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How Can we Experience Faith in the Contemporary World?

The contemporary relevance of Fr. Luigi Giussani

Rimini, August 29, 2014 – A pivotal session of the Meeting was held today at 5 pm, on the topic of faith, in light of Fr. Giussani's biography, "Vita di don Giussani", written by Alberto Savorana, an historian and spokesperson for CL. Among the panelists, introduced and moderated by Savorana, were Shodo Habukawa, a Buddhist Monk of Mount Koya, Japan; Mauro Magatti, Professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of Milan, and Massimo Borghesi, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Perugia.

Savorana began by noting the key steps of Fr. Giussani's human and spiritual journey: "Ever since he became aware of himself, Fr. Giussani lived his life driven by questions. His life story is significant, because he walked his journey with an inexorable openness to reality." Describing Fr. Giussani's decisive encounter with his students at Berchet high school in 1954, Savorana recalled how Giussani realized that Christianity was totally irrelevant for their lives. This moved him to get involved with students, in order to communicate Christ to them. "I'm not here to force you to blindly accept my statements, but rather to pass along a method to you," he used to say. He also used to add: "I was convinced that if faith cannot be found and confirmed by the experience of the present, and useful in responding to one's needs, it wouldn't be able to stand up to a world in which the opposite is held true."

Today, almost ten years after Fr. Giussani's death, Fr. Julián Carrón, in the introduction to a recently re-issued book, titled "The Movement of Communion and Liberation. Conversations with Robi Ronza," writes: "Many times, in past years, while reading Fr. Giussani's writings in the light of the most pressing questions in our lives, we noticed that his words were acquiring a new light for us and almost became more relevant now than when we read them the first time. There are moments in which we see that Fr. Giussani speaks more to our life today than when we first heard the same words spoken by him in person." The Pope's words in his message to the Rimini Meeting echo Carrón's, when he says that the question nowadays is: "How can we communicate Christ today to a generation that is constantly changing?"

Habukawa recounted his first encounter with Fr. Giussani and how he experienced truth unexpectedly: "It was June 28, 1987. I saw a person who seemed to me as though he came from the center of the Universe: it was as if he came out from the sun, at the beginning of summer. We were united by a long embrace." The monk then disclosed an anecdote: "During a visit to the Reihokan, Fr. Giussani remained deeply struck by a Buddhist goddess, with thousand arms and thousand eyes, representing the present, past, and future and the possibility of everyone being saved." He expressed his fascination with Fr. Giussani's teaching, and concluded: "By opening up your heart to all that exists, you will be able to hear the voice of the Absolute."

"The voice of the Absolute speaks to us through circumstances," said Savorana, (picking up the conversation) and raised a question to the other two panelists: "What are the traits that make up reality today? Please help us see how Fr. Giussani's teaching is useful today. What does his method have to say to us today, as we pursue a new beginning?"

Magatti was the first to address Savorana's provocation: "My encounter with you happened because of a curious discovery: at some point, I realized that many of the categories I was using in my work as a sociologist analysing our modern culture had already been proposed in Fr. Giussani's educative method. I then asked myself how a humble little priest like him could have possibly generated such a movement from scratch."

Magatti elaborated: "Fr. Giussani was able to deeply grasp and foresee the anthropological evolution that Italian society of the '50s was going through. Wealth, paired with democracy and the development of education facilitated a greater affirmation of the self: i.e., the experience of freedom available to millions of people." The man who eventually became the founder of CL truly lived the changes of his times without fleeing them, but "reinterpreting them so that young people could meet Christ."



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Magatti then pointed out some categories of modern thought and the relevant critical reading Fr. Giussani provided. While 'reality' was seen as interpreted in terms of materialism, Giussani offered a sense of its depth. 'Experience' was reduced to emotion, but Fr Giussani speaks about it as "the opportunity to exit one's own cage and encounter the other, up to the point of making a judgment." Whereas 'encounter' was considered total freedom, Fr. Giussani connects it to over-abundance which leads to transcendence. The same goes for the category of 'desire': whereas the world proposed it as mere enjoyment, Fr. Giussani introduced the concept of transcendent attraction. 'Realization' and 'fulfillment', which could end up in narcissism, Fr. Giussani were interpreted to mean vocation. "Fr. Giussani is the heir of a great human tradition, and through CL in the last fifty years, he has proposed a concrete response and a human context in which to meet the Christian experience."

Where are we today? "That experience has thus taken root and faces new challenges, while individualism is experiencing a big crisis. The twenty-first century has begun and the economic crisis of 2008 marks its beginning. Fr. Giussani entrusts us with a method: before anything else, we need to enter into the depths of the experience of our contemporaries in order to be able to meet them. Everything is reduced to appearance in this world of smoke and mirrors which doesn't allow us to see it in its depth. I feel we need to reiterate that the 'I' is relationship."

Borghesi began by suggesting a method to read Savorana's book on Fr. Giussani's life and work: "Fr. Giussani's voice and gaze were very deep: his charm derived more from his personality than from what he was saying. For this reason, the video accompanying the public presentations of his biography is essential. One needs to become one with that gaze, otherwise one reads the book in a detached way." Borghesi continued by offering some milestones in the life of Fr. Giussani: his family; his sensitivity, emerging particularly in his discovery of Leopardi as a friend; his experience in the Venegono seminary; and finally, key moments in his personal life (such as when, in 1954, he left 'academia' and decided to be around young students), which became the history of the CL Movement.

Borghesi concluded by chronologically documenting the milestones in the deepening of the charism. After the break-up of 1968, where it became evident that "there is something that comes before" our efforts; then a convention in Riccione in 1976, emphasized "the time of the I". After the Italian referendum on abortion, it was clear that the point was not so much "human values, but rather, experience." Another crucial moment is represented by the publication of the book "Un avvenimento di vita, cioè una storia-An Event of a Life, that is a History," published by the discontinued weekly magazine "Il Sabato. Borghesi continued: "The word 'event' is pregnant with the content of the Gospel. This is the content of the word 'identification' that Fr. Giussani is talking about. He doesn't simply read the Gospels, he sees the events in them. He defines faith with new words: the loving recognition of a presence." He continued to recent years, when Fr. Giussani was really sick: at the age of 74, he spoke about what needs to last, the essential. What is the essential? During his last days, he used to ask his friends to sing him a song titled "Noi non sappiamo chi era-We do not know who He was." It was not a particularly beautiful song, but it contained Jesus' name. "He wanted people to sing it, because he loved Jesus."

(G.L., C.R.)

Stefano Pichi Sermolli

Meeting Spokesperson, Head of the Press&Communication Office

Press Office: Erika Elleri

Tel: [+39/348.0138786](tel:+39348.0138786)

E-mail: erika.elleri@meetingrimini.org