

Open Christianity*

1. *The first observation is that many young people are ignorant in matters of religion; many others, are knowledgeable but not convinced.*

Once, on my way to Rimini, I happened to find myself with a group of high school students whom I engaged in conversation. I was flabbergasted by their frighteningly total ignorance. I met another four or five high school students on a second journey to Ancona and, having deliberately led the conversation to the subjects of the first encounter, I had to come to the same conclusion. The two groups of young people came from two different regions in Italy, from different ethnic backgrounds.

Back in Milan I pursued my research and discoveries (research is always conducted when there is the hypothesis of a discovery) with the students who would catch the same train as I in my return journey from the metropolis to the Seminary in Venegono.¹ These students were from schools on the fringes of the province of Milan and they left me with the same impression. And so I thought to myself: "It is necessary that the Paradise of Theology be premised by the Purgatory of toil in this life." I truly felt this to be a duty. How could I just sit there contemplating being and essence - awesomely beautiful things if people were doing fine - if my Christian brethren continued to lull in ignorance and indifference? The first question I asked young people for a few months, waving my finger at them, especially if they wore the Catholic Action badge, was: "Pardon me, are you truly a believer?" I got consternated looks from them and quite honestly I do not remember one single young person replying with the immediate confidence that reveals a stable inner life. I do not remember anyone simply answering "Yes".

Of course these statistics must not be taken at face value for they need to be evaluated. Sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen year-olds are psychologically at a critical stage. Their personality, which is defined and measured by a solid unity, has not yet been formulated. Their freedom cannot yet cleave to what their intelligence sees. Their will cannot cling to reason in a reliable and sure fashion. A youth of that age or even slightly older would always bristle a bit at being confronted with such a question point-blank. Nonetheless their way of reacting to my questions obviously revealed their lack of enthusiasm - a total absence of true enthusiasm - and this in turn, a tenuous persuasion and conviction.

2. *Young people lack enthusiasm and conviction because they lack active commitment.*

As this experience proceeded I noted an interesting fact and received insight and confirmation from the words of St Thomas Aquinas. "In hoc enim aliquis percipit se animam habere et vivere et esse, quod percipit se sentire et intelligere et alia huiusmodi opera vitae exercere."² We might translate this axiom thus: "through action, you understand that

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¹ The seminary of the Archdiocese of Milan, where Giussani taught until 1954 is located in the town of Venegono.

² St Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* 10,8.

you exist.” If you are in a coma or have fainted or are totally vacant, you do not realize that you exist. The more you commit yourself with your vital energy, the more you realize what you are.

Thus it becomes clear what we can say to young people: “Do you understand that problems such as: ‘Why is it worthwhile living?’, ‘What is the sense of existence?’, ‘Why am I in this world?’, have only one answer and this answer depends on your level of commitment? If you do not commit yourself, boredom will not only frame your life but will take over the whole canvas. If your commitment is scarce you will have flimsy matter to work with, too lean for you to realize the solidity of your person or your being.”

When speaking to young people we always try to clarify their ideas, but we fall into deception. How often I’ve experienced this! After demonstrating a principle, I will ask: “Have you anything to say?” – “No!” – “Any reason to object?” – “No!” – “So you accept this?” – “No!” How often has a religion teacher, not for personal tastes but to impress the lesson in the minds of the pupils, said: “I don’t mind whether you accept me or not, but for the moment I am right”. The class is of course perplexed and so the teacher insists: “You have to concede that I am right because you have no objection to the contrary; you have to say ‘yes.’” And the teacher gets the class to say “yes.” It is easy to understand how worthless, how totally unconvincing that “yes” is. Things remain as they were.

3. Conviction is not only a problem of intelligence but also and above all a problem of energy and action.

We see the dissociation that exists, especially in the young, between reason and the rest of their being, their person. When does reason become conviction? When does one feel totally bound inside? When does one feel the passage from reason to all of being come true and when does one experience in oneself the unity that is being created? The problem of conviction must not be only a matter of intelligence. It must also be a problem of freedom and will. Once the reasons are before us there is still much to do, because these reasons are abstract, extraneous; they are still sounds and words. So an act of energy is required, a sort of violence, ever necessary since original sin. With this energy or violence I can bring my being to accept the idea and the plan of intelligence.

At first, this energy will seem to bring the two parts together from the outside, but if it lasts, there will soon be an irresistible osmotic pressure, and slowly the idea proposed to me becomes my flesh and blood.

Therefore, the great challenge in dealing with teenagers does not really consist in the effort of rational demonstration. This is not even the issue but only a premise. Undoubtedly this premise is doggedly insisted upon nowadays but unfortunately must be relegated to the domain of the useless unless we proceed beyond to the true problem. Never as in the present has a conscious culture been asked of us. Never as in the present has an intellectual astuteness been asked of us, an unmistakable clarity, a mathematical precision; but this is not what is going to save us, or take the bull by the horns and make decisions, or even so much as manage to touch us. This may at best touch some people, those extremely rare individuals who can still be moved to tears by a geometrical construction.

4. By recalling the structural needs of the human and Christian conscience we can stir that energy and determination from which alone is born conviction and then enthusiasm.

If the rational demonstration is but a premise (we regret to admit that it is only a premise: this is asking a great deal of us!), the true problem ought to consist in the effort to draw

out the commitment of energy and action. How do we stimulate this energy, how do we provoke that determination from which alone is born conviction and then enthusiasm? We must search out those reasons and motives that are not really philosophical explanation or ideological clarification but are those moments and motives in human life that we might compare to the basic requirements of biological life. Human and Christian awareness, like biological life, has basic requirements. What are they? Jesus could not have been successful in moving millions of human beings - and he continues to do so - without touching those basic needs of the conscience. He was able to revive the structural needs of the conscience. He quenched that thirst.

5. The Christian proposal today does not deny the structural needs of the human and Christian conscience but it dodges or ignores them. Spiritual directors keep souls under their personal control.

At this point a very deep suspicion springs to mind: if the Christian proposal today no longer stimulates the energy required to accept it with conviction, then something inherent to it is missing. What is it? I am familiar with the male and female Catholic associations in the city and the country, which are often in a deep state of crisis. Their chaplains beg me to intervene and do something: "We have to start all over again," they tell us, "You've got to come and put some life back into this because everything here has wilted away." If the Christian proposal no longer stirs that commitment, if it no longer represents to the human conscience those motives that, as the word says, place one in movement, make one decide, might it not be that this proposal is unable to touch the basic structures of that conscience? I am not saying that the Christian proposal today denies the basic structures of the human and Christian conscience but I would be inclined to say that these structures or dimensions are ignored, left untouched and in disuse.

Let us consider, for example, what is normally asked of Christians during confession. Have you said your prayers? For how long? Have you followed meditations diligently? What about purity, how's it going there? How many sins did you commit last month? Next month you've got to get that down by three or four. This week you sinned a dozen times by being angry. Next week you've to keep that figure to a maximum of ten.

Now, I do not wish to say that a similar examination of one's conscience is pointless or negative. I only want to say that it reflects a highly imperfect method and is far too wanting if we consider the true content and newness of Christianity. Socrates had already come to this ascetical level before Jesus announced His Gospel. We cannot limit ourselves to a pre-Christian asceticism: we would prove Jesus's message useless. Self-control was not invented by Christianity; it is a terrestrial paradise conceived as a preventative, the effort or illusion of great stoic personalities.

I point the finger at myself for having yielded to stoic asceticism instead of Christianity. I charge myself with having placed ninety percent of my cards on the structures of human will, on the exercise of freedom and its feeble energies, and then simply sticking on a label with the words "Jesus Christ." What I should have done instead was to turn to the human and Christian conscience, to that Christ who is imprinted upon every Christian. Jesus Christ, and in this case every Christian, is something else, another form. Jesus Christ has another meaning, other dimensions. Philanthropy and Christian charity are two totally different worlds.

So must I no longer insist on self-control?

6. By insisting on self-control alone as the only reality, and on the human will's presumed ability to succeed, spiritual directors betray the young.

I can see that at least five young people out of ten respond generously to the use of the will. They understand that this is right and value their personal dignity. But after a few weeks I have to admit that even those four or five teenagers are on the verge of giving in. If I remind them of the value and the battle in the name of their ability to succeed, I deceive them, and all acknowledge this deceit.

If we have fared forward, reached the end of our mission, it is for another reason, not because we have succeeded but because God has been good and merciful to us. How can I help a young person of roughly twenty years of age to set the wheels of generosity in motion within? By paralyzing him in self-analytical observations, or by thrusting that individual outwards definitive horizons that open up to a new unified whole? This is the alternative in which I placed myself.

When I insisted on the analytical approach with teenagers I ended up making them melancholy, turning them into introverts. I saw in the countenance of some of them, as they systematically aimed at the good, a veil of sadness, a strange patina that prevented them from risking generosity and that famous rhetoric of ideal values, that marvelous rhetoric spoken of by the poet Torquato Tasso when he said that a young person who has never been rhetorical has never been young. Clearly there is an antiquated rhetoric, the empty rhetoric of those who show off having nothing to show, but there is also a rhetoric that we might describe as exuberant, overflowing. Woe to that teenager or that adult who does not pass through this rhetoric, not only in his youth but always.

7. Spiritual directors manage to set generosity in motion in young people when they bring them out of themselves and their own "I."

We must keep in mind the entire world, we have to think of Christianity in Africa and in Asia, and not only busy ourselves with disobedience and everyday inadequacies. Man resigns himself to the particular only if that particular appears to him as the fulfillment of a universal. Only the great, only the whole, only a synthesis makes us submit to the humiliation of analysis and detail. If you have the sense of the world within, then you can manage to stay in a cage for your entire life with the serenity of a cloistered nun. But without that space within, which human nature demands, everyday duties carried out for the sake of a necessary energy, become laborious and tiring.

So: there is an asceticism that undermines and another that nourishes.

There is an asceticism that is calculation and one that is abandon, because it abandons man to God. Jesus calls us and shows himself to us through ideal dimensions. Before an ideal, man inexorably understands that he must abandon himself, and he must do so through the hope that he places in another force, outside himself.

Here lies the crux of the experience that we have undergone: a young person has the stature of man in the degree to which he is able to abandon himself to the person of Christ. What after all is Christian hope? If, according to the liturgy, our hope is Christ, Christ is the hope of any man at any age. However, this truth becomes decisive at fourteen, sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years of age, when a teenager's personality is formed. In my humble opinion, this is the great problem of the method that we must use.

Where do we begin the proposal? In what must it consist? The proposal has to consist as distinctly, clearly, and decisively as possible in ultimate dimensions. Pius XII said that the universal perspective of the Church is the normal perspective of the Christian.³

Now, when it comes to the Christian proposal, what are the structural needs of the human conscience to which an answer is given? What are the characteristic dimensions of the

³ Pius XII, *Fidei donum* AAS 49 (1957) 238.

Christian act and tidings? What are the basic, most concise dimensions, what is the horizon towards which all is conveyed, the secret that the Spirit animates from within? They are the total Christ and the Church, the continuation of the total Christ in its universal perspective. These secret horizons of the Christian spirit are always present in the Christian, even when he errs, even when he fails to be pure. Indeed, it is only through a proposal of these horizons, an understanding of these horizons, that the young person will manage to resolve all his problems.

If to clean a course of water full of debris we decide to isolate the debris piece by piece, extracting one twig at a time, we will get a stiff neck and a good case of lumbago and will never manage to get the job done. We should instead allow the river to flow to its mouth. If we aim for the mouth, the debris will gradually be deposited along the banks.

8. To come out of one's self means to abandon oneself to Christ and entrust to him the solution of all problems.

The apostles followed Christ for who he was: they were attracted to Him. They did not rid themselves of their faults before following him. They went after him just as they were and as they did so, their debris gradually settled along the banks.

"Stubborn people, how long will I stay with you?" He was about to rise to heaven and they were still asking him: "Well then, when are you going to make this Kingdom of God for us?"⁴ Jesus had accomplished his work on earth and in just a few moments would ascend to heaven, and yet the apostles had understood nothing. Only the Holy Spirit, only the gift of God, would change them totally but the goodness of their consciences had already been demonstrated in their commitment to pursue the end, to follow Him, Jesus.

He, Jesus, is the prominent figure, not I with my faults. His face is at stage centre and not the features of my poverty. Gazing upon Him I will realize that He alone can resolve all problems, all of my problems and those of others.

During a discussion at school, a teenager, referring to the problem of culture said to me: "so according to you, culture is the experience of a reality that explains everything." This fellow in the first year of senior high school spontaneously arrived at this marvelous, new definition of culture. If we substitute the word "Christ" for the word "reality" we have the equivalent of the Pauline words: "Recapitulate all things in Christ."

9. To abandon oneself to Christ means to experience his dimensions, the first of which is Christ as the reality that explains everything.

What a struggle it is, what an effort to communicate this new concept of culture to the members of Catholic Action and even to their chaplains! They have retorted that faith has nothing to do with culture, that faith is up above, whereas culture is a mass of outcomes and human knowledge, that culture, basically, is an agglomeration of information that man tries to put in order.

For us instead, the Redemption has come all the way here, all the way to resolving the problem of culture. The Redemption eases and renders accessible what has been a huge problem for every single individual, a practically impossible effort after sin. Here lies the difference between Christianity and other religions. Unrevealed religions, and thus their respective cultures and civilizations are a human effort: Christianity, on the other hand, and thus its culture and civilization, is a path traced by God, it is gift, grace. Of course, God has given us the grace also to reveal to us, to communicate to us the experience of that reality that explains all, and that reality is a living reality, a Person.

⁴ See Matthew 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41.

Herein lies our greatest toil. But when a young person grasps or even simply listens attentively to this concept, his position before the Christian experience changes. Suddenly, upon hearing this principle repeated, unless he is an introvert, even be he Jewish or Protestant, a young person will pass from skepticism and indifference to interest and esteem. He will truly begin to give the thing serious consideration.

We are deeply consoled and greatly enlivened when we know that young people take into consideration with their intelligence the Christian experience and what we affirm. On the foundation of this intelligent evaluation, the irrational or non-rational aspects of sentiments and will-power will take on their proper value and will cease to be a danger or a deception.

10. *To experience the second dimension of Christ means to understand that to be a Christian is to share life together and share everything.*

What does the discovery of the Man Christ, of the reality that explains all, teach my life? In what sense is Christ my master? By teaching me that to be is to love, that to live is to share. One young fellow, light years away from our mentality, in his third year at senior high school, an implacable anticlerical, after a discussion at school stood up to say:

"I really understand now that the Mystery of the Trinity could enlighten man's whole life." The mystery of the Trinity is precisely the revelation that the essence of things is to share life together and share everything. My "I" lives as "we."

Human reason would arrive at the one. The supreme ideal of being for man is the one. But then revelation intervenes to tell us that the One is a companionship, love.

Here thus is the second dimension of Christ: charity. When I meet a young person for the first time I say to him or her pointblank: "You have to take a stand before Christ, for the very fact that I say this to you. And to take a stand before Him, to be able to understand him, you must commit yourself to undergo the experience he tells you to undergo. First you live the experience he suggests to you and then you judge him."

In this way, I was able to include some Protestants among the three hundred young people who on Sundays venture to the outskirts of Milan to teach Catechism.

When for the first time, not long ago, we evaluated the first three month Catechism experience, a Protestant Jew stood up and said: "I started to go to the 'Bassa'⁵ because others went, and then because I was driven out of curiosity. Now I see that I can no longer continue to go there without truly discovering that we are all brothers and children of the same Father." In the general silence and in that sense of characteristic unease that grips us before certain testimonies, the young man continued in these precise terms: "The experience of charity tells me, in its most genuine concept, that it consists not so much in giving to others but more precisely in sharing with them."

The young people were dumbfounded to hear that God should have made us rich because he loved us. To make us rich he came to share our poverty. He could have descended to earth and changed us completely, given us wealth in a flash and then gone away again. Instead he did not, he descended to earth and became poor like us. Charity is to share.

We respect a young person for those values universally recognized by all, for his sense of duty, for his diligence in his studies, for his precision and his submission to his parents, but we can no longer respect him for these values alone. I judge a young person from the way he uses his free time. A studious teenager who is scrupulous in his duties yet spends his free

⁵ The poor suburbs in the southern reaches of Milan where the GS students would spend time with families, instructing them on hygiene, or with the children, playing and singing with them, or helping them in their studies

time at well-deserved recreation after having carried out his duties might be akin to one of those magnificent bureaucrats which popular magazines will never be able to criticize but will be the personification of pettiness.

We can perform our duty selfishly. I prefer someone who studies a little less, who perhaps will risk a mediocre mark but is able to carve out pieces of his free time to share with others.

"If you are truly a man, you should share all your life with others," I often say to the teenagers I accompany. They reply: "We can't and we lack the courage." Then I suggest: "Begin by sharing some tiny part of your free time, maybe an hour a month, but get going! Go down to the "Bassa", not to improve the social conditions or to provoke class wars, as the communists and the radicals would have it, but to do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did for thirty-three or thirty-four years. Instead of preaching and teaching he was one of us. Instead of preaching, go and live their lives for three or four hours, the lives of those unfortunate people. You should do it always, but start with a few hours a week."

It takes great effort to get them going, but in the end it takes a great effort to stop them.

11. *To experience the third dimension means to realize that to be a Christian is share life together and share without measure.*

The third dimension is extremely clear. It is impossible to understand the first and second dimensions without understanding that neither have a limit: they are boundless by their very nature.

To limit the sphere of sharing, as existence allows us, is to deny ourselves - it is sin (i.e. "failing," which in its Latin origin means "lacking" something). The words of the Lord spring to mind: "He who sins contradicts himself."

To limit one's openness to sharing life together is to try to impose a personal measure on the profound law of being; it means confusing love with calculation, sharing with an attempt to dominate.

What is the missionary problem if not the structural need to share the world?

Talking with young people, staying with them, I have better understood the old saying: "The measure of loving is that of loving without measure." It is a clear axiom, no longer just a play on words. This is an essential given; it is truly thus.

In fact, the terms of Christ's appeal are: the extreme ends of the earth right to the end of the world. St Paul's announcement seems natural to the essential thirst of our souls: "All is yours, as you belong to Christ."⁶

We must live together with all, share the life of all, with anyone. Charity is a law without limits, universal: Catholic. According to this law, to measure and define would be to put an end to the law itself: to place a limit on it is not to limit it but rather to annul it.

We must consider that the Christian proposal is, above all, a conquest of the world in the evangelical sense: the Kingdom. To have the sense of the Kingdom means to have the missionary sense. We must live for the universe, for all humanity: "The universal horizons of the Church will be the normal horizons of its Christian life" (Pius XII).⁷

The more we love in this universal sense, the more we are capable of faithfulness to detail (prayer, purity, duties etc.). Then this faithfulness is no longer sensed as difficulty and repression, but - what it truly is - freedom.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 3: 21-3.

⁷ Giussani paraphrased Pius XII, *Fidei donum* AAS 49 (1957) 238. The precise quotation is "...the universal perspectives of the Church must be the concerns and perspectives of Christians in their daily life."

Only with this ideal are the greatest commandments fulfilled, the most humble services performed.

You then start to discover that you do not love your mother and father if that act of love does not potentially spread to the whole world. If your act of love is not spread potentially to the entire world then it is but a relationship of sentiment and blood. You have not yet attained the genuine experience of missionary charity.

This is missionary yearning. How can you go to Mass on Sundays without worrying about your brothers and sisters in China and in India?

After having learnt of the missionary concepts of Christianity a temperamental young woman of questionable ethics, coming from an unhealthy environment, said to me: "These things are starting to help me understand my mother."

12. *Conclusion: to be a Christian means to accept a mission without bounds.*

To bring the Catholic associations back to life their directors must resign themselves to sending the young out, making them understand that Christianity is not the *oratorio*⁸ or the bell tower, but specifically and only mission. The human attraction for Christianity is translated most completely with this word: "Mission." This word summarizes the motive behind a profound and clear conscience. It summarizes the cultural unity that is accomplished through the total commitment of personal energy that is charity: sharing, that is applied, of course, to the reaches of the world, of humanity.

I am not a man if I do not love all humanity. We would like to make this spirit penetrate all the Catholic associations, with the concrete elements of service to our neighbour, membership, etc.

Consequently young people will be able to become enthused with caring for the children at the *oratorio*, or with teaching them catechism. We choke our young people if we claim that they should be enthused about limited things.

Luigi Giussani

Translated by John Zucchi with the assistance of Patrick Stevenson

⁸ The *oratorio* here refers to the after-school and weekend clubs which became the focal point of the social life of many Italian Catholic children, and the locus of their catechetics.