

# IS IT POSSIBLE TO LIVE THIS WAY?

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## 1. Context

First I would like to put Giussani's book into the context of the present situation. This situation can be characterized by two things.

First of all, the reduction of religion to feeling and ethics. For a majority of people religion has nothing to do with reality. Religion has to do with a nebulous feeling in relationship with the divine. Such a feeling is difficult to identify, because what I feel in front of the Mystery is not easy to grasp and one person might have it and another might not. Therefore for a majority of people religion has nothing to do with the knowledge of reality. For them religion is not related with reason.

This can explain the second characteristic of the present situation, which is confusion. The modern world had surrendered regarding the possibility of knowing. This can seem strange at a time when science prevails. But this negative attitude with regard to knowledge and a high emphasis of science are not contradictory. Recently the Pope spoke about the resignation of western civilization before reality.

“Our faith opposes decisively the resignation that considers man incapable of truth, as if this would be too much for him. This resignation before the truth is, in my opinion, the nucleus of the Western crisis. If there is no truth, man is incapable of distinguishing between good and evil”.

What this resignation means has been clarified last Thursday by the same Benedict XVI in his talk to the Sapienza University of Rome:

“The danger facing the Western world ... is that man today, precisely because of the immensity of his knowledge and power, surrenders before the question of truth. This

means that, in the end, reason gives way before the pressure of other interests and the lure of efficiency, and is forced to recognize this as the ultimate criterion”.

The result is confusion.

In this state of affairs religion is thrown outside of reality. It is considered a phenomenon nearer to a virtual world than to the real one. Consequently for many people faith is like believing in ghosts.

When Giussani wrote this book, the situation was not yet as clear as it is for us now, but his genius could recognize the signs of the times, and now we are living through these times. For this reason this book can give us an amazing insight into an understanding of the context in which we are called to live our Christian faith and how to face it.

The reduction of faith to a sentimental experience is directly addressed by Giussani in this book:

“Let me also say a word about the most precious value that serves as the leitmotiv of the entire text, the passion that, in fact, determines it, from chapter to chapter. That is the gift that I received when I entered a high school to teach religion. Teaching religion gave me this intuition and this passion. The intuition is that faith first and foremost needs to demonstrate that it is reasonable. Indeed that it is the most reasonable thing there is, and thus, the most human thing there is. Because reason is that level of nature in which nature becomes conscious of itself and this is called the “I”. This has two pre-eminent characteristics. First of all, the dynamism of reason to grasp the richness of life: the modalities by which reason turns itself upside down and by which it arms itself for contact with reality, with all of reality, without excluding anything, are called “methods.” The problem of faith first of all should be discovered as a problem of “method”.

Secondly, in addition to this living mobility, reason is the demand, the passion and demand to know everything, the totality. An aware faith flows suddenly, providentially, graciously, fortuitously, precisely from this passion for totality in knowledge that is the fundamental characteristic of reason. A living reason is a totalizing reason.”

## 2. Faith

On this occasion, we focus our attention on faith, on Christian faith. To understand what Giussani means by faith as a method of knowledge, it might be useful to stop for a moment to explore what it means to know reality. This can help to grasp the relationship between reality and reason.

The Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri writes:

“What is proper of reason is not its presumed evidence, not its empirical or logical rigor, but it is above all the force of the impression of reality, according to which profound reality imposes itself coercively on the sensitive intellect. (...) Therefore, the problem of reason does not consist of verifying if it is possible for reason to reach reality, but quite the contrary. The real question is: How should we keep ourselves in the reality where we already are? It is not a question of coming to be in reality, but of not going out of it.”

But the impression of reality does not leave reason indifferent. In front of reality, reason is the need for totality, for total meaning. Reality acts on reason as an unavoidable invitation to discover the meaning of reality that impresses us. To block this dynamic is to block knowledge.

“Reality presents itself to me in a way that solicits me to pursue something else.... Reality solicits me to engage in a search for some other thing, something beyond immediate appearances. It latches on to my consciousness, enabling it to pre-sense and perceive something else. Faced with the sea, the earth, the sky, and all things moving within them, I am not passive – I am animated, moved, and touched by what I see. And this motion is towards a search for something else.”

This conception, which is one of the crucial points in Giussani’s book *The Religious Sense*, can be found as an intuition in some of the most moving literary and poetical expressions, like Eugenio Montale’s formula, “Beneath the dense blue sky, seabirds flash by, never pausing,

driven by images below: Farther, farther.” And this image used by Shakespeare: “Show me a mistress that is passing fair / What doth her beauty serve, but as a note / Where I may read who pass’d that passing fair?”

This dynamic of the sign is not complete, Giussani teaches us, if it does not reach its maximum outcome, that is, the acknowledgment, full of astonishment, of the existence of the Mystery that makes all things. “The summit of reason’s conquest is the perception of an unknown unreachable presence, to which all human movement is destined, because it depends upon it. It is the idea of mystery.” “The world is a sign. Reality calls us on to another reality. Reason, in order to be faithful to its nature and to the nature of such a calling, is forced to admit the existence of something else underpinning, explaining everything.” It is following the dynamic of reason and set in motion by the impression of reality that makes us capable of knowing reality.

Religion, reality and reason are inseparable. These things illuminate each other reciprocally. In his lecture at the University of Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI challenged everyone to a “broadening of our concept of reason and its application. ”What does it mean to broaden reason? It means nothing other than living religion, that is, recognizing the Mystery in reality. What is religion? It is the apex of reason. Therefore, reason does not fulfill its true nature as reason if it does not open itself to religion; and religion remains a mere sentiment unless it coincides with our rational nature. John Paul II said so in an interview quoted in *Fides et Ratio*:

“When the *why* of things is investigated with integrity, seeking the totality, in the search for the ultimate and most complete answer, then human reason touches its apex and opens to religion. In effect, religiosity represents the most elevated expression of the human person, because it is the culmination of his rational nature.”

This is what prevents us from reducing reason and religion to any of the number of reductions in use among us, in our culture, that influence us as well.

Christian faith has to do with reality. The claims of Christian faith is that the divine, the Mystery became man. In Jesus of Nazareth “the mystery which was kept secret for long ages – says Saint Paul – ... is now disclosed and ... is made known to all nations” (Rm 16: 25).

Because of this reason has to do with a real person whom we can know. This is the conviction that all Christians recognize in the words of the Apostle John:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1: 4).

Let us move on to think about faith as an indirect method of knowledge.

#### **a) Faith, an indirect method of knowledge**

Since Christian faith is to recognize an historical event which happened 2000 years ago, what method do we need to recognize this event? “Method” means the way of doing something.

There are two methods of knowledge: direct knowledge and indirect knowledge. Direct knowledge is by means of my own experience, whereas indirect knowledge relies on what someone else tells me. While the instrument for direct knowledge is within me, the instrument for indirect knowledge is outside of me: this instrument is the witness. Indirect knowledge is the method of knowledge used in the courtroom. (Cf. Giussani, *Traces*, Dec. 2007 booklet) What method can be applied to the knowledge of a historical event? The only way to grasp *any* historical event in which I didn't participate is through an indirect method of knowledge, through a witness. This is called faith. Faith then is a natural method of knowledge, a method of indirect knowledge, a knowledge that comes through the mediation of a witness.

Culture, history and human social life are founded on this type of knowledge which is called faith, knowledge of reality through the mediation of a witness. If you get rid of this mediated knowledge, you get rid of the whole of human culture, because all human culture bases itself on the fact that a person starts off from what someone else who went before him has learned and then goes ahead.

Let us hear what Alexis de Tocqueville says of that method of knowledge in his work *Democracy in America*

“If man were forced to demonstrate for himself all the truths of which he makes daily use, his task would never end. He would exhaust his strength in preparatory demonstrations without ever advancing beyond them. As, from the shortness of his life, he has not the time, nor, from the limits of his intelligence, the capacity, to act in this way, he is reduced to take on trust a host of facts and opinions which he has not had either the time or the power to verify for himself, but which men of greater ability have found out, or which the crowd adopts. On this groundwork he raises for himself the structure of his own thoughts; he is not led to proceed in this manner by choice, but is constrained by the inflexible law of his condition. There is no philosopher in the world so great but that he believes a million things on the faith of other people and accepts a great many more truths than he demonstrates.”

Applying these insights to democracy, Tocqueville concludes:

“Thus the question is not to know whether any intellectual authority exists in an age of democracy, but simply where it resides and by what standard it is to be measured<sup>1</sup>.”

This method is the most important of all the methods used by reason, because this method involves the whole person in knowledge, not only reason, as the other method does. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* trans. Henry Reeve (Cambridge, Mass.: Sever and Francis, 1863), vol. 2, 8–10.

Because you need to trust the witness. In order to trust a person in a just and reasonable way, you need to commit yourself with all the honesty of your person, you need to apply the acumen of observation, your love for truth. For this reason, it is the most precious method.

But is knowledge by means of the witness a reliable method of knowledge? To know through a witness is a reliable method of knowledge whether we can be certain about the credibility of the witness. If this is the case, this method of knowledge is as certain as any other. How can I know that what he witnesses is true?

Giussani himself asks this question and offers an answer:

“If there’s something beyond our horizon, that’s impossible to overcome, when we reach the threshold where reality becomes an unknown by its very nature, when we reach the threshold of what is called “mystery,” only this method [to know through a witness] can let us know something of the mystery. How can we verify the truth of what we know of the mystery through the witness of someone who comes from beyond the last line, who enters into the human world? How can we know if what this person reveals to us is right?

We’ll only know it if the human person flourishes. If it causes to flourish everything that is human, then it is confirmed as true.” (Fr. Giussani, *Traces*, Dec. 2007 booklet).

## **b) Christian faith**

How can we know Christ? Among the two methods used by reason we had hinted at, the only one that applies is faith. We do not know Christ directly, neither by evidence, nor by analysis of our experience. The only method which allows us to know Christ is through a witness that makes him present now. “Christ’s relevance [contemporaneity] for people of all times is shown forth in his body, which is the Church<sup>2</sup>.” It is Christ’s contemporaneity, his

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<sup>2</sup> “La contemporaneità di Cristo all'uomo di ogni tempo si realizza nel suo corpo, che è la Chiesa” (Veritatis Splendor 25).

presence to us today, that allows me to verify the truth of the Christian claim. This is the only hypothesis faithful to the nature of the Christian event as we can recognize it in history.

If we look at the first time in history, in the chronological sense, when was the problem of Christ first posed?

“The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.” (John 1: 36–38)

For the first two that followed Jesus, John and Andrew, what is the first characteristic of the faith that they had in Jesus? The first characteristic is a fact! It is a fact that had the characteristic of an encounter. “The encounter with an objective event, absolutely independent of the person who has the encounter”. The first characteristic of the Christian faith is that it starts off from a fact, a fact that has the form of an encounter.

What is the second characteristic? The second characteristic is the exceptional nature of the fact. When can we call something exceptional? Something is exceptional when it corresponds to the deepest needs of our heart. To find an exceptional man means to find a man who brings about a correspondence with what you are longing for, with the need for justice, truth, happiness, love. Something truly exceptional is something divine: it has something divine in it. If not, it doesn’t really bring us to God. “Exceptional” is synonymous with the word “divine”.

Andrei Tarkovsky, the famous Russian film-maker, made one of his characters in the movie “Andrei Rublev” say: “You know very well, you can’t manage one thing, you are tired, you are exhausted, and at a moment you meet among the people the gaze of somebody, somebody’s gaze, and it is as if you approach the hidden divine, and everything becomes easier”.

The third characteristic is wonder. His first two followers, John and Andrew, became friends of Jesus and started to see Jesus’ miracles. Let us imagine people who are witnesses of these things for days, weeks, months and years. Little by little they became more and more aware of the uniqueness of this man and they cannot avoid asking the question: “Who is He?”

This is the fourth factor. Christian faith begins precisely with this question: “Who is He?”  
Last point: Responsibility before the fact. A fact which challenges reason and freedom.

To summarize: an encounter – strikes me in its exceptionality – solicits wonder – provokes the question “who is He?” – and challenges my reason and freedom.

“In our experience there is something that comes from beyond: unforeseeable, mysterious, but within our experience. If it is unforeseeable, not immediately visible, mysterious, how do we grasp this Presence? We can grasp it with an instrument called faith. Let’s call this instrument “faith” in order to use a term that is not taken back and exhausted within the concept of reason – it is reason that recognizes our experience in its immediate factors – it is in experience that we feel the breath or the vibration or the consequences of a Presence that cannot be explained, that is a surprising encounter; therefore it is something beyond reason that can intuit and understand it, and we call this faith, which is an intelligence of reality, an intelligence of experience.

I said that faith is a form of knowledge that is beyond the limits of reason. Why is it beyond the limits of reason? Because it grasps something that reason cannot grasp: reason cannot perceive “the presence of Jesus among us”, “Christ is here now”, – reason cannot grasp this in the manner in which faith is capable of. Reason cannot *not* admit that He is here. Why? Because there is a factor here within that decides about this companionship, certain results of this companionship, certain resonances in this companionship, a factor so surprising that if I don’t affirm something other, I don’t give reason to the experience, because reason is to affirm experiential reality according to all the factors that make it up, all the factors. For example, we who fill this room right now come from completely different places and backgrounds; we have quite different temperaments and sensitivities. The fact that we are here now cannot be adequately accounted for if we overlooked the fact that we were all moved by someone who made himself present in our lives and who is present among us now.

Maybe we only feel an echo of this factor, we feel the fruit of it, we even see the consequence, but we aren’t able to see this factor directly; if I say: “So it doesn’t exist”, I am mistaken, because I eliminate something of my experience, and this is no longer reasonable.

Faith is an act of the intellect, the catechism says, it's an act of knowledge that grasps the Presence of something that reason would not know how to grasp, but that reason has to affirm nonetheless, otherwise something that is within our experience would be eluded, eliminated, something that our experience *indicates*; therefore in some undeniable way it is within it; it is inexplicable, but it is within it. Now of course, there is within me a capacity to understand, to know a level of reality that is greater than the usual; and I am obliged by reason to admit it: if I did not admit it I would not affirm all the factors that make up my experience.

To recognize this factor is the supportive nucleus of the entire conception of knowledge and of reality from the Christian point of view, the entire nucleus of Christian intelligence is here.

It is necessary to appreciate this. It isn't a matter of understanding *how* Christ is here; it is necessary to understand that one is *obliged to affirm* that there is something else here, because we aren't able to simply explain what is here with an investigation, analysis or examination of our reason.

When John and Andrew watched Jesus speak, they felt there was something exceptional there; they were not able to realize – they did not understand how, that is, their reason was not capable of grasping it – however, in order to be reasonable, they were obliged to say: “There is something else there”. Why? Because to be reasonable means to affirm reality according to the totality of its factors, and if one of these factors is exceptional, it is necessary to say that it's there, even if one doesn't understand how.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of my talk I mentioned two characteristics of the present situation: the reduction of religion to feeling and ethics, and the surrender regarding the possibility of knowing.

Giussani's approach to faith in the book *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* is an answer to both of these problems. In fact, if faith is a method of knowledge, then I can no longer deny that it is possible to know. By allowing me to recognize Christ today, who is the Mystery who became a man, the Mystery that is at the root of all of reality, I become interested in every aspect of reality, because every thing and every event is a sign of Him. Thus skepticism and the disengagement with regard to knowledge are no longer a temptation.

If faith is a method of knowledge, then all the attempts to confine the Christian faith to spiritual or virtual phenomena of man's religious imagination, having nothing to do with the reality of everyday life, are pathetic. It is the attempt to confine Christianity to the world of dreams. Why isn't it a dream? Why wasn't it a dream two thousand years ago? Because His Presence is at work among us. "The Christian faith is the subversive and surprising way of living ordinary things," said Fr. Giussani. We verify that Christ is real, present, because He changes precisely the things that are most resistant to any change: the ordinary things. This intensity of living, the ineffable and total vibration in front of things and people, the density of the moment, in times when everything is flat, convinces us that Péguy was right when he wrote: "He is here. / He is here as on the first day. / He is in the midst of us as on the day of His death / Eternally every day. / He is here among us all the days of His eternity." (*The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*)

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