

communion & liberation

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SEEKING A PATH FORWARD: Exploring the most substantial issues Christians grapple with today through the life experience of Luigi Giussani

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Echoes of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report and the McCarrick affair have reverberated through our country, evoking widespread uncertainty. In the midst of this uncertainty, the Church risks losing sight of the contribution it can make to the education of young people, as well as to social cohesion. Therefore it is critical to examine the questions that vibrate beneath this crisis and beg for answers: How do we educate our youth? What is the role of the lay Christian in the life of the Church? What is the role of the Church in the world?

In the hope of building a more authentic Church, many have offered responses to these questions. Every proposal, whether implicitly or explicitly, affirms a particular conception of Christianity; yet not all proposals are equally valid. How can we distinguish between those that merely reflect the broader ideological conflicts in society and those that are generated from an authentic Christian experience?

The recently published biography of Luigi Giussani, an influential Italian priest and educator whose experience gave birth to *Communion and Liberation*, offers Americans a case-study, of sorts, in providing a path forward from the troubled present. By examining how Giussani faced the questions provoked by the cultural upheaval of the late-1960s — which are the same questions provoked by our own era's turbulence and rapid change — we can draw the necessary inspiration to respond thoughtfully and authentically to the most significant issues Christians face in our current social context.

From March 9 to March 19, across the United States and Canada, several noted journalists, educators, and clerics will join Alberto Savorana, close collaborator of Luigi Giussani and author of his definitive biography, for ten roundtables to share their insights into the relevance of Giussani's life experience to today's context.

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Dates and Locations

Saturday, March 9 | Sheen Center, New York City: Margarita Mooney, Associate Professor, Princeton Theological Seminary; and Anujeet Sareen, portfolio manager at Brandywine Global in Philadelphia.

Sunday, March 10 | Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Helen Alvaré, Professor of Law at George Mason University School of Law; and Greg Erlandson, Director of Catholic News Service.

Monday, March 11 | St. John Vianney Seminary, Miami, FL: Miriam Cruz Bustillo, Senior Vice President of Legal and Business Affairs and General Counsel for Ole Communications; and Rod Dreher, Senior Editor at *The American Conservative*.

Tuesday, March 12 | Los Angeles, CA: Jason Blakely, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Pepperdine University; and Kristi Brown-Montesano, Chair of Music History at the Colburn Conservatory of Music.

Wednesday, March 13 | Denver, CO: John Allen, Editor of *Crux*; and JD Flynn, Editor-in-Chief of Catholic News Agency, a media apostolate of EWTN.

Thursday, March 14 | Omaha, NE: Rev. Scott Hastings, Vicar for Clergy and Judicial Vicar of the Archdiocese of Omaha; and Michael Waldstein, Professor of the New Testament at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Saturday, March 16 | Minneapolis, MN: Jon Balsbaugh, President of Trinity Schools, Inc.; and Marcie Stokman, founder of Well-Read Mom.

Sunday, March 17 | Evansville, IN: Bishop Steven Raica, Ordinary of the Diocese of Gaylord, Michigan; and Stephanie Stokman, educator.

Monday, March 18 | Chicago, IL: Conor Hill, Headmaster of Chesterton Academy of The Holy Family in Downers Grove, Illinois; and Tim O'Malley, Director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy.

Tuesday, March 19 | Montreal, Canada: Christine Jones, President of Catholic Pacific College in Langley, British Columbia; and Fr. John Meehan, Prefect of L'Église du Gesù in Montreal.

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A Brief Introduction to the Thought of Luigi Giussani

Although the 1950s appeared to provide the ideal context for the spreading of Catholic thought and ethics — full churches, traditional family values, the teaching of religion in public schools — a crisis was looming. Christians participated in religious activities, but for the most part faith was lived, at best, only as a vague ethical impulse (394). People, Giussani noticed, had no profound motivation for belief, a lack that showed itself especially in schools and universities, where Christians were entirely indistinguishable from other students. The prominent Catholic associations had become vehicles for mere moralism, the observance of specific rules deriving from a few commandments. Meanwhile, the Communists stood out prominently and proved themselves capable of a presence and a unity unknown to Catholic youth (170).

The dualism that permeated society revealed an immature Christian experience. Christianity had morphed into a vague spiritual inspiration, and faith had devolved into rules of behavior (401). This dualistic mentality prompted many, especially among the youth, to leave this nebulous form of Christianity and throw themselves into a social and political activism that sought a more sincere and just society (322). The restlessness of that era, which provoked the wave of late-'60s student uprisings, was driven by a desire for authenticity.

Furthermore, the inability to use one's experience as the source of a systematic and critical judgment led to the adoption of criteria provided by the ideologies of the day, which promised a more immediate and effective result (402). Also, the devaluing of the role of experience resulted in the dismissing of authority under the illusion that following a teacher was unnecessary for one's personal maturity. As a result, people unwittingly conformed to the dominant, fashionable forces of the day (402).

Confronted by this challenge, Giussani left his theological studies to devote his life to guiding young people in the rediscovery of Christianity's essential elements, to show them how Christ is relevant to life's needs and can meet the fundamental, original yearning in every human heart (169).

For Giussani, the Christian announcement is a person, Jesus of Nazareth (408) — a person who, once encountered, introduces an irreducible novelty to life (412). The encounter with Christ is a contemporary event, lived in the company of those who follow Him. Sharing life with Him, a more acute awareness of oneself develops almost by osmosis (359) and, as a result, a new humanity springs forth (490). Christ cannot be followed outside the companionship of His followers (180). Merely affirming or repeating that Christ is the infinite fulfillment sought by every human being is not enough (92). When faced with challenges, the isolated Christian either retreats, or, as time goes by, absorbs the poison of the environment and, without noticing it, starts to think, judge, and

act like everybody else (213).

While Giussani saw no lack in the Christian ideal itself, the method used to communicate it to contemporary society had been, to that point, unsuccessful (240). He understood the urgent need for an educational path in an increasingly hostile societal context (220), a method that could be used to discern whether Christ is who He says He is (181). Giussani invited his students to compare everything that happened to and around them with the fundamental needs of their hearts (238), for he was convinced that truth carries within itself the evidence of its reasons and that the human heart can recognize it (189). The disciples followed Christ because in His words they felt their whole human experience was understood and their needs were taken seriously and clarified (255). The life of a Christian, in fact, consists in seeing how everything documents the profound correspondence that exists between Christ and a person's humanity (403).

Giussani called this ongoing comparison "experience," and emphasized its role as the main tool in verifying the validity of the Christian announcement. Without a proper attention to — and respect for — the education and development of human experience, it is impossible to apprehend who Christ is for one's life (256). Authentic human experience is not mere impression or sentimentality; rather, experience is discovering the meaning of something by discovering its connection to the whole — that is, by realizing its purpose and function in the world (307).

God's involvement with the person is the unique starting point of Christian action in society (430). When this involvement is not lived as a present, ongoing reality in communion with others, people stop being attached to Christ and faith inevitably morphs into a socio-political ideology. According to Fr. Giussani, the name Communion and Liberation is the definitive formula of Christian presence in the world (425), for the Christian communion is the world's liberation (422).

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What is CL?

Communion and Liberation (CL) is a companionship inspired by the thought and experience of Luigi Giussani. It is a unique friendship eager to share in all aspects and needs of life. The name CL describes this companionship's presence in the world, an experience of faith in God lived in communion, which is the person's true liberation.

CL communities form spontaneously at school, in the workplace, and in the neighborhood. No formal registration is necessary. Anyone is welcome to join. Currently, CL is present in about ninety countries on nearly every continent, and in over forty US states.

Community Life

There are three proposals at the center of life in CL: School of Community, charitable work, and the Common Fund. School of Community consists of reading a text and meditating upon it, followed by a communal meeting in which everyone is encouraged to continuously compare the Christian proposal in the text with their own life experience, in order to verify Christianity's capacity to respond to each human need and illuminate every aspect of reality. Charitable work is a regular commitment to serve those in need as the means to a personal education in the most important "law" of human existence: charity. The Common Fund is a monthly financial contribution, the amount of which is decided independently and privately, to sustain the community's charitable, missionary, and cultural initiatives.

CL's Presence in Society

The awareness that faith is not something "apart from" daily responsibilities, choices, and endeavors, but is pertinent to all of these, motivates many members of CL to dedicate themselves to creating charitable, cultural, and educational initiatives in a wide variety of contexts. Among these initiatives are schools, cultural centers and festivals, rehab communities for those struggling with addiction, business cooperatives to assist owners and entrepreneurs, and nonprofit organizations dedicated to human development in disadvantaged countries. Many of these initiatives are conducted in collaboration with people from other organizations and faith traditions. All of these endeavors are the fruit of the free and independent initiative of members, and consequently are their personal responsibility. CL plays no role in the leadership or management of the organizations created by its members, with one exception: the Fondazione Sacro Cuore (Sacred Heart Foundation) in Milan, a K-12 school created at Giussani's request.

CL's Presence in the Catholic Church

Giussani's charism also gave birth to various forms of associations aimed at sustaining Christian adults in their personal vocations as laypeople, consecrated men or women, and diocesan or missionary priests. Chief among them is the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation.

The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation is a Universal Association of the Faithful recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on February 11, 1982. Founded and presided over by Giussani until his death, today the Fraternity is led by Julián Carrón, and its members in the various groups — spread across many continents — number about 67,000 adults. The Fraternity was born out of the experience of those who, having completed their studies, wanted to continue living their belonging to the Church within a communal dimension, following Giussani's charism. Membership entails a simple rule of life: daily moments of prayer; participation in the annual Spiritual Exercises and retreats; and a free commitment to give support, financial and otherwise, to the charitable, missionary, and cultural initiatives promoted or supported by the Fraternity.

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Luigi Giussani (1922-2005)

Luigi Giussani was born on October 15, 1922, in Desio, a small town north of Milan, Italy. His parents were Beniamino, an artist and carpenter, and Angelina, who worked in a textile factory. Beniamino was a Socialist, while his wife was a devout Catholic. They played a fundamental role in the human and religious formation of young Luigi.

Giussani entered the seminary of Venegono at the age of eleven, and was ordained a priest on May 26, 1945, by Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster. He completed his doctorate in theology in 1954, with a thesis on *Man's Christian Sense According to Reinhold Niebuhr*. While finishing his dissertation, Giussani came to realize that underneath the apparent flourishing of Catholicism in Italy, with churches full and thousands of votes going to the Christian Democrat party, a deep crisis was already brewing. Though young people knew the doctrines and dogmas, nevertheless they were growing distant from the Church. Seeing this, Giussani asked his superiors for permission to teach religion in a public high school. Beginning in 1954, he taught at Liceo Berchet, a public high school in Milan. His presence in the school gave new energy to *Gioventù Studentesca* (GS or "Student Youth").

In 1968, GS was overtaken by the political upheavals of the time, and many of its members abandoned the Christian life and joined a Marxist student organization.

In the early 1970s, Giussani became directly involved with a group of students at the Catholic University of Milan, where he had been teaching "Introduction to Theology" since 1964. During that time, he laid the groundwork for a recovery of the experience at the origin of GS, and adopted the name "Communion and Liberation." An organic synthesis of what he taught was published in the form of the three-volume "PerCorso," ("itinerary"): *The Religious Sense; At the Origin of the Christian Claim; and Why the Church?* These were years of great dynamism, which saw the expansion of CL into every realm of life: high school, university, parishes, factories and the workplace — often successfully challenging mindsets that were politically or culturally hostile. Giussani did not shy away from the risks of such turbulent growth, and untiringly called members back to the "true nature" of CL as an experience to mature in faith, continually pointing out the consequences of this at the intellectual, organizational, and political levels.

From the outset of GS, Giussani regarded mission and ecumenism as vital aspects of the Christian proposal. Inspired by this, several GS university students moved to Brazil in the early 1960s to accompany friends and establish a presence. Meanwhile, his friendship with Fr. Romano Scalfi and the association Russia Cristiana multiplied Giussani's ties to Eastern Europe. In response to John Paul II's warm encouragement in 1984 to "go into all the world," the presence of CL around the globe continued to grow — primarily in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. A

special relationship developed with the CL community in Spain, where Giussani periodically made extended visits.

The beginning of the 1990s brought the appearance of the first signs of the illness that would accompany him for over a decade, increasing in severity until his death. It was also during these years that Giussani presented a number of his most enduring meditations, including *Time and the Temple*, *Is it Possible to Live This Way?* and *Generating Traces in the History of the World* — all expressions of an extraordinary season of creativity focused on the themes of the Christian event and the mystery of God.

On February 22, 2005, he died at his home in Milan. The funeral Mass was celebrated in the Duomo by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, serving as the personal representative of John Paul II. His tomb remains the destination for a steady stream of pilgrims from Italy and around the world.

Cardinal Angelo Scola, Archbishop of Milan, opened the cause for Giussani's canonization on the seventh anniversary of his death.

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Timeline

1922 Luigi Giussani is born in Desio, a small town north of Milan, October 15, 1922.

1945 He is ordained a priest by Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster.

1954 Giussani begins teaching religion at the Liceo Berchet, a public high school in Milan. A group of students forms around him and joins *Gioventù Studentesca* (GS), initially a part of Catholic Action in the Archdiocese of Milan.

1957 Cardinal Montini writes a Lenten pastoral letter to the Archdiocese of Milan titled “On the Religious Sense” in which he “spells out” the situation of the Catholic faith in the 1950s. In December of the same year, Giussani publishes a text entitled *The Religious Sense*, which will be the foundation of his lifelong pedagogical work.

1958 A small group of adults, desiring to embrace a vocation of complete dedication to God while living in the world, forms around Giussani. The group will become known as the *Gruppo Adulto*, or *Memores Domini*.

1962 A missionary presence in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, run solely by GS students, begins. The association brings together people in CL who wish to live a vocation of complete dedication to God while living in the world.

1965 Giussani steps down from the leadership of GS and begins teaching at Catholic University in Milan. He will also spend a few months in the US researching the history of American Protestantism.

1968 The crisis of GS that began in the mid-1960s reaches its high point. Thousands of young people leave to join a student movement with Marxist leanings.

1969 A group of students, desiring to continue living the experience of GS, starts to meet in the university. Serious to communicate their experience, even in an inhospitable environment, they begin to produce flyers and bulletins. The most noted one bears the heading, “Communion and Liberation: to Build the Church is to Free Mankind.” From this flyer, CL takes its name.

1973 CL organizes its first public conference, with the theme: “In the Italian Universities for Freedom.”

1977 CL is attacked by extreme leftist and right-wing groups: there are 120 recorded cases of aggression and violence aimed at individuals.

1978 Several groups of adults form “confraternities”; these will be the precursors to the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation.

1982 The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation is declared an “Association of Pontifical Right” by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on February 11.

1984 Pope John Paul II receives 10,000 members of CL and encourages them with a new mandate: “Go into the whole world and bring the truth, the beauty, and the peace that are found in Christ the Redeemer.”

1985 The Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo is established. In Spain, the Nueva Tierra Association merges with CL.

1988 The *Memores Domini* are recognized by the Holy See as a “Universal Private Ecclesial Association.”

1997 *The Religious Sense* is presented at the UN upon the initiative of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations.

1998 Giussani speaks at the International Congress of Ecclesial Movements, in St. Peter’s Square, presided by Pope John Paul II.

2005 On February 22, Giussani passes away at his home in Milan. Cardinal Ratzinger gives the homily at the funeral Mass. The following month, the Fraternity of CL elects Julián Carrón as its new President.

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Book information

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