
7 For Man

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When I gave the lecture on which this chapter is based during the presentation of the Spanish edition of Luigi Giussani's book *The Religious Sense*, I was not simply performing a formal act of protocol or acting out of what could seem to be simple professional curiosity about a work bringing into focus an explanation of our faith.¹ Above all, I was expressing the gratitude that is due to Msgr Giussani. For many years now, his writings have inspired me to reflect and have helped me to pray. They have taught me to be a better Christian, and I spoke at the presentation to bear witness to this.

Msgr Giussani is one of those unexpected gifts the Lord gave to our Church after Vatican II. He has caused a wealth of individuals and movements to rise up outside the pastoral structures and programs, movements that are offering miracles of new life within the Church. On 30 May 1998, in St Peter's Square, the Pope met publicly with the new communities and ecclesial movements. It was a truly transcendent event. He asked specifically for four founders from among the many movements to give their witness. Among these was Msgr Giussani, who in 1954, the year he began teaching religion in a public high school in Milan, initiated Communion and Liberation, which is present today in more than sixty countries in the world and is much beloved by the Pope.

The Religious Sense is not a book exclusively for members of the movement, however, nor is it only for Christians or believers. It is a book for all human beings who take their humanity seriously. I dare say that today the primary question we must face is not so much the

problem of God – the existence, the knowledge of God – but the problem of the human, of human knowledge and finding in humans themselves the mark that God has made, so as to be able to meet with Him.

FIDES ET RATIO

By happy coincidence, the presentation of Giussani's book was held the day after the publication of Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, which opens with this dense consideration:

Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions that pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.²

Giussani's book is in tune with the encyclical: it is for all people who take their humanity seriously, who take these questions seriously.

Paradoxically, in *The Religious Sense* little is said about God and much is said about human beings. Much is said about our "whys," much about our ultimate needs. Quoting the Protestant theologian Niebuhr, Giussani explains that "Nothing is so incredible as an answer to an unasked question."³ And one of the difficulties of our supermarket culture – where offers are made to everyone to hush the clamouring of their hearts – lies in giving voice to those questions of the heart. This is the challenge. Faced with the torpor of life, with this tranquillity offered at a low cost by the supermarket culture (even if in a wide assortment of ways), the challenge consists in asking ourselves the real questions about human meaning, of our existence, and in answering these questions. But if we wish to answer questions that we do not dare to answer, do not know how to answer, or cannot formulate, we fall into absurdity. For man and woman who have forgotten or censored their fundamental "whys" and the burning desire of their hearts, talking to them about God ends up being something abstract or esoteric or a push toward a devotion that has no effect on their lives. You cannot start a discussion of God without first blowing away the ashes

suffocating the burning embers of the fundamental whys. The first step is to make some sense of the questions that are hidden or buried, that are perhaps almost dying but that nevertheless exist.

THE RESTLESSNESS OF THE HEART

The drama of the world today is the result not only of the absence of God but also and above all of the absence of humankind, of the loss of the human physiognomy, of human destiny and identity, and of a certain capacity to explain the fundamental needs that dwell in the human heart. The prevailing mentality, and deplorably that of many Christians, supposes that there is an unbreachable opposition between reason and faith. Instead – and here lies another paradox – *The Religious Sense* emphasizes that speaking seriously about God means exalting and defending reason and discovering its value and the right way to use it. This is not reason understood as a pre-established measure of reality but reason open to reality in all its factors and whose starting point is experience, whose starting point is this ontological foundation that awakens a restlessness in the heart. It is not possible to raise the question of God calmly, with a tranquil heart, because this would be to give an answer without a question. Reason that reflects on experience is a reason that uses as a criterion for judgment the measuring of everything against the heart – but “heart” taken in the Biblical sense, that is, as the totality of the innate demands that everyone has, the need for love, for happiness, for truth, and for justice. The heart is the core of the internal transcendent, where the roots of truth, beauty, goodness, and the unity that gives harmony to all of being are planted. We define human reason in this sense and not as rationalism, that laboratory rationalism, idealism, or nominalism (this last so much in fashion now), which can do everything, which claims to possess reality because it is in possession of the number, the idea, or the rationale of things, or, if we want to go even further, which claims to possess reality by means of an absolutely dominating technology that surpasses us in the very moment in which we use it, so that we fall into a form of civilization that Guardini liked to call the second form of unculture. We instead speak of a reason that is not reduced, is not exhausted in the mathematical, scientific, or philosophical method. Every method, in fact, is suited to its own sphere of application and to its specific object.

EXISTENTIAL CERTAINTY

Concerning personal relationships, the only adequate method for reaching true knowledge is to live and live together a vivid companionship

that, through multiple experiences and manifold signs, allows us to arrive at what Giussani calls "moral certainty," or even better, "existential certainty."⁴ This is the only adequate method because certainty does not reside in the head but in the harmony of all the human faculties, and it is in possession at the same time of all the requisites for a real and a rational certainty. In its turn, faith is, precisely, a particular application of the method of moral or existential certainty, a particular case of faith in others, in the signs, evidence, convergences, witness of others. Despite this, faith is not contrary to reason. Like all typically human acts, faith is reasonable, which does not imply that it can be reduced to mere reasoning. It is reasonable – let us push the term – but not reasoning.

Why is there pain, why death, why evil? Why is life worth living? What is the ultimate meaning of reality, of existence? What sense does it make to work, love, become involved in the world? Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? These are the great and primary questions that young people ask, and adults too – and not only believers but everyone, atheists and agnostics alike. Sooner or later, especially in the situations at the very edge of existence, in the face of great grief or great love, in the experience of educating one's children or of working at a job that apparently makes no sense, these questions inevitably rise to the surface. They cannot be uprooted. I have said that they are questions that even agnostics ask, and I would like to mention here, paying him homage, a great poet from Buenos Aires, an agnostic, Horacio Armani. Whoever reads his poems encounters a sage exposition of questions that are open to an answer.

THE TOTAL RESPONSE

Human beings cannot be content with reductive or partial answers that force them to censor or neglect some aspect of reality. In fact, however, we do neglect some aspect of reality, and when we do so we are only running away from ourselves. We need a total response that comprehends and saves the entire horizon of the self and our existence. We possess within us a yearning for the infinite, an infinite sadness, a *nostalgia* – the *nostos algos* (home sickness) of Odysseus – which is satisfied only by an equally infinite response. The human heart proves to be the sign of a Mystery, that is, of something or someone who is an infinite response. Outside the Mystery, the needs for happiness, love, and justice never meet a response that fully satisfies the human heart. Life would be an absurd desire if this response did not exist. Not only does the human heart present itself as a sign, but so does all of reality. The sign is something concrete, it points in a direction, it indicates

something that can be seen, that *reveals* a meaning, that can be experienced, but that refers to another reality that cannot be seen; otherwise, the sign would be meaningless.

On the other hand, to interrogate oneself in the face of these signs, one needs an extremely human capacity, the first one we have as men and women: wonder, the capacity to be amazed, as Giussani calls it, in the last analysis, a child's heart. The beginning of every philosophy is wonder, and only wonder leads to knowledge. Notice that moral and cultural degradation begin to arise when this capacity for wonder is weakened or cancelled or when it dies. The cultural opiate tends to cancel, weaken, or kill this capacity for wonder. Pope Luciani once said that the drama of contemporary Christianity lies in the fact that it puts categories and norms in the place of wonder. But wonder comes before all categories; it is what leads me to seek, to open myself up; it is what makes the answer – not a verbal or conceptual answer – possible for me. If wonder opens me up as a question, the only response is the *encounter*, and only with the encounter is my thirst quenched. And with nothing else is it quenched more.

NOTES

- 1 Translated by Susan Scott.
- 2 The presentation was for L. Giussani, *El sentido religioso*, revised ed. with notes, translated by José Miguel Oriol, in collaboration with Cesare Zaffanella and José Miguel García (Buenos Aires and Madrid: Editorial Sudamericana and Ediciones Encuentro 1998).
- 3 *Fides et ratio*, par. 1.
- 4 R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (London and New York: Nisbet 1943), 6.
- 5 L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1997), 19–21.

A Generative Thought

An Introduction to the
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