

THE 2017 GIUSSANI SERIES ON
FAITH AND MODERNITY:
Christianity: An Encounter that Shapes Life

THE 2017 ALBACETE LECTURE
ON FAITH AND CULTURE:
*Disarming Beauty:
Faith, Truth, and Freedom on the Threshold of a
New Era*



Dr. Michael Waldstein, Fr. Solanus Benfatti

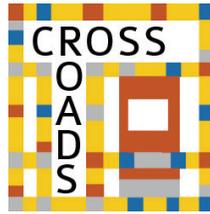
and

Fr. Julián Carrón



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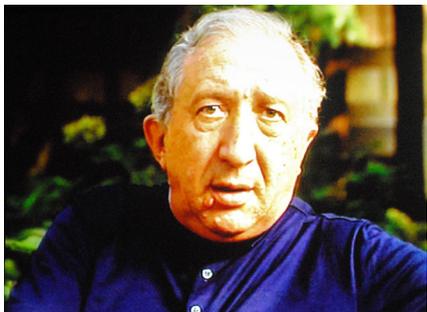
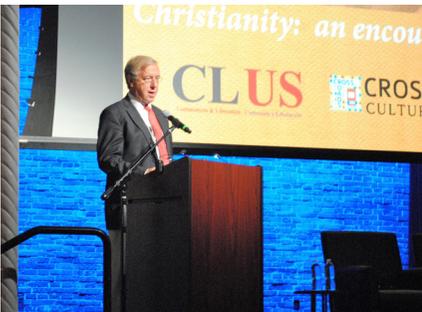
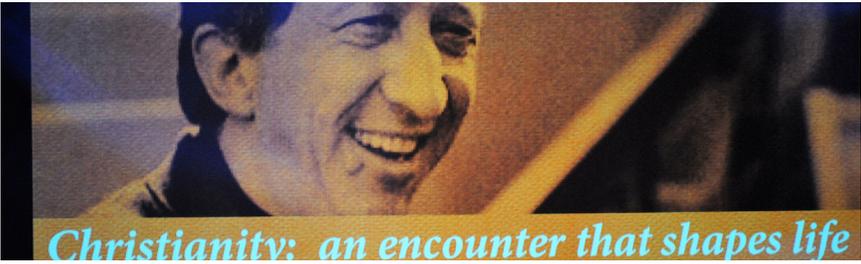
Disarming Beauty: faith, truth, and freedom on the threshold of a new era

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Christianity: An Encounter That Shapes Life

Dr. Michael Waldstein
Fr. Solanus Benfatti, CFR

The 2017 Luigi Giussani Series on Faith and Modernity
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture
New York City
June 22, 2017



Holly Peterson: Last year we welcomed Timothy Cardinal Dolan and Fr. Richard Veras for the first of our annual series on the life and thought of Luigi Giussani, founder of the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation. Tonight’s gathering is an occasion to delve more deeply into the contents of a fundamental concept of Christianity: the “encounter,” as understood and taught by Fr. Giussani.

Born in 1922 in Desio, Italy, Giussani described his childhood as “poor in bread but rich in music.” He began the path of his priestly vocation at the tender age of 10, and those formative years were filled with encounters that marked his life. He wrote: “If I had not met Msgr. Gaetano Corti in high school, or had Msgr. Colombo’s literature class, Christ would have been just a word that belonged in theological musings.”

Here is how Giussani describes the event of the encounter with Msgr. Corti: “Everything came like the surprise of a beautiful day, when a teacher in my first year of high school—I was 15 years old—read and explained the first pages of John’s Gospel.” [...] “The Word of God, in other words, that from which all things are made, was made flesh...and so beauty was made flesh, goodness was made flesh, justice was made flesh; love, life, and truth were made flesh. Being was not in the realm of ideas—it became flesh, and it is alive among us.”

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Corti and others thus shaped Giussani's understanding of the encounter with Christ: it meant to bump into a fact, into a person who, "like a beautiful day," marked you for your entire life, just as it had happened to John and Andrew when they met Jesus.

Giussani began a journey in faith that endured his entire life, as then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger noted at his funeral mass. "Fr. Giussani," said Ratzinger, "always kept the eyes of his life and of his heart fixed on Christ. In this way, he understood that Christianity is not an intellectual system, a pack of dogmas, a moralism: Christianity is rather an encounter, a love story: it is an event... This love affair with Christ, this love story which was the whole of his life, was far from superficial enthusiasm... Following Christ is to follow a path, to make a journey."

Nine years after Giussani's ordination to the priesthood, following the signs that God gave him, he left a promising career in academia to work in the prestigious Berchet Public High School in Milan. In his classes he spoke of the centrality of Christ to all of life, all the while challenging his students to verify for themselves that what he said was true for their own lives.

His methodology was dynamic and sometimes "unorthodox," as a recent dialogue among some of his former students revealed: "He pulled us in, in a completely unique way—for a priest, that is. For example, a soccer tournament, hikes in the mountains, and taking us to do charitable work—in that period of my life I learned the value of poverty and solidarity, which has been with me all these years."

Giussani used the poetry of his beloved Giacomo Leopardi with such vibrancy that, as one student remembered, "he left us mesmerized, cut us to the core—he penetrated our hearts." "Yes," said another student, "it was evident that he wanted something from us: that man wanted our hearts."

What was it that this "unorthodox" priest did in the classroom? Giussani discussed everything with his students: studies, politics, friendship, culture, life and love—and in doing so, he became for them what Msgr. Corti had been for him: an encounter with a presence who witnessed an audacious

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relationship with Jesus Christ, here and now.

But he also taught them a method to verify everything they heard, challenging them to compare what they were told and experienced with the deepest desires of their hearts. In this way, “He conquered us,” said the former major of Milan. “You could agree or disagree with him, but his class was one in which we were there, blown away by what we had heard. You had to decide!”

Around Giussani, a “movement” of young people began to form. And in 1954, what is now known as Communion and Liberation was born. Today CL spans 80 countries, and continues to educate both young and old, including the former archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who said the following in 1998: “For many years now, Giussani’s writings have inspired me to reflect and have helped me to pray...they have taught me to be a better Christian. Msgr. Giussani is one of those unexpected gifts the Lord gave to our Church after Vatican II.”

Just like the future Pope Francis, countless individuals, despite never having met Fr. Giussani, attribute much of their “encounter” with him to meeting one of his spiritual sons and daughters. He was a dear friend to people who held a wide spectrum of cultural and religious beliefs, a companion on the journey for those seeking to live life fully. In him they found a credible witness of intelligence, joy, and holiness.

Giussani died in 2005 at the age of 82, having lived a rich life as priest, thinker, and educator, able to speak about Christ to modern men and women. On February 22, 2012, his cause for beatification and canonization was opened, and today he is referred to as Servant of God Luigi Giussani. Cardinal Archbishop Angelo Scola described Giussani this way: “He is the Don Bosco of our time, a genius in the educational sphere, and I’m confident that one day he will be known as one of the Fathers of the Church, in the noblest sense of the term. I learned from Giussani a respect, a passion and love for the great body of the Church; in him I found a free man.”

Tonight we will delve into a particular accent of this man’s charism, and an

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essential aspect of Christianity: the event of an encounter. To help us along the journey we have two exceptional speakers: Dr. Michael Waldstein, renowned theologian and author; and Fr. Solanus Benfatti, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal and scholar of the life of St. Francis. Both gentlemen have impressive biographies, which you will find in your program.

Dr. Michael Waldstein: In 1973, I finished high school in Salzburg, Austria, and I wanted to see a little bit of the world, just put my toe into the ocean of this big universe. I decided to study for a year in the United States, at Thomas Aquinas College. Before I left Austria, I spoke with friends of my parents who told me, “We know a family in Arizona. They have a daughter; you’ve got to get to know her. She’ll be going to the same college.” And apparently they wrote to her about me also. I remember arriving at the college and looking around: Is that her? Is that her? Is that her? But in each case I was mistaken.

There was a party the evening before the first class, a fantastic party with a family who boasted very talented children, some of whom took part in a choir. They sang Renaissance madrigals that evening—it was fantastic! At a certain point, a young woman came across the room and I knew it was her. I think the reason I knew it was her is that she heard me speak German, and I saw in her eyes that she knew it was me. It was an encounter; it was an event. Those are the words I want to focus on: *encounter* and *event*. A lot came from that encounter, from that event!

At Thomas Aquinas College there’s a Secret Santa tradition. At the beginning of Advent, you drew a name out of a hat, and then for that person you did things during Advent that were an expression of love. At Christmas you revealed yourself, and there was a bigger present at that point. I was standing next to somebody drawing names out of the hat, and I saw that he had drawn her name, and he saw that I had drawn the name of the girl *he* was interested in. And in a matter of a moment the two pieces of paper changed hands. My wife found out about this only years later: she’d thought it was Divine Providence, but it had been her husband’s conniving. Now we have eight children, so the event had tremendous consequences.

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A couple of years after we got married, we moved to Rome for me to study at the Biblicum. It was 1981. That's when I met Father Giussani for the first time, though the real impression came a few years later. Already the first impression was similar in its impact, in its force. He seemed to me free like a bird, a man who was free like a bird, and the most natural man. Being with him was being at peace. There was no project I was being enlisted in. I was being taken for who I am, and loved. He wanted me to be happy; that was clear.

Encounter is a very strange word when you think about it. It comes from two Latin words: *in* or *into* and *contra*. So there's the idea of *in* and *against*. When the word *encounter* first came into English from Latin, it expressed a hostile clash. "The two kings encountered each other in single combat" (Gibbon, *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 38). That's not exactly what happened at that party with Susie, my wife; but from "hostile clash" *encounter* was extended to more positive meetings, meetings that surprise us, lead us beyond ourselves, promise something greater than what can be grasped.

Shakespeare is full of examples of encounter. When Romeo and Juliet exchange their marriage vows, Romeo says:

Ah! Juliet, if the measure of thy joy
be heap'd like mine...
let rich music's tongue
unfold the imagin'd happiness that both
receive in either by this dear encounter.

So there's an event—and contained in it, an imagined happiness.

Juliet's response confirms the connotation of promise in the word *encounter*:

Conceit, more rich in matter than in words...
They are but beggars that can count their worth;
but my true love is grown to such excess
I cannot sum up half my sum of wealth

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(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene VI).

A similar meaning for *encounter* is found in *The Tempest*, in Prospero's aside as he observes the meeting between his daughter, Miranda, and her future husband, Ferdinand:

Fair encounter
of two most rare affections!
Heavens rain grace
on that which breeds between them!"

Immediately after this aside by Prospero, Ferdinand asks Miranda, "Wherefore weep you?" Miranda's answer confirms her father's aside about the encounter:

At mine unworthiness, that dare not offer
what I desire to give; and much less take
what I shall die to want.
(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act III, Scene I)

You have the intensity of desire, a sense of a great wealth hidden behind the sign to come, a sense of unworthiness of entering into it immediately.

Right at the beginning of *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI writes, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." You can have family values as much as you want; if you don't have a spouse, you won't be married. The spouse is the really important thing about marriage; it's the best thing about marriage; it's what makes it rich, worthwhile. It's when you have a spouse that it makes sense for you to behave in a certain way. Moral rules in the abstract are difficult.

Early on, Pope Francis gave an interview for which, unfortunately, many of us Americans criticized him:

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“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context... This is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus... Otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow... The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.

(“Interview with Antonio Spadaro,” *America Magazine* (Sept. 30, 2013: 15-38)

Encounter is absolutely first. There is complete agreement between Pope Benedict and Pope John Paul and Pope Francis on this matter.

Now you recognize an event that happens to you as an encounter because of a promise it contains. Looking back when I first saw Susie, I was amazed. It was a sign of things to come. I didn't know exactly what was coming. An event is recognized as an encounter by a promise it contains, but above all through the experience of remaining faithful to it. Aristotle uses a word well-known already to children, *enoikeo* (living inside a house, being at home), which is close to the important word *meno* (to stay, remain) in the Gospel of John.

Lack of experience, Aristotle says

makes us less able to see the recognized facts together as a whole. For this reason, those who have dwelled more among natural things (literally, have dwelled more in the house with natural things) are better able to grasp beginnings that can speak about many facts together as a whole, while those whom many words have kept from looking at the existing things are quick to proclaim their opinions by looking at a few things.

(Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, 1.2)

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So living in the same house with natural things is the way to gather experience about them. That's the way to realize that an encounter was an encounter. It's the only way to avoid the sentimentality that makes meetings full of promise disappear in the stream of experience like a YouTube clip: it passes by and leaves no trace.

So how can an encounter unfold its promise? How can one verify the encounter? How can one verify the event as an encounter and reach a firm judgment? *Enoikeo*—you have to stay, live with, remain. That's Giussani's point of departure in the first chapter of the book that's the basis of our evening.

He talks about the first two disciples in the Gospel of John, one of whom is probably John himself. They meet Jesus for the first time, and in that passage the word for *remain*—*meno*—seems to have a very superficial sense, doesn't seem to mean terribly much. This is what the text says:

The next day, again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi (which means Teacher), where are you *remaining*?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was *remaining*. And they *remained with* him that day. It was about the tenth hour (1:35-39).

What seems to have triggered the encounter in this case are the mysterious words of John the Baptist, "This is the Lamb of God." They are very mysterious words, but you have to understand them as relating to the deep hopes of Israel, the lamb as the sacrificial animal *par excellence*, and sacrifice as a way of reaching out toward God, God reaching out toward us, of reaching union and reconciliation. And it's exactly the density of that formulation that's so effective. It's mysterious. The learners, the disciples, perceive an implicit fullness in that dense and finite sign. It was like seeing a woman walk across the room. It's a very finite, a very limited sign.

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Then Jesus takes this desire of the two men as the starting point. What is this? What's behind it? He turns to them with what may seem a surprising question: "What are you seeking?" Thus he pinpoints the desire in their hearts, the inner energy stirred up in them by this mysterious sign given by their teacher, the Lamb of God. That desire is the first thing Jesus turns to. It is what makes an encounter possible. Without desire there is no encounter.

Here is a passage from Giussani:

Our heart has an ultimate, imperious, deep-set need for fulfillment, for truth, beauty, goodness, love, final certitude, and happiness. So to come across an answer to these needs should be the most obvious and normal thing. Yet, on the contrary, this correspondence, which should be supremely normal, becomes supremely exceptional for us. To come face to face with something absolutely and profoundly natural, that is to say, something that corresponds to the needs of the heart that nature gives us, is therefore something absolutely exceptional. (Giussani, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, 3).

It often happens when a man meets a woman. It corresponds deeply to the needs of the heart. It happens often, but it's exceptional.

When Jesus asks, "What are you seeking?" he pinpoints their desire. (That desire was very much awakened in me, looking at Susie for the first time.) They don't ask, "Well, what did John the Baptist mean, 'This is the Lamb of God'? What exactly is meant by that?" All they say is, "Well, where's the place where you're remaining? We want to be with you."

If you read the whole Gospel of John, you know that the place in which the Son remains is the Mystery *par excellence*; it's the mystery of the Father, and so this question opens up an abyss of mystery.

In Chapter 14, Jesus says, "In the house of my Father there are many places to *remain* in. If not, would I have told you that I am going in order to prepare a place for you? [...] I will take you to myself, so that where I am

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you also may be” (14:2-3). Jesus simply invites them to “come and see,” and they stayed with him that day; they remained with him that day. John says it was about the tenth hour; he has the exact detail in his mind.

That evening when I met Susie, I can remember the details of her steps across the carpet. They would have maybe disappeared had a history not happened after it that grew out of it, but because a history grew out of it, I recognize it in retrospect as an *encounter*.

People often talk about love at first sight, and it’s silly because love is something built over time. But then in a way it’s true if you look back and recognize the moment as the seed from which something really great sprang. It’s like recognizing an oak tree in an acorn. An oak tree is not an acorn, that’s for sure; but an acorn has all the power of the oak tree in it. So the encounter begins with particular circumstances at a particular time, a particular place—“about the tenth hour”—and those circumstances may seem poor. What they require is a journey of verification, and in that verification a judgement must be made. Was the encounter really an encounter? Is it worth pursuing? Does a real goal or real good reside within it? Without that work of verification, and without continuous openness to the newness of encounter, the original impact would suffocate in its finiteness.

The depth to which these things can go! Jesus indicates them in the Eucharistic discourse. He says, “The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood *remains in* me and I in him” (6:56).

The word *remain* has taken on a lot more force than in the first occurrence—“Where are you remaining?” and “They remained with him that day.” Now it’s deepened, they’ve come a long way. They’re invited to enter the depths and interior of the initial encounter. That’s what’s meant by “Do this in memory of me.” That’s why Giusanni called the group of consecrated lay people *Memores Domini*—those who remember the Lord. “Do this in memory of me.”

The first time John uses the word *remain*, he talks about *remaining with*. In

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the Eucharistic discourse he talks about *remaining in*; it's a step forward. *Remaining with* could be kind of side-by-side; *remaining in* shows much more interiority. Through the Eucharist, the one with whom the learners remained achieves what only this particular rabbi can achieve, namely that you can enter his depths, remain in him, and he will remain in you.

Augustine has the fantastic phrase in *The Confessions* that "God is more inside than what is most inside me, because God is the source from which I spring." More inside than what is most inside. That's the level they reach.

In Chapter 15 there's an important passage that adds some aspects that Giussani draws out. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, I also have loved you." Notice this is an announcement of a fact; this is stating a fact—not making a demand. It's stating a fact. But then comes the moral consequence: "Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love." The commandments do come along, but they come along in second place. It's very important that they come along in second place. If they come along in first place, what is it you perceive religion as? As a limit on your freedom or perhaps as a guidance, but still an arduous guidance. But in the first place it's an encounter with something fascinating that takes up your life. "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

"Do not commit adultery." Okay, that's true. It's not a particular reason for joy. Well, in a sense it is a reason for joy if you don't do it, but it's the spouse who is the reason for joy. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." The community of Christians is to be the sign—the fragile, limited sign in which the beauty, the attractiveness of Christ breaks through.

Let me conclude with a few words about Father Giussani. When my wife and I left Rome in 1984, that was the year in which he sent the first Italians over to the U.S. at the request of Pope John Paul II, and my wife and I helped. I was studying at Harvard Divinity School, so I became friends

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with the ones who were sent to Boston. We helped them a little bit, and in those years Father Giussani would come pretty regularly to help get things started. Since I knew Italian, I was usually the one who translated. Being near him time and time again was an immense grace. It's difficult for me to state exactly my impression of him. I said earlier tonight that he seemed free like a bird; he seemed able to go where he wanted. He didn't seem oppressed by anything. He seemed natural. There was no pressure from him on me, no violence, but an immense attractiveness that came from love of God, love of Christ, of having been deeply struck by Christ. I think this is why this event has, in the many years since, slowly been verified and I stayed with it, remained with it. For both my wife and for me, and for many of our children, it's been an education in the faith.

Thank you very much.

Fr. Solanus Benfatti, CFR: I was so honored by and grateful for the invitation to speak at this event that I rearranged my schedule significantly so that I could accept it.

And, once I did, my next step was to call Holly with the question, "Why did you ask me?" Because there are many experts on the thought of Msgr. Giussani, and I don't consider myself among them. There are also many members of Communion and Liberation, the movement he founded, and I am not one of those, either.

Holly gave me various answers to my question, but if I could summarize them and put them in my own words, her answer was: because you are our friend. And you love Giussani. I am happy to say that both of those things are true.

1. The surprise of the gift of coming to feel to be oneself

My friendship with members of the Movement came about as any truly good thing does, anything that is truly good for you: as a surprise. As something entirely unlooked for and unexpected. As a gift, a thing given. Not a thing taken, wrestled away, manipulated, or orchestrated. Something

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given. Given from an Other.

And that is one of the fundamental qualities of what Msgr. Giussani calls an *event*. It's how Christ happened to John and Andrew.

In many respects, the day Jesus walked into their lives had been like any other day. They were listening with curiosity to the prophet, John the Baptist. Which may not sound like an ordinary day, but it is. Because they were doing what we are all doing from day to day. That is, whether they were conscious of it or not, they were there because they were looking for something, longing for something. But for what? They did not know, and they didn't know where to find it, or even what it would look like if they were to find it.

When the Baptist said, "Lamb of God," and pointed his craggy finger at Jesus—because prophets have craggy fingers, in my estimation—something happened to them. Let's pay attention here: the Baptist gives them no arguments, no narrative, no explanation, no catechesis, no proof; rather, he simply says, "Him. That one." And they can't help but follow after him. And they spend a few hours with him, at most, and when they come back, Andrew goes directly to his brother, Simon, and says, "Something unexpected happened today. We found the Messiah." Which is to say: we've found what for so long we've all been looking for.

Now, this is a ludicrous thing to say and we must not pass over it too quickly. Msgr. Giussani asks, "How could the first two, John and Andrew ... have been won over at once and recognize Him ... ? There is an apparent disproportion between the extremely simple way it all happened and the certainty of the two" (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 7–8). The answer, to put it a bit in my own words, is that when this one looked at you, you felt for the first time to be yourself. "This event, then," writes Giussani, "is what sets in motion the process through which man becomes fully conscious of himself, of his entire physiognomy, and begins to say 'I' with dignity. God became an event in our daily existence, so that our 'I' might recognize itself with clarity in its original factors and attain its destiny, be saved" (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 10).

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Although I do not remember if I ever read Giussani commenting on this, I often consider Simon's response to Andrew. Because, like I said, this is a ludicrous thing for a fisherman to say: "We found the Messiah." How would you know? I would have asked him. But Simon does not. Simon says, "Let's go." Why? Because he knows Andrew, and Andrew is a different man. He has become a different man. Something has happened to him.

Then, one of the most bizarre conversations ever recorded takes place—and all of these initial conversations with Jesus are numbered among those. This total stranger—a complete stranger!—looks at Andrew's brother and says, "Simon?" Who answers, "Yes," only to then hear, "Now you're Peter." And Simon looks into the eyes of this complete stranger and says, "Okay. Alright." What is that?

There is only one possible explanation for this: when this man looks at you, you feel like yourself for the first time; when this one tells you your name, you know it for the first time. "Think of how many times," Giussani writes, "the Samaritan woman had thirsted for the attitude with which Christ treated her in that instant. She had never realized it before, but when it happened she recognized it" (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 22).

2. You receive the gift of yourself from another

And it has to happen this way.

Notice that coming to be oneself, to feel like oneself, does not come about through one's own work or planning or effort or understanding. It comes about through the encounter with another. You receive the gift of yourself from another.

We live in an unprecedented time in which, on a mass scale, we feel an incredible and unnecessary burden to create ourselves, to determine ourselves, to determine our identity. Even our gender. What an incredible burden! And we've convinced ourselves that we lose our freedom when we depend on another, when we look to another to become ourselves. At

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least Christians should see that this is incorrect. For it is woven into the very fabric of being itself to become oneself in relationship to another. For we believe in one God who is three Persons. And the Son is only the Son because he is always and has always been, coming forth from the Father. And the Father is Father because he is ever-begetting the Son. Therefore it is not an imperfection to derive one's identity from another.

This is why it is beautiful and freeing and astonishingly perfect that John and Andrew begin to come to be themselves on the day they look into the eyes of Jesus for the first time. It is also why it is perfect that once Andrew does so, he can now go to Simon and change Simon's life forever.

Once you begin to truly be yourself, you can give that gift to others.

Msgr. Giussani, while one day approaching an enormous assembly gathered to hear him speak, was asked by a reporter, "Why are they here in anticipation of you like this?" A loaded question, for sure. Tempting him, I would think, to self-importance, self-reliance, independence. He, without batting an eyelash, responded, "Because I believe the things I'm speaking about," and flashed his tremendous smile, as he continued on. Which is the same as saying, "Because I've encountered Jesus."

It's my experience, for sure. Because he had encountered Christ, and looked to meet him again every day, I encounter Christ every time I read Giussani's words about Christian encounter. Every time I see footage of him telling the stories of the Gospel, my hair stands on end, I get goose bumps, and I say, one more time, "That's true!"

When someone lives according to God's method, the way God himself chose to happen to us, he becomes a different man and the people who meet him meet God.

This is why a member of the Movement could answer, when I asked her if she hadn't known Giussani, "Known him? I don't know how to answer that. But I can tell you he saved my life." Which is her story to tell, but I will say that she added: "No one looked at you the way he did. No one

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loved you the way he did. No one was a father like he was a father. And I felt his preference for me, and felt that it was for me alone. Until the day of his funeral, when I looked around at the thousands of people gathered there who felt exactly the way I did, and I asked myself, ‘Who was this man?!’”

He would have answered, “Someone who knows Christ.”

You don’t have to be Luigi Giussani to generate this encounter for people. Some weeks ago, I met a young man who told me a story that astonished me. We were making small talk and I was inquiring into his life a bit. He is a Catholic missionary, serving the poor. I asked if he had gone to university. He had. “Which school?” He named a prestigious Ivy League school. (He didn’t mention what I later learned, that he went there at 16.) Soon, it came out in conversation that he is Jewish. By this point, my mouth was wide open, and it remained so for the rest of the conversation. I stood there with my mouth wide open, with a half-eaten hot dog in one hand, staring at this young man, pleading with him, “And then what?” at each juncture. He had been sent to a synagogue as a boy that was unsatisfying for him, and did not, he felt, give them content; only superficial things, like learning to pronounce Hebrew. He became an intellectual atheist. “So what happened?” I demanded. “At university, I met someone who told me the Gospel story.” “Yeah?!?” “So, I was baptized.” “What?! That’s it?” “Yes, that’s it.” “What did the guy say to you?” “He just told me the Gospel story.” “You were an atheist, a bright, intellectual atheist. Why did you believe it?” Do you know what he said? “Because the guy loved me. And then I met his family, and they loved each other. And I had never seen that before. And I knew it was all true.”

That’s how Christ happens to people.

Giussani writes, “In the Christian event, Jesus’s face has the shape of human faces, of companions, of the men He chose, just as, in the villages of Palestine He could not reach, Jesus took on the face of the two disciples He sent there” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 17).

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Again, when John and Andrew and the others met Jesus on day one, he did not propose catechesis to them, doctrine, or information. Not yet. That is not why they clung to him, were instantly bonded to him. Indeed, the only reason they believed anything he would later teach them was because they were bonded to him, because they adhered to him—which happened because he loved them in a way that made them feel to be truly themselves. But make no mistake: after that, they would believe anything this man said. This is the way God chose and chooses to come to us. This is his method.

3. Experience confirms it

My experience as a priest, in various ways, confirms this method God chose. I see what happens when I propose this Gospel, this way of Christ being for you, to a penitent in the confessional, for example. I know that I can shrink back into a way of confessing my sins that is an enumeration of a list that I have worked hard to create so that I can earn the legal satisfaction that comes through the sacrament. And that's not all wrong, but what would happen if I were to approach the sacrament as Peter looking into the eyes of Jesus that day on the beach, after he had betrayed the Lord three times (an event Giussani would often speak of)? Peter's "yes" to the question, "Do you love me?" in this fragile moment where Peter feels his sinfulness like never before, can only be understood if we see that, before this man, who looks at you this way, and asks for your love, one becomes capable—as a complete surprise, a gift—of being one's true self, of having dignity, of loving. And I see that repeated again and again in the confessional, for example, depending on how I, the priest, approach the sacrament with my disposition and advice.

I also think of a woman I worked with for a long time, who was destroyed for having had abortions years earlier. Some time before I met her, the panic attacks had gotten so bad and had become so debilitating that she finally started seeing a psychologist. After trying everything else he could think of, he finally asked: "You're a Christian, no?" "Yes, I'm a practicing Catholic." "Well, look, I'm Jewish, so I don't know, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the whole point of this Christianity business that Jesus died for your sins, to forgive your sins?" "Yes," she replied flatly, "of course." "Okay.

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All sins?” He waited for her to connect the dots. “Yes. All sins,” she said, not making the connection. “Every single one?!” She saw what he was getting at. Her final answer? “Well, all of them except this one.” Here was a Jew trying to catechize a Catholic. And, in fact, doing a fine job. What he told her was accurate. She understood it, understood the teaching, the catechesis. But it had no avenue to penetrate. Nowadays, she tells other post-abortive women a story of an important turning point for her in her journey toward healing. We—she and I—were going around and around, as we had for some time, about whether or not God had forgiven her or even could. When I insisted for the thousandth time, she, exasperated, blurted out, “How do you know?! How can you be so sure?!” She says that I answered, “Because I know him.” And something moved in her, something shifted. And she determined to get to know him. Once she encountered him, then things started to move for her. It was a long journey, not overnight, a journey made up of living this method day after day: not her own work, but allowing him to show up, love her, create her, give her to her.

A religious sister who had met this woman at the beginning of her journey was sitting next to me years later as the woman spoke. She turned to me and whispered, “She’s not even the same person. She’s a completely different person.” And it’s true. A darkness and sadness and torment lifted and was replaced by self-possession and peace. What was needed was to meet Jesus, whom she knew all about from years of Catholic school, and honored every Sunday at Mass, but had never encountered.

4. Christianity is unsustainable without the encounter

John Paul II, in a teaching on catechesis, once explained: [I]n catechetical practice...[the] model...must allow for the fact that the initial evangelization has often not taken place. A certain number of children baptized in infancy come for catechesis in the parish without receiving any other initiation into the faith and still without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ; they only have the capacity to believe placed within them by Baptism and the presence of the Holy Spirit” (*Catechesi tradendae*, 19).

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There is a book that has had a certain amount of success in recent years: *Forming Intentional Disciples*, by Sherry Weddell. Its opening pages are quite alarming, giving statistic after statistic that all add up to an indication of just how many un-evangelized—people who have not encountered Christ, people to whom Christ has not “happened”—are sitting in the back pew of Catholic churches as an experiment, looking for something, hoping to meet something, but, not finding it, disappear. Because it isn’t sustainable to live Christianity as just a bunch of doctrines. I have to know that they are doctrines that answer my real needs. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical (in the second paragraph!): “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus caritas est*, 1).

It is not a coincidence that the words sound like Giussani’s words, because Giussani had been saying this, in truth, for decades, and Ratzinger was one of the people listening. Msgr. Giussani presciently saw this chapter of Christianity coming at least since the 1950s, when everything, to many, seemed to be a Golden Age. Everyone was baptized, everyone went to church, everyone knew their catechism; but he looked around, surveyed the situation, and said to himself that this would all fail, was not sustainable. Giussani was a gift given to the Church precisely for this purpose, I believe. His little sister would tell a story from childhood. She recounts a day when Luigi was standing at the front door of the house, hands behind his back, in what I take to be a posture of surveying the world. A Franciscan came walking along, probably a questor—going about praying with the people and asking for donations of food. When the friar saw this boy, he stopped dead in his tracks, looked him up and down and said, “O missionario o milionario,” which is to say, “This one here is destined for one of only two possibilities: either he will become a missionary or he will be a millionaire.” That image comes to my mind when I imagine him surveying the state of Christianity in the 1950s and determining that something would have to change, and God’s method would have to be reintroduced.

But Weddell’s conclusion is absolutely correct, in my experience. People are starving for something that will satisfy their real desires.

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Conclusion

As I conclude, I would like to illustrate this last point with an image that has come to mind many times since I saw it. I don't actually have the image—a photograph, in fact (although I do hope that after telling this story one of you will come out of the woodwork with a copy of it for me). It is from an exhibit at Communion and Liberation's annual event, the New York Encounter—I believe from three years ago. And for any of you who were part of the extraordinary project in question, please forgive me (and correct me) if I get any of the details wrong. I am referring to what was called The Millennial Experience. At this exhibit, there was a photograph of several of the participants in the project, all young adult women, if memory serves. They are out having dinner or drinks in a restaurant, engaged in vigorous conversation, and a young man their age is looking on with his eyes and mouth wide open, astonished. You see, these Millennials were discussing with urgency, asking after the possibility of real happiness, deep, abiding happiness that can't be taken away and isn't dependent on social-media "likes," and certainly not on what they viewed to be the lie they had been told growing up that a stable career was the one thing to work toward if one wanted happiness. And their waiter—I believe it was their waiter—overheard this conversation and, with his eyeballs bursting out of his head and his mouth wide open, exclaimed, "I've never heard anyone speak like this!"

Because they were speaking like this, asking the most important questions of the human heart, not censuring a single one, a bystander came along and said, "I think I have that question, too!"

I want to thank my friends of the Movement for asking these questions. Because if the questions aren't asked, the proposed answer to the questions that is Christ will never find a landing place, and Christianity will die, and with it the possibility of happiness.



JULIÁN
CARRÓN

*Disarming
Beauty*

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

The only way to truth is through freedom.
History is the space of dialogue in freedom;
this does not mean an empty space, void
of proposals for life, because nothing can
live off of nothingness. Nobody can stand,
have a constructive relationship with
reality, without something that makes
life worth living.

Disarming Beauty: Faith, Truth, and Freedom on the Threshold of a New Era

Fr. Julián Carrón

The 2017 Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture
New York City
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From the Introduction to *Reinventing Bach* by Pablo Casals:

My father used to come once a week from Vendrell to visit me. We would go for walks together, sometimes wandering into music shops looking for music scores; and after a few hours he would have to go back home. The repertoire of the ensemble at the Cafe Pajarera was broader than the Cafe Tost; I continued my solos, and of course I needed more music. One day I told my father I needed especially to find some new solo music for the Cafe Pajarera. Together we set off on the search. For two reasons I shall never forget that afternoon. First, my father bought me my first full-sized cello—how proud I was to have that wonderful instrument! Then we stopped at an old music shop near the harbor. I began browsing through a bundle of musical scores.

Suddenly I came upon a sheaf of pages, crumbled and discolored with age. They were unaccompanied suites by Johann Sebastian Bach—for the cello only! I looked at them with wonder: Six Suites for Violoncello Solo. What

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magic and mystery, I thought, were hidden in those words? I had never heard of the existence of the suites; nobody—not even my teachers—had ever mentioned them to me. I forgot our reason for being at the shop. All I could do was stare at the pages and caress them. That scene has never grown dim. Even today, when I look at the cover of that music, I am back again in the old musty shop with its faint smell of the sea. I hurried home, clutching the suites as if they were the crown jewels, and once in my room I pored over them. I read and reread them. I was thirteen at the time, but for the following eighty years the wonder of my discovery has continued to grow on me. Those suites opened up a whole new world. I began playing them with indescribable excitement. They became my most cherished music. I studied and worked at them every day for the next twelve years. Yes, twelve years would elapse and I would be twenty-five before I had the courage to play one of the suites in public at a concert. Up until then, no violinist or cellist had ever played one of the Bach suites in its entirety.

Performance of *Cello Suite No. 1* by Johann Sebastian Bach

Mario Paredes: That was Dave Eggar, performing the first two movements of *Cello Suite No. 1* by Johan Sebastian Bach. Thank you, Dave, for the beautiful introduction to tonight's lecture.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues. On behalf of Crossroads, I extend a warm welcome to the 2017 Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture. A special thanks goes out to the Sheen Center for hosting this special event.

I am Mario Paredes, and I am a member of the Crossroads Advisory Board. More importantly, it is my privilege and great joy to have been able to call Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete a close friend for almost four decades. Like so many touched by his daring, authentic faith, wit and unfailing kindness, I can testify to his genius—a genius

that was not just intellectual, but that was also evident in his sheer humanity, his compassion for others, his ready embrace of people of all backgrounds and beliefs, his boundless and eager curiosity about every person he met—discovering in each and every human encounter a constantly-renewed invitation and encouragement to encounter his Savior. Monsignor Lorenzo was in all respects an expert in humanity—but never in the abstract.

Tellingly, at the heart of his priesthood was his faithful devotion to the care of his ailing brother, a task he fulfilled until the very end of his life. The primacy of that commitment often made him late for appointments or sometimes even caused him to fail to show up for speaking appearances.

Indeed, he was far from the conventional type, both as a person and a thinker. He pushed the envelope in all that he did. His decidedly untraditional ways prompted the Board of Trustees of the Pontifical University of Puerto Rico in Ponce to ask for his resignation only nine months after naming him president of the school. His rapid ouster earned him the moniker of “Lorenzo the Brief!” Then there was the time, way back in 1978, when he was tasked to drive Cardinal Karol Wojtyla around Washington, D.C. for some sightseeing, and the two became engrossed in a philosophical discussion; Msgr. Lorenzo promised to send the visitor some books as a follow-up. That never happened, as he was reminded when his new acquaintance returned as Pope John Paul II the following year and gently scolded Lorenzo for his neglect when the two met again in St. Mathew’s Cathedral.

Unbothered by the demands of schedules and relatively superficial obligations, Msgr. Lorenzo preferred to look into the depths of things. That spirit animated Crossroads from its start in 2007 until our dear friend’s passing on October 24, 2014. He once expressed that vision as follows:

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Confronted with an intensely polarized social and cultural environment, we have to resist the temptation to side with one party against the other, to identify enemies and fight their ideas. We cannot reduce the scope of our cultural work to apologetics. This would be a betrayal of Crossroads' original motives. The goal of our cultural work is not so much defending what we think we already know to be true, good, and right, but rather rediscovering it in reality, again and again. This re-discovery is necessary because what is true, good, and right is not an idea or a doctrine: it is a living person. As Father Giussani once stated "Looking for the traits of this person is the nature of reason."

Tonight we are truly blessed and honored by the presence of Fr. Julián Carrón, the president of Communion and Liberation, to deliver this year's Albacete Lecture. A professor of theology at Milan's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, he took over the reins of the Movement after the passing of Msgr. Luigi Giussani in 2005. Please consult the program for his stellar background; and I warmly recommend his book of essays, *Disarming Beauty*, in which, just as in tonight's lecture, he tackles what some have identified as the lack of "ontological density" that leaves so many men and women in contemporary society feeling unmoored.

Father Carron will deliver his talk in Spanish, so please use your headsets for a simultaneous translation in English: simply turn on the volume wheel on the receiver.

Please help me welcome Father Carron to the stage!

Julián Carrón: All of a sudden, the discolored pages fell before his eyes in which the suite of Johann Sebastian Bach appeared, and there Casals saw those pages with all the amazement which would determine the rest of his life. Everything begins because of a fact

that is absolutely surprising and precedes everything else. For this reason, the fact of having heard, a few moments ago, this cello suite, is the summary, the key of what we are celebrating tonight, because the entire life of Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete was defined by this fact. He spoke to us about it during a meeting we had in Italy in 2004: “I want to highlight the word ‘friends.’ Everything that happened was possible only because we were friends who had a mutual respect for each other.”

Albacete asked himself: “What do I do with all these lay people who have a secularized conception? These people are intellectuals, eminent editors of important American newspapers like *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, from progressive publications like *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*, producers of public television documentaries, and professors at distinguished universities. The encounter with these people came about in a completely accidental way for me, [just like for Casals]. These people would meet weekly, and they had expressed the desire to let me into their circle, which I had called the ‘Lefty Salon.’ Here they would discuss politics, art, global problems, philosophy, etc., but they were discussing these things because they realized, they admitted that they didn’t know anything new about these themes; they were meeting precisely because they recognized the need to encounter a new way of facing the problems of modern life. They were aware that their old school secularism had nothing to say to life today. It was an experience of an impasse.”

I will continue to quote Albacete: “During our first encounter in the ‘Lefty Salon,’ I asked them why they had invited me, because they were famous people, experts in things about which I had no idea. One of them told me he had invited me because, although they had many friends who were priests, none of them had anything interesting to say, nothing different than what they could say themselves, and he

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added: ‘Those who think differently from us do not want to be our friends; they think we are evil, that they should avoid us.’ A friend told me that I had been invited because, despite the fact that I didn’t think like them, I appreciated their companionship.”

Monsignor Albacete’s judgment amazed me: “The decline in energy of these friends was present from the beginning, because an intellectual discourse is not capable of breaking through this impasse: only a fact, an encounter, brings freedom. In our encounters with these friends, and others like them, we should be aware of the danger of reducing our hope to the correct terms of a discourse. Only a fact can break the impasse through something that is undeniably evident.” This is what, today, we want to live again, not just as a memory of the past, but as a present experience.

The book that we’re presenting has a lot to do with Msgr. Albacete’s experience that he described. This book, *Disarming Beauty*, was born fundamentally through the insistence of an Italian publishing house which printed the works of Father Giussani, and who for a long time insisted that I publish a book. I did not have any particular interest in adding anything to my biography because I did not need to, but when these question started to arise, like the questions Albacete indicates, it seemed to me that it could be an occasion to share with others some of the reflections and the life which has been given to us, as a help in clarifying the commotion around us, the dark forest in which at times we find ourselves. So in the end I accepted. My intention is that it create the possibility for a 360-degree dialogue. Like Albacete, during these presentations I wanted to open a dialogue with people who are totally different, who in some way or other have a question, have a desire to understand what is happening in reality.

The first thing that struck me is that so many different people, authoritative people, with stories that are very far from mine, could be

interested in the contents of this book. This has been such a surprise for me. And that is not something that should be taken for granted. When I wrote the book I never imagined that it could arouse such interest. It has been a surprise for me to feel that this disorientation that many people live—the impasse about which Albacete spoke—is revealed paradoxically as an occasion for encounter, because many people whom I met and who belong to histories very different than mine have seen their own ideology fall apart, have seen that which they believed in for years fall, that which had given them life, and therefore they find themselves more open now to enter into a dialogue. And this allows me to understand what is the task for all of us: it has to do with an incredible moment, to be able to share with others what has happened to us. It has begun a path with many people which was absolutely unforeseen, unimaginable, but which has happened. We have seen “processes”—as Pope Francis says—open up and we don’t know where they will lead. This will depend on how each of us fans the flame that has been born, just like it was born in Casals and Monsignor Albacete.

I would have never thought that so many people would become so dear in such a short time, to the point of sharing many aspects of their life, in a completely open dialogue, including the most intimate and true parts of their life! Everyone whom we invited to present *Disarming Beauty* in Italy, Spain, and Latin America have shown themselves open to this dialogue and have continued in relationship, to the point of friendship. Truly, I did not imagine that what we live, what has been given to us (because I did not say anything more than what has been given to each one of us) could generate such interest today, in this particular historical moment in which everything seems to be crumbling, and that it could sustain the desire to deepen and follow a dialogue, because many people whom I have met have their own wounds, like all of us have.

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Therefore, during the presentations, while I dialogued with intellectuals, journalists, politicians and businessmen, I was trying to dialogue with the person of today, with his or her doubts, uncertainty, insecurity, fears. Everyone sought a welcoming proposal, an encounter in which they felt embraced as they were.

I encountered a completely unexpected openness. Many people perceived that identity and openness do not contradict each other, that it is not necessary to dilute your own identity in order to enter into dialogue. It has truly been a dialogue in which I learned again, responding to the questions of the people I met, the same method in which I believe. I verified that dialogue is the only method: to measure yourself against the freedom of others, because there is no other form of relationship with the truth except through freedom.

I was never interested in *a priori*, pre-packaged answers, but instead, of helping the people I was encountering to reach the answers through their own experience, because this is what has been helpful to me in the first place. When I met Don Giussani, I already had many of my own answers. When I was ten years old, I went to the seminary in Madrid; I got a Ph.D. in theology. But, as I used to say to Don Giussani, “When I met you, I began to walk down a truly human path of the faith.” And it’s only by following the path of experience that I was able to encounter the complete density of everything I had studied before, rediscovering it as something absolutely new. For this reason, I want to share with you tonight some of the intuitions that can help us understand the situation that we find ourselves in today.

1. A change of era

Pope Francis has said that “Today we are not living in an era of change, but a change of era, epoch. The situations we are living today

pose new challenges to us, which are at times difficult to understand” (Florence, November 10, 2015). And this is truly the case.

We find ourselves today in this dark forest that now is made more dense because certain certainties that everyone held in common before are less common, and this comes to light in everyday conversations with the people with whom we live, from the meaning of work, to why to have a child, a family, to loving someone or getting involved in society, from caring for the people we meet, to welcoming immigrants or not responding to terrorism in a way that creates more violence. Problems that stir all of us and present us with many questions. I also want to understand all of this. Why does this happen?

I share the judgment of the sociologist and philosopher Matthew Crawford, who affirms: “As the inheritors of layers of theorizing about the human person, we find it no trivial task to recover a more direct access to our own experience.”

Already, some years ago, I was struck by a phrase of a Spanish philosopher, Maria Zambrano. She put the emphasis on what Crawford was saying: “What is in crisis is this mysterious nexus that unites our being with reality, something so profound and fundamental that is our own intimate nourishment.” So when this connection is lacking, we find it’s not easy to understand ourselves, and we easily become slaves of those who want to point us in different directions, tell us what to look at because we don’t know ourselves. Since we don’t have direct access to reality, we depend on what others tell us.

Crawford writes: “Without the ability to direct our attention where we will, we become more receptive to those who would direct our attention where they will—to the omnipresent purveyors of marshmallows,” that is, fashion. We’re more easily suggested. We

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buy more things, but why? Why did all this collapse happen, the collapse of the things that up until very recently seemed very certain, evident.

I have been helped by a phrase that Pope Benedict XVI used years ago; I'll say it simply as a synthesis, a phrase that explains why this is happening at this time. Pope Benedict said that the Enlightenment, after the collapse of the religious unity of Europe and the so-called wars of religion, in which we Christians fought amongst ourselves, was an attempt to recreate a new basis for social life. The great genius of Immanuel Kant was the intuition that what could be the basis of this new social fabric was to try and safeguard the great convictions that Christianity brought forth, to save the concept of the person; that is, that the person had an intrinsic value—the concept of freedom, the concept of work, the concept of progress, all these things that were not present in other cultures, which were an achievement of Christianity. They did not want to lose this, they did not want to return to the catacombs, to the stone age; they wanted to save it. But as they had just come out of the wars of religion, they wanted to save that inheritance independently of religious conflicts. And Pope Benedict says very succinctly: they wanted to save the essential values of life, those things that could make life dignified. And he says it with a powerful phrase: they tried to save the evidence of those values independently of their connection with religion, with Christianity. He utilizes a very important word: evidence. In that moment those values really were something evident. This is how they wanted to assure the basis of life together, and more generally the basis of humanity. Many times, there has been a negative perception of the Enlightenment. Instead, Pope Benedict speaks positively about it. They tried to save these values, and afterward we have seen that a great part of these values were defended in legislation and written into law, and we lived our lives based on them, and this is what now is starting to be no longer evident.

He says: "In that epoch it was thought that the great, deep convictions that came largely from Christianity could endure; they seemed undeniable." Very strong words. And we can ask ourselves: of all this, though, what remains? What happened before this challenge? Has this evidence been capable of resisting the vicissitudes of history? The search for a certainty that could resist all the changes of history has failed. We are experiencing the failure of this attempt to separate the great, fundamental questions of life from their historical origin, from that which gave them birth, from that which generated them, in the midst of all its errors, its failed attempts, its many equivocations, its own evil. But it was able to bring them to humanity, and this even the great philosophers of that time recognized; they recognized the educative function of the Church which brought these truths to such a level.

"One can believe tranquilly that if the Gospel had not first taught those universal ethical laws in their integral purity, reason would not have known them in their fullness. Although now, given that they already exist, each person can be convinced of their adequacy and validity through reason alone."

Without the Gospel, Kant said, we would not have arrived at these laws, but once the Gospel has made them known, we can dispense with the place that generated them, because reason can recognize them without a belonging to that place, which is the Church. *We* have this idea that once we have the content clear and our own moral strength, we no longer need to belong to the Church. The ingenious effort of the Enlightenment is falling apart. This is the profound nature of the crisis in which we find ourselves paralyzed. This is only the appearance. We've lived through world wars, technological revolutions, and we all shared these great convictions, but they disappeared. These laws stopped being evident. And this is what is happening to us. Why? Because we have forgotten something

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important.

Henri de Lubac describes clearly what has happened: “These great values—spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice: these great things, without which there is no true humanity, which ancient paganism had half perceived and Christianity had instituted, quickly became unreal.”

The evidence of which Pope Benedict speaks is like the word *unreal* from Henri de Lubac. Once the values are separated from their source, they are ideals, collective myths, pale, lifeless, as if they had gone up in smoke. Why have they disappeared? If they do not appear as rays emanating from God, from an event, from their origin, they become unreal. It is interesting that now this is said by someone like Bauman, the recently-deceased sociologist. What we believed to be unmovable, unable to crumble, has become liquid. Nothing has the consistency it did before, and therefore we find this difficulty in speaking to each other, in understanding each other. Because everything we shared for centuries—even in the midst of the wars, difficulties and challenges of history—now is no longer evident in such a way that everyone can recognize it.

I believe that confusion is a common sentiment in our societies today. It is as if we are meeting each other in the midst of a hurricane, like those that devastated the Caribbean in these months, which makes people feel disoriented and insecure. Thomas Friedman from *The New York Times* describes this very well. For him, this confusion is due to the rapid change of the world we once knew and which we almost don't recognize anymore. Friedman writes: “This discrepancy [between the world we knew and the world today] is the basis of that tumult that today shakes the political world and all of society, as much in the industrialized societies as in those that are developing.” An important chapter in this history is the role played by the Church

in this process. Eliot, the great English poet, asked himself more than half a century ago: “Has the Church abandoned humanity or has humanity abandoned the Church?” And this hits on a pressing question, because it is clear that something has gone wrong in the transmission of the faith, in the communication of this evidence, of this life, in order to arrive at the situation we are facing. Already in the 1960s, he recognized that secularization and atheism could represent for Christians the possibility to rediscover the true nature of Christianity.

Whatever the responsibility of Christians in this situation, the loss of evidences is a problem that affects everyone, whatever the confession, the position in front of reality, the cultural position that each person has, whether he be atheist, Christian, Buddhist, or agnostic. We all find ourselves in front of the same challenge.

2. The current crisis is an opportunity

Hannah Arendt said that a crisis poses questions to everyone. “A crisis”—Arendt said—“obliges us to return to asking ourselves questions, and demands new or old responses from us, but, in any case, direct judgments. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with pre-established judgments, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude exacerbates the crisis and, what is more, impedes us from experiencing reality and takes away the occasion for reflection that reality offers.”

This situation is an occasion to establish this dialogue and to come together in front of these questions, because here it is really quite a task to be able to offer something that responds to such questions. These are not abstract questions, but questions that enter into the drama of life: why I go to work, why I get up in the morning, why I get married instead of live with someone, why I have a child, why

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it's worth it not to steal, why it's worth it not to cheat someone, why I don't violate someone by imposing a truth on him, why a religion should not desire to impose the truth on someone with violence, etc. They are questions we all have and before which I ask myself: Do we, as Christians, have something to offer in this situation?

A friend of mine told me that on the day she announced that she was getting married, she received very strong reactions: "Why are you getting married so young? Forever?" When they went to the wedding, they couldn't believe what they saw. It was so beautiful. This is what happens. For most people, getting married is an empty thing. Only when they see the beauty of something do they intuit that they're missing something. A situation like that allows a dialogue. People are more open, curious.

But, on the other hand, today there is another difficulty added to this dialogue: fear.

3. Freedom and the condition to discover this freedom

If we had to choose a word to identify the content of the current challenges, I would choose one of the most beloved for our culture and for all of us: freedom. In *Don Quixote* we find the following: "Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts heaven gave to men; the treasures under the earth and beneath the sea cannot compare to it; for freedom, as well as for honor, one can and should risk one's life."

"In the consciousness of today's humanity, freedom appears with great distinction as the highest good to which all other goods are subordinated. This enlightened culture," Cardinal Ratzinger said, "is substantially defined by the rights of freedom. Based on this freedom as the fundamental value, everything else is measured."

This is a great challenge for every situation, for everyone, also for the Church. You can't meet the truth without freedom.

Let us think of the long road the Church had to walk through her history in order to arrive at the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on religious liberty: there is no access to the truth except through freedom.

“Religious freedom is a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction” (Benedict XVI, 22 December 2005). It's not simply a new strategy. This is not what the Church has learned.

This is the crucial point. Freedom of religion derives from a consciousness of the nature of truth and of the relationship between truth and freedom. The truth cannot be imposed from outside; man has to embrace it and make it his through freedom.

“The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.”

Cardinal Ratzinger recognized that it was precisely “the merit of the Enlightenment to have re-proposed these original Christian values and to have given reason back its own voice. The Second Vatican Council, in the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, highlighted anew this profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to arrive at a true conciliation between the Church and modernity.”

Freedom has a great challenge facing it.

For a long time, it was affirmed and preached that in order to be truly free it was necessary to rid ourselves of chains and constrictions; to be

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free, man needed to belong only to himself. But later, we discovered that the absence of constrictions is not sufficient in order to be free, because to move ourselves and to realize ourselves fully, freedom needs an adequate reason, an attraction that moves it.

In this situation, there is a question with which we must come to terms: Is there something capable of attracting freedom to the point of making it adhere? Is there something worth committing to? If everything is the same, if everything has equal value, why do we have to choose?

If freedom does not find something attractive enough to move it, man remains paralyzed in the center of his "I"; in spite of appearances, all his action and his excitement are incapable of moving the "I." This can happen on the personal or the social level.

"Last night," someone writes, "I was at dinner with some friends from high school who are engaged and living together. After dinner we stayed up talking for a long time, and during the conversation the question arose about whether or not to have children. My friend said: 'I will never bring a child into the world. How could I condemn another poor person to unhappiness? I do not want to take on that responsibility.' And later he added: 'I am afraid of my freedom: in the best of cases it is worthless, and in the worst of cases it can cause so much harm to others. What I hope for from my life is to do the least harm possible.'" We see this person does not have a good enough reason to bring another person into the world. This is something so common.

It is the demonstration of what Kafka said: "We fear freedom and responsibility and, therefore, we prefer to suffocate within the cage we have constructed." In order to put myself into play and do everything that I can, I need something that moves my person, that

implicates me in a love. If something doesn't pull me out, I don't have a reason to put myself into play.

We all find ourselves in front of this challenge. How do we respond?

Overcoming the scheme of the “wars of religion” that lead nowhere, I read that Russell Moore, president of the Ethical Commission of the Southern Baptist Conference (the largest Protestant denomination in the United States), aims toward reconciliation and not toward a hegemony obtained through the imposition of truth. This does not mean that we retire from the world, but we change the method with which we relate to others (as our great Lorenzo did when meeting with his friends of the Lefty Salon). Moore writes: “A Christianity that is walled off from the culture around it is a Christianity that dies. The gospel we have received is a missionary gospel, one that must connect to those on the outside in order to have life. Our call is to an engaged alienation, a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens....We will recognize the necessity of engagement in social and political action, even as we see the limits of such action, this side of the New but Jerusalem. But we will engage not with the end goal of winning, but with the end goal of reconciliation.”

This means that we Christians—just like every man—have to rediscover a form of being present in society without cultivating the pretension—the impossible dream—of dominating.

What is the method of this presence? For myself, I have no doubt: the method is testimony. And it surprised me to encounter in Moore the same perception of the question. He writes: “The church now has the opportunity to bear witness in a culture that often does not even pretend to share our ‘values’. That is not a tragedy since

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we were never given a mission to promote ‘values’ in the first place, but to speak instead of sin and of righteousness and judgment, of Christ and his kingdom.” Only through testimony, just like in the beginning of Christianity, will we be able to contribute to the good of people and of society. “In a society like this it is not possible to create something new except with a life: there is no structure or organization or initiative that can sustain it. Only a new and different life can revolutionize structures, initiatives, relationships, everything.” Pope Francis is a fascinating witness to this “disarming beauty” wherever he goes and with whomever he meets. His is a presence so attractive that it gives birth in everyone to the desire to live like him.

And so, like Albacete and Casals, we begin with this amazement. Christianity began from this amazement, from the amazement in front of someone in whom life has become so interesting that it affected this whole list of things: freedom, education, love. It has to do with all these things, with marriage, with fulfillment. Therefore, Christianity’s point of departure is totally distinct. Machado spoke of the point to which the religious man can reach:

Has my heart gone to sleep?
Have the beehives of my dreams
stopped working, the waterwheel
of the mind run dry,
scoops turning empty,
only shadow inside?

No, my heart is not asleep.
It is awake, wide awake.
Not asleep, not dreaming—
its eyes are opened wide
watching distant signals, listening

on the rim of vast silence.

(A. Machado, "Has My Heart Gone to Sleep?")

In his attempt to decipher meaning, man's reason reaches the rim of a great silence. And what can the religious man do? Await distant signals, some sign from another part of that great silence? Religious man can reach this point. There it can be said, when nothing else exists, Do I invent what I cannot see when I enter a dark room? When I reach the dark depths of which the physicists speak, do I invent it or is there a possibility that the Mystery, in the darkness, takes a step and tells us something about Himself? Is this contrary to reason? Reason cannot deny this if it is truly open, because it would be like thinking that it already knows the Mystery sufficiently, so that there would be no need for this possibility. To save reason is to save the category of possibility. Therefore, it is a historical fact we have to encounter. So I understand the question that someone asks if he has not encountered it; I understand how one can blame us for creating something because we feel abandoned and, because life is miserable when we are abandoned, we decide to invent something for ourselves to ward off that feeling. Or we can be in front of something that amazes us so much that we follow this amazement, like when someone falls in love. One is so amazed by this thing that one could ask: But will there truly be something that can fulfill this presence?

Only the one who gives credit, who accepts the link with reality that is generated like this, unarmed, in front of the beauty of someone, can test whether life is filled with meaning, with fullness. And this is what makes it possible for us to believe. It does not make us believe anything that is our own creation. The great dilemma is always if the origin of faith is the creation of Christians or if the origin of Christian faith is a fact. Does faith create the fact and afterwards the stories, the Gospels, the empty tomb; or is the fact what gives

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birth to faith? And here is what will be the eternal debate between the one who has met the living, risen One, in the new life, the new creation that begins to touch our life now, at least as the dawn of another life; and the one who has not had this possibility and can only hope that it may be like this, because the boundaries of science occupy the whole panorama of his reason. But also reason will have to recognize that it is not capable of embracing all of reality, as William Shakespeare's Hamlet remarks: "There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Therefore, this affirmation from Hamlet will always be a challenge for human reason, an affirmation which allows this dialogue to continue.

Pope Francis has perfectly identified the question: In front of the strange anesthesia that affects man today, "before the stupor of life, how can the conscience come awake?"

I repeat, it is something that affects everyone.

4. Does Christianity have something to say to humanity today?

"The most pressing question on the problem of faith is whether a man as a civilized being can believe in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ." This sentence of Dostoyevsky identifies the challenge that faith in Jesus Christ faces today. It is neither a skeptical nor a fearful question. This situation, which for many is a motive for complaint and for closing ourselves off, is precisely an exceptional opportunity: "A fascinating path is open for the Church, just like at the beginning of Christianity, when men struggled in life without the courage, strength or seriousness needed to express the decisive questions" (Message of Pope Francis to the Meeting 2015). It is a great occasion for Christianity to show its difference in front of these new challenges.

Will it be capable of becoming a proposal that is sufficiently fascinating to attract the tired freedom of today's men and women as Albacete did with his friends?

How is this possible? This will only be possible if the announcement comes through the experience of beauty. In fact, by its nature, beauty exercises an attraction that is capable of moving reason and freedom.

“How does man discover his truth, the truth of himself?” Father Giussani once asked. His response was simple: “Man recognizes the truth of himself when he experiences beauty, when he experiences the gusto and the correspondence, when he perceives the attraction that the truth brings out, a total attraction and correspondence, not in a quantitative but in a qualitative manner! [...] The beauty of truth is what brings me to say: ‘It is true!’”

The reach of this “disarming beauty” of the Christian faith will be verified by its capacity to awaken reason, the freedom and the affection of the “I,” without forcing anything and without having to impose itself through power.

Here we meet with the root of the educational crisis on which the future of our society depends: to awaken that “burning point” that is in each person, even when it seems to be hidden under mountains of garbage.

This is what is happening in some of the people we are meeting along this exciting path, starting from this book. A person wrote to me: “I just finished reading *Disarming Beauty*. I profoundly enjoyed the freshness you have portrayed. I share with you the intimate relationship which exists between the destiny of freedom and the destiny of faith. We are being called to an exciting challenge.” Another person highlights: “But do we Christians still believe in

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the capacity of the faith we have received to provoke an attraction in those we meet, and in the victorious fascination of its disarming beauty?’ This question has touched my heart. Faith in the disarming beauty. Which is not a misguided attempt after a defeat, but a fascination for the victory.”

This is precisely the intention which underlies the title *Disarming Beauty*. Beauty is the splendor of truth, as Saint Thomas said. Therefore it does not need any other weapon than its own attractiveness in order to win us over. Our only access to the truth is its own attractiveness. Witness is the incarnation of this beauty, of this newness of life, the only thing capable of awakening reason, freedom and affection.

When people meet this kind of Christian proposal, these are their reactions.

Pilar Rahola, Catalan journalist and writer, wrote a commentary in *La Vanguardia* on the meeting we had in Barcelona to present the book: “It mattered little that one was a believer and the other not, because the dialogue was founded on the basis of fundamental principles, which are, according to Carrón, the foundations of Christianity: individual freedom and respect for our neighbor. And thus it was that, from the two shores of spiritual motivation, religious faith and rationalistic doubt, we were able to strip away the layers of this time which is so convulsive and disconcerting. Julián expounded the disarming beauty of Christian faith, which presents itself divested of tributes, without shields, without ambitions, with the only hope of serving humanity; and in this friendly back-and-forth between us both, I personally responded that this kind of faith was foreign to me, but what believers achieved was luminous. I was enlightened by what I saw in these believers. This is the type of proposal that I would’ve liked to have seen when I lost the faith at sixteen years old.”

So people are waiting, are expecting for us to witness to the faith in the way that we have received it.

And Pilar Rahola concludes her article: “In one part of his book, Julián speaks about the end of the Enlightenment, an Enlightenment that accomplished the good of putting reason in the center of the human universe, but the evil of thinking it was the only possible motor. And what is certain is that from my perspective of not having faith, I agree with him: the Enlightenment failed in its attempt to have reason measure and resolve everything. Such that, in this profoundly disconcerting moment, with ideologies that threaten us and democracies that are drowning, the word of Jesus becomes a light again. It is not the only light, but without a doubt it is very necessary, especially when the Cross forgets the crozier and the purple and returns to the asphalt. I will end with a provocation: that Christians come out of the armory. Maybe not all of us will come to faith, but their faith makes all of us better.”

In Barcelona, Rahola told me: “You really struck me with your questions! There are so many questions in this book! Where there is dogma, you say: ‘Let’s talk’. Where there are answers, you pose pertinent questions. In this time of crisis for humanity, I find a Christianity like that of Communion and Liberation interesting, a Christianity that poses questions and not structures of power.”

And a Spanish scientist, Juan Jose Gomez Cadenas, said during the presentation of the book in Madrid: “As a scientist, I tend to sympathize with the idea that clear, strong evidences are those which follow the empirical method, those which follow mathematics. But I am not an idiot. And when I try to explain myself, of course the most transcendent feeling in my life is not my love for science, but my love for my children, and I do not know how to explain this in terms of empirical evidence or theorems. Therefore, it would be foolish for

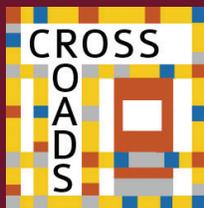
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me to think that the only way to encompass reality is the scientific method. Of course it is a powerful method and to deny it, to pretend like it doesn't exist and go against its evidence, is barbaric. To say that the Earth is flat or to say that the universe is not expanding, or to deny the theory of evolution is barbaric. But then, to try and say that the love I feel for my children is the sum of the programming that my genes have made..."

It seems like dialogue has produced its fruit, because it is all a question of affirming a "you." You cannot deny, as a scientific person, that the greatest evidence is the love for your children, for a "you." And this is the key point of the book. Because for us the origin of this evidence is this "you," who had and has a face that has awakened this love, which is not an obligation in the moralistic sense of the word, but which is the only true obligation. It is the only bond that is more powerful than the Kantian imperative.

The only bond. And therefore it is the only energy that is capable of broadening reason, broadening spaces, not building walls. The only question is if we have the freedom, each one of us, in front of another "you" to allow ourselves to be provoked by the presence of this "you" in order to expand our horizons. How can we educate ourselves in a society, full of hatred, full of separations, in a society that builds walls every day? What is the only thing that can generate life? Simply looking at the face of a "you" and seeing that while we can keep on building walls, the wall is already destroyed by the recognition of a "you." And therefore the wall cannot prevail. It cannot prevail because this allowing ourselves to be surprised by the face of another "you" is more fundamental than any human strength, any power in this world, and therefore the force to fight against any type of power and any type of ideology will always be a "you" because no one can stop recognizing it, because the beauty of falling in love, the beauty of having a child, the beauty of having a friend, the beauty of meeting

a witness in whom the unreal becomes real, needs no weapon except its own beauty in order to open up those closed spaces. And it is true that here the Church has to disarm as well. A fundamental chapter of the book speaks precisely about the fact that the Church had to walk a long road in order to arrive at the idea of religious freedom. But that did not happen as a consequence of not being able to convince others that Christianity was true. No. It was because of a deepening of the nature of the truth that the Church proposed religious freedom, even at the risk of scandalizing many Christians at the time of the Council. Because there is no other way—the Council said—to arrive at the truth except through freedom. Therefore, there is nothing more free than this dialogue between an “I” and a “you,” whoever that “you” may be. And so it seems to me that a dialogue like this is already in itself a victory over ideology.



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