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**Peace
be with
you all**



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Editor (Direttore responsabile)
Stefano Filippi

Editorial Assistant
Anna Leonardi

Graphic design
Four In The Morning

Layout
Lorenzo Penna

Editorial office
Via De Notaris, 50 - 20128 Milano
Tel. + 39.02.92945400
E-mail: aleonardi@tracce.it
Web: english.clonline.org

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The first *Regina Caeli* of Pope Leo XIV.

01 Editorial

02 Letters

04 Close-up
The pope of unity and mission

14 Current affairs
False Europe

18 Hope for the lost continent

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Peace, justice, truth

“Pease be with you all!” In his first greeting after being elected pope, Leo XIV echoed the words Jesus spoke to his disciples after the Resurrection. It is a wish for a new, full, and joyful life, which corresponds to the deepest hopes of every person. It is a promise, a hope, whose origin the pope clearly pointed out: “A peace that comes from God, the God who loves us all, unconditionally. All of us are in God’s hands. Christ goes before us,” he added from the Loggia of the Blessings. “The world needs His light. Humanity needs Him as the bridge that can lead us to God and His love.”

The peace of Jesus is also a responsibility for each person. Leo asked the crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square to help him “build bridges of peace”: “I want to walk together with you as a Church, united, ever pursuing peace and justice, ever seeking to act as men and women faithful to Jesus Christ, in order to proclaim the Gospel without fear, to be missionaries.” Peace, justice, and truth. These were the key words that the pope shared just a few days later with diplomats accredited to the Holy See. He reminded them that peace is “an active and demanding gift. It engages and challenges each of us, regardless of our cultural background or religious affiliation, demanding first of all that we work on ourselves.” In other words, it is a value that demands education. But not only that. As Leo told the Diplomatic Corps, “there must also be a resolve to halt the production of instruments of destruction and death, since, as Pope Francis noted in his last *Urbi et Orbi* message: No peace is ‘possible without true disarmament [and] the requirement that every people provide for its own defence must not turn into a race to rearmament.’”

“I invite you to accompany me in prophecy for peace!” Pope Francis said to the CL movement during the audience on October 15, 2022. Davide Prospero’s article, first published in *Repubblica* in mid-March and later expanded in *Corriere della Sera* (both are published also on the CL website), follows that same spirit. The starting point is simple and echoes what every pope over the past century has emphasized: the destructive force of weapons, multiplied by the development of military technology, has reached catastrophic potential. Today’s wars are no longer fought between opposing armies but aim directly at civilian populations. And the military power deployed is far more devastating than any earthquake.

It is a realistic stance, not a purely symbolic appeal. It is a judgment that is both ideal and historical, culminating in a critique of the rearmament policy adopted by the European Union. In recent weeks, Prospero’s articles have been an opportunity to reflect on and delve deeper into this judgment. That is what we also wish to do with this issue of the magazine.

Roberto, Federica, Benedetta, Maria Elena, and Cristina

edited by
Paola Bergamini
pberga@tracce.it

A “joyful youth” as an adult

Since having retired and adopting a different schedule, I do charitable work in a parish after-school program. Before we begin our work, we read passages from Fr. Giussani’s *The Meaning of Charitable Work* (apart from an occasional exception; like recently, our archbishop had written a pastoral letter about charity, after which we again took up this short and incisive text). When we came to the sentence, “Above all, youth is the unique moment in which, at least normally, we can develop this mentality with agility,” we had to smile, since we were all closer to seventy years old than sixty. Then, thinking about it, I felt very provoked. Sometimes I have the feeling of having been “robbed of my youth” and I alternate between feelings of recrimination or the rather silly desire to recover, in the time I have left, all of the “silly things” that I wasn’t able to do in my youth. This for me has been a very strong rebuke and it came to my mind what Fr. Giussani said about a very old priest who would say, “I will enter into the altar of God, to the God who makes my youth joyful.” I give thanks for this joyful youth.
Roberto, Turin (Italy)

Rediscovering the Exercises thanks to two friends

I invited a colleague to the Spiritual Exercises for adults and young workers. She was among the first to register and for a month and a half, we didn’t talk about the details. Before we left and as soon as we

arrived, I was worried about the organizational aspects of the gesture. Another friend had come with us (they met each other right before we left) and in the first moments, they were together while I was busy with other things. During the first song, “Come, Holy Spirit,” I was moved by watching my friend after I had opened the songbook so that she could read the words. The next evening, I asked her how she was feeling, and she answered that she had finally found what she was looking for. Even as a student, she wanted to find people who shared “the most profound aspects of themselves.” She moved to Milan and this desire has always been present within her. She told me, however, that when she tried to share parts of herself with her friends, she often felt made fun of and so she began to hide them. Instead, in those days, she had felt, as she said to me, free to be “completely herself.” I was also amazed by how free my other friend felt with us because she is generally very reserved. I had left feeling agitated and worried, but being with her and looking at things through her eyes for the first time, I rediscovered the texts of songs that I had always read, and I listened to what was being said, noticing that it had to do with my life. In other words, everything seemed new to me, as if it had been the first time for me also, but with gratitude and an awareness of the journey I am on.

Federica, Milan (Italy)

There is always a benefit to going outside of yourself

In this period, taking up again the text for School of Community, *The Religious Sense*, has reset me on-track to be within reality: otherwise, my tendency is to always fall back into myself. I am amazed to be

aware that there is only one reality, but I can decide to look at it by either trying to bend it to what I want or by embracing it as a place where I can encounter Christ. If I hadn't begun to know Him, I couldn't look at reality with fondness. This is just as it was with the recent birth and death of my nephew, Mauro: either it is a misfortune of fate to be born with a heart malformation, which means we try to look elsewhere so as to forget it as soon as possible, or this small, brief life has been desired and loved in God's mysterious design, and we can ask God to help us to see the good within this great pain. Just as it is with my job: If I don't know something, I can decide not to ask myself any questions, not to ask a colleague, and also to avoid revealing my shortcomings and avoid struggling. But if instead, as my teachers have taught me, I look, I ask, I investigate, then I discover new things that are useful for others, for science, for the sick. With time, it becomes less interesting to hide my limits and more interesting to know reality and to look for answers together, causing my relationships with my colleagues to blossom. In a recent dialogue with a patient, talking about his dramas and of the pope's death, the question of meaning became explicit. I told him about my faith in the Good that sustains everything. He answered, "There! That's the point: The Good that sustains everything!" It helps me to look at my agenda at the end of the day, so as not to forget the various meetings, which so often happen fast in the frenzy of a packed consultation schedule. There are difficult moments, like the recent deaths, when it seems the Lord doesn't keep His promises. What helps me? The gaze upon reality that I see in my friends and which I ask them to help me regain; prayer; the sacraments; the Grace of the Lord, which I can always ask for. One evening I was returning home in a bad mood from a meeting of the movement, and I found my children reciting evening prayers with Dante's Hymn to the Virgin. I could have remained in my contrariness, or instead I could look at my children and learn from them. It is always a stretch to go outside of yourself, but the benefit is always clear.

Benedetta, Italy

The seriousness with which they live everything

During the Easter season, I went to Tuscany to visit my uncle who is a priest and who for a few years now has followed the CLU students from Florence.

One evening, we invited to dinner some university students from the movement in the Tuscan capital. What struck me most was the intensity and the seriousness with which they live everything. I intuited a unity in their life, as if everything and everyone of us were one thing. They walk, not without effort, but together. I immediately felt a strong cry from my heart, the desire to be happy, to live a great life, full and above all united. I thought of the relationships I have in Milan, of the friends from the movement who accompany me in these years of the university. In particular, the face of my friend, Elena, came to me. A few days earlier, together with her, I had participated in a two-day pilgrimage to Caravaggio for Holy Week with a group of CLU university students. The evening of Holy Thursday, after dinner with the community from the School of Medicine, I returned home, full of the beauty that I had lived with my friends, a beauty that is always greater, day after day. In the days spent in Florence, I lived the continuation of the beauty that I live at home. With the Tuscan young people, I had an experience of that infinitely beautiful horizon for which we are made and of which Elena and my friends from Milan are daily witnesses. Also with them, I have been able to intuit the promise of good in my life. I desire to live always more deeply in that ardor that I have encountered.

Maria Elena, Italy

How questions are reignited

For the first time, I participated in the Exercises of the CL Fraternity via video conference in a place a little outside Paris where I moved last December because a new *Memores Domini* house had been opened. I still have alive the flavor of those days. I can say that I have seen in action the beauty that bowled me over when, at the age of nineteen, I met the community of the faculty of agricultural sciences at the University of Milan, and I was converted. This is a very young community—all young Italians who are recently married, or who work in research centers, or who have internships after college. I found people who live intensely, who ask themselves so many questions, and who want to look at the essential; who are not afraid to bare themselves in front of everyone, who search. It is so true that being with young people, one becomes young again and the questions that make the "I" vibrate are reignited.

Cristina, France

The pope of unity and mission

Leo XIV as described by Monsignor Giovanni Paccosi, who met him in Peru: "As a bishop, he valued everyone. He goes to the heart of faith—the encounter with Christ—in embracing everyone, especially those on the margins."



Stefano Filippi

Eight days before the conclave began, Monsignor Giovanni Paccosi shared a personal thought: “I would not rule out the possibility that Cardinal Robert Prevost might become pope.” The Prefect of Bishops? “Exactly. He is an exceptional man, known to many of the electors because of his role in the Vatican. He is a canonist, a polyglot, and above all a person of deep faith and human sensitivity. I had the chance to get to know him while on mission in Peru, and I can testify to that personally.” After Leo XIV’s election, we speak again with the bishop of San Miniato to better understand the pope he had predicted. But Monsignor Paccosi deflects modestly: “Even an algorithm developed by the Bocconi University had listed Prevost as the most likely papal candidate among the cardinals, based on his network of relationships.”

Do you see that as a positive sign?

I would say so. The algorithm emphasizes that the new pope has many relationships with many worlds.

You met Prevost in Peru.

Yes. I was responsible for the CL community in the Andean country, and he was the bishop of the diocese of Chiclayo, a city 850 kilometers from Lima, where I was living. I would visit our friends there three times a year. I had also met his predecessor, the Spanish bishop Jesús Moliné Labarta, of Opus Dei, with whom I was friends. When he was replaced, I was surprised to hear that a North American religious man was coming. However, we knew that he

had already been a missionary in Peru. The first time, he was sent for a year and a half as a young priest to Chulucanas, a very poor mountainous area that was then an apostolic vicariate and is now a diocese governed by the Augustinians. In the 1990s, Prevost returned for a longer period to Trujillo, a large city where he had taught and held numerous positions both in his order and in the diocese. He was later recalled to the United States, then went to Rome as prior general of the Augustinians for two terms. After that, he returned to America as novice master and provincial in Chicago, his hometown.

Then, in 2014, Pope Francis appointed him bishop and sent him to Peru for the third time.

At the time, I did not know him well, so I was surprised by the choice. I interpreted the appointment as the pope asking him to serve as a point of reference and harmony with the other bishops in the area, and to bring a broader outlook to the diocese of Chiclayo. Francis evidently knew that Prevost was someone who would not break ties with anyone and would get along with everyone.

What is Chiclayo like?

It is a city in the north of Peru, overlooking the Pacific, with a population of about a million. In recent decades it has experienced explosive growth thanks to its geographically strategic location for trade, including drug trafficking. Over millennia, large desert areas were transformed into farmland, especially for rice cultivation, which led to increased trade. Today, many agricultural products are shipped by air and taken abroad. Being a crossroads, the city has also attracted crime and drawn many very poor people from the mountains to live in the slums. Most of the population lives in poverty, if not destitution.

How was the CL community born in that corner of Peru?

The first members were linked to the Belgian Dominican Father Johan Leuridan, who had met Father Giussani and Father Ricci. In the second half of the 1980s, he asked Father Giussani to send a few people from Italy to Peru, and one of them was Andrea Aziani. The community in Chiclayo was very large—about one hundred to two hundred people—but when Father Leuridan dis-

tanced himself from the movement, many followed him or drifted away. A small group remained faithful, just a few dozen people, and Dado Peluso from Lima would visit them. When I arrived in Peru, he asked me to guide them. I went to Chiclayo for the first time in 2001. It was a small but lively community. A young man, Marcos Ballena, had decided to enter the seminary after encountering the movement. Years later, after returning to the diocese from a mission in southern Peru, Bishop Prevost chose him to be the rector of the seminary and made him one of his closest collaborators. Together, they initiated an educational shift to help seminarians learn to accompany those who suffer and those on the margins, which included being present in poor areas and making regular visits to prisoners. One time, speaking about Father Giussani, Bishop Prevost said that he wished all his priests could experience “a place like the School of Community.” It is interesting that he described School of Community as a “place.”

Did you often meet the future pope?

The first time I had the opportunity to go to Chiclayo after his appointment, I went to the bishop's office to introduce myself as the head of CL in Peru and to speak to him about the movement. After that, I saw him another three or four times. Even after I returned to Italy, I knew of his closeness to the CL community. He greatly appreciated the movement and would celebrate Mass on the anniversary of Father Giussani's death with warmth and friendship. The friends in the Chiclayo community were very grateful because they felt supported by him.

Did you see him again after Pope Francis appointed him as prefect of the Dicastery of Bishops?

Yes, twice. The first time was in 2023, the year he was appointed. In September, all the new bishops—including myself, since I had been appointed to San Miniato in December 2022—were invited to the Vatican for a training course. It was the first one organized by him, as he had taken office at the head of the dicastery at the end of January. As soon as he arrived, I went to greet him. He remembered me



*“[There is] an indispensable commitment for all those in the Church who exercise a ministry of authority. It is to move aside so that Christ may remain, to make oneself small so that he may be known and glorified, to spend oneself to the utmost so that all may have the opportunity to know and love him.”
(Homily during the Holy Mass Pro Ecclesia, May 9th)*

That mad rush toward the square

It is Thursday, May 8th, around 6:00 p.m. My wife and I, together with my six-month-old daughter, are in the center of Rome, on Via Cola di Rienzo, looking for clothes for the new job I will start in a few days. I get a call from my mother and I am tempted not to answer, but then I think: “That is weird, we already spoke this morning, something must be up.” I answer. “Are you in the square? It is white!” I hang up the phone almost forgetting to say goodbye. We rush out of the shop and, pushing the stroller over cracked Roman sidewalks and cobblestones, we begin to run like crazy, with the bells ringing in celebration in the background.

Ahead of us, we see people of all ages running in every direction: faithful, priests, nuns, tourists. Some leave their cars in the middle of the street and rush toward St. Peter’s, not caring whether they will still be there or towed when they come back—it seems not to matter. The closer we get to St. Peter’s, the denser the crowd becomes, making it increasingly difficult to walk and push the stroller. Squeezed in the crowd, we manage to protect our daughter and get to the square, where the joy is contagious. Everyone cheers even before knowing who has been chosen. The very essence of the joy is perfectly expressed by the words of the cardinal protodeacon: “*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus Papam!*”

A surreal scene. The square is full of everything, including many people who you can tell have little to do with the Catholic Church (even many of my colleagues). Yet, we are all there, our lives suspended at the sign of that white smoke, for which everyone instantly stopped whatever they were doing and started running to see that man, whose face was still unknown. Some people were at work, some were shopping, some were at home—everyone dropped everything to be there.

I wonder: What moves such a diverse crowd? In life, I have seen people do crazy things for all sorts of different passions: getting in line at dawn for the release of the new phone, attending a concert, or buying tickets for a soccer game. But this time it is different. What moves them? Let us include everything: fervent faith, the chance to attend an event of global and historic importance for “free,” folklore, selfies with the new pope to post on social media, and everything else. But I feel that these explanations are still not enough. What drives such different people to drop everything, risk fines and their wallets, to run at sixty as if they were twenty? There must be a deeper reason, one that overcomes laziness and spur-of-the moment instinct. As if, deep down, people sense—or hope—that in that electoral process which seems so outdated, there is something that you cannot explain just with earthly categories, despite the past weeks’ newspapers being full of strategies and power deals. Perhaps it is the vague sense that behind that man—whoever he is and whatever country he comes from—there is a promise of salvation for each person’s life, more important than anything we were doing at that moment, more important than our wallets and jobs. A vanishing point, unspoken and longed for, that everything we do cannot reach. I do not know if this is a conclusion that satisfies my need for reason, or if it is just a hasty thought. What I know for sure is that I have never seen anything like it. And that that race, so seemingly crazy, was the most reasonable thing I have ever done in my life.

Pietro, Rome



well, and we even called Father Marcos in Peru together to say hello. Bishop Prevost really respected him, so much so that after his election as pope, he invited him to the Vatican together with a delegation from Chiclayo for the Mass inaugurating his pontificate. I then saw Cardinal Prevost a second time at the beginning of March 2024, when the bishops of Tuscany went to the Vatican for the “ad limina apostolorum” visit, which included an audience with Pope Francis, but also a series of meetings with the heads of the Vatican dicasteries, and a pilgrimage to the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul.

“Christ's peace is not the sepulchral silence that reigns after conflict but rather a gift that is meant for all, a gift that brings new life. Let us pray for this peace.” (Jubilee of the Eastern churches, May 14th)



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Did you notice any changes in the “Roman” Prevost?

I vividly remembered how he had been in the diocese, enhancing and maintaining relationships with everyone: from Opus Dei, which had a strong presence in Chiclayo, to the organizations working with the poorest. The Church there had a beautiful and rich life. During the training course for new bishops, I appreciated his deep knowledge and pastoral care for us. I remember that he delivered his speech in several languages, effortlessly switching from one to another. I was deeply impressed.

What kind of person was Monsignor Prevost?

Someone who created unity. In Chiclayo, he fostered dialogue among everyone in this spirit of communion. That is something truly beautiful, because it is something we all deeply need. Unity is the deepest meaning of his episcopal motto, “In illo uno unum.” It is a phrase from Saint Augustine that means “in the One, we are one.” Prevost is a canonist, someone who has studied philosophy and mathematics, and who served as pri-

or general of the Augustinians for twelve years. He is a man of governance, but with a spirit similar to that of Pope Francis. He is someone who goes to the heart of faith—the encounter with Christ—and lives it in embracing everyone, especially those on the margins. I would add that I have the impression that in Latin America, he may be listened to even more attentively than Francis.

What do you mean?

It seems to me that the previous pope was not actually followed by many. Those closest to liberation theology claimed that Bergoglio was “one of them,” but that was not really the case, because Francis placed Christ at the center—not a sociological approach. Those more attached to tradition instead viewed him with suspicion because they thought he was breaking with the past, even though he was actually deeply attached to the essential. Ultimately, I felt that not many people in Latin America truly fol-

“From the Christian perspective, truth is not the affirmation of abstract and disembodied principles, but an encounter with the person of Christ himself, alive in the midst of the community of believers.” (Audience with the Diplomatic Corps, May 16th)

lowed him. Prevost was certainly one of the few who did, along with, for example, Cardinal Barreto, a Peruvian Jesuit in his eighties who did not participate in the conclave, and also my bishop at the time, Monsignor Lino Panizza. Leo XIV shares Francis’s view of the poor, seeing in them the most evident need for Christ—not as a sociological category, but as a theological place; that is, as a privileged context to understand what the Lord asks of His Church. Together with this, his North American background will help clarify aspects of Francis’s teaching. For instance, Bergoglio spoke of “the people” as a universal category because in Latin American countries “the people” coincides with faith. But someone coming from the United States has the experience of Catholicism as a minority and can bring together tradition, popular piety, commitment to the poorest, and theology in order to dialogue with (and challenge) the dominant culture. I believe that Leo has the capacity to interpret and synthesize the differences within the life of the Church across various parts of the world—perhaps even more so than Pope Francis.

What does it mean that Leo XIV is an Augustinian?

It is an order not widely known in Italy, but in Peru, for example, several dioceses are entrusted to the Augustinians. The same is true across the Americas and the rest of the world. They are deeply rooted in a gaze of faith and have a strong devotion to the Virgin

Mary. This was evident in Leo XIV’s first greeting from the Loggia of Blessings, when he had the faithful in St. Peter’s Square recite the Hail Mary. May 8th—the day of his election—is the feast of Our Lady of Pompeii in Italy, but for the Augustinians, it has also been the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help since the Middle Ages. Marian devotion is an integral part of the Augustinian tradition. It is also an order that has always dedicated itself greatly to culture and to the systematic study of theology. I know the Augustinian convent in Florence well, which has always been a hub of great culture. And I have seen the Augustinians in action in Peru, always alongside the people in the poorest and most neglected areas of the country, yet also dedicated to education. Together with them, the Universidad Católica Sedes Sapientiae, which was founded in Lima in part thanks to the presence of many people from the movement, has opened a campus in Chulucanas, which continues to grow year by year.

What has struck you most at the beginning of the pontificate?

His first words, “Peace be with all of you,” followed by the explanation that this was the Risen Jesus’s first greeting. Leo XIV has a very clear focus on Christ, as did Pope Francis, though few emphasized it. Francis’s last document, *Dilexit nos*, bears witness to this well. During the inaugural Mass of the pontificate, I was struck by the joyful certainty with which Leo described the days of the conclave and his election. I remember his words



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*“I would like that our first great desire be for a united Church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world.”
(Homily for the beginning of the pontificate, May 18th)*

when he said that the College of Cardinals, coming from different backgrounds and paths, placed in God's hands the desire to elect a shepherd capable of preserving the heritage of the Christian faith and, at the same time, of looking ahead to the future to confront the questions, concerns, and challenges

of today's world. He then added that the cardinals felt the working of the Holy Spirit, who was able to harmonize their hearts into a single melody. And when he said, “I was chosen, without any merit of my own, and now, with fear and trembling, I come to you as a brother, who desires to be the servant of your faith and your



“Our life originates as part of a loving plan of God, and faith leads us to “open our hearts to this mystery of love and to live as men and women conscious of being loved by God. Here we see, in all its simplicity and uniqueness, the basis of every mission, including my own mission as the successor of Peter and the heir to Paul’s apostolic zeal. May the Lord grant me the grace to respond faithfully to his call.” (Visit to the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, May 20th)

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joy, walking on the path of God’s love, for he wants us all to be united in one family,” I understood that the certainty and joy in him stem precisely from the awareness of a task entrusted to him in the communion of the Church—something the conclave brought out in an extraordinary way. Other cardinals I have spoken to were also struck by the unexpected outpouring of unity they experienced. That is why I believe that Pope Leo is free from the frameworks that others might try to impose on him. He is not alone but lives in the presence of Christ in the unity of the Church. In this light, one can understand his em-

phasis on communion, expressed through collegiality and synodality. Even his gestures toward the Eastern churches, his commitment to peace, his references to the cultural revolution underway regarding artificial intelligence, and the simplicity with which he presents himself to everyone, seem to me to already be breaking through the hearts and even into the walls of “factions” that have no place in the Church. The essence of faith and mission as a humble and bold presence in every human environment—How could we not desire to follow him and place ourselves at his disposal for the glory of Christ and the life of every human person? ■



False Europe

“The commotion around a rearmament could serve as a smokescreen to hide a central uncertainty. Before finding the means of defense, we need to ask the fundamental question: What exactly are we trying to defend?” A conversation with Professor Rémi Brague.



Mattia Ferraresi

Rémi Brague, historian of philosophy, is one of the most prominent Catholic intellectuals around. Professor Emeritus at the Sorbonne in Paris, he also taught for many years at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, where he held the chair named after Romano Guardini. He has received a long list of appointments and awards, including the Ratzinger Prize for Theology in 2012. Brague is the originator of many ideas about Europe, including the hypothesis that it is the only civilization with a clear awareness of the diverse traditions that have shaped it:



“

The immense tragedy of the Second World War ended eighty years ago, on May 8th, after having claimed sixty million victims. In today's dramatic scenario of a piecemeal third world war, as Pope Francis stated many times, I too address the world's leaders, repeating the ever-timely appeal: 'Never again war!'(Leo XIV, May 11th, Vatican City)

Here above, and on page 18, the places where once stood the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the Cold War, torn down on November 9, 1989. The photos were taken at the end of 2024.

classical Greek civilization, Roman law, and Jewish and Christian culture. Europe is not only the product of a mixture of cultures; it is aware of being such. This awareness underpins how Europe thinks about itself. Because of this, Brague has criticized abuses by certain spheres of European culture that—often backed by institutional power—have worked to erase and silence parts of its heritage, such as its Christian soul. The French philosopher agreed to speak with *Traces* on the topic of Europe, starting from the rearmament project, which has been presented as a necessary step in the integration of the European Union.

The European Commission is focusing on the rearmament project, not only to defend itself against the Russian threat, but also to accelerate European integration in the area of common defense, an issue that has been debated since the very beginning of the EU's formation. There is a risk that the rhetoric of common defense could mask the weakness of a project that has never found a shared identity. What is your take on this?

The threats are undoubtedly real, and Russia—having never held its “Nuremberg trials” and having retained leaders trained by the KGB—represents one of them. From this perspective, it is indeed wise to equip ourselves to resist a possible attack. But there are also internal threats, you are right. All the commotion around a rearmament—which, in any case, will proceed slowly—could serve as a smokescreen to hide a central

Professor Rémi Brague.



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uncertainty. Before finding the means of defense, we need to ask the fundamental question: What exactly are we trying to defend? We often hear the answer, “our freedom.” But the freedom to do what? To consume, to travel? Why not? Hunger and imprisonment are certainly not something good. But perhaps there is something deeper. I would say it is the freedom to access the truth.

In the 2017 Paris Declaration, which you signed, a false idea of Europe was denounced as having overtaken the true Europe. Among other things, it stated that “the true Europe is at risk because of the suffocating grip that the false Europe has over our imaginations.” Several years later, do you think that this false idea of Europe is still dominant and decisive? Should the growth of movements and parties critical of the EU be seen as a reaction to this “false Europe”?

Only in part. The divide between true and false Europe runs through the EU and all its institutions, as well as through the soul of every European. I do not think that the situation has improved since 2017. And I fear that the growth of those movements and parties you mention is a clumsy response to a real problem.

The document also says that “the patrons of the false Europe are bewitched by superstitions of inevitable progress.” Even when it comes to common defense, the rhetoric of inevitable progress and destiny is being deployed—instrumentally and, indeed, superstitiously, it seems to me.

What you are referring to is just one instance of a broader trend. The rhetoric of freedom to be preserved and fought for has dominated the West for centuries in various forms. Curiously, however, it easily flips into its opposite. Just think of Margaret Thatcher’s “*There is no alternative.*” Or, at a deeper level and much earlier, Nietzsche’s revival of the ancient concept of *amor fati*, and all the definitions of freedom as the awareness of necessity, from Spinoza to the Marxists. We are witnessing a vulgarized version of these ideas. It is extremely useful to those in power, because as long as ordinary citizens believe that nothing can be done, they will not actually try to do anything.

There is often debate about the foundations of the European project. Some argue that the Christian spirit instilled by figures such as De Gasperi,

Schuman, and Adenauer is still, in some sense, present in the institutions of the EU. Others, on the contrary, argue that such an idea of Europe has never been realized, and that it was socialists and liberals who shaped its architecture. This leads to two attitudes: Some think that the EU should be restored to bring out its original Christian ideals, while others believe that it must be criticized to reveal its true ideological foundations. What is your view?

A similar debate has been stirring among American Catholic intellectuals for some years now. They are questioning the very foundations of the project of the United States. They ask, for example, whether the principles laid out in the country's founding documents (the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, etc.) are simply a straightforward application of Enlightenment ideas, particularly those of John Locke, or whether they are part of the tradition of Greek, Roman, and then medieval natural law. This is not an academic conversation for historians and scholars. The question is whether a structure founded on such principles is worth defending or not. In this regard, France's refusal (and I am ashamed of this), followed by Belgium's, to acknowledge the Christian roots of European civilization during the drafting of a European Constitution was a terrible sign. It was, after all, a perfectly incontestable historical fact—one that imposed no obligation on anyone. But denying what is plainly evident, claiming that what everyone sees does not exist, is typical of ideological regimes.

In his speech in Munich last February, US Vice President J.D. Vance emphasized that European chancelleries and bureaucracies tend to silence dissident voices, even going so far as to cancel elections when the results are unfavorable. Do you agree with this view? Or do you think it is an exaggeration?

To my great surprise, J.D. Vance—along with Marco Rubio—is the only member of Trump's circle about whom I have ever heard positive things from a New York friend of mine who is a Democrat and very liberal in the American sense of the term. I recently listened to Vance's full speech in Munich—a city that I love very much, by the way. There is certainly some exaggera-

tion in his tone. The style of a speech meant to shake people's souls to wake them up requires this kind of dramatic flair. But he is right on the substance. I cannot speak for countries like Romania, but I observe what is happening in my own country. The dominant media, especially state media funded by taxpayers, silence—I would be tempted to use the excellent German verb *totschweigen*—any ideas that diverge from the mandatory opinion. To this end, the term “populist” is very useful.

You have spoken about the “self-hatred” that characterizes modern Western man. Deep down, today's individual desires his own self-destruction. Where does this suicidal tendency come from?

I spoke about this at a conference in Madrid on November 18. In my opinion, self-hatred is the expression of a paradoxical phenomenon: self-envy. We envy people who have benefitted from gifts greater than ours, even if they have not taken anything away from us (in which case it would be jealousy), and even if it is not unfair (otherwise it would be cause for indignation). We envy those who have won the lottery. Today, the emergence of the human species is increasingly seen as the result of pure chance, so it is no surprise that individuals might feel a kind of hatred toward their own species.

Woke ideology seems to concentrate this impulse to the highest degree, but at the same time many observers believe it has reached its peak and is now receding. Do you agree?

Like all errors, woke ideology has a kernel of truth that allows it to survive. Otherwise, it would not hold any appeal. It is a fact that the history of the West includes dark chapters, and that repentance is not without foundation. Indeed, it is a matter of honor for the West to recognize its own faults, and this is probably due to the shadow of the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation. But why, outside of Uzbekistan, is there no commemoration of the exploits of Tamerlane at the end of the fourteenth century, which cost seventeen million lives according to some historians? Why only talk about the European slave trade, when the Arabs committed worse atrocities? The demand for forgiveness must be mutual. If it is one-sided, it becomes toxic—for both sides. ■

From France to Scandinavia, thousands of young people and adults ask for baptism every year. Is post-Christian Europe starting to be post-secular?



18

Hope for the lost continent



Matteo Matzuzzi

“Something is happening that surprises us and brings us joy,” said the bishop of Arras, Monsignor Olivier Leborgne, looking at the numbers of Easter baptisms recorded in the ninety-eight French dioceses, more than ten thousand among adults (double compared to a year ago) and more than seven thousand among young people. Numbers like these have not been seen for decades in the country that made secularism a dogma. In 2002, when Europe was still debating whether to include Judeo-Christian roots in a proposed constitution (which was later rejected by France and Belgium through referendums), there were just four thousand adult baptisms. It is mainly young people aged sixteen to twenty-five who confidently request the sacrament of Christian initiation: they have “the will to share their faith in society without complexes,” explains the French Episcopal Conference, where the reasons for requesting entry into the Church were read. More generally, they note “a thirst for interiority” unlike anything seen before in this area of the world.

France is the clear example of a slow and patchy awakening that is touching much of Europe. There exist creative minorities, to use the words of



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the then-young professor Joseph Ratzinger, who focus on the essentials of faith and are not afraid to show it to others. This is an evangelization that brings together new technologies—first blogs, now social media, with the sharing of life experiences—and old forms such as pilgrimages. Fifteen thousand young people were gathered in Chartres a year ago for the traditional three-day pilgrimage over Pentecost in the French countryside. These kinds of pilgrimages center around themes that do not exactly seem aimed at attracting crowds of young people distracted by videos on TikTok or Instagram. This year's theme is "The Social Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Last year's was "I Want to See God." In 2023, "The Eucharist, Salvation of Souls." Not exactly lighthearted advertising slogans. Meanwhile, thirteen thousand high school students from Île-de-France went to Lourdes last April during Holy Week. A thirst for interiority is also visible further north, in Great Britain, where Catholics are now about to surpass the number of Anglicans: this is the first time this has happened since 1527, when Henry VIII promoted the Reformation and broke away from Rome.

The Bible Society, reporting on what *The Times of London* emphatically called an "epochal change," stressed that if until recently those who declared themselves Christians did so because they were born and raised in a Christian context—whether due to family influences or simply cultural ones—today those who call themselves Christians do so because they are practicing. One statistic stands out: in 2018, 41 percent of those attend-

Monsignor Erik Varden, bishop of Trondheim (Norway), during the Jubilee pilgrimage of Scandinavian Catholics.



ing Mass in the UK at least once a month were Anglican and 23 percent were Catholic. Today, the ratio has changed dramatically: 34 percent are Anglican and 31 percent Catholic.

Here too, as in France, it is the under 25s who drive what the Bible Society calls a “silent rebirth,” and the methods are the same as those noted across the Channel: evangelization through communities and youth groups, especially among those born in the 1990s and later. These numbers and trends disprove the easier assumption that young people approach Christianity only if it embraces the spirit of the world: Anglicans have done so for some time (as have German Lutherans) and see their numbers dwindling year after year. Further north, the pattern is the same. In Sweden, over the last decade, the percentage of Catholics has increased by 20 percent. The numbers are small, but growth is steady, confirming a consolidated trend that is not only due to new-generation immigrants, who are mostly Muslim. These conversions mainly involve men and women from more educated classes, including doctors and teachers and even several Protestant pastors: In 2014, the conversion of Ulf Ekman, the founder of Sweden’s largest megachurch, whose son then be-

came a Dominican, made headlines in all of the local newspapers. Cardinal Anders Arborelius, bishop of Stockholm (and of all Sweden, since the capital diocese is the only diocese in the Scandinavian country), ironically commented on the anti-historical boom in one of the most secularized realities in the West: “It has become cool to be Catholic in Sweden.” He himself is a convert, previously a young Lutheran who was fairly indifferent to the religious sense. Then, thanks to the friendship with some Catholics, something changed in him. He read *Story of a Soul*, became passionate about the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, entered the Discalced Carmelite Order, and a few weeks ago sat with his cardinal brothers in the conclave that elected Leo XIV.

What drives hundreds of young people to convert to Catholicism in a world full of distractions where the space for faith—or so it has been said for years—seems reduced or nonexistent? “An inexhaustible thirst for God,” said the parish priest of St. Erik’s Cathedral in Stockholm. Incredible as it may seem, these young people are drawn to the tabernacle and the Blessed Sacrament. A Norwegian seminarian studying in Rome explained the situation this way: “The trend for

“I see more and more people feeling empty after trying the atheistic, relativistic, and materialistic postmodern project, leaving them hungry for something bigger and deeper. Secularization has run its course. It is exhausted, devoid of positive purpose. Meanwhile, human beings remain alive with deep aspirations.”

a long time was strong secularization and a growing irreligiosity. However, I see more and more people feeling empty after trying the atheistic, relativistic, and materialistic postmodern project, leaving them unsatisfied and hungry for meaning and purpose, for something bigger and deeper. Neither money, career, fame, nor hedonism have been able to give them the happiness and peace that everyone seeks.”

And all the talk about the decline of Western spirituality and the rise of secularism? “I have the feeling that our continent, and not least its young people, are waking up. Covid was a wake-up call. It brought the specter of death closer. It shattered the illusion that well-being or scientific expertise keeps us safe, that death is just something that only happens to others,” said Norwegian bishop Erik Varden, the bishop of Trondheim. “Secularization has run its course. It is exhausted, devoid of positive purpose. Meanwhile, human beings remain alive with deep aspirations. Consider the fact that Marilynne Robinson and Jon Fosse are read worldwide; that people flock to the cinema to see Terrence Malick films; that thousands seek instruction in the faith. These are signs of the

times. They should fill us with courage.” For at least two decades, Europe has been described as the epicenter of the Christian crisis, with the collapse of religious practice and the rise of religious indifference, especially among younger generations. They were, sociological studies and demographic analyses claimed, no longer interested in Mass and the sacraments. Confirmation came from increasingly empty church pews, with fewer and fewer children being born—not only in the deeply secularized north but progressively also in the south, including Italy. Then, slowly and not always visibly to the naked eye, there occurred the first glimmer of a reversal of the trend. Even in Germany, where for the first time in years—although the situation remains critical, with priestly vocations at a very low level—1,839 Germans have chosen to join the Catholic Church. This is an increase from 2023, to which are added the 4,743 people who, after having left the Church (in Germany people can leave by cancelling their registration from a special register, thus avoiding the expensive church tax), have asked to return. The “new” Catholics, as in Scandinavia, are almost entirely former Protestants. Perhaps, as Bishop Varden says, rather than post-Christian, European society is beginning to be post-secular. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

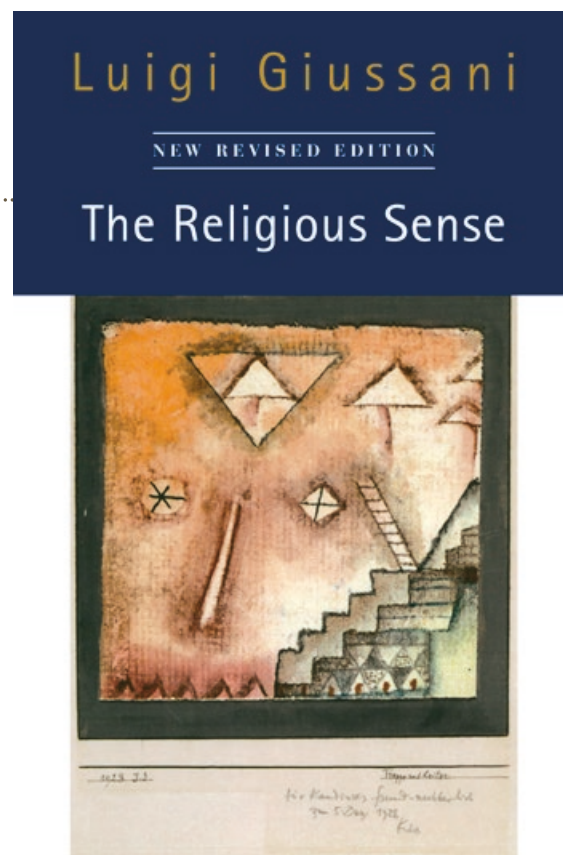
A new translation of one of Giussani's seminal works

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Monsignor **Luigi Giussani** (1922–2005) was the founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation in Italy. His works are available in over twenty languages and include the trilogy *The Religious Sense*, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, and *Why the Church?*, as well as the three volumes of *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*



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