

WHAT IS CHARITY AND IS IT POSSIBLE TO LIVE IT TODAY?

A discussion arising from Msgr. Luigi Giussani's book "Is it possible to live this way?"

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This text is the third book of Fr. Giussani's trilogy "Is it possible to live this way?" which deals with the three theological virtues; faith, hope and charity. Once again Fr. Giussani introduces a dialogue on the nature of the Christian experience, as it emerges from within the dynamic of daily life. For him faith, hope and charity are not words to be superimposed from outside our human existence, but have to do with the structure of the I, in its awareness of itself. These words carry with them the claim of answering the problem of life. This, in fact is what is at stake above all today: whether life is worth living. In this book Fr. Giussani accompanies us in the rediscovery of the value of words that explain life. Man has long lost the original meaning of these words, and as a result, feels them as abstract or burdensome.

For this reason, in our time, words like "love" and "charity" cannot boast of a good reputation. Rather, impoverished notions of these words thrive. They prevail as either sentimentalism, loving and doing good for the sake of it, or moralism, loving and doing good for a sense of duty, according to the "moral imperative" of Kant. Behind the word "love" can be hidden a secret desire to impress. This raises the question; is loving dictated by a real interest in the person towards whom it is directed or by an ill-concealed egoism?

Pope Benedict XVI himself, in his first encyclical *Deus caritas est*, cautions against this risk of equivocation when one speaks of love and charity. He says, "Today, the term "love" has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words"¹.

It is difficult to overcome this encumbrance if we are not willing to learn from experience. It is not uncommon to encounter people who doubt the existence of good, considering it to be motivated by one's own interests, comfort, habits, etc. When, however, one experiences being

¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 2.

loved gratuitously, as we all have, at least once in our lives, all these theories and interpretations crumble. If this occurs because of the disinterested gesture of another fellow human being, what will happen when we are faced with God's charity towards us? It is for this reason that the Pope affirms that "God's love is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are"².

Let us begin from the second of the two questions (who are we?), in order to understand the extent to which the love of God is fundamental for us. We cannot understand what charity is, if we do not become aware of our needy, wanting nature. This emerges in the relationship with all things: nothing satisfies us.

1. "What exactly is this lack a lack of?"

The Italian poet Mario Luzi could not more comprehensively and exhaustively delineate what constitutes our very nature, "what is this lack a lack of, | o heart, | of which all of a sudden you are full? | of what? | Once the dam is broken | it floods and submerges you | the inundation of your poverty... | It comes, | perhaps it comes, | from beyond you | a recall | which you now do not listen to because you are in agony | But it exists, fostered by strength and music | the perpetual music will return. | Be calm"³.

The nature of this deficiency becomes clear when we try to address it. The pursuit of pleasure commonly constitutes the first attempt to fill this void. But we are in for a surprise, one Cesare Pavese describes in an exceptional way: "What man seeks in pleasure is an infinite, and nobody would ever renounce the hope of achieving this infinity"⁴.

Where we usually hope to find an adequate answer to our great desire, is in love. The Pope reminds us why we thus place our hope in love: "love between man and woman where ... human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness ... would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison"⁵. For this reason there is nothing which helps us understand our being human better than the relationship between man and woman.

It has to do precisely with the experience Giacomo Leopardi unforgettably describes in one of his poems, "Your beauty, O lady,

² Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 2.

³ Mario Luzi, *Under Human Species*, Green Integer, 2010.

⁴ G. Pavese, *The Business of Living*, Transaction Publishers, 2009.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 2.

appeared as a divine ray to my thought”⁶. The beauty of the woman is perceived by the poet as a divine ray, as the presence of the divine.

The beauty of the woman is a sign which points to beyond, to something greater, divine and immeasurable compared to her limited nature. Shakespeare’s Romeo is describing this when he says “Show me a mistress who is passing fair, |What doth her beauty serve, but as a note |Where I may read who pass’d that passing fair?”⁷.

This is the greatness of man, this “ inability to be satisfied by any worldly thing or so to speak, by the entire world. To consider the inestimable amplitude of space, the number of worlds, and their astonishing size, then to discover that all this is small and insignificant compared to the capacity of one’s own mind; to imagine the infinite number of worlds, the infinite universe, then to feel that our mind and aspirations might be even greater than such a universe; to accuse things always of being inadequate and meaningless; to suffer want, emptiness, and hence boredom - this seems to me the chief sign of the grandeur and nobility of human nature”⁸.

Experience shows that nothing tangible corresponds to the infinite nature of our desire. At the same time we cannot remove it, and it is inevitable that sooner or later we try to fill this emptiness by trying to possess people or things. This attempt cannot but be violent and pretentious. This would then be our fate: to sink into scepticism, abandoning the hope that there is something capable of matching the greatness of our desire.

But from the deepest depths of man a desirable hypothesis springs forth, “something unforeseen | is the only hope. But they tell me| that it is futile to say this to oneself”⁹.

Well: this unforeseen event has occurred.

2. “Christ draws me completely to Himself, such is His Beauty”

We are used to hearing about the charity of God. For this reason we find it difficult to identify with the novelty which Christianity

⁶ G. Leopardi, *Aspasia*, vv. 33-34.

⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I, 1.

⁸ G. Leopardi, *Pensieri*, LXVIII., translated by W.S. Di Piero (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 113.

⁹ E. Montale, *Prima del viaggio*, vv.25-27

introduced to the ancient world. A world characterized by what, in modern terms, is called “multiculturalism”: there was room for every culture in the Pantheon; there was no want of diverse cults.

So it is all the more surprising the way the novelty of Christianity was immediately grasped. Its prodigious and unstoppable diffusion is evidence of this. What did it have that was so new and attractive? In the ancient religions the Gods did not bother themselves much with the affairs of men. (For example: in the Mesopotamian religions the Gods created humans in order to get rid of the burden of work. The Gods were certainly going to look after them!) A constant in the ancient religions was a belief in the inability of the divine to love. Love was understood mainly as desire or eros. Therefore, accepting that the Gods had desires – eros - implied that something was lacking in them, and this was not in accordance with their divine nature.

It is in this context, that Christianity burst forth, revealing the nature of God and introducing a new meaning to the word “love”, that is charity or in Greek, agape.

The first sign of this love is the gift of being and the heart of man – when it is simple and true - is capable of recognising this love: “At this moment, if I am attentive, that is, if I am mature, then I cannot deny that the greatest and most profound evidence is that *I do not make myself*, I am not making myself. I do not give myself being, or the reality which I am. I am "given". This is the moment of maturity when I discover myself to be dependent upon something else. If I descend to my very depths, where do I spring from? Not from myself: from *something else*. This is the perception of myself as a gushing stream born from a spring, from something else, more than me, and by which I am made. If a stream rushing forth from a spring could think, it would perceive, at the bottom of its fresh surging, an origin it does not know, which is other than itself. Here we are speaking of the intuition, which, in every period of history, the more intelligent human spirits have had. It is an intuition of this mysterious presence which endows the "I" with substance. *I am you-who-make-me* - except that this *you* is absolutely faceless. I use this word *you* because it is the least inadequate in my experience as a human being to indicate that unknown presence which is beyond comparison, more than my experience as a human being. What other word could I, on the other hand, use? When I examine myself and notice that I am not making myself by myself, then I - with the full and conscious vibration of affection which this word I exudes - turn to the Thing that makes me, to the source that causes me to be in this instant, and I can only address it

using the word *you*. *You-who-make-me* is, therefore, what religious tradition calls God- it is that which is more than I, more "I" than I myself. That is the means by which I am. For this reason, the Bible says of God: "tam pater nemo"¹⁰(Nobody is such a father as God).

This simple recognition would be enough for man not to feel alone in front of reality. He could live with the awareness of being the child of a God who is so much a father. However, many times we forget this elementary evidence and live like orphans.

Man's forgetfulness over the course of the centuries does not cause God's nature to change. Rather, this separation is the opportunity for Him to reveal his true nature. A mother in the face of her stubborn child is forced to mobilize her maternal heart. Similarly, in the path of the human journey – God takes a step which renews and realizes the gratuitous nature of His being - He in Christ, makes a gift of Himself.

Fr. Giussani writes "God's nature appears to man as an absolute gift: God gives Himself, gives His very self to man. And what is God? He is the source of being. God gives man being: He gives man the ability to be; He gives man the ability to be greater, to grow; He gives man the ability to be completely himself, to grow to fulfilment; that is, He gives man the ability to be happy (which means, totally satisfied or perfect. As I've always said, in Latin and in Greek, "perfect" and "satisfied" are the same word: *perfectus*, that is, perfect or fulfilled. A man who is fulfilled is a man who is satisfied). He gave himself to me by giving me His being: "Let us make man in our own image and likeness". And then, when man least expected it – he couldn't even dream about it, he no longer expected it, he no longer thought about Him from whom he had received being – this "Him" re-enters man's life to save it, He gives Himself again, dying for man. He gives everything, a total gift of self: "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." A total gift"¹¹.

However, Fr. Giussani does not stop at the objective fact of God's great gift of himself, but adds that this gift of himself is "moved": "This second factor – the first being the essential one – is like an adjective next to a noun, it's descriptive. Adjective means that it rests, it rests on the noun, therefore it is secondary to the first. Nevertheless, it is the more impressive, and we – I am willing to bet you – have never thought of it and would never think of it, if God had not put us together. Why does

¹⁰ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999, pp. 105-106.

¹¹ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol. 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, pp. 9-10.

God dedicate Himself to me? Why does He give Himself to me, in creating me, in giving me being, that is, Himself? Moreover, why did He become man and give Himself to me to make me innocent once again and die for me (which there was absolutely no need for: a click of the fingers and the Father would have certainly done it)? Why did he die for me? Why this gift of self to beyond the extreme of the conceivable? Here you must go to read and learn by heart the sentence of the prophet Jeremiah, in the thirty-first chapter, from verse 3 onward. Through the voice of the prophet that is fulfilled in Christ God says: “With eternal love I have loved you, for this I have attracted you to me, having pity on your nothingness.” What does “having pity on your nothingness” mean? What is it about? It’s a feeling, a feeling! It is about a value that is a feeling, because affection is a feeling. To have “affection for” is not only a feeling but also a value; if it does not have reason, no type of affection is a value because it is missing half of the I, the I is truncated: only what is below the navel remains”¹².

He who is capable of speaking of charity as the “moved gift of self” can do so only because he is moved by the fact that Jesus is moved. “God’s charity for man is being moved, a gift of self that vibrates, agitates, moves, is fulfilled in emotion, moved in the reality of being: it is moved. It is God who is moved! “What is man that you should be mindful of him?” asks the psalm”¹³.

Fr. Giussani is well aware of the risk of reducing even this aspect. We have already seen how the Pope warns of this in the beginning of the encyclical. Fr. Giussani tells us therefore, “We must pay attention to a particular point: this being moved and this emotion bring with them a judgement and a beat of the heart. It is a judgement and therefore a value, a rational value, let’s say; not inasmuch as it can be boiled down and reduced to a level that only our reason is capable of, but rational in the sense that it gives a reason, it carries its reason within it. And it becomes for this reason a *beat of the heart*. If emotion or being moved doesn’t carry this judgement and this beat of the heart within it, then it is not charity. What is the reason? “I have loved you with an eternal love, therefore I have made you part of me, having pity on your nothingness.” The beat of the heart is pity on your nothingness – but the reason is that you might participate in being”¹⁴.

¹² L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, pp. 11-12.

¹³ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, p.14.

¹⁴ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, p.18.

The whole of the New Testament affirms the absolute precedence of the love of God. In his letters, St. John expresses this in a definitive way; “This is love: not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away. My dear people, since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another”¹⁵. And further on “We love then because he loved us first”¹⁶

This is the novelty the Pope reminded us of in his first encyclical: “The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts—an unprecedented realism”¹⁷.

This moved love of God which was made evident in Christ, is the only form of love that corresponds to man’s wanting nature, to the deficiency in him. This is why man is so attracted to Christ. Jacopone da Todi articulated this attraction. He says, “Christ draws me completely to Himself, such is His Beauty”. Beauty became flesh, and Christianity is precisely the surprise at the fascination provoked by Christ’s attractiveness. This is what struck those first two disciples, John and Andrew, who from the day they met Him became His. And now we can understand why they followed Him, because “charity (...) indicates the deepest content *and* (...) discovers the heart of that Presence that faith recognises”¹⁸. This is what strikes those who belong to Him. Christianity would not exist if there were not this surprise, this surprise that no human error can impede.

For this reason, “the first object of man’s charity is called Jesus Christ. Man’s first object of love and of being moved is called “God made flesh for us””¹⁹. In fact, this endless love of God, as revealed in Christ, awakens all the affection of the person who welcomes it. “And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me”²⁰. The Christian personality is completely defined by this recognition. Christians are those who bear witness to this; “We have come to know the love God has for us and have believed in it”²¹.

¹⁵ 1Jn, 4, 10-11.

¹⁶ 1Jn, 4, 19.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 12.

¹⁸ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, p.4

¹⁹ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, p.22

²⁰ Gal.2,20

²¹ 1Jn, 4, 16.

“It is this affection for Christ, this continuous surprise caused by the “moved” gift of Himself that the Mystery brings to fruition in our lives, it is this affection and surprise that in time generates a subject capable of being interested in the destiny of every man. And this subject is interested in the destiny of every man not in an ideological or mechanical way, but as compassion and closeness, as a moved gift of himself which is a testimony to the original precedence of the Mystery.” (P Martinelli) “In fact if God had not become man, nobody would have been able to conduct their lives according to this gratuity. Nobody would have dared to look at their own life with this generosity.”²²

Therefore we can understand well the beginning of the Pope’s recent encyclical, “Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity”²³. Why? Because “*everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it*. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope”²⁴.

It’s God’s infinite love for us, a love more fulfilling than any hypothesis of individualism that makes us capable of charity: “As the objects of God’s love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God’s charity and to weave networks of charity”²⁵.

From the abundance of charity, from the fullness of the love we are objects of, can spring gratuity. It cannot come from a lack but only from a surplus! “Because this Christ exists there is no longer any man who doesn’t interest me. If only you could read certain notes of Mother Teresa and her sisters, especially one I often read a few years back that relates about how one of Mother Teresa’s sisters found a man who was dying in a sewer in broad daylight. She took him, brought him home, washed him and got him in order, and that man said: ‘I have lived like a wretch, now I’m dying like a king.’ But only a Christian can do this.”²⁶.

Who is capable of loving like this?

²² L. Giussani, *L’io, il potere, le opere*, Marietti, Genova, 2000, p.132.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 1.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 2.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 5.

²⁶ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way? Vol . 3 Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, pp. 22-23.

Giussani can thus tackle, in a completely new way, the two most incomprehensible issues of the Christian experience: sacrifice and virginity.

3. When sacrifice and virginity become interesting

"There is no ideal to which we can sacrifice ourselves because we know the falsity of everything we who do not know what truth is "²⁷. This astonishingly realistic phrase by the French thinker Andre Malraux eloquently expresses the human reaction to sacrifice. In fact, sacrifice is perceived as something against human nature, a nature made for happiness. In order for sacrifice to become a value it is necessary to discover something for which it is worth undertaking that sacrifice.

When did sacrifice become interesting? Sacrifice began to become interesting when man, stupefied by the gratuity of God, intuited that he could do nothing more intelligent than recognise Him. Only this experienced preference of God's love can be an adequate reason to give Him everything. Sacrifice is born from the longing for Christ's love. "The love of Christ overwhelms us (...) because one man has died for all (...) and the reason he died was so that living men should no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for their sake"²⁸.

"The truest sacrifice is to recognise a presence. What does it mean to recognise a presence? The I, instead of affirming itself, affirms you. This is the greatest devotion: "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends"(...) To affirm the you in order to affirm the I, to make the I live, to affirm the you as the goal of the I's action, to affirm you is the love for you. (...) To affirm the other implies the forgetting of ourselves, which is the opposite of being attached to ourselves; we sacrifice to the other. The truest sacrifice is to recognise a presence, which means that the truest sacrifice is to love"²⁹.

It is this recognition of Christ, this attraction to Christ's beauty, this emotional longing, which is felt by the person who meets Him. It is the recognition of Christ that can fill the affective capacity of the person, and that lack which the poet Luzi spoke about. It is the experience of fullness that enables a gratuitous relationship with people and things. This new

²⁷ A. Malraux, *La tentation de l'Occident*, Bernard Grasset 1926, p. 216.

²⁸ 2Cor.5, 14-15

²⁹ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, pp. 79-80.

relationship is called virginity. Giussani defines virginity as “a possession with a detachment within it”. “For me to be able to think of your life, (you whom I don’t know) to be able to think of your life as destiny, I must sacrifice something. To think of your life, to love your destiny, to love your happiness (...) to truly love a person you need detachment: does a man adore the woman he loves more when he looks at her from one metre away, in awe at the being he has before him, almost on his knees, even if he’s standing, almost on his knees in front of her; or when he takes her for himself?”³⁰. This is the way Christ loves. “When they arrived within twenty metres of Him, they were nevertheless pierced by that Presence inside Him, a Presence that remained with them for days, that required an effort to shake off! In this way, Christ put Himself in a relationship with people, bringing about a more useful love, a love that was more of a *company* on the path, a love that made the road lighter, a love that foreshadowed – like the skipping of a heartbeat – eternal tenderness”³¹.

Who would not desire to be reached by such a gaze? To make this gaze present today God calls some people to “shout out in front of everybody in every moment that Christ is the only thing for which life is worth living”³².

Conclusion

“I have loved you with an everlasting love and I had pity on your nothingness”³³. This news, which comes to us from the history of the Jewish people is what moves me most. The Mystery, who made all things, has had pity on my nothingness, on our nothingness. Our Lady recognised this when she said “The Lord has looked on his servant in her lowliness”. God’s mercy towards us comes “before” any other consideration - so much so that it is not connected to our goodness. The preference of God is totally gratuitous. In fact, he takes us just as we are. This is why God’s preference is the starting point for every one of our initiatives towards others. It also indicates the method; gratuity.

If, in every one of our attempts to love and help others and in every gesture of what we call charity, we do not set out from here sooner or later we tire. Things wear us out and in time we become oblivious to our needs and the needs of fellow human beings. It is for this reason that we

³⁰ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, pp. 106-107

³¹ L. Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way?* Vol . 3 *Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009, p. 108

³² L. Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio. Dio e l’uomo*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1995, p. 20.

³³ Jer 31,3

are tempted to imprison ourselves in individualism, ultimately indifferent to everything and everybody, that is, alone. Remaining amazed by Christ's pity on our nothingness, his lowering of Himself to the point of becoming one among us, is what overcomes every type of confusion. It is what overcomes every sense of powerlessness and fills us so that we can accept every sacrifice. We can thus even accept the humanly inconceivable sacrifice of giving one's life so that another can live. This is exactly what Jesus did with each one of us and what a Christian mother would do for her child.

Thank you