

Life of Luigi Giussani

Excerpts

<i>A Real Event in the Life of Humanity</i>	19
<i>Hans Urs von Balthasar</i>	23
<i>Bethlehem and Nazareth, God's method</i>	27
<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>	32
<i>John Paul II: "We believe in Christ present here and now..."</i>	34
<i>"Event: the supreme method for knowing"</i>	38

A Real Event in the Life of Humanity

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 803- 806

The topic of Christ's presence in history had always dominated Giussani's thought on the nature of Christianity. It came up again during the CL university student Equipe that took place in Bruzzano (Milan) on 29 May 1990. The Equipe nearly overlapped with the publication of *Why the Church?* Giussani spoke about the book in reference to the tensions that were broiling within Italian universities at the time: an ultra-left "Pantera" student movement of moderate proportions, which was greatly amplified in the press, as Onorato Grassi recalls: "There were sparse, little groups, tied to the social centres, that occupied departments, made declarations, and threatened retaliatory or disruptive action, opportunistically put under the magnifying lenses of the media. [. . .] For a few months the 'struggle that doesn't pay but entertains,' the obsessive repetition of slogans and abstract demands, and the 'camp-out' in the courtyards tainted the atmosphere in the universities. Some of them tried to take issue with the Catholic presence, the only student presence left after the dissipation of all the leftist organizations." The CL university students found themselves put to the test concerning the meaning of their presence "within necessities and normal, daily relationships. In our classes, with our professors, in our involvement with the Cattolici Popolari in the university student government, in conversations about ideas for reform, and in our involvement with the CUSL to help students with their studies and find housing for students from out of town."

In this context, Giussani invited the students to recognize that "[o]ur proposal, what we put forward to the world, is this extremely simple message [. . .]: God became man and is here present. He is present here and now; He is a presence. [. . .] His presence implies a material reality. The message of the angel ('He will be called Emmanuel, God with you') implied flesh. His presence—'I will always be with you, until the end of the world'—implies flesh, implies matter, our flesh. Therefore, it is something that occupies a time and a space, it is a subject in time and space." He concluded, "[W]hat my being conveys, what it brings into the world, is this message: He is presence, here and now, and, therefore, He corresponds to a present, physical reality. He is a human presence, and, therefore, corresponds to (is revealable, reachable, visible, tangible, audible as) a present, physical reality."

The following August, Giussani delved more deeply into the topic of Christian presence when he spoke at the Equipe in Arabba (Belluno). Carmine Di Martino remembers: “A transcript was published as an insert in *Il Sabato*, in the form of a little book entitled *Promessa compiuta, non menzogna* [“Not a lie, a promise fulfilled”]. It became a working tool for the university students (and the movement in general) for that entire year. Father Giussani considered it to be so important that he didn’t want anything else to be circulated.” He would say as much at the following Equipe: “The only reading should be the one from August’s Equipe. This summer I said that we have to spend the whole year working on that text, because at first it seems like you understand it, but then the second time you read it you see that you hadn’t actually understood it.” But why? What was so important about it? The introduction serves to explain.

The talk came at a time in which Giussani was focusing heavily on “history’s real protagonist [. . .]: the subject, the person, that is, you and me.” During the open assembly in Arabba he emphasized, “Let’s help one another to be human. You aren’t human in a collective sense. [. . .] The issue is the individual; the issue is the person. The issue is you.” The lesson that followed focused entirely on the relationship between the person and presence: “Since the 1976 Equipe, which was called *From utopia to presence* [here, see page 479] we have followed a course that is pushing us now to break through and strip down the word presence: we need to break through it and strip it down. Because [it’s true that] the CUSL [University Cooperative for Work and Study] is presence; the welcome table for incoming freshman is presence; School of Community is presence; the testimony we have given is presence, but we have to strip presence of all this expressiveness. Because presence is in the person, solely and exclusively in the person, in you. Presence is a topic that overlaps with your self. Presence comes from and consists in the person. We’ve told ourselves this a thousand times!”

But what was the substance of the person in an age that had rendered it so fragile and fleeting, buffeted by trends and dominant opinion? “What defines the person as the actor and protagonist of a presence is clarity of faith, [. . .] because faith is the ultimate aspect of intelligence. It is intelligence that reaches ultimate horizons and identifies one’s destiny.” But if this “intelligence” recognizes the ultimate horizons and reaches out to touch them, Giussani went on, “it is only because of something that happened, something that happened inside us, through a word or a message— an announcement.” He immediately added, “We have to recognize that, if this is true of each of us, it is

because we have been called, elected, chosen. The supreme and determinative event of human existence [. . .] is an event called Baptism.” Giussani knew he was using a familiar word, one the students surely took for granted, and he set out to expose their lack of awareness: “Nothing is further from the hierarchy of values, of interests, of praise, of tastes, and of the crowding desires that encumber your lives than the word Baptism.” Di Martino recalls, “It goes without saying that not only were the students with Catholic backgrounds shocked, but all the others, too. Deep down, for all of them, baptism was underappreciated.”

Perceiving this, Giussani went on: “An event has happened in our lives— an event! A real event: we call it encounter. But this encounter is like the flowering of a root. The thing called Baptism happened— the encounter that Christ made with our flesh: He has taken our flesh and carried it in His.” So Baptism and encounter were two events: an “initial” one and a “concluding” one.

In the second point of the lesson, Giussani went to the core of this human issue, saying that the real event could only be recognized in all its significance by entering into relationship with it: “If we don’t take this fully into account, everything else becomes blurred. It blurs into pietism, or a set of liturgical preferences, or scriptural analysis.” To get his point across, Giussani drew from the book of Wisdom: “God did not create death and does not take pleasure in the destruction of the living. He created everything for existence. The creatures of the world are healthy, there is no venom of death in them, nor does the netherworld reign over the earth, because justice is immortal.” But how did this positive statement square up with everything happening at the university and the world? Giussani provided a peremptory answer to the question: “Without Christ, this would not be true, because contradiction destroys everything one has imagined and built, and plunges everything into the vortex of death. Without Christ, these words from the Bible cannot make sense. Without Christ, it’s not true; it would be an optimistic expression of Greek thought. It would be useless, or better, cynical, because it would contrast in such a morbidly sharp way with reality. [Or] it would remain a utopia: a Jewish utopia. These are the two, bitter kinds of hope that dominate the culture of the world: optimism and utopia.”

For Giussani, Christ was not a thought or a figment of the imagination, but a real event in the life of humankind. Philosophers and poets had grasped this, as Giussani pointed out using an expression from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Christianity is not a doctrine; it is not a theory of what was and what will be of the human soul. Rather, it

is the description of a real event in the life of man.” With these words, Giussani said, Wittgenstein had captured the essence of Christianity, as had the poet Cesare Pavese when he wrote: “In planned things the element of inevitability is always missing. The most resolute thought is nothing compared with what actually happens.”

After a discussion on the contents of the lesson, Giussani offered a summary: “Yesterday’s entire lesson can be summed up in these two points. The first refers to the passage from Wisdom: God made humanity for life; this would be a lie if Christ did not exist. The second is that, as a result of this, the new event in life is Christ, because he gives a reason for living.” But all of this, he added quickly, “must become a personal experience.” And this was “the work of living.” So, “there is only one issue: the blade of freedom, recognizing Christ,” is that each person repeat, along with the last words of the book of the Apocalypse, “Come, Lord.” This means that each person should seek Christ with a sincere heart. “A personality that becomes presence is one that begins to ask with a sincere heart.”

Giussani concluded by pointing out the channel for the journey of personalization, for the work of living: “From Adam on, everything that reveals the work of God, everything that reveals God’s plan with man in the world, takes as its supreme category the person in the midst of the people, the person in communion, the person-in-communion. That is why he chose Abraham for a task and made him into a people. He chooses you in Baptism and he makes you a people, Church— His Church.” Therefore, “the most important thing is faithfulness to what you have met, not as a theory, but as an event. Faithfulness, that is, to the companionship. The greatest crime is not betraying, underestimating, or being inconsistent about what you have seen, about the truth. The greatest crime is the betrayal or abandonment of the reality in which the truth has been communicated to you. It is betraying the company, betraying the event, not betraying a bunch of words, even if they are theoretically illuminating.”

In January 1971 Giussani participated in the spiritual exercises of the CL groups of the universities of Freiburg, Bern, and Zurich, which took place at Einsiedeln, site of a historic Benedictine abbey. The lectures were given by him and by Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss theologian that the movement had met not long before. The contents of their lectures were collected in a small book, published in June of that year by Jaca Book under the title *L'impegno del cristiano nel mondo* (The role of the Christian in the world). Out of modesty and respect for the great theologian, Giussani had his own name printed on the cover in miniscule lettering, and entitled his own lectures "notes edited by a group from 'Communion and Liberation.'"

Claudio Mésoniat, a university student at the time, says that "it was Scola's decision to invite von Balthasar to Einsiedeln, the centre of Catholic Switzerland." A photograph shows Fr. Scola (who had been ordained a priest a few months before), Giussani, and von Balthasar eating together during those exercises.

The resulting book begins with the following words of von Balthasar: "I dedicate these two conferences, held for the groups of 'Communion and Liberation,' to Fr. Luigi Giussani, as a sign of my friendship and deep admiration."

The exercises had such an effect on Giussani that on 22 March von Balthasar was invited to Milan for a conference organized by the San Babila Cultural Centre. The topic was the same: the role of the Christian in the world. On 24 March, Giussani participated in a gathering to discuss the conference, during which he commented on it point by point, but first he said, "We want the lesson von Balthasar gave us the other day to become a working tool— or, better, the working tool, the most important tool for these months of reflection, because it was truly an exceptional witness." Giussani underscored that he was struck by the assertion that the human person reaches towards something that exceeds it: "The human being— as he so accurately described— is a being in await, striving all over, without knowing what he's waiting for. So, he is a being awaiting something that is beyond his powers of imagination, not to mention his intelligence." The human person is awaiting, and "only when the thing is put in front of him does he understand that that's what he is waiting for."

Given the title of the conference, the first point of discussion appeared to have little to do with the theme, since the theologian had spoken about the engagement of God with

the world. But Giussani explained that the logic of this choice was immediately apparent: “The Christian is one who follows God, who imitates;” so, before speaking about Christian engagement with the world, von Balthasar addressed the question of God. “The Church’s presupposition,” he said, “is God’s engagement with the world.” Indeed, the world awaits something “that it cannot construct alone because it is beyond the bounds of its intelligence, beyond the scale on which it can theorize, on which it can generate projects, and beyond its imagination.” And God’s response is Christ, “the man Christ,” who is “God’s love for us.” So what is the Christian in the world? “One who brings to the world that for which the world is waiting and which it does not know: Christ.”

Giussani brought up two of von Balthasar’s practical observations: the first, that “the Church, that is, the Christian reality in the world, is not first of all the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The ecclesiastical hierarchy— he said— is like the structure, the skeleton, whose job it is to give support, but you don’t go to another person and try to attract him to yourself as a skeleton, because he would be scared, he’d run away.” The second was “an adversarial Church— what kind of sign of salvation is that?” Giussani agreed with von Balthasar that “the duty that emerges for the Christian, for the presence of the Christian in the world, is to bring about communion.” This, he added, “is the law of the Christian, nothing more.” And, thinking of the movement, he said, “We are together because Christ died and rose again,” so “all your objections to those who don’t do anything, or who always want to be in charge, or who do as they please, or who you don’t get along with, or who leave you alone; all your objections, which are the reason you stay at the edges or the margins of the life of the community— where do they come from? From the fact that, for you, it’s not yet true that we’re together because Christ died and rose again. Because even if you killed my mother I would have to accept you in communion; even if you killed me I would have to accept you in communion— because even if you killed me, you cannot get rid of the fact that Christ died and rose again for our unity.” He recalled that he used to say these same things in his classes at Berchet: “If you come to kill me, what does it mean that I forgive you? That I accept you just how you are, you are one with me, because what makes me one with you is deeper than what you are and what you do: it is Christ dead and resurrected, it is this objective fact that all your ill-will cannot take from me, because you are me, and I accept you. If this guy understands this while he is standing there about to stab me, he will die of rage, because while he is about to kill me he can’t escape me, I embrace him, get it?!”

Giussani also picked up a line of advice from von Balthasar: it was important to be aware that “it is not we who build the unity of the Church; the unity is Christ dead and risen. Because of this, in order to maintain this unity, we must continually *dépasser*, go beyond all of our experiences.” Giussani agreed, “because its achievement is something that surpasses us, that surpasses our experiences; the death and resurrection of Christ is what brings it to completion. And the absurd begins to take shape— that is, unity among us, which would otherwise be impossible.” He offered a summary formula: “It is not our experiences that build unity, but rather unity that is the foundation for our experiences. First is a given, a fact that is offered to me: I’m no good . . . but this fact offers itself to me anyway. God gets involved . . . I find him underfoot anyway. He comes with me!”

Here he referred to an important *nota bene*: the first thing to do to engage with the world “is not to do or to build, but to accept this involvement that God has made with us,” according to the Biblical rule: “It wasn’t the most capable people who built, who took on projects and adventures, and enterprises; it was obedience to the word of Yahweh.”

Giussani began to address the second part of von Balthasar’s talk, dedicated to the role of the Christian, with a large premise: Christ brings “the answer to humanity’s waiting. An answer that is as much awaited as it is impossible to foresee, to anticipate, to imagine, because it is an answer that comes from beyond man; and the most authentic play of human relationships is a symbol, a sign of this.” Von Balthasar, he said, had drawn a comparison with Michelangelo’s painting of the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: “Man, humanity is like that hand and that finger that seeks its object, and its object is another hand. Human hope cannot pacify itself alone. Within history there is no human figure capable of satisfying our hope.”

In this unfulfilled situation, the role of the Christian takes shape: “To direct hope toward the object of its satisfaction that is among us. The fact of God among us— Christ— who shows himself, more or less covertly or clearly, in the impossible experience of unity among men, in ecclesial communion.” It is a unity that “transfigures the structures, the limited, fleeting structures. It changes them from within through divine love. It is only through the Church that these attain a light, a transparency that for man is unimaginable, because this is the paradox of Christianity: “That it already achieves— at least a little bit— the experience of the unimaginable; it makes that unimaginable an experience.”

Precisely for this reason, according to Giussani, the Christian cannot help but be “a sign of contradiction when he wants to bring the world beyond the confines envisioned by his politics and his philosophy. Therefore, the shape of Christian action in the world is this: witness.” He concluded with an explicit reference to von Balthasar: “Meeting such a man has awakened in us a great thankfulness to God. Not least of all because it really is a delight to hear a stranger, one of the greatest theologians alive today, so literally confirm (down to the exact words) what we have been telling one another for years.”

Bethlehem and Nazareth, God's method

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 722-726

Giussani considered Bethlehem to be evidence of the method God used to make himself known: "Saint Augustine said that the world could have been created as a tiny point that contained the *rationes seminales*, the seeds, of all the further developments to come (fifteen hundred years before Darwin, an evolutionary world view that no one ever mentions!). This is precisely the method God used for coming into the world: he became an absolutely imperceptible reality." Why would the Lord use this method? "To demonstrate that power is not ours, that it doesn't lie in our intelligence, that it doesn't belong to our strength— it's His Power." At the Grotto of the Holy Innocents, Giussani said that the seed developed as testimony: "It's about living and dying: life and death would have no meaning without Christ."

Giussani told the others, "When you think that salvation comes from the anonymous town of Nazareth, it's almost instinctive to think, 'From here?' And when you visit the house of Joseph you say, 'From here?' And when you think of that handful of confused and ignorant people who followed him, who had no power whatsoever, you think, 'From there?'" This led him to the conclusion that "at a certain point, it is another factor that acts. And not alongside the human being, or above, it, but through the flesh, the bones, the pockets, and everything else that makes up the life of the person."

As soon as the group reached Jerusalem, Giussani read and commented on the passage from Saint Luke's Gospel containing the account of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth in a village a few kilometres outside the city. He described it as one of the most humanly moving things in Christianity: "After the Annunciation, an impulse of total and absolute openness was kindled in her. Think of the more than 150 kilometres of road she had to travel to get here, not meandering along, but (the Gospel tells us), 'walking in haste along the road,' totally wrapped up in her purpose." He added, "What amazed Elizabeth amazes us, too: 'How does it happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' It is a cry of wonder for this absolute gratuitousness, because no relative would have travelled so far to come help her!" This meant that "faith makes the human come alive, and reinforces its bonds, it makes people into a single thing."

One necessary stop during the visit to Jerusalem was the Wailing Wall, all that remains of the ancient Jewish temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It is the site of constant pilgrimage for Jews from all over the world, and has been a spiritual centre of

Judaism for over two thousand years. Giussani took the occasion to highlight the significance that the history of Israel should have for everyone: “God chose this people. He chose it with a messianic end, and today the Jews pray that their people may endure and rebuild the temple that is its symbol. They pray because the meaning of each Jewish person’s life is bound to what happens to their people. The Wailing Wall is, humanly speaking, one of the most moving and dramatic things on earth [. . .]. People who go to the Wailing Wall, reciting the psalms, or the prophets, or Exodus, are asking God for their people to endure, because it is the only witness in the world to the living God.” On the other hand, as Giussani observed the stream of believers who stood swaying before the Wall, it seemed to him that “despite their great awareness of being part of a people, all the Jews standing before the Wailing Wall recite their psalms in a tremendous solitude. It’s almost like the pain of the situation is so great, and their emotion for their people’s situation is so profound, that it cannot take on communitarian forms.” He concluded that “perhaps the greatest choice in all the history of religions is right there under that wall: has the Promise been fulfilled, or has it not?”

The pilgrims walked in silence along the Via Dolorosa, the route Jesus travelled through the alleyways of Jerusalem toward his crucifixion on Calvary. They listened to the Gospel account of the Passion and Giussani’s meditations: “Everyone’s life has the destiny of the Via Crucis [Way of the Cross] [. . .]. Everyone in those days was waiting for the Redeemer. But the Redeemer has a face; he is conditioned in a way that doesn’t suit our fancy, just as he didn’t for the Jews of that time, because he is different from what we’re expecting.” The Via Crucis was defined by this “rebellion” against the face with which Christ had appeared in the world.

The stop in Jerusalem ended with the remembrance of the evening of Easter and the two men who were travelling along the road to Emmaus. They were joined by a stranger, whom they would recognize only at dinner later as the risen Lord. Giussani told the pilgrims to put themselves into the scene from Luke’s Gospel: just like the disciples from Emmaus, “we walk along like sad Christians. Our sadness doesn’t come from our troubles or sorrows; it comes from the absence of meaning or from the fragility of reason. Sadness is always a question about whether ‘it’s worth it’: ‘is it really worth it?’ ‘Is it really going to be this way?’ At base, sadness comes from our ultimate skepticism. [. . .] But the Lord [. . .] doesn’t abandon us in this sadness.” “If we, like the disciples from Emmaus, keep the thirst [. . .] for happiness alive in our hearts, the Lord,

even unrecognized, will accompany our steps along the way. And for each of us there's that moment, there's that sign, there's that event in which everything becomes clear." The pilgrimage continued, making stops at the Judean Desert, Jericho, the Dead Sea, Masada, Qumran, and Bethany. In Jericho, Giussani relived the pivotal moment of the encounter that changed Zacchaeus's life:

We saw [. . .] one of those sycamores which Zacchaeus must have climbed to get a better look at Jesus as he passed by. If you think of how Zacchaeus was something like the mafia don of Jericho and its surrounding area, that he was one of those tax agents who were considered enemies of the people and public sinners that you should stay at least thirty feet away from so you don't get contaminated by their air, then you can imagine what that meeting with Jesus must have meant for him. [. . .] Just because of that brief pause, and those few words Christ said to him, that man must have looked at things in a different way for the rest of his life.

Then, in Bethany, Giussani recalled that "the same thing happened to Lazarus, too, even if on that occasion the Lord showed his love for him through an even greater sign," by raising him from the dead.

On the return flight, Giussani told Amicone his first impressions of the trip: "Most of all I experienced a confirmation of the nature of Christianity. God made himself present to man through a human reality set in a fixed environment, loyal to all human conditions and the historical moment in which he chose to appear. I felt a renewal of the concept of incarnation [. . .]. In that sense the Grotto of the Annunciation and Saint Joseph's house in Nazareth were the two places that left the strongest impression on me." "Seeing those places," he said, "where only a living humanity (albeit one in an embryonic or seed-like state) could grow and resist to communicate itself and impact the world, it's clear that what matters in the life of the Church today is the liveliness of renewed faith, not power derived from a particular history, or from an institution that grew to be respected, or from an intellectual system of theology. What truly matters is that the life that began in Mary and Joseph, in John and Andrew, is sparked again in people's hearts, and that the crowds are helped to have an encounter that matters to their lives, exactly as it happened at the origins of Christianity."

Giussani thought of Calvary: "The hole where the cross was planted, the place where Christ died, the place of Christ's agony. Seeing that place, imagining the lack of understanding and recognition by the whole crowd that had gathered to watch, you

understand that the evil of the world must be something both great and terrible, if God accepted a sacrifice like that, a death like that.” He pointed out:

[W]hat we bring away from those places is the desire, the longing for people to realize what happened. Today it seems like what happened could all be erased, the way you can take one foot and erase a letter in the sand, a letter in the sand of the world. But this is precisely because what happened is a proposal to human freedom, and to make it clear that power belongs to God. Today everything else (politics, the economy . . .) seems bigger and more important than this event that can so easily and cheaply be looked on as a fairytale. But when you see those places, the concreteness of the event is so human that you can’t come back from Palestine still harbouring the doubt that Christianity is a fable. To put yourself in the natural, logistical conditions in which Christ found himself, the landscape he saw, the stones he stepped on, the distances he travelled—it all comes together to force you to understand the truth of what happened.

Giussani carried these impressions with him for days. On 4 October 1986 he dedicated a large portion of his lesson at the *Memores Domini* retreat to his memories of the trip to the Holy Land. “The thing that most blew me away, and froze my spirit— froze it with awe— was when I visited the little ruin of a house/ cave where Our Lady lived, and saw a trifling little sign that read: *Verbum caro hic factum est*, the Word became flesh here. I was dumbstruck by the unexpected evidence of the method of the great God, who took nothing, who created everything from nothing— from absolutely nothing.” Giussani went on: “To see the house where St. Joseph worked [. . .] and to think that Jesus was working in that house! In short, the impression that dominated the whole week in the Holy Land— because everything else was secondary, or derived from this impression— was that the Lord, out of nothing, makes.” He went on, reemphasizing the point:

All the grand affairs they talk about in the papers are vanity, are ephemeral. Ephemeral means that something lasts a day— like the grass of the fields that the Bible always talks about, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, in the Psalms. In the Holy Land I understood what they meant. One day we were talking with some Bedouins in a tent in the Judean Desert, and some of our friends asked: “How do you feed your flocks if everything is so dry out here, so dry that there’s not a blade of grass to be seen?” They told us that they go out every day at four in the morning, because since the dew falls at night, the grass immediately grows a

centimeter or two. So until sunrise— because everything dries up as soon as the sun comes up— the flock eats that tiny bit of grass that was brought up by the dew. That's why the Bible talks about grass that dries up, that withers just as soon as it is born. Everything in the world, everything the papers talk about, all the "biggest" goings-on are just like that grass that springs up from the dew, but withers instantly because it's not yet saved. But what is saved? Where can we find something that, unlike grass that flourishes and withers in an instant, is capable of becoming a tree and bearing fruit? It is our life. Lucky you, who are called to understand the mystery of God's kingdom; others are not given this gift. What a task, my friends, what a responsibility! Because the rest of the world depends on our life. What a terrible responsibility! Would you be able to do it? Only the God who has called you is able. And don't try to cover up arrogance with a false profession of your own weakness, because "with God everything is possible."

Gaudium et Spes

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 321-323

From the very start Giussani appreciated another document from the council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. He admired “its interest and passion for the world and its esteem for human efforts, while being aware of their ultimate sadness [. . .] because of human incompleteness, such that only within the experience of Christ does hope find its fulfillment.” Also from this point of view, “one cannot say that we were not in harmony with the Council.” Furthermore, “the theologians by whose books we were formed, were they not the forerunners and experts of the Council?” After all, “key problems such as the relationship between history and revelation, or between dogma, scripture, and tradition, or the social and communal dimension of the People of God, or the value of the person, or the missionary task” were all subjects familiar to Giussani, since his years in Venegono. He was deeply convinced that the starting point which the Second Vatican Council pointed back to was “the imitation of the mental structure, of the method that Christ used in his life: [. . .] to meet the desire for truth that animates people.” *Gaudium et Spes* pointed out among the greatest errors of our time “This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives.” In light of this judgment, Giussani observed that “faith that has nothing to do with life—with all of its most important necessities, with the conception and feeling of reality, with the need to judge and give reason for all that enriches man and makes him more human—a faith that does not permit him to build up his personality as the focal point of new relationships, is a faith which, in the first place, is useless and as time passes dissipates.” And he finished by writing that “the Church [. . .] happens and continuously grows in people’s hearts and in the core of social settings and situations by means of the encounter with the living presence of Jesus Christ. The existential certainty of this encounter grows, and so does the experience of His real capacity to save what is human in all its drama and normality,” in an age that has progressively turned its back on Christ.

All the same, as Camisasca writes, Giussani “was not obsessed with the problem of modernity. [. . .] He felt the modern age was one that was ending, one that it was not necessary to concentrate upon. Instead, what was necessary was to rethink, in new terms, the age-old questions, which modernity had rendered inconceivable in its own way. What was necessary, in a certain sense, was to begin again from scratch, to discover

again the fundamental words, to examine man in action anew, in order to welcome his deepest dynamisms and most radical expectations.”

In this regard, Maria Bocci observes that within the anthropology developed by Giussani “the human desire for fulfillment and the Christian proposal cannot be decoupled. This synergy— valued greatly— has a key role in the indirect reception of the council, above all, in relationship with the secularized world. Such synergy does not entail preventative criticisms, for example, of the moralistic type [. . .] but it solicits human freedom, which is valued as the necessary precondition for the discovery of the correspondence between the Gospel and people’s aspirations.” In this sense, Bocci concludes, “the theological and pastoral horizon in which such perspective situates itself calls to mind certain passages from *Gaudium et Spes*.”

John Paul II: “We believe in Christ present here and now, who alone can change and changes man and the world”

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 654-656

The time for the encounter with John Paul II finally arrived. Giussani greeted the pope in the Paul VI Audience Hall, which was overflowing with people from the movement from all over the world: “We desire to obey your word so much that we wish the whole Christian world would do the same. All our weakness cannot disappoint us or stop us: in the mercy that is revealed on the Cross lies the unspent wellspring of that luminous and persuasive power that will always make us start again, indomitably, ‘hoping against hope’ (Romans 4: 18).” Still addressing the pope, he went on: “Christ has removed from our fragility any possibility for doubt because, in the life of the Church, He remains the power of Grace and the Magisterium’s guide. [. . .] For this reason, we share in Dante’s ancient view: you have ‘the shepherd of the Church to guide you. Let this suffice for your salvation’ (Paradiso, V: 77– 78).” Taking a more confidential tone, Giussani declared to the audience that he felt called, once again, to an educational task: “Not only by your Magisterium, but also by what you are and live, humanly, as a person: love for Christ Present and, therefore, love for the world.”

John Paul then took the floor. He thanked Giussani and then told the audience, “Continue steadfastly on this road so that, through you, the Church may become more and more the environment of man’s redeemed existence [. . .], where every person finds the answer to the question of meaning for his or her life: Christ, centre of the cosmos and of history, [. . .] interpretive principle of man and of his story. To affirm, humbly, but no less tenaciously, that Christ is the principle and inspiring reason for living and working, for awareness and action, means adhering to him, to render his victory over the world sufficiently present.” The pope went on: “Herein lies the richness of your participation in Church life: a method of education in faith so that it has a bearing on the life of man and of history. [. . .] The Christian experience, understood and lived in this way, generates a presence that proposes the Church, in every human circumstance, as the place where the event of Christ [. . .] lives as a horizon full of truth for humanity. We believe in Christ dead and resurrected, in Christ present here and now, who alone can change and changes— transfiguring them— man and the world.”

The pope recognized that CL's presence, "ever more substantial and important in the life of the Church in Italy and in the various nations where your experience is beginning to spread, is due to this certainty, which you must deepen and communicate because it is this certainty that touches man. It is significant and important to note how the Spirit has stirred up many ecclesial movements in the contemporary Church to continue with contemporary man the dialogue God began in Christ and continued throughout the entire course of Christian history. They are a sign of the freedom of forms in which the one Church appears, and they are surely a novelty, still waiting to be adequately understood in all its positive effect for the kingdom of God at work in the today of history."

Here John Paul adopted the words his predecessor, Paul VI, had spoken to CL members gathered in that same audience hall on 28 December 1977: "We also thank you for the courageous, faithful, and steadfast attestations, which you have given in these times, made somewhat turbulent by certain misunderstandings that surround you. Be happy, be faithful, be strong, and be joyful. Carry with you the testimony that the Christian life is beautiful, is strong, is serene, and is truly capable of transforming the society around it." The pope observed that doing so contributed to "generating that culture of truth and love that is capable of reconciling the person with himself or herself, and with his or her own destiny."

The pope's next words had all the weight of a mandate: "'Go out to all nations,' Christ told his disciples (Mt 28: 19). And I repeat to you: 'Go out to all the world and bring the truth, the beauty, and the peace that meet in Christ redeemer.' [. . .] I know that you have already put down roots in eighteen nations in the world: in Europe, Africa, and America, and I also know the insistence with which other countries request your presence. Load yourselves with this ecclesial need: this is the charge I leave you today."

"The pope sends us out into all the world"

Upon returning from Rome, Giussani wrote a letter to the entire movement. He had felt great emotion at hearing the great charge to go out into all the world: "The pope has, firsthand, thrust open the boundaries of the Church's mission. The pope of the 'new evangelization' sends us out into all the world as announcers of that Event, Christ, of which he is the ultimate custodian and unequivocal guarantor in today's world." The pope's message brought out all "the sense of our own inadequacy, not only because we are constantly discovering our limits, but also because we feel terribly incoherent." Therefore, he invited everyone, "Pray for me, brothers and sisters, that I may be the

first to live these things, so as to make your great following less difficult. And all together we entrust our lives to God, in hopes that a new time of truth and peace flourishes in the hands of this great servant of Christ, John Paul II.”

On 19 November, Giussani again commented on the pope’s speech. He was referring to bishops from all over the world who were asking the movement to come to their dioceses. Speaking to a group of priests, what he said to them was almost an order: “We need to carry this speech around in our pockets all the time, to be able to put it under anyone’s nose, especially our own. We also went to the Bishops of Washington D.C., Boston, and New York, all of whom strongly desire our presence there. [. . .] n Dallas [. . .] we already have a small community.” He added that in Madrid there was “a group of parishes counted on by the Cardinal [Angel Suquía Goicoechea], that keeps in constant contact with our members to learn their method” (here, see page 501). Also, “there is a nice group going in Ireland; twenty-five people got together in London the other day for School of Community; [. . .] the movement is growing in Germany; [and] two of us are going to Belgium at the invitation of one of the Jesuits there.” Meanwhile, he went on, in Poland “I gave the first Spiritual Exercises for all the Polish members of Communion and Liberation, and there were one hundred and eighty people there, with about ten excellent priests.” He closed by pointing out that the pope’s task must not remain a mere intention: “Now it becomes a matter of obedience on our part.”

On 8 November 1984, during an encounter in Bologna, Giussani read and commented once again on the salient points of John Paul’s speech. ““ We believe in Christ dead and resurrected, in Christ present here and now, who alone can change and changes—transfiguring them— man and the world.’ [. . .] Transforming them: not eliminating man and the world. Not superimposing something else on them. But changing them from within, making them a new reality.”

““[T] he Spirit has stirred up many ecclesial movements in the contemporary Church to continue with contemporary man the dialogue God began in Christ and has continued throughout the entire course of Christian history.’ [. . .] It is the Christian fact that makes itself known as movement: not merely as abstract words, rites to carry out, and laws to apply, but as a happening that urges life forward. Like a child, who follows the great rules that allow him to become a man not because his parents make him memorize the theories, but because he is seized and urged on by the happening of the family.”

During those months, Giussani coined an expression that would become common currency in the movement in Italy: “Empty the boot” (“boot” alluding to the shape of the Italian peninsula —Trans.). It referred to the movement’s need to serve, in every possible way, the charge laid on them by the pope. “We have to empty the boot. If [the movement in] Italy had to be reduced to literally one tenth, or one hundredth of what it is now, I would personally be totally at peace, because it’s a missionary destination. It’s the nature of our experience.” And again: “We have to empty the boot. We have to turn Italy upside down and dump everyone out to go out into all the world.” He repeated this invitation when he spoke at the spiritual exercises for priests of the movement in September 1985.

“Event: the supreme method for knowing”

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 839- 843

The next day, 18 August, Giussani returned to the word “event,” referring to Charles Péguy, “an epic poet of this supreme characteristic of the Christian phenomenon. We have always turned to him for clues and support in our way of thinking and feeling, as though he were here among us as a friend.”

In *Notre jeunesse* [Memories of Youth] Péguy had written, “The most unexpected thing is always the thing that happens.” Giussani commented, “People— all people, ourselves included— call it ‘chance,’ [. . .] because nothing focuses our imagination on the Mystery, on the sign of the Mystery, like the word ‘chance.’” Giussani finished the quote from Péguy: “The most unexpected thing in the world is always the thing that happens. It’s enough to have lived just a little bit outside the history books to know and have experienced that all the things you wish would happen generally happen least, and all the things you haven’t wished to make happen generally simply occur.” For Giussani this meant that “the part you bring about is the fantastical part; you don’t bring about what happens.”

And to add further emphasis, he cited another Frenchman, the thinker Alain Finkielkraut. In an interview with *30Giorni* in June 1992 the philosopher had placed the category of event at the centre of his thought: “An event is something that bursts in from outside. Something unexpected. And this is the supreme method for knowing. [. . .] We need to restore event to its ontological dimension as a new beginning. It is an eruption of the new that busts the gears, that sets a process in motion.” In other words, Giussani said, it “sets a new world in motion, a new creature, a new creation.”

Giussani went on reading from Finkielkraut: “The most extraordinary thing is that, if we fail to preserve event, we completely lose touch with reality.” The philosopher observed that “modern culture as a whole, modern man, modern power, the modern government, modern politics, the modern revolution has completely lost contact with reality.” In this way, “man, rejecting reality as it offers itself to our bodily eyes, no longer attempts to shape his reason modeled on the image of the world, but rather to construct a world modeled on the image of his reason. Experience is abolished.” Giussani explained that he had read the passage from Finkielkraut in order to clarify that “event reveals Being,” and that it had a synonym in “the concept of experience. Therefore,

experience as a new and richer perception of reality is an event. If it's not an event, it's not experience."

Christianity was the beginning of a new world, Giussani explained, which manifested itself in the form of unity among those who recognize Christ. To emphasize the tenderness he felt towards the figure of Christ, he recalled a conversation he had had with a young man who had fallen in love: "'What is your girlfriend made of?' 'Flesh and bones.' 'But ultimately, what is she made of?' 'God's Mystery.' 'That is, she is made of Christ, because the living God who creates man is the God who revealed himself in Christ. Who was it that led you to meet her? The Lord of time, the Lord of history: Christ. Who is it that will never take her away from you for all eternity? Who has put you together with her for eternity? Christ!'" At these words, the young man exclaimed: "My God! But then this Christ is sweeter than my sweetheart!" Giussani replied, "He is more: He is the one who allows her."

Giussani set aside a deeper exploration of the topic for the following days, during the university student Equipe in La Thuile, in the Alpine valley of Aosta, which took place from 19 to 25 August 1992. Di Martino remembers those days vividly: "We were all left literally with our mouths hanging open. The topic blossomed, or more precisely, exploded in Giussani's two lectures. It was an incandescent moment of thought, an apex that oriented all the developments of the previous years and also constituted, in my view, the first sketches of the blueprint that would become his book *Generating Traces in the History of the World*: a work that would document the new and deeper level of awareness he had reached." The main category of all Giussani's thought was "event." He used it to identify the nature of Christianity, and he often used it in combination with "chance" or "unexpected," to highlight its irreducibility to any design, power, claim, or prediction. "But he had never [before] paused to carry out an extended reflection on the concept of event and its relationship with knowing," Di Martino observes. The interview Finkelkraut had granted [to *30Giorni*], which focused on Péguy and his notion of event, and which contained language very close to that regularly used by Giussani, had given him the launch pad he needed. Giussani's thought was always alive; it leapt up when it met new people, situations, and occasions. It reacted with acute sensitivity to the slightest provocation. "He certainly didn't follow standard academic pathways," Di Martino points out. "He didn't have the time, but he had an inner brilliance that was always ready to leap out. During those days, we witnessed one of these eruptions."

What Giussani said was this: “An event [. . .] is ‘something’ that introduces itself unexpectedly. It is unforeseeable, unforeseen factor: a non-consequence of the factors that came before. The nearest word to ‘event’ is ‘chance;’ the word ‘chance’ means something presence of which is not explainable to our watching eyes. So, we might say that an event is something purely and ultimately chance-based, random as far as our reason and our abilities are concerned. For our capacity to investigate and grasp, an event is an event to the extent that it is unfathomable, that it has some element that escapes us.”

And as a counterpoint to Finkielkraut, who had stated, following Péguy, that “[a] n event is something that bursts in from outside. Something unexpected. And this is *the supreme method for knowing*,” Giussani replied, “To know is to find yourself facing something new, something foreign to yourself, not made by yourself [. . .]. The word event is, therefore, crucial for every kind of knowledge.” He gave an example: “Many years ago I was walking on Mount Pana, following a trail that climbs up from one of the villages in the Gardena Valley, near Sasso Lungo. The kid walking in front of me kept looking at the ground, picking up rocks here and there. After watching him for a while I understood what he was doing: collecting fossils [. . .]. When he spotted a rock with the imprinted outline of a fossil, he made a ‘discovery:’ an event entered into his life, and through it he knew something more.”

This was also (and perhaps above all) true for self-knowledge, knowledge of one’s own “I,” and this point was Giussani’s main target. He would spend years denouncing, in increasingly clear and dramatic terms, the great confusion and negligence surrounding the self: “The conception of and sensitivity to the self are tragically confused in our civilization.” “Only an event [. . .] can make the self clear and substantial in its integral elements. This is a paradox that no philosophy or theory— sociological or political— can tolerate: that there is an event. Not an analysis, not a measurement of feelings, but a catalyst which allows the elements of our self to come to light with clarity and to fall into place before our eyes, before our awareness, with a clearness that is firm, long-lasting, and stable.”

If it were true that only an event could trigger the process of beginning to say “I,” then it was necessary to take a further step, in which the word “event” became “the only category that can define what Christianity is (Christianity can be totally reduced to this category).” This step was a necessary one: “It is the Christian event that serves as the proper catalyst of self-knowledge, that makes a clear and stable perception of the self

possible, and that permits the self to become operative as self. Outside of the Christian event, you cannot understand what the self is. And the Christian event is [. . .] something new, something foreign, that comes from outside, and therefore something unthinkable, unimaginable, that cannot be ascribed to some reconstruction of our own, but rather bursts in on our life.”

What was the hallmark form of the Christian event? “A human encounter in the commonplace reality of our everyday life [. . .]. The Christian event appears, reveals itself, in our encounter with the lightness, the sheerness, the apparent flimsiness of a face that we glimpse in the crowd: a face like all the others, and yet so different from the others that, when we meet it, it’s as though everything were suddenly simplified. You catch sight of it for an instant, and then as you walk away you carry within you the blow from that gaze, thinking to yourself: ‘I should like to see that face again!’”

After making this point, Giussani used his speaking time through to the end of his second lesson to offer a sequence of additional steps, in-depth explanations, and further developments leading to the “totalizing” and “catholic” (universal) nature of the Christian event, and to make some additional comments on “mission.”

The audience at the Equipe had the impression that they were witnessing Giussani in a moment of exceptional fruitfulness and hearing the happy finalization of thoughts and reflections that had been developing and weighing on his mind throughout the preceding years. Di Martino recalls, “Fr. Giussani himself had that impression. I distinctly remember the way he greeted me on Via Martinengo, before the regular lunch with the CLU leadership, on the day the first preview copies of the text of his two lectures were released. They were entitled *In cammino* [On the journey]. He had just re-read them, and he was glowing with excitement, as though he had noticed the richness of the contents all over again and was stunned by it (it was an attitude I had seen in him many times). He had an extremely humble and profound gratitude for the fact that he had been given the gift of understanding and expressing things.” Giussani gave the text of his talks broad impact, pushing it in every possible setting with dogged determination. *In cammino* caused quite a stir, even within the movement: the force and audacity of some of the concepts, starting with that of event, provoked some degree of disapproval. Giussani himself acknowledged, “People don’t ‘like’ to take that step you might say, because it lets in and offers hospitality to something that does not correspond to our fantasy or to the image we have of experience.”