

“The Highest Form of  
Culture”:

Fr. Luigi Giussani  
and Politics

(1945–2000)

In 1987, Fr. Luigi Giussani, founder of the Movement of Communion and Liberation, was invited to speak at a regional congress of one of the most influential political parties in Italy: the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*).<sup>1</sup> The invitation came as a surprise to many, including Fr. Giussani himself. For years, influential lay and clerical leaders in the Italian Catholic world had objected to Giussani's approach to politics, but by 1987, it was undeniable that he and the Movement had made a crucial contribution to the political life of the country. In his speech, Giussani succinctly defined his understanding of politics and political activity: "As the highest form of culture," he explained, "politics must inevitably consider the person to be its fundamental concern."<sup>2</sup>

This definition of politics as the noblest of human activities, driven by concern for human flourishing, stands in stark contrast to the cynicism and frustration with which politics and political activity are often associated in contemporary North America. We might wonder if Fr. Giussani was misguided or naïve when he dubbed politics "the highest form of culture." In order to assess the claim, however, we would do well to try to understand how he came to formulate it.

In this text, we will consider several formative events in the life of Fr. Giussani (and, by extension, of Communion and Liberation) that occurred between 1945 and 2000. In a period that was marked by significant social, political, cultural, and religious upheaval in Italy and the world at large, Fr. Giussani was driven to ask the following questions: What is the task of the Christian in civil society? To what extent should a Christian be involved in politics? For that matter, what, if any, is the connection between politics and faith?

In undertaking this historical analysis, we are not engaging in a dry academic exercise, nor are we indulging in nostalgia for a bygone golden age. Rather, this foray into our history is driven by the conviction that revisiting our past and observing how Fr. Giussani shaped the Movement by responding to the questions that arose in his life and the lives of his friends can help us to understand our identity and tradition. In so doing, we will be more aware of the great gift that we have received in the charism, and thus be better poised to respond to the questions and challenges that arise in our lives in North America in an increasingly volatile political, cultural, and social climate.

This text traces the development of Giussani's political and cultural thought

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\*\* This text is based on the notes for a talk of the same title given by Emanuele Colombo in Estes Park, CO, in October 2024. It is the fruit of conversations between Emanuele Colombo, Rocco, and Francesca Silano. Sofia Carozza, Stephen Lewis, Angelo Sala, and Alberto Savorana provided us with suggestions and references. All the translations of texts originally published in Italian are by the authors. The quotations from texts published in English have occasionally been edited for clarity.

1 The text of Fr. Giussani's speech can be found in: Luigi Giussani, "Religious Sense, Works, and Politics," in *L'io, il potere, le opere: Contributi da un'esperienza. The I, Power, Works: Contributions from an Experience. El yo, el poder, las obras: Contribuciones de una experiencia* (Milan: Edizioni Nuovo Mondo, 2000), 22-25.

2 Alberto Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 731 (hereafter, *Life*).

over three periods: 1945–64, 1965–77, and 1978–2000. In each of these periods, the urging of historical circumstances, combined with the growth of the Movement and Fr. Giussani’s own understanding of his charism, allowed him to gradually formulate an approach to politics that was firmly grounded in the teaching of the Church, but which was expressed with an accent unique to the charism. Today we, the inheritors of his charism, have in our hands a powerful and nuanced description of our task as Christians engaged in politics in the modern world. In the conclusion, therefore, I will provide some examples of how people in the Movement in North America are carrying out this task in order to demonstrate the fascinating capacity of our charism to generate people who make Christ present in every aspect of life, including in the political sphere.

Before continuing, however, I ought to define what I mean when I use the word “politics” in this text, drawing directly, as I do, from Fr. Giussani himself. In a 1976 interview, Fr. Giussani said: “the first level of political impact that a living Christian community makes is in its very existence.”<sup>3</sup> By its very existence, a Christian community introduces a new way of living and dealing with the problems that affect all people. For Fr. Giussani, at the broadest level, “politics” refers to the contribution that Christians make to constructing a more humane society. Therefore, “politics” refers to and includes a way of conceiving of human beings and the world (culture), efforts to address the needs of a society (education, jobs, charitable initiatives), and, in the strictest sense, both direct and indirect participation in the governance of a city, a region, or a country.

At the most fundamental level, Giussani’s approach to politics was driven by a passion for humankind, where the word “passion” signified not a feeling, but a sense of identification with the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ, lived in the world, and gave Himself up on the cross. “Passion” here refers to God’s charity, to His gratuitousness, and to His desire to affirm the value and freedom of every person.<sup>4</sup> Giussani’s priestly vocation was defined by this identification with Christ that was expressed as a passion for humankind, as becomes immediately evident when we consider the circumstances in which he was ordained.

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<sup>3</sup> Luigi Giussani, *Il Movimento di Comunione e Liberazione (1954-1986). Conversazioni con Robi Ronza* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014), 152.

<sup>4</sup> “A Passion for Human Beings,” (*Una passione per l’uomo*) was the title of a speech Fr. Giussani gave at the National Assembly of the *Compagnia delle Opere* (Company of Works or CDO) in 1993. The Company of Works is a non-profit organization that was established by recent university graduates from CL and others on 11 July 1986 as a living witness to mature faith in action. Firmly grounded in the social doctrine of the Church, in its mission statement, the CDO explains that it “supports entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, managers, and professionals in developing businesses and professional services through an approach that aims towards benefitting everyone involved” (<https://www.cdo.org/>). The CDO is present on three continents, and has created a network of over 10,000 members whose numbers include entrepreneurs, charitable and cultural associations, and non-profit organizations. For more information, see Davide Rondoni, ed., *Communion and Liberation: A Movement in the Church* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 100-102.

## PROLOGUE: A WORLD IN RUINS AND A YOUNG PRIEST WITH A MISSION



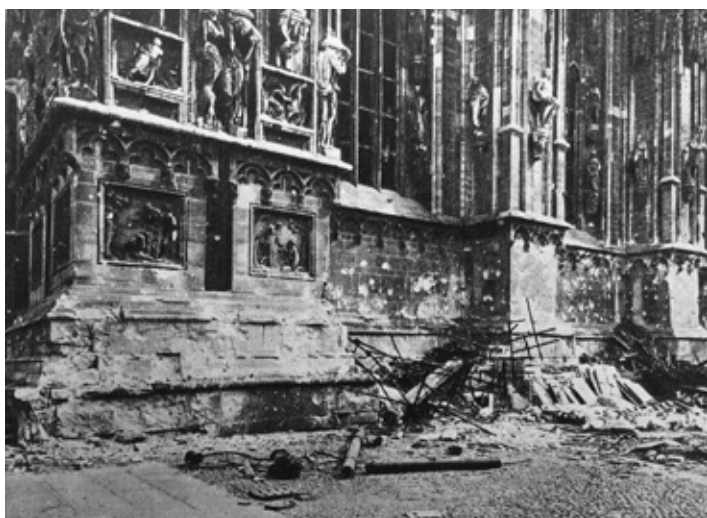
*Piazza Fontana, Milan, 1943*

In the Spring of 1945, after six years of grueling warfare that left millions of soldiers and civilians dead, the Soviet Red Army entered Berlin, and on May 9, World War II came to an end in Europe. Although the bombing had ceased, the wartime experience was far from over. Fifty million refugees, including former slave laborers, prisoners of war, and concentration camp victims set out on foot to reach homes and families that they were not sure

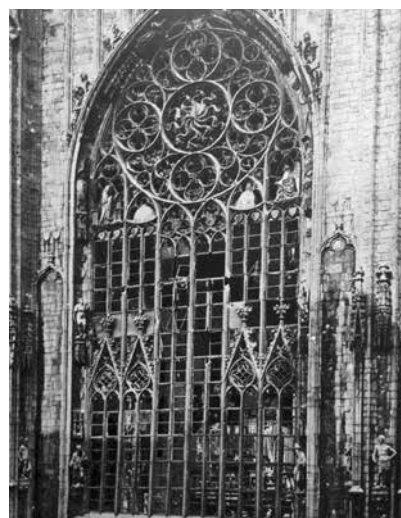
existed any longer. American and Soviet troops were spreading the word of things they had seen in Poland, things that seemed too monstrous to even be true: mountains of ashes and of emaciated corpses of the Jews who had been gassed in Nazi concentration camps and killing centers.

Two weeks later, on May 26, Luigi Giussani was ordained a priest in the Cathedral (Duomo) of Milan, which had been heavily damaged by bombing. The young man must have had a range of emotions as he made his way to the Cathedral through neighborhoods devastated by bombs, in a country that a Fascist regime had ruled for more than twenty years. In fact, less than a month before Giussani's ordination, Benito Mussolini had been captured and killed—probably by Communist partisans—and the political direction of the country was very much in question.

In those days, the rejoicing over the end of the war and the fall of Mussolini often went hand in hand with a violent sense of entitlement on the part of the Communist partisans who had risked their lives to fight against Mussolini at home. They wanted at all costs to remake Italy in their own image, and they felt



*The Cathedral (Duomo) of Milan after a bomb attack, 1943*



*A stained glass window of the Duomo of Milan after bombing, 1943*

entitled to power because of the sacrifices they had made to defeat Fascism. For these partisans, the Church was often seen as public enemy number one. Thus, although the Second World War was finished, in Italy another kind of war was beginning: one over the political and cultural future of the country, and one that we might argue lasted for the next thirty years—that is, the same period in which the Movement was born and began to flourish in Italy.

Taking this context into account, we can better understand Giussani's ordination card, which featured an image of Christ's suffering face from a painting of the crucifixion by Guido Reni, and the Gospel quote, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Giussani personally wrote a prayer to accompany the image and quotation: "Oh God who is great and good, who made me, who redeemed me, and who consecrated me, accept the first sacrifice that I offer you for your Church, for my country, and all of my brothers and sisters. [...] Convert those who do not want to serve you."<sup>5</sup>

This ordination card sums up the attitude towards politics and Christian life that Fr. Giussani would develop over the next sixty years. The twenty-three-year-old priest conceived of his call to holiness and the destiny of his country as being intimately united. His invocation on behalf of those who did not want to serve Christ, moreover, speaks to the type of world in which he found himself, one that the French poet Charles Péguy had described as "a modern society, the modern world. A world, a society in formation, or at least, assembling, growing, after Jesus, without Jesus."<sup>6</sup> Giussani was ordained in a country that was overwhelmingly Catholic, but he was acutely aware that Western Europeans had been building a world "after Jesus, without Jesus" for decades. Both his vocation and our Movement emerged in this context, and, as we shall see, grew through active engagement with it.



Fr. Giussani with his family on the day of his ordination in Desio, 1945

<sup>5</sup> *Life*, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Giussani frequently referred to this passage by Péguy when describing the challenges of modernity: "For the first time, for the first time after Jesus, we have seen, before our eyes, we are about to see before our eyes a new world arising, if not a city; a new society forming, if not a city - modern society, the modern world. A world, a society in formation, or at least, assembling, growing, after Jesus, without Jesus. And the most terrible thing, my friends, we mustn't deny it, is that they have managed." Charles Péguy, *Véronique: Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme charnelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), quoted in Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World. New Traces of the Christian Experience* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 100-101.

## I. “WE, CATHOLICS”: MISSION, DIALOGUE, AND DEMOCRACY (1945–64)

Giussani’s early priesthood continued to be shaped by the chaos and excitement of the postwar environment. Starting in July of 1945, he served as a confessor in a church that had been heavily damaged by bombing in a lower-class neighborhood in



*A young Fr. Giussani in Milan*

neighborhood in Milan. As he rode the bus, tram, and train, he attempted to engage any and everyone in conversation about a range of topics from the meaning of life to the political future of the country. He was particularly concerned about the widespread support for Communism, which he saw as one of the greatest threats to Italy and to human flourishing.

In the neighborhood of the parish where he served, Communists were in the majority, and they longed to seize the reins of power in the country.<sup>7</sup> In a letter to his dearest friend, Angelo Majo, Giussani wrote about the melancholy these people engendered in him as they gathered to try to muster support for the Communist Party and its newspaper, *Unity*:

I can hear the street cars and trucks going by—they have been going by for more than two hours now—full of men and women going out to [...] the *Unity* Day and I am weeping. I am crying like a baby. The Lord Jesus put us in this world for happiness. Why do so many people construct for themselves ephemeral illusions that will only lead them to eternal unhappiness?<sup>8</sup>

On April 18, 1948, Italians were called to the polls to elect the parliament of their newly-declared republic. Two major parties faced off against one another in a hotly contested race: the Popular Front (made up mainly of members of the Italian Communist Party and Italian Socialist Party) and the Christian

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<sup>7</sup> For a long time, the Italian Communist Party was the largest Communist party in the Western world.

<sup>8</sup> The *Festa de l'Unità* (*Unity Day*) was a yearly gathering organized by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) to finance and distribute its official newspaper, *l'Unità*. The letter is dated September 2, 1945, published in Luigi Giussani, *Lettere di fede e di amicizia ad Angelo Majo* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2007), 34–35.

Democrats, who were firmly rooted in the Church and Catholic tradition. A week before the vote, Giussani wrote letters to his parishioners, friends, and acquaintances, in which he pleaded for them to vote for the Christian Democrats. Particularly telling is the text he wrote and had his sister deliver to all of his former classmates from the years before he entered the seminary:

A day is approaching that will be decisive for our religion; you have already understood where I am going, and maybe you will grow angry with me for what I am going to say. They have already convinced you that the Church and religion have nothing to do with the vote on April 18. They have already convinced you that a fuss is being made by a bunch of priests “who are messing in politics.” They have already convinced you that you can be a Communist and still be a Christian. [...] Remember that it is an illusion to put hope for economic wellbeing in movements that go against God and the Church. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot expect that the Church bless your marriage or your death because you would like to have it that way, and then turn around and support those who badmouth and defame it. You cannot fool God. Believe me. And with all of my overflowing affection, I am begging you [...] do not listen to those who would fill your head with hostility and mistrust of the sign of the Cross, which is the sign of the faith of your fathers. [...] Believe me: I am no fraud; you know me.<sup>9</sup>

The urgency, intensity, and concern that characterize this letter would also characterize much of Giussani’s activity in the following years. Despite the fact that the Communists lost the 1948 election, and all appeared to be well for the Church in Italy, Giussani rightly perceived that many people (especially young people) in Italy were possessed of the same ideas about the Church, politics, and society as his former classmates. Ignorant about the Church, yet nominally claiming adherence to it, they saw little connection between faith and life.



*A “Unity Day” gathering in Rome, 1948*

By 1954, Giussani could not deny that these tendencies were only becoming more pronounced among the youth. Convinced that he had a duty to respond to the problems of his time, he decided to leave what he called “the paradise of theology” for the “purgatory” of teaching high school. Years later, he explained the choice thusly:

How could I stay [in the seminary] contemplating being and essence (stupendously beautiful things when people are at peace!) if my Chris-

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<sup>9</sup> *Life*, 126.

tian brothers and sisters were steeped in ignorance and indifference?<sup>10</sup>

He took up a post teaching religion at the Berchet High School—a classical lycée in the center of Milan frequented by the sons and daughters of the most influential Milanese families. In later years, he often recalled the first moments of his new life at the school:

As I climbed the three steps to the door of the Berchet High School for the first time [...], it was clear to me (although I was aware of my limitations) that this was a matter of reproclaiming Christianity as a present event that was humanly interesting and worthwhile for anyone who was unwilling to renounce the fulfillment of his or her aspirations, or the uncompromising use of the gift of reason. Everything that ensued (with both the *élan* and the imperfections that are inherent to every human endeavor) depended, and still depends, only on that first intuition.<sup>11</sup>

In those years, Italian high schools were highly politicized environments. Student assemblies were animated affairs that featured fierce debates among students with conflicting worldviews. Moreover, as John Kinder explains, “Giussani was stunned to see that in the schools where he taught, most students were baptized, crucifixes hung in every classroom, and priests were teaching religious education, but Christianity was effectively absent in the lives of the students.”<sup>12</sup> Giussani was just as dismayed to see this tendency in his students in 1954 as he had been to see it in his friends and neighbors in 1948. From his sadness and disappointment, however, came an encounter that he would remember for the rest of his life:

Not long after I began teaching religion at Berchet, I noticed that during the break between classes there was a close-knit group of students who would gather on one of the landings in the staircase, speaking passionately with one another. Every day, I always saw those same students. Their steady friendship positively impressed me.

“Those are the Communists,” he was told when he asked who they were. The answer provoked him, and he asked himself: “Why aren’t Christians at least as capable as them of living in unity, especially since Christ pointed to unity as the most direct and visible feature of those who believe in Him?”<sup>13</sup> For days, Giussani was dogged by the question. Then one day, “a bit sad and even a little angry, I was walking on Via Lamarmora,” where he found “four kids on the

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<sup>10</sup> *Life*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Giussani, *The Journey to the Truth Is an Experience* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> John Kinder, “De la présence, seulement de la présence: 1968 in the Experience of Luigi Giussani,” in *1968: Culture and Counter-Culture. A Catholic Critique*, ed. Thomas V. Gourlay and Daniel Matthys (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 49-63, here 53.

<sup>13</sup> *Life*, 170.



sidewalk in front of me who were strolling slowly along, heading home.” Giussani was about to pass them by, but on the spur of the moment, he stopped and asked them:

“Are you guys Christians?” It was noon, and they stood there a little startled. One of them [...] answered me, “Yes. We’re Christians!” So, I let them have it with my pent up aggravation, “And who in this school would ever know it? In the student assemblies, all you see are the Communists and the Monarchist-Fascists. What about the Christians?”<sup>14</sup>

A few days later, there was a student assembly at the school. On that Thursday, as usual, two motions were put forth: one by the Communists and one by the Monarchist-Fascists. But that day, there was a third one that no one expected, least of all Fr. Giussani: one of the four students Giussani had met a few days earlier stood up and said, “We Catholics...”

For Fr. Giussani, this episode marked the beginning of the Movement. That phrase, “We Catholics” signaled the beginning of what Giussani would later come to describe as a “presence” of Christians in the school. This was the first experience of what would become GS, or “Student Youth”:

In 1954 we came storming into the public schools, which were not yet Marxist (although the Marxists were already determining the atmosphere in many of the schools). At that time, [the schools] were essentially Liberal, and thus secular and anti-Christian. We did not enter the schools striving to formulate an alternative project for them. Rather, we came into the schools with the consciousness that we bore He who saves people, even in school, who makes living human, and who makes the search for the truth authentic. That is, we came into the schools with the awareness that we bore Christ in our unity. [...] [And so] we also formulated a new interpretation (at that time we called it a “revision”) of history, philosophy, and literature that provided the students with a real alternative to the Liberal and Marxist interpretations they heard in their classes. We ended up creating an alternative curriculum without setting out to do so. What we set out to do was to make Christianity present.<sup>15</sup>

Some years later, one of the students at the Berchet recounted how Giussani had entered the school “like a hurricane.” The hurricane was welcomed by some but resented by others, who even went so far as to accuse Giussani of meddling in politics. As Giussani later recalled:

Feeling attacked by a Catholic group, our adversaries secretly made a motion against me, which they then published, saying that the priest who taught religion was intervening in politics at school. [...] I never intervened at all! My only intervention had been with those four kids

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<sup>14</sup> *Life*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> *Life*, 173.

whom I had met at noon on the sidewalk [near our high school].<sup>16</sup>

The GS group rapidly expanded and, from Milan, reached other cities in Italy. Those who came into contact with the hundreds—and then thousands—of young people who were receiving such a powerful education were taken by the intensity, enthusiasm, and intelligence of the students.<sup>17</sup> Such was the case for the American journalist, social activist, and anarchist-turned-Catholic convert, the Servant of God Dorothy Day. On a visit to Milan in 1963, she met Fr. Giussani and attended a GS gathering, about which she wrote in her travel journal. Her reflections were subsequently published in the *Catholic Worker*:

This meeting went on all morning, and I was impressed again at the patience of the Italians. [...] The students were intent and disciplined during this long meeting. Fr. Luigi Giussani is the inspiration for this work among the youth of Milan. They are given the best in intellectual and spiritual leadership, and Fr. Giussani is not afraid of taking their time, asking all, demanding search, research, more meetings, preparation for that moment, that opportunity, that choice which will affect their entire lives.<sup>18</sup>

Giussani dedicated himself tirelessly to the GS students and their education, and he did not shy away from asking them to do the same: to commit themselves to loving and serving Jesus and, by extension, their fellow human beings. Convinced that every epoch presented Christians with a unique task, Giussani encouraged the GS students to ask what it meant for Christians to be in the world but not of it in the early 1960s, to engage meaningfully with people who had distinctly different worldviews, and to contribute to the common good. In a series of texts meant for distribution among the students, he articulated responses to these questions, setting out the distinctive features of Christians in civil society. In one of these, “Notes on the Christian Method” (1964), Giussani highlighted some fundamental elements of Christian engagement in the contemporary world, emphasizing three words: mission, dialogue, and democracy.<sup>19</sup>



*Dorothy Day, 1968*

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<sup>16</sup> *Life*, 234.

<sup>17</sup> Many Italian politicians were intrigued by GS, including Venerable Giorgio La Pira, who was the mayor of Florence between 1961 and 1965, and Aldo Moro, who served five terms as prime minister of Italy and was kidnapped and killed by the far-left militant group the Red Brigades. See *Life*, *s.vv.*

<sup>18</sup> *The Catholic Worker*, October 1963, pp. 3, 6, 8. <https://catholicworker.org/808-html/>. Also quoted in *Life*, 304.

<sup>19</sup> Luigi Giussani, “Notes on the Christian Method,” in Giussani, *The Journey to the Truth Is an Experience*, 87–141 (hereafter “Notes”). In the text, “dialogue” and “democracy” are sub-sections

## a) Mission

Fr. Giussani insisted that “everyone who participates in the ‘communion’ of the Church also participates in Christ’s mission.” Like Christ, the Christian had to strive to “embrace the whole world” with a zeal directly proportional to the intensity with which one lived communion in the Christian community. Based on his ample experience in postwar Italy, Giussani observed that the first people who risked being “lost” to the Church were Catholics themselves. Only through communion lived in obedience to authority could a Catholic “verify the Christian proposal and come to realize that the end of all things is truly the Kingdom of God.” Mission, therefore, began “with the life of the Christian community in its environment,” and it was expressed as a capacity for “tireless dialogue with one’s companions” which was “born of the initial certainty of a common destiny that unites us and the desire to express true unity visibly in the environment.”<sup>20</sup> The missionary impetus that was rooted in unity among Christians and was both pursued and expressed through this “tireless dialogue with one’s companions” facilitated the Christian’s capacity to dialogue with all people, even those most distant from the Christian experience.

## b) Dialogue

Indeed, for Giussani, dialogue was an essential instrument of mission:

We can already begin to build unity, one step at a time, by entering into dialogue with others, with each person, in the hope that he or she may change. Respect for differences is not to be mistaken for the absence of hope that we can reach unity with the other person, that the other person can live our life, that the new life may reveal itself to everyone.

If a human being, much less a Catholic, wanted to mature, Fr. Giussani posited, engaging in this kind of dialogue was of the utmost importance:

If we were to be totally cut off from the world, from others, alone, absolutely alone, we would not find any novelty. Newness always comes from an encounter with the other. A seed left on its own does not grow; but placed in a setting where it can be nurtured by something else, it opens up. The “other” is essential in order for my existence to develop, for what I am to become dynamism and life.

However, dialogue and openness were not to be confused with relativism, or what Fr. Giussani called “mistaking compromise for dialogue”:

To take what we have in common with the other as a starting point does

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of a chapter entitled “Mission”.

<sup>20</sup> “Notes,” 113-28, here 127.

not at all mean we are saying the same thing [as them], even if we use the same words: that which is justice for one person is not justice for a Christian; that which is freedom for another person is not freedom for a Christian; someone else's conception of education is not education as the Church conceives it.

For a Christian, Giussani explained, the capacity for tireless dialogue was grounded in the certainty that all human beings share the same “native structure,” the same “human needs” for beauty, justice, happiness, and truth, or what Giussani called “those original criteria, in which he or she is human like us.” However, sharing those needs did not mean that all attempts to respond to them were equally capable of doing so. Christians alone had encountered the exhaustive answer to the human question.<sup>21</sup>

### c) Democracy

Giussani's uncompromising assertion that Christianity provided the most satisfying response to the human question may appear to challenge the notion that he was truly dedicated to dialogue. In fact, in these early years of GS, Giussani and his friends were often accused of being intolerant and antidemocratic, precisely for this reason. Giussani responded to just such a possible objection in a section of “Notes on the Christian Method” titled “Democracy,” which he presented as another declension of the missionary impetus of a united community:

There is a tendency to identify relativists—no matter which version of relativism they espouse, as long as they are relativists—as being democratic. And there is thus a tendency to identify as anti-democratic (intolerant, dogmatic) anyone who affirms an absolute. Out of this mentality, or any compromise with it, arises the temptation to define as an “open spirit” anyone who is ready to “put aside what divides us and look only at what unites us,” and the proclivity towards a “setting aside of ideologies” (a “de-ideologization”) that is laden with equivocation.<sup>22</sup>

Giussani observed how such a mentality undermined the presence of Catholics in the public sphere. With their insistence on obedience to authority and communion, Catholics would always be condemned as being narrow-minded, or even as being a threat to democracy, where democracy was understood as a kind of relativistic, neutral system in which everyone could act as they pleased. In contrast, Giussani argued that,

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<sup>21</sup> “Notes,” 131–32. For a fascinating example of dialogue, see the friendship between Fr. Giussani and a group of Buddhist monks from Mount Koya, Japan, in *Life*, 739–42. For more on the “original criteria” common to all human beings, see Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, New Revised Edition, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal–Kingston–London–Chicago: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2023), 6–12.

<sup>22</sup> “Notes,” 130.

For Christians, democracy is co-existence; in other words, the acknowledgment that one's life implies the existence of the other. The instrument of this co-existence is dialogue.<sup>23</sup>

These words—mission, dialogue, and democracy—complement and complete each other, describing the tasks and mindset of a Christian in a Western democracy in the twentieth century. They also formed a blueprint for the Movement's political, social, and cultural engagement for the next forty years.

In the first decade of GS (1954–64), then, Fr. Giussani had created a movement of young Catholics that was extraordinary both for the enthusiasm it generated and also for the radical nature of its proposal. Everything had emerged from that simple yet powerful moment when Fr. Giussani spoke to four teenagers on the sidewalk outside of his school. But this explosion of a new life was soon to be challenged by a crisis that would rock Italian and Western society, the Catholic Church, the Movement, and Fr. Giussani himself.

## II. FROM UTOPIA TO PRESENCE: THE YEARS OF CRISIS AND TWO CORRECTIONS (1965–77)

In 1968, the city of Busto Arsizio (thirty miles north of Milan) hosted a conference titled “The Christian and the Marxist,” at which one of the speakers was Fr. Giovanni Battista Franzoni. The former abbot of the monastery of Saint Paul Outside the Walls and an attendee of the Second Vatican Council, Franzoni had become enticed by Marxism and had founded a dissident community, *Cristiani di Base* (Basic Christian Community).<sup>24</sup> Giussani later summarized Franzoni's talk at the conference:

Who is the true Christian? Someone who wants to do right by the poor. And the Marxist? Someone who wants to do right by the poor. Therefore, Christians today must be Marxist. That was the kind of logic that was typically espoused in those years. A little older woman who had helped out with the conference raised her hand and timidly asked, “So then what's the difference?” The speaker, after a moment of perplexity, replied, “The Christian sees Christ in the poor, while the Marxist does not.” Then, a friend of ours who was in the audience stood up and said sarcastically: “So, we might say the Christian is hallucinating.”<sup>25</sup>

This episode reflects the revolutionary mentality of 1968: a year of political and social upheaval that was felt everywhere from Prague to New York City. In the West, the year was marked by student protests whose participants rebelled against received authority, and the social and economic structures imposed by previous generations. Often leftist or even Marxist by nature, the protestors of

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<sup>23</sup> “Notes,” 128–31.

<sup>24</sup> *Life*, 259–60, note no. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Life*, 393–94.

1968 pushed for a complete break with the past and with tradition, especially the Christian tradition.

As the conference in Busto Arsizio demonstrates, this rebellion against the Christian tradition and Christian authorities was also felt within the Church, especially in the tumultuous years after the Second Vatican Council, which had taken place between 1962 and 1965. Years before, Giussani had noticed the weaknesses of Catholic groups in Italy, as well as the alluring nature of Marxism; now, that crisis of faith was manifesting itself in all its drama.

Some GS students who had graduated and were now university students were also enticed by the slogans of 1968. They began to claim that the primary task of the Christian community was to change the social and economic structures that had led to immense injustice in so many parts of the world. These students, however, ended up leaving GS and, eventually, the Church, convinced that Marxism could more adequately respond to the human need for social justice. In Milan alone, half of the nearly two thousand members of GS abandoned the Movement.



*The Catholic University of Milan during a student occupation, 1968*

The wave of departures was deeply troubling to Fr. Giussani, and it forced him to reflect upon the ideals of 1968 in comparison with those that he was proposing to GS. In 1954, he had admired the young Communists at Berchet who had united together in order to enact change. Fourteen years later, he had not lost this sense of admiration, and he commended the young protestors insofar as their opposition expressed their desire for liberation and authenticity, both of which were fundamental markers of human dignity. He objected, however, to their assertion that their quest for liberation necessitated the rejection and destruction of the past and of tradition. Those who claimed to be able to put everything to rights in the world displayed both a naivete and an arrogance that quickly expressed itself as intolerance and violence.<sup>26</sup> Such was also the case in Church circles, where people like Franzoni broke with the Church and Catholic tradition in order to pursue their own agendas for change in the name of Christ.

There were also people in the Church with very different views from Franzoni and his ilk, however. As John Kinder explains, Fr. Giussani found himself in great company as he attempted to navigate the travails of 1968 from within the bosom of the Church. “In the summer of 1968,” writes Kinder,

as Paris, Milan, and other cities mopped up the debris of the riots, three important figures in the Catholic world, all independently, came to the

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 38-41; 83-97.

same conclusion. If the Church had to find new ways to propose Christianity to the world, there was only [one] place to start from: the person of Jesus Christ.

On June 30, Pope Paul VI closed the Year of Faith by proclaiming his Creed of the People of God. In a general audience a fortnight before, he asked, in the face of widespread religious apathy, “How can we succeed in having a faith that is alive?” First, he said, “faith must be a personal fact for us,” and second, “faith has its focal point in Jesus Christ; it is, we might say, a personal encounter with Him.”

In Germany, Joseph Ratzinger, then a professor of theology, was completing a book for publication: *Introduction to Christianity*. In the preface, which he wrote in the summer of 1968, he came to the conclusion that faith is “more than the option in favor of a spiritual ground to the world...It is the encounter with the man Jesus; it is finding a ‘you’ that upholds me, the countenance of the man Jesus of Nazareth.”

The same summer, Giussani met with the young people who remained fascinated by his proposal of the Christian fact. A priest friend of his who was present at those meetings summed it all up: “From there we started up again: we started over on the word Jesus and the word communion, and that’s it”.<sup>27</sup>

Fr. Giussani seized the opportunity to challenge the students who had stayed in GS to face the questions that had inevitably emerged as a result of the dramatic departure of half of the members of GS: What was God trying to tell them through these events? Were the students who had left in order to fight for an apparently more immediate and fulfilling liberation and social justice correct in doing so? What truly liberates human beings? What can truly fulfill our need for justice? In facing these questions, Giussani’s hypothesis for himself and the remaining students was that,

God does not allow anything to happen unless it contributes to the maturity, the maturation of those whom He has called. [. . .] This, we might say, is the indicator of the truth, of the authenticity (or lack thereof) of our faith: if faith is truly in the forefront, or if some other concern is in the forefront; if we truly expect everything from the fact of Christ, or if we expect from the fact of Christ what we decide to expect, ultimately making Him a starting point and a support for our own projects or plans.<sup>28</sup>

In saying such things, Fr. Giussani was not denying the importance of politics and political involvement. In fact, he asserted numerous times that the Christian life truly lived could transform a society, down to its political structures. However, he argued, it would be an illusion to claim to be able to change political and social structures without the occurrence of something gratuitous

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<sup>27</sup> Kinder, “De la présence, seulement de la présence,” 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Life*, 399.

that preceded this change—what he called “an encounter.” In a world that yearned for revolution, Giussani described the encounter with Christ and the concomitant conversion it provoked in each person who was graced by it as the most radical form of revolution: “a revolution of oneself.”<sup>29</sup> At a time when the Marxist notion of historical progress saw people speaking enthusiastically about “the forces that move history,” Giussani claimed that, “The forces that move history are the same ones that move the human heart. [...] The force that makes history is a man who made his dwelling among us: Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

It was in this period that the Movement took on the name by which we now know it. In order to emphasize that Christ alone is the source of salvation and liberation, and that the presence of Christ is found in the communion of Christians—the Church—a group of university students who had remained faithful to Fr. Giussani came up with the name of our movement: “Communion and Liberation” (CL).<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that the willingness of its members to face the challenges of their time literally gave birth to the Movement as we know it. These, in turn, were able to propose their Christian experience to their friends in university, and the Movement quickly began expanding again.

CL university students soon numbered in the thousands, and they became a relevant and recognized presence in Italian society, undertaking various initiatives ranging from charitable work to political engagement. This political involvement resulted in the creation of a movement within the Christian Democratic Party, the *Movimento Popolare* (Popular Movement), which was founded in 1975 and existed until the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> A strong, active, and vocal presence in politics, the



A conference on administrative elections organized by members of CL and the Popular Movement in Milan, 1975

29 For a collection of speeches given by Fr. Giussani between 1968 and 1970, see: Luigi Giussani, *Una rivoluzione di sé. La vita come comunione (1968-1970)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2024).

30 *Life*, 415-16.

31 Alberto Savorana writes: “In November of 1969, a flier bearing a strange header began to circulate at the State University of Milan. ‘Communion and Liberation,’ it read, and the subtitle was similarly unusual: ‘To build the Church is to free mankind.’” As Savorana explains, one of the authors of the flier, Pier Alberto Bertazzi, later recalled of the experience of authoring it: “I remember that we wanted to talk about two things: liberation—in other words, the need we shared with everyone else— and communion, the thing that, in our experience, was capable of achieving it. Communion and liberation: the two things to hold dear.” The students then put a paper signed “Communion and Liberation” on the door of the room that they were meeting in at a cultural center in Milan. One day, Savorana continues, the poster “caught Giussani’s eye. ‘There,’ he exclaimed, looking at it: ‘we are the name the university students gave themselves. Because communion is liberation’” (See *Life*, 420-23).

32 See *Life*, 533-538; and Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. Il riconoscimento (1976-1984). Appendice 1985-2005* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2006), 233-35.



Popular Movement became the prime target of militant left-wing groups who, throughout the 1970s, dedicated themselves to bringing about the revolution. They viciously attacked their opponents, both verbally and physically, such that in the 1970s, CL was constantly insulted in the press, students from CL were physically assaulted, and more than one hundred CL offices throughout Italy were vandalized or set on fire.

Meanwhile, the Italian Church continued to suffer a crisis of confidence that was expressed, above all, in a disaffection and opposition toward the Pope, Paul VI, and his authority. When, on the occasion of the 1975 Jubilee, the Pope summoned all young Catholics in Italy to Rome for a meeting in St. Peter's Square, Vatican authorities were concerned that only a few hundred Catholics would show up, leaving the square practically empty. One can only imagine the Pope's gratitude when he entered the square on March 23 to greet the 17,000 university students from the Movement who were waiting for him. On that day, after an event that most Italian Catholics had snubbed, the Pope asked to see Fr. Giussani. He thanked Giussani for what he was doing for the Church, and told him: "Take heart, you and your young people, because this is the right road."<sup>33</sup>



*Pope Paul VI greeting students from CL in St. Peter's Square, 1975*

It was precisely as the Movement was growing in numbers and influence, when it was becoming increasingly accepted by Church authorities, however, that Fr. Giussani again felt the need to correct its members. In 1968 he had been concerned about GS students abandoning their faith and pursue a secular form of salvation. Now he was concerned that the more active the members of CL became, and the more they risked for their convictions, the more they also risked dedicating themselves less to the presence of Christ than to the construction of a Christian utopia that they sought to realize at all costs. He worried that the young members of CL were moving away from the initial impetus with which GS students had entered the high schools twenty years before: "we did not enter the schools striving to formulate an alternative project for them [but] with the awareness that we bore Christ in our unity."

In the fall of 1976, Giussani spent three days with leaders of CLU (Communion and Liberation University, which was made up of students and professors from CL) in what he would later say was "one of the fundamental steps, if not the fundamental step for the movement after its inception."<sup>34</sup> "By giving in

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<sup>33</sup> *Life*, 516.

<sup>34</sup> *Life*, 482. See Luigi Giussani, "From Utopia to the Presence, Notes from a talk by Luigi Giussani to a group of university students in Riccione, Italy, in October 1976," *Litterae Communio- nis-Traces 11* (2002).

to the temptation of utopia,” he told the students, “we are competing against the others, at their same level and, ultimately, with their same methods.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, he urged the students towards what we might call “original action,” which was distinguished by the fact that it was not merely a reaction to what others were doing, but was an original expression of the Christian announcement:

It’s not the “presence of our community” in the university that needs to happen, but a “new heart in each one of us”—your own growth, brother: a surge, or a dawning of your Christian maturity, of a new faith and a new passion. The impact on the university and on society, and the contribution to the Church, are consequences to be determined by God, just as he determines the ages of history.

This correction was not meant to discourage the students from political engagement. On the contrary, Fr. Giussani explained,

the way presence expresses itself is through an operative friendship, gestures of a new personality that appears in everything, which use everything (the desks, studying, the attempt to reform the university, et cetera), and that end up being, first of all, gestures of true humanity, that is, of charity. [...] The initial presence of the movement in ’54 was an interest in our classmates, and starting with that gesture of friendship we created a vast charitable structure. [...] It wasn’t for the sake of some political project, but in order to share in a need [...]. Because man does not create: man collaborates in the manifestation of what God has already made, like a seed that matures into a plant, flowers, and fruit. Therefore, the issue is to plant the seed, that is, the presence. We can only manifest what already exists; the design, the project, is inside the seed, inside what is already there, inside the Mystery that we are, and it will come to the surface, as a matter of consistency, in its own time.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note the nuances within Fr. Giussani’s perspective. On both of the occasions on which he corrected the young members of GS, and, subsequently, of CL, he did not deny that Christian faith had to be expressed in culture and, therefore, in a political vision. However, the starting point of political action could not be a project, but rather had to be an expression of joy for the event of Christ’s presence, and the gratitude and certainty that follows from it. It was easy to lose sight of this, and Giussani never tired of correcting the Movement’s course, and when he did so, he used the plural: “we” (e.g. “*we* made this particular mistake for this reason”). By including himself among those at fault, and by taking responsibility for his role in errors, he demonstrated the nature of communion: we are part of the same body, for good or for ill. We should note, however, that he never told these students to stop their

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<sup>35</sup> *Life*, 483.

<sup>36</sup> *Life*, 483.

activities. It was precisely because they were so engaged that they could mature in the path of being Christian citizens in a changing world.

### III. THE SELF, POWER, AND WORKS: THE MOVEMENT AND POLITICS (1978–2000)

The third phase of the life of the Movement coincides with the beginning of the pontificate of John Paul II (1978). Much could be said about the relationship between John Paul II and Fr. Giussani and the importance of his pontificate for the Movement. We would not be what we are today without St. John Paul II, especially insofar as he constantly urged the members of CL to broaden their horizons and seek to serve all people, Catholic and non-Catholic, within Italy and beyond its borders.

With a Pole on the Chair of Saint Peter, the Movement, which was already supporting Christians and dissidents in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, confirmed and expanded its involvement in the Eastern Bloc countries,



Pope John Paul II and Fr. Giussani

where religious and political freedom were highly restricted. The Movement strongly supported the Polish trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity), which was made up of people who, because of their Catholic faith, fought for freedom and dignity under the oppressive Polish Communist Party. They were frequently subjected to arrests, violence, and sanction

by the government; at one point the whole country was placed under martial law because of their activities. Giussani lauded the courage of a people whose faith motivated them to act, but who also saw in their faith the only possibility for the salvation and reconstruction of their nation: “The Movement, too,” he exclaimed, “must be a *Solidarność*.”<sup>37</sup>

I have some personal recollections from those years. I remember being a child and watching my mother prepare food packages to send behind the Iron Curtain. Meanwhile, my parents’ friends would visit the Eastern Bloc countries with copies of the much-coveted Bible hidden in their suitcases.

But it was not just Westerners or people from the Movement who brought something to their brothers and sisters trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Rather, Eastern European Christians often taught those in the West what it meant that Christ was truly at the center of the cosmos and history. Fr. Giussani never tired of reminding members of the Movement about the “Letter to the Christians of the West” by the great Czechoslovakian theologian Josef

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<sup>37</sup> Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. La ripresa (1969–1976)* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2003), 237.

Zvěřina, who warned Western Christians that they were assimilating to secular culture:

You have the presumption of being useful to the Kingdom of God assuming as far as possible the *saeculum*, its life, its words, its slogans, its way of thinking. But reflect, I beg you, what it means to accept this world. Perhaps it means that you have gradually lost yourselves in it? Sadly, it seems you are doing just that.<sup>38</sup>

In Zvěřina, Giussani saw a model of exactly the kind of political action that he had urged CL students to take up in 1976. Reflecting on Zvěřina's letter, Giussani explained:

We cannot allow ourselves to be misled by external models and empty frameworks which do not spring forth from that of which things are made; all things consist in Christ, and the only framework in the world is the Father's plan, and it has a name—Christ. Evil is assuming the frameworks of another who is foreign to our new nature.<sup>39</sup>

Even secular dissidents, like the playwright Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, contributed to our understanding of the true nature of politics. Many of us are familiar with Havel's book *The Power of the Powerless*, one of the books that the Movement in the US suggested we read last summer. "If the main pillar of the system is living a lie," wrote Havel, "then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. This is why it must be suppressed more severely than anything else."<sup>40</sup>

Havel's insistence that the locus of social change lay in the capacity of each person to live in truth resonated deeply with Fr. Giussani's assertion that "the forces that move history are the same ones that move the human heart."

Taking his cue from John Paul II, Zvěřina, and, to some extent, Havel, Giussani dedicated a number of reflections in these years to the notion that the



CLU students at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, 1982. The sign, drawing on Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, reads: "Fighting for the aims of life against the aims of power"

38 Josef Zvěřina, "Letter to the Christians of the West," in Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, 110-12.

39 Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, 113.

40 Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf>), 20.

coercive states that stifled religious and political freedom in Eastern Europe were not the only forms of oppressive political power. In the West, he argued, there existed an insidious form of power whose aim was to stifle Christian witness. This type of power nullified the person, urging him or her to conform to the status quo. For Fr. Giussani, the response to this kind of power came in the form of what he called “a living ‘I,’” a “self” that was continually reborn in the encounter with Christ.<sup>41</sup> It was precisely because they were new men and women, born again in the encounter with Jesus and thus free of the constraints of power, however, that these new creatures would inevitably provoke the wrath of the powers that be.

In 1988, Fr. Giussani said as much to the CLU students at the spiritual exercises he gave them in the days leading up to Easter that year. “The Church is persecuted,” he stated; “the truth of the Church is intolerable to today’s mentality.” He told the students that he considered it a “tremendous honor” that the Movement had become

the pretext for the world’s (and falsehood’s) attack on the truth. [. . .]. This is an inevitable condition of familiarity with Christ, who is recognized and embraced by us. It was the fate of the apostles until even they ran away— *fugerunt*—they abandoned him. They abandoned him without abandoning him in their hearts, but they abandoned him; they abandoned him socially. Falsehood may be an inevitable condition, but it is a condition that is without reason; it is an affirmation that is without reason. Our life that is so fragile, so burdened with limitations, so weak, so sinful, is called to defend the truth, is called into the world to carry its meaning: God.<sup>42</sup>

By this time, the Movement was growing exponentially every year, and it was brimming with new men and women eager to carry the meaning of the world to people within Italy and outside of it. Spurred on by John Paul II, people from the Movement took on an even more significant role in social life, one that was marked by the flourishing of cultural, social, political, and charitable initiatives (*opere* or works), which were often founded in order to respond to the needs of people from the Movement, but which were then made available to anyone who wished to benefit from them.

These “works” were defined by Fr. Giussani as an essential aspect of Christian life, which, he argued, could not be lived exclusively in private. Rather, the event of Christianity had to be lived “in front of everyone because a sentiment or decision is never truly accomplished if it is not ready to stand in front of everyone.”<sup>43</sup> Since the birth of the Church, Christians had sought to

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<sup>41</sup> Giussani’s critique refers to worldly power. For a positive view of power as an instrument that can be used for the good of all, see Giussani’s speech to the regional congress of the Christian Democratic Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*) in Lombardy in 1987, quoted above.

<sup>42</sup> Luigi Giussani, CLU Easter spiritual exercises, Certosa di Pavia, March 31– April 1, 1998, quoted in Giovanni Marco Calzone, *Si prospettano giorni felici* (Genoa: Marietti, 2012), 14–15.

<sup>43</sup> “La dichiarazione esplicita” (“The Explicit Declaration”) episode 5 of the podcast of Luigi

respond to the needs and problems of their time and place through works. Fr. Giussani challenged his friends to incarnate this Christian ideal, saying:

The Christian event generates realism and true responsiveness to the needs of all people. This is what we need for our faith: that it demonstrate the profound realism that characterizes it, insofar as it springs forth from the heart of Christ. Existence is a web of needs, and sensitivity to them cannot help but make us desire to respond to them.<sup>44</sup>

On another occasion, Fr. Giussani stated with his characteristic directness: “there is no saint who has not built up works.”<sup>45</sup>

The variety and breadth of the initiatives conceived by members of the Movement in these years is truly staggering; as such, we cannot even begin to cover them in this text. It is worthwhile, however, to highlight a few initiatives that are particularly indicative of the kind of contribution that the Movement made to social and political life in Italy at the time.

Families in the Movement went to great lengths to found Catholic high schools that could offer people of all backgrounds an education informed and shaped by the Christian experience. Nationwide, a constellation of charitable initiatives sprung up to respond to people’s material and economic needs. Recognizing that culture was also a human need, members of the Movement founded the Rimini Meeting in 1980. The cultural festival, which is now among the largest in Europe, was envisaged as a place where dialogue—conceived as Fr. Giussani had defined it to the young people from GS in the 1960s—was possible. The full name of the festival, “Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples,” spoke to this intention, and its exceptionalism did not go unnoticed.



John Paul II greeting attendees of the Meeting of Rimini, 1982

In 1982, the third year of the Meeting, John Paul II gave a speech in which he invited the people of the Movement to action; he begged them to “construct a civilization of truth and love.”<sup>46</sup>

The people who were involved in all these initiatives took risks and, as

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Giussani, *E voi chi dite che io sia?* (“And who do you say that I am?”), Choramedia, min. 14:45 ss. <https://www.clonline.org/it/luigi-giussani/podcast-e-voi-chi-dite-che-io-sia>

<sup>44</sup> Luigi Giussani, *L’io, il potere e le opere: Contributi da un’esperienza* (Genoa: Marietti, 2000), 147.

<sup>45</sup> Giussani, *L’io, il potere e le opere*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, “To the Participants in the Third Meeting for Friendship Between Peoples,” Rimini, August 29, 1982. <https://origin.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/to-participants-in-the-third-meeting-for-friendship-between-peoples-rimini-26119>

such, made mistakes. They were not immune to yielding to a worldly logic that ought to have been foreign to the Christian experience. Like all people, they risked placing their hope in success and power. They could be lacking in the capacity for authentic dialogue, sometimes demonstrating an insensitivity to those who were different from them, and a limited capacity to listen to others and value their experiences.

Whenever Giussani observed this yielding to worldly logic, he promptly corrected it. In a speech to the National Assembly of the Company of Works in 1996, he reiterated his conviction that faith could not exist without works, saying, “faith without works would be ugly, as Saint James tells us.” He did not stop, however, at this observation:

But I always thought, “How ugly works would be, too, without faith!” [...] There may be some among us here who have works but who do not have faith. Brother, I say to you, you are not the master of what you do; [...] be aware that if your work is illuminated by faith, it will be fresher, it will be like the bones of the dead after great toil: “your bones shall flourish like the grass” (Is 66:14), as a passage of the Bible says.<sup>47</sup>

This third period of the Movement’s history saw increased participation of many members of CL in politics in the strict sense. As a result of the cultural,



Members of CL at the Day of Solidarity for Educational Rights in Rome, 1982

al, charitable, social, and educative initiatives that they had founded around the country, people from CL were more aware of what ordinary people needed, of what kinds of initiatives should be supported, and of the kinds of policies that should be implemented at the local, regional, and national levels so as to promote the common good. They knew better what to fight for and what was worth waging a political battle over. Thanks to this

network of initiatives, and with Fr. Giussani’s guidance and support, people in the Movement started to conceive of political engagement in a new way. Politics acquired a more profound meaning: it was a daily task and an indispensable contribution to constructing the “civilization of truth and love.”

For example, in late 1978, a group of people from CL began a campaign involving parishes, movements, and associations to help refugees from the Vietnam War. The hundreds of thousands of so-called “boat people” had fled the country after the conclusion of the war, and they desperately sought countries to take them in. In addition to their charitable activity on behalf of the refugees, politicians from CL conducted a lengthy negotiation with the Ital-

<sup>47</sup> *Life*, 711–12. For more on the *Compagnia delle Opere*, see above, note number 5.

ian government in order to persuade them to allow the refugees to enter the country. Thanks to their efforts, thousands of Vietnamese refugees were finally welcomed in Italy.<sup>48</sup>

In a personal meeting with John Paul II in 1987, Fr. Giussani explained the theory behind this kind of unified approach, one that required coordinated social, charitable, and political activity on the part of members of CL. He theorized that engagement in politics in the strict sense was another expression of the “works” that were the natural result of a mature faith:

If faith is separated from life, it is no longer reasonable to adhere to it; you adhere out of mere emotion. It’s irrational. We adhere to faith rationally and reasonably because if faith—the company of faith—is lived, then works are generated. A work is a human structure that is built to respond to a human need. So, for us, politics is a structure that must act to help bring about what the human heart desires, to help bring about what people try to do to answer their needs.<sup>49</sup>

This was the ideal to which Fr. Giussani urged the people of the Movement. As one of the young people involved in politics recalled: “We did not want to be ‘professional’ politicians, but to live our Christian belonging and do politics as an expression of it.”<sup>50</sup>

Such an understanding of politics may seem unusual to many of us. For example, a few weeks ago, a friend of mine told me that for him, politics in the US is something akin to the World Cup: it happens every four years, and then you don’t think about it until it happens again. Fr. Giussani used a similar image when he described what politics should not be: “Many Italian Christians have resigned themselves to [ . . . ] being in society, seeking to be in society, only when they are called to vote (every five years).”<sup>51</sup> Instead, Giussani saw political engagement as being both necessary and beneficial for members of the Movement.

As we have seen, Fr. Giussani was all too aware of the risks that came with Catholics being intensely engaged in politics. Taking his cue as always from John Paul II, however, he argued that Catholics were, in some sense, obliged to be involved in politics. In a 1993 interview, he was asked to expound on the matter. In response, he referred to a speech given by John Paul II at a conference of the Catholic Church in Loreto in 1985, where the Pope invited Catholics to take up a commitment to political and social affairs.<sup>52</sup> “The unitary ontology at the origin of the Christian community,” explained Fr. Giussani,

tends toward a unitary realization in politics as well, for the greater

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48 See Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. La ripresa (1969-1976)*, 233-35.

49 *Life*, 752.

50 Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. La ripresa (1969-1976)*, 348.

51 Luigi Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose: (1979-1981)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007), 382.

52 [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/april/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850411\\_convegno-loreto.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850411_convegno-loreto.html)



good of society and the greater manifestation of the glory of Christ. Following the Pope's observation, I believe that John Henry Newman's profound observation from *Arians of the Fourth Century* is still valid: "Strictly speaking, the Christian Church, as being a visible society, is necessarily a political power or party. It may be a party triumphant or a party under persecution, but a party it always must be, prior in existence to the civil institutions with which it is surrounded, and from its latent divinity formidable and influential, even to the end of time. The grant of permanency was made in the beginning, not to the mere doctrine of the Gospel, but to the Association itself built upon the doctrine; in prediction, not only of the indestructibility of Christianity but of the medium also through which it was to be manifested to the world. Thus, the Ecclesiastical Body is a divinely appointed means to realize the great evangelical blessings. Christians depart from their duty or become in an offensive sense political, not when they act as members of one community, but when they do so for temporal ends or in an illegal manner; not when they assume the attitude of a party, but when they split into many."<sup>53</sup>

With these ideas in mind, Fr. Giussani urged those of his friends who were passionate about politics to get actively involved. He had no qualms about recognizing the mistakes made by members of CL who were politicians. As critical as he was of the mistakes that politicians from CL could make, however, he was equally critical of "those Christians, those people—even in the Movement—who do not want to get their hands dirty [...] with political engagement, and who disapprove of the mistakes that only a person who is engaged can make!"<sup>54</sup>

In his appeal to Newman and his assertion that Catholics should "get their hands dirty" with politics, Fr. Giussani was directly challenging the standard approach that most Catholic associations in Italy of that time took to politics: the so-called *scelta religiosa* (religious choice). Adherents to this approach held that the Church could be most free and effective in a society in which Church and state were strictly separated. The Church had the task of nourishing the spiritual life of citizens, while the state's task was to promote democracy, ensuring that all people had an equal right to express their opinions and desires for civic life. Giussani was critical of this approach, arguing that it promoted both a distorted idea of a faith that was completely disconnected from earthly affairs, as well as an equivocal idea of democracy as relativism (the critique of which he had already expressed strongly in 1964, as seen above).

As an alternative to the *scelta religiosa*, Fr. Giussani countered that no one who had met Christ could be indifferent to the cultural and political dimensions of life. "In the life of the Movement," he explained, "there is a permanent tension between the two poles: the cultural, social, and political sphere, and

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<sup>53</sup> Onorato Grassi, "Il tempo di una creazione nuova. Intervista a mons. Luigi Giussani," *Il Nuovo Areopago* (1993): 60-68, here 67. For the citation from Newman, see John Henry Newman, *Arians of the Fourth Century*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 257-58.

<sup>54</sup> Luigi Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001), 40.

the spiritual life, and it could not be otherwise.”<sup>55</sup> For Giussani, the religious and political spheres were distinct, but not strictly separate. We might ask, however, what this meant in action.

First, it entailed clarifying that although people from CL were involved in politics, this did not mean that Communion and Liberation was itself a political party. Giussani never tired of explaining that the Movement was a friendship whose task was to educate people to faith. People from the Movement who actively engaged in politics did so by virtue of their belonging to the Movement, but, like people in the Movement who had started social initiatives or opened schools, those involved in politics were considered to be wholly responsible for their words, actions, and policies. This also meant that they could not expect that they would automatically receive the support of people from the Movement.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, although Giussani did not shy away from underscoring the importance of unity among Christians in all realms of life, including in politics, he also clarified that such unified action could neither be imposed upon Christians nor taken for granted:

Ideally, we strive for unity, even in politics, because Christians must strive for unity in everything, since they are one body. To find that we are not all of the same mind is painful; it is not a right that we should assert recklessly. Disagreement is sad, even if it is often inevitable, but in the search for unity, we must all make an effort to discover why our brother sees things differently and, in turn, explain in the best way possible the grounds for our own convictions.<sup>57</sup>

Second, Giussani proclaimed the Church to be both the source and safeguard of the Christian unity he strongly desired, and also of his innovative approach to politics. When it came to elections or referendums, Giussani unflinchingly obeyed the indications given by local bishops to their flocks, even when he did not completely agree with their methods. Such was the case in 1974, when Italians voted over whether to repeal a law that allowed for divorce. Although Fr. Giussani was a staunch supporter of the indissolubility of marriage, he disagreed with the approach that the Catholic hierarchy had taken to the campaign. Nonetheless, he resolutely complied with all of the requests that the bishops made of Catholics, and he insisted that everyone in the Movement do the same.<sup>58</sup>

Giussani’s and the Movement’s innovative and controversial approach to politics made waves in Italy, but it was also undeniably fascinating. And so, we return to the episode with which we began these remarks: Fr. Giussani’s invitation to the regional congress of the Christian Democratic Party in 1987. We

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<sup>55</sup> Giussani, *Il Movimento di Comunione e Liberazione (1954-1986)*, 176.

<sup>56</sup> See Giussani’s idea of the need for a “critical distance” between Communion and Liberation and the people involved in politics in *Life*, 533-38.

<sup>57</sup> *Life*, 735.

<sup>58</sup> See *Life*, 470-72.

can now better understand the context and weight of his words: “Politics, as the highest form of culture, must inevitably consider the person to be its fundamental concern.” The role of the state, he argued, was to support the initiative of individuals, groups, and communities that organize themselves to respond to the needs of all people. With the motto, “More society, less state,” the Movement began to implement subsidiarity—an idea that was essential to the social doctrine of the Church, but which had been de-emphasized and even forgotten by Italian Catholics of the time.<sup>59</sup> Thirty years after meeting those four boys on the sidewalk outside the Berchet High School, then, Fr. Giussani had introduced a radically new approach to politics among Catholics in Italy, one that was albeit entirely grounded in the rich tradition of the Church.



*Fr. Giussani speaking at the regional assembly of the Christian Democratic Party in Lombardy, 1987*

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: FACING THE PRESENT WITH THE RICHNESS OF THE PAST**

It is by now fairly obvious that the story of the Movement’s development is inextricably linked to the history and culture of Italy in the latter half of the twentieth century. In none of the over ninety other countries where it is now present has the Movement become such a significant social and political force. When we compare our life in North America to what we have described thus far, we might object that our presence appears much more fragile. We might also argue that, not being Italian, or living as we now do in a completely different world from that of the postwar era, it makes little sense to compare our experience, methods, or criteria with things and people from a different time and culture.

Yet, I am firmly convinced that the history of the Movement in Italy indicates a method and a series of criteria that are valid for all times and places. First and foremost, Giussani’s definition of (and passion for) politics can become our own. Thus, for example, the notion that cultural, charitable, and social works and initiatives are the first way to be politically engaged is a fascinating and provocative one that we would do well not to dismiss. Moreover, considering how Fr. Giussani urged members of the Movement to do the same, we should have the courage to take the risk of being actively involved in politics in a strict sense, starting at the local level. Finally, and most importantly, no member of CL, wherever he or she lives, can claim to be excluded from the

<sup>59</sup> PCJP (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, sec. 185–88 (London: Burns & Oates, 2004).

powerful invitation that the Movement received from Saint John Paul II in 1982, and which his successors have repeated in different ways: to construct a civilization of truth and love. This, in fact, is what I see many people from the Movement in North America doing.

When I came to the United States fifteen years ago, I was fascinated by the “political” activities of the members of CL in North America: people in the Movement were a presence despite their relatively small numbers and the apparent lack of significance of CL on such a vast continent. To my eyes, the disproportion between their minuscule numbers and the vibrancy of their presence was astounding.

First, I was intrigued by the New York Encounter.<sup>60</sup> At that time, it was in its infancy, but it continued to grow and create opportunities for dialogue in the sense described by Fr. Giussani. The same impetus is at work in many of the local cultural initiatives that have emerged across the country. I am especially grateful for Suzanne Lewis, who has worked tirelessly over the years to develop the cultural center Revolution of Tenderness.<sup>61</sup>

Later, I learned that two friends in the Movement had left their jobs at a big corporation to found Los Angeles Habilitation House, a nonprofit organization that offers employment and career opportunities to people with disabilities.<sup>62</sup>

A few months later, I listened to a testimony given by our friends in Québec who were working to oppose a law that would legalize euthanasia; the entire community—from high school students, to working adults, to retirees—was involved in this cultural and political work.<sup>63</sup>

Then, I met Marcie Stokman and became involved in the Well-Read Mom group, which was born from her desire to give women an opportunity to have meaningful conversations and friendships by reading thought-provoking literature together.<sup>64</sup> The group now has more than ten thousand members in the United States and beyond.

Still, later, I was astounded by the passion of two young friends in Minnesota who recently began publishing “The News Memo,” a weekly newsletter with the ambitious aim of helping readers “engage with what’s happening in the world while not losing their lives.”<sup>65</sup>

In the last fourteen years, I have been involved in CLU and have had the pleasure of witnessing college students growing in the awareness that faith generates a “new culture.” In September 2023, the CLU students organized a public conference at Benedictine College entitled “Faith and Culture: Luigi Giussani and the Christian Presence on Campus,” to which they invited students, professors, and campus ministers from around the country. The conference also allowed them to meet some Italian friends from CLU, as well as

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60 <https://www.newyorkencounter.org>

61 <https://www.revolutionoftenderness.net>

62 <https://www.lahabilitationhouse.org>

63 <https://nationalpost.com/full-comment/john-zucchi-euthanasia-question-about-more-than-just-when-to-die>

64 <https://wellreadmom.com>

65 <https://www.thenewsmemo.com>

a world-renowned pianist born in Macau who had recently encountered the Movement. A few months later, these same Italian students invited the pianist to Milan, where they organized a concert to raise money for the Holy Land. The sold-out concert was dedicated to Fr. Giussani, and the theater was packed with more than fourteen hundred people.<sup>66</sup>

Recently, in Boston, a young woman told me about something that happened after she participated in another initiative organized by some people from the Movement: the MedConference. Every year, physicians, nurses, healthcare administrators, scientists, and students gather in a Canadian or American city to dialogue about how to generate a medical culture that affirms the dignity of the human person. Returning to work at the hospital the day after the conference, this young woman shared her experience with her advisor, who initially reacted harshly, telling her that medicine should be discussed using numbers and statistics, not by sharing “experiences.” The following day, after they went on rounds together to visit patients, he confessed that he had had a change of heart, and was intrigued by the approach she had described. This is “politics”: something that changes our hearts and the hearts of the people around us.

These are only some examples of the intense life that is present among us today. To the objection that we still have not attained the kind of cultural and political significance as the Movement in Italy, we ought to remember, first of all, that each and every community has a different story and journey that is, in turn, connected to the cultural, social, and political environment in which it is located. To attempt to imitate or replicate what happened in Italy without considering these cultural differences would not only be foolhardy, but it would also undermine the personal responsibility of each member of the Movement to attempt to incarnate the charism in his or her time and place. As Pope Francis told us in St. Peter’s Square in 2022, “all the adherents [of the Movement] are called to live personally and to share co-responsibly the charism they have received. Everyone lives it originally and also in community.”<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, as Fr. Giussani constantly reminded us, when assessing the “results” of any Christian activity, time and patience are necessary. The “results,” if there are any, may come about over centuries:

This is what happened in early Christianity, which went out into the world, not to change philosophy, but to make itself present, to make Christ present by sharing in everyone and everything, even philosophy. And so, over the centuries, in the monasteries, in the schools, and in the universities, a new philosophy and a new culture were born.<sup>68</sup>

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66 <https://us.clonline.org/news/stories/2024/11/25/me-music-and-god-s-touch>

67 “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of Communion and Liberation, Saint Peter’s Square,” Saturday, October 15, 2022. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/october/documents/20221015-comunioneeliberazione.html>

68 *Life*, 483. On this point, see the passage by Alasdair MacIntyre, frequently quoted by Fr. Giussani, on the powerful impact that early Christian communities made on the Roman Empire: “A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the con-

From this indication, we are brought back to the essential themes of this text: that our encounter with Christ cannot but spur us into wholehearted and creative engagement with all aspects of life, even politics, but also that this same encounter frees us from the worldly logic, methods, and measurements that typically characterize this kind of engagement.

What can we learn from our history? How can we imitate Fr. Giussani, who encouraged everyone to take the risk of getting involved in politics and who, at the same time, was not afraid to judge and correct the attempts of his friends? How can we “tend toward unity, even in politics”? Together with Fr. Giussani, we can undertake the journey toward communion. May our works and initiatives become increasingly the expressions of our communion; may they be conceived, evaluated, and corrected in the light of our being one body, our belonging to the Church. The creativity and energy of each one of us can thus become the expression of a people. This is more challenging and exciting than any other work: building up the Church, building up the community, living communion (or, in the words of Fr. Giussani, “making communion”<sup>69</sup>), and, in so doing, constructing a civilization of truth and love.

### Suggested Readings in English

Luigi Giussani, “Notes on the Christian Method,” in Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 87–141.

Luigi Giussani, “From Utopia to the Presence, Notes from a talk by Luigi Giussani to a group of university students in Riccione, Italy, in October 1976,” *Litterae Communionis-Traces 11* (2002).

Luigi Giussani, “Religious Sense, Works, and Politics,” in Giussani, *L’io, il potere, le opere: Contributi da un’esperienza. The ‘I’, Power, Works: Contributions from an Experience. El yo, el poder, las obras: Contribuciones de una experiencia* (Milan: Edizioni Nuovo Mondo, 2000), 22–25.

Luigi Giussani, “Open Christianity,” *Logos* 10, no. 4 (2007): 151–66.

John Zucchi, “Luigi Giussani, the Church, and Youth in the 1950s. A Judgement Born of an Experience,” *Logos* 10, no. 4 (2007): 132–49.

Alberto Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018).

John Kinder, “De la présence, seulement de la présence: 1968 in the Experience of Luigi Giussani,” in *1968: Culture and Counter-Culture. A Catholic Critique*, ed. Thomas V. Gourelay and Daniel Matthys (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 49–63.

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tinuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.” Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 244–45.

69 Giussani, *Una rivoluzione di sé*, 68.

## Suggested Readings in Italian

- Luigi Giussani, *L'io, il potere, le opere. Contributi da un'esperienza* (Genoa: Marietti, 2000).
- Luigi Giussani, *Il Movimento di Comunione e Liberazione (1954-1986). Conversazioni con Robi Ronza* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014) [first edition 1976; second expanded edition 1986].
- Luigi Giussani, *Dall'utopia alla presenza (1975-1978)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006).
- Luigi Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose: (1979-1981)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007).
- Luigi Giussani, *Ciò che abbiamo di più caro: (1988-1989)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2011).
- Luigi Giussani, *Una rivoluzione di sé. La vita come comunione (1968-1970)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2024).
- Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. Le origini (1954-1968)* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2001).
- Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. La ripresa (1969-1976)* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2003).
- Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione. Il riconoscimento (1976-1984)* Appendice 1985-2005 (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2006).
- Giancarlo Cesana, "Politica e CL. Storia di una esperienza," in *Luigi Giussani. Il coraggio della speranza* (Genoa: Marietti 2013), ed. Francesco Ventorino, 123-132.
- Michele Rosboch, "Politica vera, comunità intermedie, potere – A trent'anni dal discorso di Luigi Giussani alla DC lombarda (1987)," *Politica.eu* (2017).
- Antonio López, "Pour se poser, il s'oppose: Luigi Giussani sulla natura del potere e la vocazione cristiana", in *Il cristianesimo come avvenimento: Saggi sul pensiero teologico di Luigi Giussani*, ed. Carmine Di Martino (Milan: Rizzoli, 2022), 355-80.
- Luca F. Tuninetti, "Autorità e potere nel pensiero di Luigi Giussani," in *Vivere la ragione: Saggi sul pensiero filosofico di Luigi Giussani*, ed. Carmine Di Martino (Milan: Rizzoli, 2023), 363-79.
- Andrea Gianni, *Passione per l'umano, passione per la libertà: Tracce di politica nel di Luigi Giussani* (Siena-Lugano: Cantagalli-EuPress, 2023).
- Massimo Camisasca, *Introduzione a don Giussani* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2024).
- Alberto Frigerio, "La presenza dei cristiani nella società plurale. Il caso serio della politica," *Annales theologici* (forthcoming).

