. You wonder, what could have lead to this? What reality? What experience this Psalmist must have had to be able to end his Psalm in such a way!

Fr. Giussani begins his remarks this way: "When in fact the grip of a hostile society tightens around us to the point of threatening the vivacity of our expression and when a cultural and social hegemony tends to penetrate the heart, stirring up our already natural uncertainties...."

Okay, very few words, but very powerful, you must admit. But what I want you to do is compare those words, or what they are talking about, to the first part of Psalm 46. We are not for the moment under the threat of any huge ocean or invasion, not even the tornadoes that are threatening so many other parts of the country, and we can stand and say we're not afraid, but the threat comes from this culture. We're led by a culture that is trying to kill our capacity to be interested in our destiny and act accordingly. That's a pretty serious threat. And Fr. Giussani, we have just heard, describes it in very few lines. The Psalmist is out of control. Fr. Giussani is very precise: "...when a cultural and social hegemony tends to penetrate the heart," increasing, adding, highlighting, raising the banners of what are "already our natural uncertainties," when that is taking place, when our own destiny, our own self is under attack, is under a deep threat, you know that there is a possibility that you might lose it, or if not lose it totally, lose it enough to not even recover from it, when you see your own children infected by this virus, who are really less and less interested in anything, when you run into the religious nihilism that we talked about last time, in which it was not a removal from God from society that American nihilism is all about, but adding more versions of God so that everything becomes religious, therefore, nothing is important; without any *hic* it's impossible.

Anyway, when the situation is like that, suddenly, Fr. Carrón stops there and says, “Before continuing, I would like to know...in front of a similar situation, what would you answer?” Fill in the blanks. Given this description of the dominant culture that surrounds us, how would you fill in the...? When this is the case, what does Fr. Giussani recommend that we do? I want to know if it is like, “Run for your lives!” I mean because it’s so negative. When we are in a situation like that Psalmist, where do we find the help that that Psalmist found? What would give consistency and meaning to our lives? When that is the case? What do we do? What does it mean?

And then, once again Fr. Giussani stuns us with his answer. When this happens, when this situation is like the one just described, this means “*the time of the person has arrived*,”—the time for the emergence of the beauty, the dignity, the destiny, the reality of the human person. Where does this man get this kind of stuff? You would think it is time to run for you lives! You would think that it is the opposite. It means that what a human person is has been lost—the sense of it. If a situation is like that, no one even knows what a human person is anymore. But this is not what he says. No! He says it means *the time of the person has arrived*. And what is the person? Where does it find its consistency? Its meaning? That which makes it real, cohesive? And Carrón quotes Fr. Giussani again:

What pushes so that the person exists, so that the human subject has vigor in this situation in which everything is ripped from the trunk to make dry leaves of it, is *self-awareness*, a clear and loving perception of self, charged with awareness of one’s destiny and thus capable of true affection for self, freed from the instinctive obtuseness of self love. If we lose this identity, nothing is of help to us.

I wish I could learn that by heart. This is the one point, “If we lose this identity, nothing is of help to us.” So when Carrón goes back to quote Fr. Giussani, because Giussani says, “It means the time of the human person has arrived,” that’s how he reads and challenges what we are facing. We are facing a similar situation and we want to learn how Fr. Giussani faced it, and what he answers about it, and it is surprising because he answered instead of being a form of “Get out of there as soon as possible, get protection against yourself, put up walls and live inside...,” his answer is a totally unexpected affirmation—this means the time of the human

person, the human subject, the time of the “I” has arrived. And Fr. Carrón asks, “What does that mean? What is the human person? Where do we find its consistency? What makes a human person a human person? What makes a human subject a human subject? What are we talking about? And then he gives the answer. And how do we find that reality? Then he gives the continuing stunning and surprising answer: We learn to care about ourselves.

We are reflecting on what has moved us so far, what has been a real success in terms of numbers and of interests, a successful history of the cultural center, a cultural center which has even spread to other places beyond the New York City area, and, as Angelo said, we want to pause for a moment and look at what has moved us, what is moving us now, and should guide us in the future. I propose to you Fr. Giussani’s reply to that is that we be guided by the power of whatever it is that we are considering to do or not to do, that it be a witness to the triumph of Jesus present, alive and that that is the case, that it is Jesus present and alive, can be tested by the effect it has on how interested we are eventually in our own identity, in our own self, in our own destiny, and let that serve as the guiding light.

So I just want to finish it again. What is the person? Because when he says, “It means the time of the person has arrived,” look, damn it! People should see this! People should see in what we do and what we say and how we comment on presentations of the people we invite, in whatever it is. At the very least people should be able to say, “These are people who are fascinated.”—not in those words, in whatever words they find it, fascinated by the reality of human personhood, by the reality of human subjectivity, by being *someone* and not just *something*. The reality of freedom that makes us *someones* and not just *somethings*. These are people who love that, who get excited about that. This is what it means to raise the banner that says, “The time of the human person has come,” and to say it joyfully because we are not afraid, because the battle has been won!

How do we know we are on the path? Not because we don’t make mistakes. The problem is not going to be that we make mistakes, it’s what guides us, what moves us. The title of this speech is precisely, *The Time of the Person Has Come*. And so Fr. Carrón asks what we would ask, but there’s no one to ask upon such a stunning and surprising affirmation of Fr. Giussani’s, an affirmation that was accompanied by his witnessing to it, not just his words

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on an iPad. Fr. Giussani, what is the person? Where is his or her substance? “What pushes so that the person exists, so that the human subject has vigor in this situation in which everything is ripped from the trunk to make dry leaves of it, is *self-awareness*, a clear and loving perception of self, charged with awareness of one’s destiny and thus capable of true affection for [the] self, freed from the instinctive obtuseness of self love. If we lose this identity, [then run for your lives! then] nothing is of help to us... nothing is of help to us.”

Crossroads Cultural Center's Goal, Ideals, and Method

I think we're doing much better than I thought. You all know this joke, the old story of the drunken man who had lost his car keys and was looking for them on the street. And another person who was not drunk passes by and says, "What happened?"

The drunk man answers, "I can't find my car keys."

And he responds, "You lost them somewhere around here?"

"No, no, no. I lost them about four blocks away, but there's more light here."

So he could've been perfect in designing and carrying out his task of looking for his lost key. I usually do the opposite; when I'm looking for something I lose, I make it even more difficult to find. But suppose this man or this woman knows exactly what to do, and does it. He or she is never going to find that key because she's looking in the wrong place. We can be eminently successful in all that we do, and all the results that have been just presented are so inspiring and encouraging and satisfying. Even if we have a crisis, we do pretty well. There's even a little money around; I want to remember that! So it's very positive. But if we are not looking, seeking to understand our call, our desire to do this, it's origin, if we are not looking in the right place, then all of this, in the end, will be useless.

I want to identify that right place to see what it implies, and then at the end there are some specific questions about the mission statement which Angelo sent me and we will have our discussion based on those questions, I hope in the light of what we grasp now.

I read the last speech for the Second Vatican Council. It ended on December 8, 1965, the Feast of the Solemnity of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. So that's why they chose that particular day. That speech of the Pope, Pope Paul VI, can be found very easily on the Internet. But what's more difficult to find is the address that he gave the day before, December 7, 1965. That day was the last session of the Council. Not the

* Given April 13, 2013 at the American Bible Society

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closing of the Council, but the last session. Read this; I think it's stunning. You can quote many parts of this address to people who have absolutely no idea that it would come from a Catholic Pope.

In my opinion, his concern is that the Council have successful activities associated with it, reform the catechesis, the liturgy, all of these things. To all of that, and even consider the great questions of the day at the scientific level and other levels of study, the Council did all of that, but that it must do it within this particular point of departure or else it is not a truth of the Second Vatican Council.

I remember reading this speech way back, (I wasn't a priest yet) and how impressed I was, and now rereading it for this other gig—the priests' retreat we had, I have become more and more stunned. And what we need to do, although we're doing alright, as we can see the results, but I would suggest that we devote some time, not necessarily even today, to see how we're doing at the level of the point of departure for these activities. For example, at the end I would like to recommend that these brilliant organizers put together at some convenient time a day of recollection for the Advisory Board because we need that in order to grasp that particular point of departure. It is a matter of allowing ourselves to be shaped by a certain attitude in front of knowledge and in front of reality.

St. Augustine expresses it very well when he said that he had to read all of the Platonic books and waste his time because what he got out of there he found in the teachings of the Church later. He said, "God, why did you make me plough through all those books if you were just going to reveal this to me?" He had come to the conclusion that the reason why God wanted him to study all the secular philosophy was so that he could learn the difference between presumption and confession. The follower of Christ is motivated by confession. The worker who is doing some secular work can be doing it with someone who doesn't have that point of view, but is doing it and it comes out fine. This is not a condition for the success of scientific examinations or anything like that. This is a personal matter.

Why (and it keeps coming up in all the questions) are we doing this? What do we expect? Just like being here today. It's amazing. Don't you have anything better to do than come to the American Bible Society, confirm the mysterious absence of Mario Paredes who is campaigning for

another Pope, forgetting that he's been elected? Anyway, we're all here, and I assure you that if we didn't have this meeting, I would never be anywhere near here on a Saturday. I would be asleep. I definitely would. We're not paid. I do it as a penance for a particularly shameful confession. There is an attraction, an interest. But there are many attractions and many interests. What is the particular quality of this one? In what does its strength lie? If we grasp that, then we are guided by it in all the activities that we undertake and plan.

The presumption of St. Augustine was precisely that, a knowledge, not that it was of incorrect facts, but it was the attitude of knowledge that attributed its successes to our own efforts or goodness. Efforts or goodness—God rewarding us: Because we behave, we have successful events. The moment we digress, it will all come crumbling down. That is the thinking according to presumption. Confession, on the other hand, was simply an expression of the joy and the wonder of the glory of God present in reality, present in our world, present within us.

The Pope, to summarize very, very briefly in his speech, at the end concludes that our attitude should be obviously one of confession—confession of what? Confession of the value, the always more value of man. Confession of the fact that in all situations we will affirm, not because of the teaching of the Church, although the Church teaches that, not even because of the reading of the Council, but because we wonder at this creature.

I watch the National Geographic Channel a lot and find out how to murder people! Lovely stuff. At one level the amazing insignificance of the human being in the light of the Gospels. I keep looking at the people, and my brother watches it with me and thinks I'm completely crazy. "Look! He has feet!"

My brother answers, "Well, what do you expect?"

"Well, they evolved so that he could walk, so that Jesus could have feet. I don't know." It surprises me that this little creature in front of this vast and overwhelmingly awesome, in the best sense of the word, cosmos, this little creature, is worth all of it and more. One sole human person! That kind of attraction. It is, by the way, in all of us, only I would like to talk about myself, put on my lights so I can see it better. It is that kind of attraction

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that motivates or should motivate the activities we undertake.

Pope Paul VI says something that people are surprised is associated with the Second Vatican Council, “What is the religious value of this council?” Now someone in another talk mentioned it, and I thought of it myself too—isn’t what we want the very opposite? Are people going to say, “Oh look, Catholic religion. Don’t they have the freedom, the integrity to think by themselves?” The religious sense of the council cannot be equated to this. But the Pope calls the religious sense, “Giving glory to God.” It is precisely marveling, caring for the beauty, sensitivity of the real, of what exists.

The present Pope in his own discussion...it’s becoming very popular to have discussions with rabbis. I’m looking for someone. In any case, it’s a fascinating discussion about what we are looking at now. In one’s stance before reality, before the world, before the cosmos, the way we stand before it, can there be at that moment, under that powerful attraction and conviction that we want to share with other people, is there any room for doubt? Or is such a certainty achieved that no possible doubt is allowed? You may get off the horse later and doubt comes back, but this is a doubt *within* the certitude. This is not a little Mickey Mouse pope discussing that. And it’s fascinating because the man who was to become Pope says, Yes, there must be a space...I don’t know if we can call it doubt or not, but we cannot enter the presence of God without being overwhelmed in such a way that it is in a sense too much for us to grasp. In that too-much-ness, there is room for doubt. In fact, if it is not there, (again this is the speech of the man who was to become Pope), one would question whether the attitude or feeling of awe in all of that is the proper one.

That extra, how the human person exhibits this extra-ness, is what I think we need to reflect on because according to Pope Paul VI, the purpose of the Council and everything that it generates afterwards, all those activities, (we are fruits of the Council too), should be guided by this desire to give glory to God, and this does not mean that the Council is a reunion of the dogmatic proclamations or piety or anything like that. But first comes God. Listen to this:

Could we speak of having given glory to God, of having sought knowledge and love of Him, of having made progress in our effort of contemplating

Him, in our eagerness for honoring Him and in the art of proclaiming Him [to the people of today]?... from this basic purpose [to give this glory to God, to do what we do, to follow the attractions that we have in the secular sphere, to do them with love and amazement at the glory of God, this should be the direction of the future of this council.]...To appreciate it properly it is necessary to remember the time in which it was realized.

First is the giving glory to God. Within that, we find other things, but within that. One of them is the awareness of the times in which we live, the awareness of our cultural environment. The point is that giving glory to God as a desire will lead us, if followed correctly, to the question of the culture that surrounds us and to what happens when the two meet, when the glory of God meets the time in which we live. What happens? How does this happen within the heart of the human person? What happens there?

Look at the description of our times:

A time which everyone admits is orientated toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than of that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person [that which carries our person, that which determines us as human—the fundamental act of the human person] more conscious now of himself and of his liberty, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time in which secularism seems the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the highest wisdom in the temporal ordering of society; a time, moreover, in which the soul of man has plumbed the depths of irrationality and desolation; a time, finally, which is characterized by upheavals and a hitherto unknown decline even in the great world religions.

It was at such a time as this that our council was held to the honor of God, in the name of Christ and under the impulse of the Spirit: who “searcheth all things,” “making us understand God’s gifts to us” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-12), and who is now quickening the Church, giving her a vision at once profound and all-embracing of the life of the world. The theocentric and theological concept of man and the universe, almost in defiance of the charge of anachronism and irrelevance, has been given a new prominence

by the council, through claims which the world will at first judge to be foolish, but which, we hope, it will later come to recognize as being truly human, wise and salutary: namely, God is—and more, He is real, He lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in Himself, but also immeasurably good to us. He will be recognized as Our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on Him, [the effort to look on that reality that we are calling God] and to center our heart in Him [This is what we want; we want to see Him] which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity.

Then we suggest that the next step, if you wish, after taking a look at our relation with God and our relation with nature and our relation with human beings, then accept an act of introspection, which is where we are at this moment today, going over what has happened to us.

But this introspection has not been an end in itself. [Our introspection] has not been simply an exercise of human understanding or of a merely worldly culture. The Church has gathered herself together in deep spiritual awareness, not to produce a learned analysis of religious psychology, or an account of her own experiences, not even to devote herself to reaffirming her rights and explaining her laws. Rather, [our introspection is] to find in herself, active and alive, the Holy Spirit, the word of Christ; and to probe more deeply still the mystery, the plan and the presence of God above and within herself; to revitalize in herself that faith which is the secret of her confidence and of her wisdom, and that love which impels her to sing without ceasing the praises of God. “Cantare amantis est” (Song is the expression of a lover), says St. Augustine (Serm. 336; P. L. 38, 1472).

Then he says to note that our efforts to underline, to follow, to affirm “the religious meaning of the council” [that is, relation to God in what we do, has led us, commits us] to the study of the modern world.”

Never before perhaps, so much as on this occasion, has the Church felt the need to know, to draw near to, to understand, to penetrate, serve and evangelize the society in which she lives; and to get to grips with it, almost to run after it, in its rapid and continuous change. This attitude, a response to the distances and divisions we have witnessed over recent centuries, in the last century and in our own especially, between the Church and

secular society—this attitude has been strongly and unceasingly at work in the council; so much so that some [people have been complaining about this] have been inclined to suspect that an easy-going and excessive responsiveness to the outside world, to passing events, cultural fashions, temporary needs, an alien way of thinking...may have swayed persons and acts of the ecumenical synod, at the expense of the fidelity which is due to tradition, and this to the detriment of the religious orientation of the council itself. We do not believe that this shortcoming should be imputed to it, to its real and deep intentions, to its authentic manifestations.

We prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of this council. Now, no one can reprove as want of religion or infidelity to the Gospel such a basic orientation, when we recall that it is Christ Himself who taught us that love for our brothers is the distinctive mark of His disciples (cf. John 13:35); when we listen to the words of the apostle: “If he is to offer service pure and unblemished in the sight of God, who is our Father, he must take care of orphans and widows in their need, and keep himself untainted by the world” (James 1:27) and again: “He has seen his brother, and has no love for him; what love can he have for the God he has never seen?” (1 John 4:20).

What I want to underline here is that you see what he is doing; he is starting from that point of departure...and following, if we situate ourselves correctly in a sense that an openness to the glory of God. If we do that, we will be lead across this path, including, next step, not only the desire for knowledge and commitment to search for knowledge, secular knowledge, but also to charity, to care, to love.

The Church of the council has been concerned, not just with herself and with her relationship of union with God, but with man—man as he really is today: living man, man all wrapped up in himself, man who makes himself not only the center of his every interest but dares to claim that he is the principle and explanation of all reality. Every perceptible element in man, every one of the countless guises in which he appears, has, in a sense, been displayed in full view of the council Fathers, who, in their turn, are mere men...Among these guises we may cite man as the tragic actor of his own plays; man as the superman of yesterday and today, ever frail, unreal, selfish, and savage; man unhappy with himself as he laughs and cries; man the versatile actor ready to perform any part; man the narrow devotee of

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nothing but scientific reality; man as he is, a creature who thinks and loves and toils and is always waiting for something, the “growing son” (Gen. 49:22); man sacred because of the innocence of his childhood, because of the mystery of his poverty, because of the dedication of his suffering; man as an individual and man in society; man who lives in the glories of the past and dreams of those of the future; man the sinner and man the saint, and so on.

Secular humanism, revealing itself in its horrible anti-clerical reality has, in a certain sense, defied the council. The religion of the God who became man has met the religion (for such it is) of man who makes himself God. And what happened? Was there a clash, a battle, a condemnation? There could have been, but there was none. The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the council. A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it. [Are our activities motivated by this “boundless sympathy” for modern human beings?] The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs (and these needs grow in proportion to the greatness which the son of the earth claims for himself). But we call upon those who term themselves modern humanists, and who have renounced the transcendent value of the highest realities, to give the council credit at least for one quality and to recognize our own new type of humanism: we, too, in fact, we more than any others, worship mankind.

The word “worship” was removed by the Vatican censors, for obvious reasons, though the recording exists of him saying it, and the official phrase is: “We more than any others *honor* mankind.” But of course what he meant is the humanity of Christ, which is not just honored, but also worshiped as it is the humanity of the Son of God.

So it goes, on and on and on.

I think the mission statement was prophetic. I think we have been faithful to it. I think the fruits we have seen are the fruits of our fidelity to this path, even if we don't refer to it this way or give reference to it. I think that we are at the center of the drama of today which is precisely to show that the religious sense, that the glory of God is not a competitor of human progress, human achievements. I don't know how to do that. We would have to vary it in certain projects. In some we could be direct, as we do

already. But even in the others, is there a way of making the air perfumed with this desire so that we can say, “Well, I want this for Your glory?” I think, anyway, that we could have a little day of recollection to do that.

I read the mission statement, obviously. I don’t remember, does the word “God” appear in it anywhere at all, and above all, does the word “Jesus Christ” appear? I don’t remember. But I remember this: Fr. Giussani faced a situation like that at which people in the Movement were very successful as a political presence in Italy, at the universities especially, and he was horrified because the success was being attributed to proclamation, or whatever St. Augustine said. And he said, “This year let’s make a super-poster,” and what he wrote down was essentially a reflection on the Apostles Creed—a confession that Christ who was dead, now lives, and lives in the life of the Church, and so on and so forth, all the stuff that is in the Creed. And he said, “This will be this year’s.” Well, it revolutionized everything. People were amazed at such explicitness, something which presumably should have been kept hidden in order to attract.

When our friend Peter Beinart went to Rimini and said that if we did something like that in the United States, we would really have an impact on American culture, remember one of the three characteristics that he put together, the very first one was the religious one? That event was a Catholic event. There was no way whatsoever of disguising it. The second one, remember, was the critical part where we showed our intelligence, our devotion to work hard, research, desire to know. He said it reminded him of the English Literature Department at Harvard. Nothing was foreign to it. That was great, he said. And the third, he said it was a Disney World because it was a family coming together, a friendship. He said that those three in the United States do not come together. If you succeed in doing it, you will see unleashed a fascinating fascination, and you can begin to think of having an impact on American culture.

Comments on the Introduction to *In Search of the Human Face* by Msgr. Luigi Giussani

What struck me in and remained throughout my reading and thinking about *In Search of the Human Face*, is the seriousness with which Fr. Giussani looks at this activity—searching for the human face, therefore how important it is for us. We emerge out of that charism to be familiar with this term and to understand well what is it in it that moves so much Fr. Giussani, so much to the point of seeing that its absence or its neglect of the concern of the human face, for that of our own personal...He calls is “the supreme obstacle” today to undertaking a human walk towards one’s destiny...I want to repeat that again. He is saying...the other day someone came to do my therapy...I clarified to him that I had only fallen three times and not four, that is at my parish over here. On the street we ran out of places for the procession on The Way of the Cross, so we had Jesus collapse at least six times; it’s an Hispanic parish. Anyway, to say that ignoring or making a mistake in one’s search for the human face in whatever it is that we are doing as expressed in a human action, and that mistake in that process could be disastrous, so I wonder in all our activities how does that show itself that without this desire to find Christ, what we do eventually will make what we do fall apart because that is the supreme obstacle to a human action, let’s put it that way. That without that, a human action is inauthentic, is not really fully human, so therefore it will collapse as such when it tries to be human.

A life according to this view consists of a pilgrimage towards a destiny that calls us. I can’t imagine anyone would contest that unless you hold that there is no sense to anything. Indeed we may be living in a time in which it will be necessary to start at that fundamental level, with our conviction that there is sense. But presuming that that is not a question, the question still remains that the first step, this is how it is called by Father Giussani, the first step along the path of the fully human is precisely the affirmation, the search for the human face. It is to have in some way been touched by

* Given May 3, 2014 at the Human Adventure Corporation

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it. It is a flash and it goes off, is to be moved that way.

Finally, the touch that we are looking for, the search for the human face, cannot be found or cannot be pursued through intelligence at all. It has to be found with contact, with reality, with someone, contact with something, not exclusively by imagining, by studying with our mind alone. So, in the task of discovering our humanity, in that task we have found two conditions for it to be a success: Number one was the need to look for something that gives sense to the human, and the second, not to be carried away in that search by an intellectualism. Obviously this is one of the parts of being human; it cannot encompass everything. Instead, it opens itself to be touched by a reality that reaches you through something or someone else; that is what makes a human action human.

A third question that appears that I think is important in order to guide us, a third question is precisely: What is an action? What is a human action? And now you are in the midst of a very exciting philosophical discussion. John Paul II repeatedly gave importance to the task of finding one's personhood and one's identity being shown through ones actions. Some of our actions that we human beings do are like an animal might do. For example, every human being eats, every animal eats, but only human beings eat the human way. What is that difference? In what does that consist that will make an action go to the human side? Let me put it that way. Now what kind of an answer to explain to that question is along the lines...the answer is going to be expressed in terms of relationships between the person and things . . . In the interaction between ourselves and the reality in question, judging that interaction is how we find what are human actions versus what are actions performed by human beings are not human actions as such. To repeat, a human action is defined as human by the relationship that exists between the self, the I, and the objects or others that you are working on or communicating with or acting together, that kind of thing. Now I am sure of this, I am sure this is what John Paul II always felt because he told me himself! And it was put in terms of what is the best language, the most human language to communicate love. He asked me that question, "You are a scientist; what is the best way to communicate human love?" The way he said it is like saying to communicate in a human way, to the human reality one to the other, what is the best way? And I said, "Well, I know it is not science because when I was looking for women, I did not send them differential equations." And

he smiled, and I said, “Now you tell me, what is the best way?” He said, “The best way to transmit all that is human is a theater drama, the language of the drama and the theater.” So, I don’t know what to do about it, but that’s the third one.

Finally, for today, if we spend time discussing these three and if we ever stand up and say, “Well, we’ve finished that, go on to the next one,” you are crazy. It’s like somebody wants a discussion. . . I said let’s talk about chapter something or other of the book we were looking at, the chapter on the resurrection of Jesus, and this person with all self-assurance said, “Well, we talked about that already.” And I said, “Oh, I see, so now you can move on to something else!”

There is one more point to be made, I believe, and that is precisely: What does all of this have to do with saying that the answer to the human question is Jesus Christ? Remember how much Fr. Giussani quoted Niebuhr’s remark, “Nothing is more ridiculous than the answer to a question that no one is asking.”? The question that everyone of us should be asking ourselves is precisely that one: What is the key to my humanity when I act? That is why it fits then that it is open to Christ being its answer, but if it isn’t, it will end in uselessness. That’s all.

A P P E N D I X

Meeting with Fr. Carrón and Msgr. Albacete

Crossroads: We really wanted to have this opportunity to meet with you, Fr. Carrón. Those of us here are part of Crossroads either as volunteers or members of the Advisory Board. We have also invited some of the speakers of our previous events who wanted to know a little bit more about us. One of the characteristics that is striking for us, but also for many of our speakers, is the fact that we carry an interest, a curiosity with respect to every aspect of reality. We do not have a predetermined agenda being a Catholic cultural center. We are aware that this interest comes from the fact of having had a Christian encounter, having faith. For us, culture as a gaze on reality, (and we had a beautiful example just a few minutes ago at New York Encounter) comes from faith.

We would like to understand better the relationship between faith and culture, reminded by the fact that many times you quoted a statement by the Pope that says that “It is necessary that the intelligence of faith becomes intelligence of reality”. In a certain way we would like this to be our permanent manifesto as a cultural center.

Albacete: Wow! A permanent manifesto! I had in mind, like, just a few thoughts.

I'll tell you why I'm here. The way I saw this moment, most important and first of all we were here to be with Fr. Carrón, just to enjoy being together even if for only a little while. For us, presence is an important experience and therefore we come together to be before a presence, to discern together, to recognize a presence. Through the gift of grace given to Fr. Giussani we have come to recognize the presence of Christ in our coming together. Fr. Carrón is the custodian of this charism—charism being a fancy term for this gift, this grace, this ability, if you wish, this special taste of life, special

* January 15, 2011 at the New Yorker Hotel

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way of living. We use the word charism in secular thought too, sometimes to talk about talent, musical talent, artistic talent, scientific talent. Charism is that talent that is inviting and that attracts you. All of us have been touched and sustained and changed and enriched by the charism given to Fr. Giussani, and then again Fr. Carrón is again today the bearer and custodian of this charism, so he's very important for us.

Second point, one of the fruits or one of the effects of living this charism is an arousal of interest. We become interested in everything really. I was struck by something Fr. Carrón said quoting Fr. Giussani that we were discussing at the Meeting of the House with people who I live this with. In a certain sense, God, the Mystery, the Unknown, the Unknowable took on human flesh to awaken our interest, to awaken the strength and the capacity to be interested in life, in all aspects of humanity. I never heard it put like that before. It's really bottom line theologically speaking. Why did God become flesh? You can give I don't know how many answers from the ones given in the Bible—salvation, forgiveness of sins, etc... to the great tradition of the fathers of the Church, etc... But today these other ways mean little. Sometimes they mean the opposite of what they originally meant as Walker Percy wrote in *The Thanatos Syndrome* about the priest there who wouldn't preach because the words had been emptied of their meaning, (Flannery O'Connor also made the same point) and sometimes mean the very opposite of what they originally meant in the Christian experience. So you need to go way bottom line and I can't imagine a simpler way: God became man so as to be interesting to us.

The cultural center is one expression of this interest in which we invite people from all kinds of human experiences to share their stories with us, again for no other purpose than that they are interesting. I first came across the reality of a cultural center in Turin, Italy called *Solomon's Portico*. Remember the temple where the apostles and all the early Christians gathered before the split with Judaism? It was a plaza like Times Square. Here we are at Bloomberg Portico or something like that. You couldn't be in a place of more shows, the stage. Anyway I was invited to speak at Solomon's Portico a number of times and it was great, but I remember one time I just attended because I happened to be in town, and the guy who came to speak to everyone is the head of air traffic control at Malpensa Airport, and that's what he spoke about. You try and connect that to the resurrection of Christ! I guess the fact that the planes actually take off

and land and do not crash is the miracle of Christ. But it was just because it was interesting. I said to myself, this is amazing. The cultural center, with its limited resources was almost like a mini Meeting, a mini New York Encounter. This is something on a grander scale, but this was on a scale that allows these events to take place throughout the year. But in some respects the purpose is the same—to fire up our hearts with interest because pursuing our interest will lead us to the One who is interesting, infinitely interesting, whose face and human presence is Christ.

When, a few years ago, I accompanied Peter Beinart, who was then Editor of *The New Republic* (traditionally the voice of American Liberalism—liberalism in the American sense, progressivism in the European sense) and Peter was its editor and he agreed to come and talk about American Liberalism at the Meeting in Rimini. And the experience of the Meeting blew his mind. And I asked him to tell me what he had thought, what was his main impression, how would he describe the Meeting. And he said, “Well, it has three dimensions. These three dimensions of the Meeting exist in American culture [because I had asked him what he thought of the chances of doing something like it in the United States] but they are hostile to each other. They just don’t come together. There may be attempts [this was years before Obama] to find a common ground, but it’s impossible.” He mentioned those three dimensions as the following: First, a public, confident, unabashed, certain profession of faith without any attempt to dilute it, to adjust it, to make it sound at least more pleasant. It was a rejoicing in the faith, whose purpose was just that—rejoicing. He said that the closest thing you have in the United States like that have political motivations or moral reform from the old revivals to the Moral Majority or Christian Coalition, etc...Not here, this is different. This is a profession of faith whose purpose is a serious, joyful celebration and witnessing. The second, he said that the intellectual level of this Meeting exceeds that of the foreign language department criticism schools—deconstruction, hermeneutics, the whole modern thing at the academic level. At this Meeting there’s no fear of that and it’s engaged. And third and finally he said, “It’s like Disney World,” which doesn’t need explanation. He said that in the United States these cannot come together, not now, and if we do succeed in making something like that rise up within the American culture, we would have made a very substantial contribution to it. His remarks were published in *Traces*. You can look it up.

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Why? Because of our passion. Because our faith gives us the passion for what is truly interesting because it is human and it is in this way that a culture is changed. So we are here today facing American culture as it is. Our interest in developments this week, the question has become a matter of public discourse as a result of the tragedy in Tucson, the very famous President's speech over there. For a moment there you could see commentaries, columns, op eds and all that of people normally very much opposed to each other come together and they succeeded in touching something that is still left in the American heart as a basis for the union in this country. Again what that is exactly is to be determined. Years ago, on the other hand, we had a huge article that I recommend. (By the way, *Time* magazine which just came today and I haven't read it, is entirely dedicated to the Tucson tragedy, and there are articles about what it means.) It was in *Harpers* magazine, "The American Heresy" in which he says, "The dominant culture of this country is nihilism, only that it's not the European nihilism. The European nihilism loses interest in God, it removes God. Here it's a nihilism that comes from believing everything," just for the fun of believing. And this is so true. You see it again even in the reaction to the speech. In fact, I will conclude with reading you just this passage which I found amazing:

Ours in the United States is a sort of workshop spirituality that you can get with a cereal box top and five dollars, and yet in our culture to suggest that such belief is not deserving of respect makes people anxious—an anxiety that expresses itself in a desperate sincerity with which we deliver life's little lessons. The sincerity is surely one part ardor, but it is also a warning: I have invested a lot of emotional energy in this belief, the way I've staked the credibility of my life on it, so if you ridicule it, you can expect a fight.

There's an obvious problem with this form of spirituality. It takes place in isolation. Each of us sits at our computer terminal tapping our own convictions. It is as if we were each our own foreign country and we wanted to know what people in the land of this or that or Brenda or Eduardo believe. Consequently it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that our greatest belief is the creed of heresy itself. It is heresy without orthodoxy. It is heresy as an orthodoxy. The entitlement to belief is the right of each to his own heresy. Religious freedom has come to this where everyone is free to believe whatever he likes. There is no real shared conviction, and hence no Church, no community. Strangely our freedom belief has achieved the

condition that Nietzsche called nihilism, but by a route he never imagined. For Nietzsche, a European, nihilism was the failure of any form of belief—the condition that church attendance in Europe presently testifies. But American nihilism is something different. Our nihilism is our capacity to believe in everything and anything all at once. Oh, it is all so good.

Is there a way out of this if it is true? Is it true? I suggest to you there is a way out of it. Pursue the path of what is interesting.

Carrón: I don't need to add anything else to this description by Lorenzo because he has described very accurately the challenge that we have before us. In front of this nihilism there is something that you can offer because the word nihilism describes very well the nature of the crisis that we're facing. It's not a crisis of an aspect of life or of something that is wrong or something that doesn't work. Each of us can understand very well what nihilism means—the lack of interest in anything. We believe in everything because we don't believe in anything. There's nothing left to awaken our interest, and this is the situation in which we all live. In this situation there is something in our experience that we can offer to our fellow human being, our companion to destiny, our friends. There are things that we thought were eternal such as desire or interest that belong to the natural being, but they have decayed. The reality that we see in us and around us shows with evidence that this nihilism is the sign of this decay of interest—the decay of human desire, of the human being, a decay that we can describe in different ways. In front of this really dramatic situation, do we have something to offer to our fellow human beings? As Lorenzo said about this journalist invited to Rimini, even for a liberal without any kind of limit it's impossible to win over this nihilism. And yet he recognizes that this victory would be a big contribution to society. However, nobody knows how to do it because it is impossible. It's impossible because the human being is like that; we are what we are. Without a new relationship with reality that can reawaken all our being, all our desire, all our heart, all our humanity, reality becomes less and less interesting. This is the challenge of our cultural center: witnessing that in every aspect of reality it is possible to reawaken an interest. There is no other more important challenge before us because this is the challenge of Christianity today: Is it possible to be born again? This is the question that Nicodemus put to Jesus years ago and it is the same today. We are saying, yes, it is possible to be born again. In this situation of lack of interest, Christianity (not reduced to one of its variants,

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i.e., reduced to ethics or feelings, or whatever) witnesses that it is possible to start again.

But Christianity is a presence where if one person finds somebody who is a Christian, a new creature, he will be struck. This is the question: Why is this person so different? What is the origin of this difference? This is the same question that the presence of Jesus arouses in the people who met him. This is not a “religious” or “spiritual” problem; it’s a problem of a presence because religiosity is interesting only if it’s something real, not virtual, not “spiritual” but something that we can touch, that we can see, that we can remain astonished by. For this reason, Fr. Giussani always put in front of us the scene of John and Andrew. But what is interesting about what happened to John and Andrew in our context in New York City 2,000 years after that event? It’s the same as the first two people who met him—they remain astonished, interested, grasped, drawn by the presence of Jesus. Their humanity started to be reawaken because of that encounter. If Christianity exists like the scene with John and Andrew, the mission of the Church in the world is to be witnesses of what happened to those two people who met Jesus. The tools can be changed but in everything, in the way we deal with a problem, in the way we gaze at another person, in the way we treat those we meet—the question remains the same: Can somebody touch this diversity? Can someone be struck by or bump into this person who is changed? This is the possibility of our cultural center. Is it a really fascinating thing or not? And this is the challenge: having this intelligence of faith that becomes intelligence of reality in order for you to offer a new way of dealing with reality, with a new intelligence where people can be struck and ask for the origin of it. This is what I desire for you in this adventure...human adventure.

I’m very grateful for all your work. We are trying to do something like it in Italy with our possibilities. We are friends because we have become companions in this adventure. Thank you very much.

Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you

Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you.

Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you.

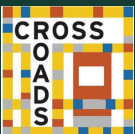
*And without feet I can make my way to you,
without a mouth I can swear your name.*

*Break off my arms, I'll take hold of you
with my heart as with a hand.*

Stop my heart, and my brain will start to beat.

*And if you consume my brain with fire,
I'll feel you burn in every drop of my blood.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*
Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy
1996, Riverhead Books, New York



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