

# A PRESENCE YOU CANNOT REDUCE

The ruling of the European Court of Human Rights against crucifixes in classrooms set off a vast echo of protests in Italy: almost all Italians - 84% according to a survey by the leading Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* – are justifiably scandalized by the decision.

“And who do you say that I am?” This question that Christ posed to the disciples reaches us from the past and challenges us now.

That same Christ on the cross is not a relic of popular piety which at most conjures up a pious recollection. Nor is he a generic symbol of social and cultural tradition.

Christ is a living man, one who brought a new judgment, a new experience into the world, one that has to do with everything, with work and study, with affections and desires, with life and death: an experience of humanity fulfilled.

Crucifixes can be removed, but you cannot remove a living man from reality - unless, of course you kill him, which they did, and now he is more alive than before!

Those who would remove the crucifixes delude themselves if they think they can contribute to erasing Christianity as an experience and a judgment from the public square. Even if they have the power to abolish crucifixes – but this remains to be seen and we trust that they will not prevail – they do not have the power to remove living Christians from reality.

Yet there is one inconvenient truth: we Christians have the possibility of not being ourselves, and thus forgetting what Christianity is. In that case, defending the crucifix would be a lost cause, because that man would no longer speak to our lives.

The ruling handed down by the Court is a challenge to our faith. After protesting our scandal, we cannot then simply return to business as usual, all the while avoiding the basic issue: crucifix or not, where is the event of Christ today? Or, in the words of the writer Dostoevsky: “Can an educated man, a European of today, believe, really believe, in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ?”