

TRACES

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06

*This place exists*





## TRACES

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Vol. 27

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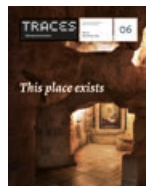
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December 2025



The Milk Grotto in Bethlehem.  
The image of the CL poster for Christmas 2025.

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NEW YORK  
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2026

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WHERE  
"EVERYTHING  
IS WAITING  
FOR YOU"

DAVID WHYTE

## Surprised by Grace

**F**or years, Europe has been crossed by an underground river that every so often surfaces—when statistics mention it—only to sink back into the depths of souls and friendships, still alive and sparkling. This new water is the ever-increasing number of conversions to Catholicism among young people and adults. A steady increase in baptisms has long characterized Africa, America, and Asia, and now this discovery of God is spreading to the Old Continent as well. A few weeks ago, the Sunday supplement of the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* even wrote that “God is in fashion.”

**Sociologists, intellectuals,** and observers of religious issues are beginning to take an interest in what they consider a phenomenon to be analyzed rather than a new way of life, and they attempt to interpret it by applying a series of categories: the search for security by a fragile and precarious generation, the recovery of solid traditional values in the face of the challenges of technology, the role of influencers who are as skilled as they are devout, the need to come together in a world that exalts narcissism and self-affirmation. There could be countless reasons for it. It would be interesting if one day a scholar of church life could update a work like *La conversione al cristianesimo nei primi secoli* [conversion to Christianity in the early centuries], detailing—as Gustave Bardy did—the motivations, needs, obstacles, and methods that are typical of new Christians in the twenty-first century.

**That volume,** in its final lines, recalls that throughout history entire peoples have converted in the wake of their kings’ doing so, and others have joined in out of imitation, ambition, or convenience. But in Bardy’s view, “facts of this kind are less significant than individual conversions, brought about by the grace of God.” Even today, what fills us with wonder and gratitude is discovering and recounting these stories, the questions that awaken them, and the encounters that suggest an answer. The new Sauls, Augustines, and Irenaeuses are people who come from very different backgrounds and approach the church along unexpected paths. And who, now as then, allow themselves to be surprised by grace.

**Fostering an encounter with God** and with the Christian community is one of the most valuable contributions that ecclesial movements offer to the whole church, as well as proclaiming that Jesus is present here and now, that He claims to reveal man to himself that Jesus is present here and now, that He claims to reveal man to himself, and that He can be encountered in those who gather in His name: “This place exists, and not in the heaven of some dream, but on the earth of a bodily reality.” To all our readers, Merry Christmas!

## Cecilia, Ornella, and Michela

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
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### What can be born from a tragedy?

As soon as I arrived at school, I found out that one of our former students had taken his own life. It was his former classmates who told me. From the hallway, I called them into my office. Other faculty members were also with me. I intuited that these young people didn't know what to ask, but they knew whom to ask. Our thoughts went immediately to all of our students. What impact would the news have? Looking for help, I called a few dear friends and consulted with the faculty, and in the end, we decided that in the upcoming days, I would make a round of the classes. Besides being the principal, I also teach religion and understood that it would be very important for the students to dedicate some time to talk. These were dense hours in which I tried to say with strength and resolve that life is not a matter of performance, that we are loved as we are, and when we have a problem, from the most banal to the most painful, we should not be ashamed. We must ask, because there is always someone who will listen to us and embrace our questions. And so it was that some of the young people began to open up, to say that they also were living in painful personal circumstances, some explicitly in front of everyone, others communicating individually, and still others by writing a letter. On the day of the funeral, the faculty was joined by so many students and former students, all of whom lived the moment in a climate of silence and profound dignity. When I saw the father's face over the coffin, I asked myself who could give him hope. During the song *Madonna Nera*, I understood that for him there was an embrace, because, as the lyrics say, "It is sweet to be your son." And that is what I was able to say to his mother outside of the church: "I

entrust you to Our Lady and I will stop by to visit you." Returning to school the next day and coming across some of the young people, I cannot look at them and see anything less than the sense of their destiny, and this gaze transforms into a deeper attention toward each of them who, in the uniqueness of each of their lives, desires to be longed for and welcomed. A few days after the funeral, the father showed up at the school without calling. He entered my office and burst into tears and stayed for an hour to talk to me. How was I able to live this circumstance? In the first place, it is because Someone has valued and forgiven me even before I changed. In time, I've begun to understand that through us passes the love of life, Jesus, who has made Himself a concrete companionship in the piece of the church that has reached us through the faces of the friends that we have met in the movement.

### Signed Letter

### I desire to live with greater truth

Through unexpected circumstances, I ran into a former colleague from the secondary school where I worked until two years ago. Talking about some of the students to whom I had taught Chinese, the name of a particular student came up. I had given him some short extra help sessions during my lunch break because he was very behind his classmates. When I mentioned this to my former colleague, who was recounting the academic success and the enthusiasm of the student in question, she blurted out, "I remember so well! You were so patient and kind and look how far he's come!" And so I asked myself, "But did I take that time from my lunch break because I'm particularly patient and kind or particularly good and willing to help?" I did it because I couldn't be in front of that kid without taking him seriously for what he was, with his struggles and his failings, just as I am continuously taken seriously with my struggles and my failings in the precise places to which I belong, the church and the movement. Here



I am made the object of a gaze that is truer and more correspondent and more surprising than the gaze I have upon myself, which is the gaze of Christ. But the thing that has struck me the most about this situation is that it has reawakened in me a nostalgia and a desire to receive again that gaze upon me and to be able to give it to those around me: to my husband and children, my family, my parish priest, and to the people of the community. This nostalgia for Him has returned and I have begun again to beg for Him to return. So, in the experience of today, I noticed that I desire to participate and to live the belonging to Him whom I met in order to live more humanly and with greater truth the circumstances that are given to me.

**Cecilia**, Berkhamsted (Great Britain)

### The paternity of Andrea Aziani

In July, we participated in a trip to Peru organized by Russia Cristiana with the title, "Following in the Footsteps of Andrea Aziani" (the *Memor Domini* sent to Lima by Fr. Giussani in 1989 who died at aged fifty-five and is buried there). In addition to visiting some beautiful places in the country, we met the communities in Trujillo, Chiclaya, and Lima. Still moved seventeen years after his death, they told us of meeting Andrea and of becoming the children of a paternity that made them fall in love with Christ and develop an affection for the movement. We participated in the School of Community and it was impressive to touch with our own hands how belonging to the movement makes us companions on the journey, breaking through barriers of unfamiliarity and culture. I asked some of the people what struck them about Andrea. The answer was: the love of the person, the promise of a true and intense life, a friendship that makes it possible to encounter Christ in the verification of faith. This was exactly what struck me at aged twenty when I answered yes to Fr. Giussani when he asked about our willingness to leave the CLU in Milan to go to Siena with Andrea, Dado, and Lorenze to start the community. Returning to the present, we were still at the Lima airport when the secretary of the bishop of Carabayllo, a diocese north of the city, called my husband to invite him to participate in September in an international conference titled, "The Challenges of Artificial Intelligence for a Humanizing, Personalized, and Innovative Education." As an educator, my husband has written quite a bit on the human school, but we were certainly taken by surprise! The conference was organized by the Sedes Sapientiae Catholic University, which was founded by the then bishop, Mons.

Lino Panizza, and by Andrea; it was desired by Fr. Giussani. We thought to contribute remotely, but the proposal was to go in person, and what's more, with a presentation in Spanish, a language my husband does not know. We decided to go. The judgment was clear: greater than our misgivings were our belonging to the friends we had met and the joy of being able to contribute who we are to the construction of a place of good, continuing Andrea's work.

**Ornella**, Lugano (Switzerland)

### An entire school mobilized for Gaza

On Sunday evening, the coordinator of the Instituto Francesco Ventorino Child Care Center, of which I am the principal, received a message from the teachers that they had discussed participating in the strike for Gaza the following day. They wrote in their message, "There is the desire to participate, but we do not want to cause any distress, only to raise awareness about what is happening." On Monday, we were all at school, but the question remained: How should we raise awareness? During the staff meeting, they asked how a strike would work, in particular whether they would need to give advance notice of it. I answered based on legal norms, but I also threw out again a proposal that was born from a dialogue with the president of the school's CDA. I said that "if we had gone on strike, they would have docked us our day's pay. However, whoever would like to freely give up half a day's pay, even having worked, the other half would be matched by the management and the amount we would raise would be given to the organization Pro Sancta Terra, which for decades has worked in the region for the encounter and coexistence between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples." The proposal was met with interest from everyone. We prepared a notice for the school's teachers and we sent an email to the parents, sharing the reasons for the gesture and inviting them to an online meeting with the journalist, Andrea Avveduto, the communications director for Pro Sancta Terra, to better understand the situation in Palestine and to explain where our money would go. In the meantime, the middle school kids had taken it upon themselves to raise funds with the same goal as the staff and parents. There was the classic bazaar with candy, bookmarks, bracelets, and keychains. Will the money raised change the situation? No, but what has happened has begun to change the judgment and the hearts of those who allow themselves to be touched.

**Michela**, Catania (Italy)

# CHRISTMAS 2025

## This place exists

God loves first, from the very beginning! In his mercy, God has always desired to draw all people to himself. It is his life, bestowed upon us in Christ, that makes us one, uniting us with one another.

Pope Leo XIV

We know how much people of our time are searching, even unawares, for a place where they can rest and live their relationships in peace, where they are redeemed from the lie, the violence, the nothingness in which everything otherwise would tend to end up. Christmas is the good news that this place exists, and not in the heaven of some dream but on the earth of a bodily reality.

Luigi Giussani



Communion  
and Liberation

Milk Grotto in Bethlehem  
© Andrey Shevchenko/Alamy



# Pain and hope

In the Milk Grotto, the Holy Family hid from Herod. There, for centuries, thousands of women, including Muslims, have entrusted their struggles to Mary in a place of prayer where life triumphs.



Alessandra Buzzetti

A few steps from the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, at the end of an alley lined with woodworkers' shops, stands a small shrine. Once you pass through the gate and descend a few steps, you find yourself enveloped in the silence of a white stone grotto. The Arabs call it the grotto of Our Lady Mary, but pilgrims know it as the Milk Grotto. According to a tradition dating back to the sixth century, the Virgin Mary found temporary refuge in this grotto while fleeing from Herod's soldiers, who had orders to kill all children under the age of two. After the blessing of the angel who appeared to St. Joseph in a dream, they left this grotto to seek refuge in Egypt.

**Silent yet determined** to obey God promptly, later tradition says that St. Joseph hurried Mary along while she was breastfeeding the baby Jesus. A drop of her milk fell on the stone, which turned completely white. A miraculous stone for hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, especially women and mothers, who throughout the centuries have entrusted their struggles to the Virgin Mary in this grotto: young women longing for a child who never came, young women facing difficult preg-

nancies, mothers who knelt and asked for the miracle of healing for their child. Christians and Muslims. Yesterday and today. One often encounters women of the Islamic faith caressing that white rock, their faces wet with tears as they venerate Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In Bethlehem's Milk Grotto, pain and hope transcend boundaries and barriers in the cry for help to the Virgin, feeling loved and understood by that woman who experienced the pain of childbirth, the fear of seeing her son killed by Herod's soldiers, the fatigue and difficulties of the long escape to save that child just a few weeks after giving birth—whose existence was, in her eyes, a mystery of the power of God. In the land of the Bible, where every stone is a sign of the divine presence, Christians in the Milk Grotto have revived the tradition of venerating Rachel. The tomb of the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob—who died in childbirth while delivering her second son, Benjamin—is only a few kilometers away. It is a place as holy as it is contested. Due to the political conflict, since the 1980s access has been exclusively reserved for Jews, and many Jewish women who cannot conceive still go to Rachel to pray, whom the evangelist Mat-

thew refers to in a prophetic role to describe the pain of mothers who experienced the massacre of the innocents.

**In the Milk Grotto**, life triumphs. To see this, you need to go to the rooms to the right of the entrance to the shrine, which is guarded by Franciscan friars. An entire room is dedicated to votive offerings for graces received. There are more than two thousand faces of children born under the protection of the Virgin of Milk, living in every corner of the world. White powder from the grotto is given in small sachets, to be given to mothers in difficulty as an invitation to prayer. Generations of women have rubbed handkerchiefs or baby clothes against the rock walls. Thanks to the restoration carried out by the Custody of the Holy Land and completed in 2006, the small shrine is now more intimate. To help visitors focus not so much or not only on devotion, but on prayer—which alone generates peace of heart—an underground passage leads from the back of the grotto to another chapel, dedicated to the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, where visitors can dwell peacefully in the presence of the Lord. ■

# The reawakening of faith

In France every year, thousands of adults and adolescents receive baptism. They come to the church in many ways, including from the effect of influencers, and the recurrent explanation is that “believing makes me become truly myself.” A report from Grenoble.



Mattia Ferraresi

**“W**ho is Christ for you?” This is one of the questions that Fr. Christophe Rosier always asks in his first meeting with someone wanting to draw closer to the church. “He’s a friend who helps us,” “A family member who watches over us,” are two of the answers. “What has faith changed in your life?” he goes on to ask. Some speak of their habits, clothes, and consumption, others of renewed trust, the future, and their use of time. A recurring answer is that faith “makes me become truly myself.” Thus Christ is a friendly presence whose first effect is to bring out a person’s authentic “I.” This is what most of the young people say during their first conversation with the parish priest of Saint-Joseph, in Grenoble, in what can become the first step toward baptism. Known by all as the “parish of young people,” Saint-Joseph is one of the many places in France where postsecularized youth are looking to the faith. “For the most part, these young people have received nothing of their parents’ faith; they were not born Catholic and have no point of reference,” recounts Fr. Christophe, “but neither do they have prejudices, and this is positive.” The second shared characteristic is that almost all of them have authentic spiritual experience. “In church, reading the Bible or in prayer in their heart, or as they are going through a trial, the Lord seems to give signs of His presence with perceptible graces,” Fr. Christophe says, adding a third common trait: Before taking the step that brings them to ask for a meeting, they all go through a personal search that can last years. They read the Bible, approach the magisterium of the church, and seek where they can.

This journey of finding information for oneself happens more often on TikTok than in the pontifical universities, and in the space of the French-speaking social media one comes upon Christian influencers for all sensibilities. Among the most followed are the Dominican Brother Paul-Adrien (569,000 followers on YouTube), Sister Albertine Debacker (230,000 on Instagram), and the traditionalist priest Matthieu Raffray





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(182,000 on Instagram). These are also gateways to the faith. “Many of their parents’ generation called themselves Catholic, but they didn’t necessarily have an encounter with Christ. Instead, these young people first have the encounter, and then the practice comes as a consequence,” says Fr. Christophe. The final step in their personal journey is discovering that they cannot be Christian alone, but only within a companionship.

**When they decide to turn to someone,** they meet the parish priest and a group of educators who follow people on their sacramental journeys. Among these are Sister Annie Devlin and Sister Antonella Piazzoli, two missionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo who, in addition to teaching in the schools, accompany the parish youth in the sacramental journey and follow the School of Community of the CL university students. This is the dynamic that has made the reawakening of the faith a statistically significant fact, a surprising one given the reign of *laïcité*, where atheism is the most widespread practice; Catholicism is formally the religion in France with the most followers, but Islam is the most practiced. Last Easter there were 17,800 baptisms of adults and adolescents, a 45 percent increase over the previous year, which had also been marked by a notable jump. For 2026, an increase in line with this trend is expected.

At Saint-Joseph, the numbers become faces. We meet a few young people before the 7 p.m. daily Mass. Twenty-one-year-old Juliette Oulié is studying math at the University of Grenoble and will receive baptism at Easter. Her family is not Catholic. She came upon the faith through the Scouts.

"In the gatherings I began to let prayer into my life," she recounts, "but it happened only every three weeks when we got together, and then at summer camp. During the summer holidays we prayed three times a day, and I thought I'd like to live this way every day of my life."

**But Juliette's daily life** was "separate," as she says. Her high school friends were not Catholics, and the topic was not even mentioned at home. Faith was something private. Three years ago, she participated in a week-long retreat in Provence with the Scouts. "We went to Mass every morning at 6:45, something I had never done. And there, I said to myself, 'This will be the moment when God and I stop speaking to each other.' Actually, the opposite was true. It was strangely easy to go to Mass every morning. I wanted to go, even though I was very tired. Then when I stopped going, I missed it. So I realized that I needed to begin a journey toward baptism, and six months ago I came here."

8 Arnaud Costanziello is one of the veterans of the parish group. He is twenty-seven and received baptism last year. He had not grown up in a Catholic environment either. "I almost hated Jesus and the church," he recounts. When he was fourteen he asked himself a logical question: "Why do I detest so much something that doesn't even exist?" With a gesture halfway between a fist closed against heaven and Pascal's wager, he decided to read a prayer, putting his heart into it, to see what happened. "I remember that all my hatred for Catholicism disappeared and I broke into tears. I don't know what happened, but in that moment I was freed from something." With this seed planted in his heart, Arnaud began looking for his place in the world. He was surrounded by friends who achieved incredible success in their studies and work, while he limped along, working as a waiter to support himself. "I didn't find my place because I wasn't at their level," he recounts. His sense of inadequacy compared to the dominant model of self-realization threw him into a depression. He said to God, "You have blessed my friends, giving them an evidently extraordinary task. But I don't see where You want me to go." He took a sabbatical year with an association that serves the poor. "They asked me to organize a Christmas celebration for those who had no place to go. I felt panicked because I

didn't know how to do anything, but I took my assignment seriously and saw that something was happening. I understood there that I also had talent, the ability to be with people. Then in the journey of conversion I understood something more important: The very fact that I exist fills God with joy, regardless of what I am capable of doing," he recounts. Baptism led Arnaud to make some radical decisions, for example, to leave the girlfriend he had been living with for some time. "She was an atheist and against marriage, and didn't want children, all things that went in the opposite direction to the one I was going in. I loved her very much, and with great sadness I told her it was over," he says, reflecting on the fact that an encounter with the church asks for a change that can mean sacrifice.

**At this Wednesday's Mass** there are about seventy young people of university age. Those who have not yet been baptized come to Communion with their arms crossed over their chests, to receive a blessing. In this cold church full of cracks there is an air of the Acts of the Apostles. The carpet around the altar has seen better days, but Europe is full of churches with precious marble where nobody is there to kneel. After Wednesday evening Mass, the young people have dinner together and then there is a cultural proposal. The parish is full of life. In addition to preparation for the sacraments, there are recreational activities, vacations, sports, study groups, a café, and a coworking space. Every week a new face turns up. The young people are not just the passive recipients of the pastoral activities; they are co-responsible for them.

"People are looking for communion and a place where this communion can express itself. Only within this communion can each of us offer ourselves to God," says Fr. Emmanuel Decaux, the Vicar General of the Grenoble-Vienne Diocese since 2023. Before accepting this position, he had been the parish priest of Saint-Joseph and had followed the entire phase of diocesan reflection on a credible proposal to offer this generation of searchers. "The risk for us is to want to explain the cause of the phenomenon we see," explains Fr. Emmanuel, "but the point is to understand



where we are going. I have the sensation that today there is a reawakening of faith because people are waiting for someone to take them by the hand and say, 'come, let's go.' Ours is not a faith that explains; it is a faith that guides."

The mission of the Sisters of Saint Charles Borromeo is woven into the fabric of the local church. In 2019 they opened a house in the Corenc neighborhood along the Isère River outside the city, surrounded by the Alps. The garden of the house borders the main location of the school where Sister Mariagiulia Cremonesi, Sister Francesca Salvi, Sister Annie Devlin, and Sister Antonella Piazzoli teach; Sister Monica Noce, instead, works in an elementary and middle school and visits the sick in the big hospital of Grenoble. They all participate in the activities of the local church. Even though the school is Catholic, the French government, which also recruits and pays teachers in private schools, makes a tremendous effort to keep religion outside the classroom, and "allows" faith to be spoken of only before and after the bell rings. Anything in between is proselytism.

**This does not stop** the missionaries from being a presence. First of all, a visible presence. Wearing the habit in a France that drastically limits the signs of faith in public spaces is a significant fact that causes those who are searching to ask themselves questions. They had invited all of the students to go to Mass on Thursday and then come to a brief lunch at their house, a space planned for welcoming everyone. Over twenty students participate in the Mass, but not all are Catholic. Some come simply because they have been invited, others out of curiosity. And some because they have something in their heart that is still unnamed. After Mass, one student did not want to come to lunch, because it was her first time and she didn't know the other students well and felt embarrassed. With a very kind insistence, Sister Francesca invited her to stay. As they spoke at table, the girl confided that she was beginning to feel the desire to receive baptism, but hadn't told anyone about it yet.

Among the friends of the missionaries is Fr.

Roch-Marie Cognet, a forty-one-year-old vice-parish priest in the Notre-Dame de Vouise parish in another area of the diocese. He too has seen the ferment that leads young people to become interested in the faith. In his area, "the grandparents were Catholic, the parents are not practicing, and the children don't know what they are," says Fr. Roch-Marie, "and so questions about faith are a point of departure, certainly not one of arrival, in part because those who have a cultural trace of Christianity must build an affective relationship with God."

**In the parish, about** 150 young people participate in the activities, and Fr. Roch-Marie is an untiring generator of proposals, from pilgrimages on mountain bikes—which is very appreciated in a place full of athletic people—to days on the ski slopes. His activity corresponds with an observation linked to a certain intellectual or spiritualistic temptation of French Christianity. "Here, faith must pass from the head to the heart. The journey of being accompanied toward baptism that many begin is an incredible grace," explains Fr. Roch-Marie, "but what we try to communicate is that the content of the sacrament is revealed within the Christian life. Friendship with God requires time, space, and sharing." Last year in his parish, 120 people were baptized, among them 6 adults and 5 high school students. One adult converted from Islam, in secret.

"We are in front of something that is a pure work of the Lord," says Mirco Iadarola, the CL leader in France, "and this makes us ask how we should accompany these brothers and sisters of ours. After the experience of the catechumenate, when they are accompanied step by step, they can feel lost in the great jumble of ordinary Christian life."

Originally from Bergamo in northern Italy, Iadarola has lived in France for over thirty years and directs the Parvis Part-Dieu cultural center of the Lyon diocese, a perfect place for observing the reawakening of faith. This is also a great provocation for the movement. "I believe that we who live such a strong communitarian dimension are called to renew our missionary drive," says Iadarola. "We can only put ourselves at the service of what is happening through the work of an Other."■

# Spring in northern Europe

Perhaps inspired by a video on TikTok or a book by Jon Fosse, it is mainly young people in Norway who are discovering the faith. They seem to appear out of nowhere. But they are seeking Jesus.

**T**rappist monk Erik Varden, born in 1973, bishop of Trondheim, Norway—his native country—comes from a formally Lutheran but de facto agnostic family. He began his journey of conversion at the age of fifteen while listening to Gustav Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony. Today, he presides over the Scandinavian Episcopal Conference, which reports that in 2024 about a hundred conversions to Catholicism were recorded in the diocese of Oslo and in the prelatures of Tromsø and Trondheim. It is a real phenomenon—though still marginal, given that Catholics make up about one percent of the Norwegian population—and it is growing, as confirmed by the faithful, who are increasingly encountering new faces in their parishes, individuals who are asking very specific questions. Until recently, it was mainly non-practicing adults who returned to the faith, but increasingly, it is young people seeking baptism.

A common ground for this reawakening of religious consciousness

is, as Varden testified in a recent interview with the Italian daily newspaper *Il Foglio*, the recognition that “secularization has run its course. It is exhausted, devoid of positive purpose. Human beings, meanwhile, remain alive with deep aspirations.” That these people are seeking “instruction in the faith,” he added, is a “sign of the times.” This view is shared by Fr. José Clavería, a missionary of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo, who this year began serving at St. Olav's Cathedral in Trondheim.

**“These are people who** seem to appear out of nowhere, who come from a fluid, confused, and disordered society,” explains the priest. “They are mostly young people between fifteen and twenty-five who are fed up with superficial, simplistic, and changeable answers. They are looking for something that can endure over time.” And what are they asking for? “It is difficult to reduce it to standard formulas,” he continues, “but generally it is a journey that arises from personal



Matteo Rigamonti





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experiences, often painful or traumatic, that pushes them to seek.” It is not uncommon for it all to start “with Christian content found online, perhaps a video on YouTube or TikTok, or from solitary reading of the Bible; many eventually go to pray in church or attend celebrations. It is only later that they begin to approach a priest or a layperson who lives the life of the community.” This is what happened to Johannes, who lives in Trondheim with two roommates with whom he shares his faith. He is thirty years old and was recently baptized. Before that, however, he thought that “religion was something outside of time.” A “too ambitious” young man, as he describes himself, he wanted to “get rich in finance,” but at a certain point he realized that “a sad life” awaited him: working ten hours a day only to end up a slave to mon-

ey. He comes from a liberal and socialist family. He left the bank where he worked and enrolled in engineering school. Meanwhile, he began to search, attracted by faith: He listened to podcasts and read Jordan Peterson, an author who publicly speaks highly of Christianity. He began to perceive that “there is something true” in it, approached Catholicism, and began attending Mass—going for two years before deciding to talk to someone. That is when he wrote an email to the parish and met an elderly priest; they talked for hours, and the priest introduced him to other young adults with whom he met for dinner every Thursday. “He was very attentive and kind.”

After a year of introductory courses on the faith, Johannes met the bishop. “He asked me about my relationship with Jesus and invited me

to pray on my knees in front of the tabernacle.” His conversion was not “overnight, but gradual,” he notes. What had changed? “I feel that the sacrament of Communion is working within me, I feel more alive, and I am more attentive to the people around me.”

**Håkon, on the other hand,** after studying in Bergen and spending a year in Iceland, moved to Oslo in 2019. A cultured person with a job in publishing, he was baptized Lutheran and received confirmation “without really believing in it,” like many Norwegians. At that time, he began asking questions and became fascinated by a character in a book by Jon Fosse, a Nobel Prize-winning writer who converted and was totally taken by the mystery of the Mass. This sparked in him a desire to “deepen his faith.” He began

Norwegian university  
students on a trip  
with Fr. José Clavería.



reading the Bible, only to realize that “something was missing.” Having always had “a certain respect for Catholicism, because of my admiration for John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta,” he sensed what was missing: “It was Jesus, the bread and wine.” One particular aspect of the Catholic Church fascinated him: “It makes a claim on people and does not leave you alone.” Although he describes his conversion as “intellectual,” during the Covid pandemic he began “reciting the rosary” and “praying to the saints,” intrigued by the idea that they form a living chain “from Jesus to us today.”

Entering the cathedral on November 1, 2020, on All Saints’ Day, Håkon was captivated by the “beauty of the music” and the priests’ words. So much so that he felt “uplifted” and decided, “Okay, I need to be Catholic.” He began a journey of faith formation and, in 2022, on the second Sunday of Easter, received the sacrament of confirmation, taking the second name Ambrosius because he loves the hymn *Veni Redemptor gentium*, composed by the

patron saint of Milan. This year, he began participating in the CL community, with whom he spent several days on a summer vacation and prayed the rosary for the Holy Land. He recalls “interesting conversations” and “beautiful days” spent together.

**“These people are looking for** truth, guidance, and community,” Fr. Clavería continues, reflecting on what they ask of those who already live a mature faith. “Everything that serves to nourish these three things should be promoted; everything that hinders them should be reconsidered. It is essential that the ecclesial community offer a complete, rich, and balanced life experience that corresponds to this new beginning. We need to teach them to pray, to live together—something that is often not learned in the family—and to share time, affection, and goods freely.” We also need to offer, which they greatly appreciate, “a beautiful and well-prepared liturgy, where God acts and restores order to life. Finally, we need to teach them to experience community

not as a refuge, but as a workshop where they can learn to read reality in a new way.”

For this reason too, in addition to “meeting them personally, one by one,” it makes sense to offer them “simple moments of togetherness: walks outdoors—here the culture of the outdoors is highly appreciated, even in climates unimaginable to us—and moments of formation. With some, we have started reading the Gospels together every week,” and with the students, “we study together in the parish buildings; about ten young people participate. They share daily life, which has great educational value: It makes them understand, even without words, that Christ has something to do with everything.” He concludes by stating, “I believe that we are asked to bow down before these flowers that are growing, to observe them barefoot, admire God’s work in them and to follow them. It is true that we can offer much of our experience, but this will only be possible if, first of all, we humbly and gratefully follow their experience.” ■





# That encounter in Texas

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**Paola Bergamini**

*While studying abroad in the United States, Beatrice met a “strange” Italian student, who went to Mass, received Communion, and prayed. She was fascinated by his friends. And then her faith, long forgotten, came back to life.*

A degree in management from Bocconi University, marriage, perhaps in a church in Siracusa, her hometown, to make her grandmother happy, a nice job, children, perhaps two... These were Beatrice's plans until August 2022, when something unexpected happened. An unforeseen event that has a name, “Alessandro.” It happened in Austin, Texas, where Beatrice was studying for a semester. When they met for the first time at a mutual friend's house, Beatrice's first impression of Alessandro was not the best. He seemed intelligent, a little full of himself, and completely absorbed in the study

of mathematics, which is why he was in Austin. They met again a few weeks later on a trip to Dallas with a small group of Italian students. During the car ride, out of the blue, Alessandro told her of a very painful event that had turned his life upside down a few years earlier. She thought to herself, “Why is he saying these things to me?”

On their last night together, they went out and had a lot of fun, and Beatrice got drunk. The next morning, Alessandro picked her up at the hotel, and while they were having breakfast he said, “Yesterday you were feeling really bad. You did things you never want to

Beatrice (at the center) during a vacation with CL friends.



do. I care a lot about your destiny and about you, and that's why I took you back to the hotel." "Destiny." "Care." These words sounded strange to Bea, but at the same time were intriguing to her. "But who is Alessandro?" Upon returning to Austin, she looked for him and they began seeing each other almost every evening. He told her about his life and about some friends who had kept him company during that painful period. They were special friends. He also told her that thanks to his friends, Christ had become a presence in his life. That everything originates from God, even love for a girl. "Love"—another word that acquires a new meaning, exactly at a time when she was wondering what the word means. Alessandro did not explicitly speak of CL, but he talked about those "strange" friends all the time. He is the only guy she knew who goes to Mass, receives Communion, and prays. For Beatrice, this very concrete faith was something totally new that had nothing to do with the Catho-

lic education she had received and forgotten about for so many years. They met for lunch and dinner several times. "I couldn't tear myself away," she recalled.

**In January both** returned to Milan. And immediately on the first night she was back, Alessandro invited her to dinner to meet his friends. There were about fifteen of them and they all studied mathematics and physics. Ale told them how Christ came to him in Austin through Beatrice. "In my relationship with her, I relived the truth of my encounter with Christ." Bea was amazed. Who were these people who listen to each other in such an attentive way? For them, Christ exists. What Alessandro had told her about in Austin became flesh. These friends kept reaching out to her. She saw them several times and would sometimes join them for School of Community or assemblies. The movement became a compelling experience that entered into her daily life. Alessandro

invited her to go to Mass with him, but she decided that her "return" to the Church would be on her own. One day, she entered Santa Maria al Paradiso, and while sitting in the back of the church she prayed. "I wanted that moment to be mine. Me and Him."

One night at dinner, a medical student asked her, "Why don't you go and meet the CLU students at Bocconi?" "Why? Are there CLU students there?" "Of course, the CLU is in all the universities. Go and introduce yourself. They study in the campus ministry building." Before she would never have done such a thing. Then she remembered a classmate she met in her first year at Bocconi who had told her that he lived in a "Catholic" apartment. Three years had passed and she had not seen him since then. She called him and asked him if he knew the students who studied in the campus ministry building. "Of course," he replied, "they are my friends." "But do you know if they are part of CL?" "Yes, and so am I." The fol-

*"These friends look at each other, hug each other, greet each other with true affection. I want to have friends like that."*

lowing Thursday, accompanied by Alessandro, she went to the School of Community. Lucrezia, a roommate, was also there and was curious about what Bea was doing and talking about. That day Bea met Father Pier Paolo, the chaplain of Bocconi University. "He only asked me, 'So, who are you?' and his eyes seemed to look right through me," she recalled. A few days later, she went to see him and told him her story. "I found myself doing things that I normally wouldn't do. But I couldn't resist." She started studying in the campus ministry with the CLU students. She did not know anyone, and Alessandro was not there. One evening she wrote, "These friends look at each other, hug each other, greet each other with true affection. I want to have friends like that." And they talked about God in a way that was interesting. For them, God is involved in their lives. What about in her life?

**Beatrice received the answer** at the Easter Spiritual Exercises, where she went without having fully understood what they were. But she trusted her friends. Holy Thursday Mass, Way of the Cross—these words were unfamiliar to Beatrice. It was during the Way of the Cross,

following the reading of the Passion, that she clearly felt that that Man existed, and died and rose for everyone. Everything was true and it was happening again. Beatrice burst into tears. On the evening of Good Friday, Alessandro wrote to her that he would leave Milan permanently. Beatrice was trembling with fear. Could it be all over for her too? Immediately she remembered what she felt that day: that the Resurrection happens every day. She could see that Christ exists and that what He has to do with her life is not linked to Alessandro. In the following months, she attended School of Community, vacations, meetings, evenings in Bologna for the Campus by Night organized by the friends of the CLU, and more dinners, and they study together... Every part of reality turns into an opportunity "to deepen my relationship with God." This discovery is something that Beatrice could not keep to herself and it intrigued her new classmates in the master's program. "It's not like I introduced myself by saying 'Hi, I'm Beatrice. I'm Catholic,'" she said, laughing. "But, for example, I would ask them to save me a seat at the cafe while I was going to recite the Angelus. And they waited for me." Erika was the one among her friends who had

more questions about her faith. "I had intense conversations with her about the profound meaning of life and at a certain point I understood that she, a nonbeliever, was a sign of the presence of Christ in my life because I was going deep within myself."

**In November 2023**, Beatrice received confirmation. As with the first Mass, the right time had come. Beatrice and Pietro, a friend in the community, asked Fr. Pier Paolo to prepare them to receive the sacrament. "The sacrament was precisely the confirmation of what I was experiencing: my return to God, my faith."

In a few weeks Bea will graduate. And the plans she had when she started university? "They are the same but there is something more in them after her experience of recent years. That love I first experienced in the conversations with Ale in Austin is taking shape in the relationship with my boyfriend." What about work? "I realized that I want to do something in life to help people live well. I became passionate about the health sector to the point of looking for a management-related thesis in this sector." A bit unusual for a Bocconi graduate? "Manager of the good in life!" ■



# “My whole life I’ve been waiting for you”

India had never entered a church, but when she first set foot in the university she received a flyer, which led to a friendship full of questions and encounters.

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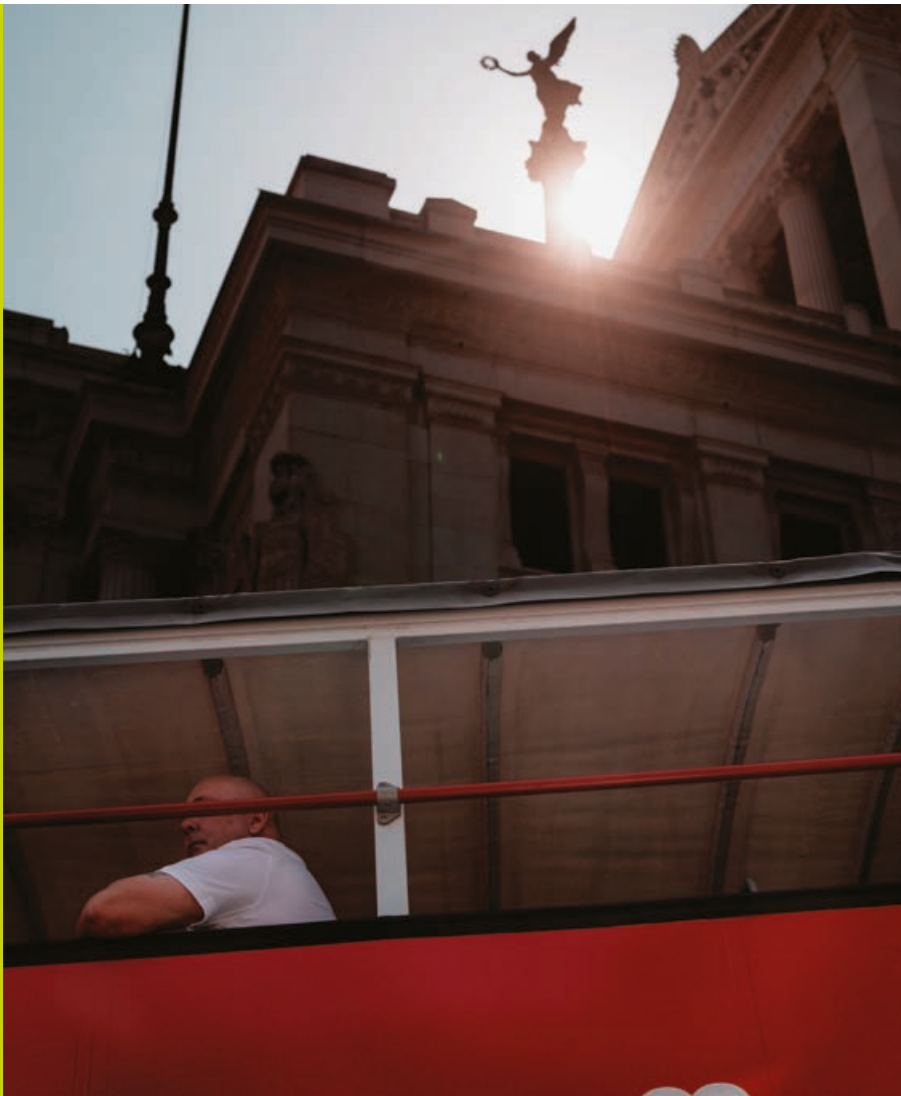


Anna Leonardi

**I**t all happened the first day she set foot in the university, after almost two years of lessons online because of Covid restrictions. On May 3, 2022, India entered the Filarete Courtyard of the University of Milan full of expectancy. At that time, in her second year of philosophy, she had fiery red hair. She attended a few hours of lessons and then looked for a place to study, as she did not plan on returning home until the evening. The university was abuzz with campaigning for the imminent elections of student representatives to the Academic Senate, and the various candidate groups were very busy. Among them, India noticed two young women who were distributing not only flyers but Nutella sandwiches. She was struck not so much by the snacks, but by their faces. “You could see

they were having a good time. They were different from the others,” recounts India, whose unusual name already provides a hint about her story. Her family was close to Buddhism, and she grew up in an atmosphere of strong religiosity that took root in her as a perception of the positivity of each thing. With these eyes hungry for something for herself, she returned to the university the next day.

As she was going up the stairs of the Santa Sofia student services building, a young woman approached and handed her a flyer. India read the signature, “Objective: Students,” and exclaimed, “You’re the ones with the Nutella sandwiches! Yesterday I saw your companions and I wish I had stopped to talk with them.” They began talking. India is very attentive to political issues and



during her high school years she and a friend had created a candidate group to counter a left-wing group. She had thrown herself into it heart and soul, to the point of failing some classes and having to do make-up exams the following September, all because of her desire that the period of alternative to scholarly activities co-managed by students and teachers would provide interesting opportunities for everyone. After asking some specific questions about the Objective: Students electoral platform, she also asked, "Why do you do this?" And the young woman replied, "For my friends."

"That answer rang in my ears like crazy because in high school I, too, had been motivated by the desire to form true friendships," she recounts. After an hour talking on the steps, they were joined by Giovanni, who, after answering some of India's questions, asked for her phone number and invited her to an assembly on the elections. Laughing, India recalls, "I thought he was hitting on me. I couldn't find another explanation for so much attention." Her suspicion intensified as the invitations multiplied. "Actually, he never came to the meetings alone; he was always with other friends. Between coffees, lunches, and aper-

itifs I met a lot of people. I was really amazed, even though a classmate had warned me, "Be careful, because they're *ciellini*" [CL members]. I didn't know anything about them, and asked, "Oh my God, what are *ciellini*?"

She asked Giovanni the same question and in answer, he invited her to School of Community. "It's an assembly about life," he explained succinctly. Then, in the bookstore he bought her *The Religious Sense*. "I remember thinking, 'He must have a really big crush on me.'" Actually, she was the one who had fallen in love, but with Fr. Giussani. "For three days I did nothing but read that book. I went around the university with my face in that book and said to everyone, 'This man was able to put into words what I feel, what I've always known to be true. He has the words I've always sought.'"

**She kept a diary** of that period, entitled "Diary of the Encounter," where she recorded the most crucial step of her life. "God, are You the one knocking? You've entered my life suddenly through these happy faces, and I can no longer live without them. These friends, so different from each other, all look at me in the same way. I feel truly loved. The truth is that I, too, want to be one of those faces and to give love."

One evening they invited her to a concert by an Alpine corps choir, and for the first time India entered a church. In front of the crucifix and listening to the songs, she broke into tears. "My whole life I've been waiting for this beauty. My whole

Left, India with a friend at the State University of Milan.



life I've been waiting for you," she told the friends sitting next to her. From that point on, there was an uninterrupted series of encounters, faces, and conversations. India could speak of nothing other than what was happening to her. "I used to go study in the library but I couldn't sit still more than ten minutes. Everything became a question and prayer." A young woman, Matilde, offered to help her prepare for her Hegel exam, and in that week of intense study the two became friends. During their breaks, India asked her everything about Christianity. "Why the Incarnation? Why do you go to Mass? What is the Eucharist?" And then, "Matilde, what is your greatest dream?" Matilde's answer floored her. "To become a psychoanalyst and a mother." It was the first time she had heard someone her age admit a desire to have children. "I also secretly nourished this same dream. It had been at the top of my list ever since I was three years old, and I had never confessed it to anyone. Why was Matilde able

to look at herself with such sincerity? Why was she so free?"

Her CLU friends invited her to their vacation in La Thuile at the end of July. For India it was an opportunity to try to understand better the "You" that she felt pressing behind the faces of her new friends. As she was hiking toward the waterfalls, watching the hundreds of other young people walking in silence, she had the intuition that would lead her in the following days to ask to be baptized. "I need to fill my eyes with You, Christ. Through the mountains, the snow, and the lakes. But the true panorama is these people. What keeps them together here? I see You behind the others. Is it You, Christ? And if it is You, who are You?"

**This irrepressible question** has continued to guide India's journey ever since. She wrote about it in another diary, the one "on my conversion." After being baptized in the Milan University chapel in front of her friends from the CL community, she graduated and began

working as an equitation instructor, which was another dream on her list. But not everything has been easy. After her intense life at the university, things began to slow down. "Many relationships have cooled off, maybe because I work a great deal, even on Sundays," she recounts. "I found another School of Community and try to stay grounded there. At times I feel solitude, even though, actually, I can no longer conceive of myself as being alone. When I think of myself, when I'm angry or disappointed, I realize that I'm always in a relationship with this God who came to find me on the Santa Sofia steps. I can't pretend that nothing happened to me." At times all it takes to reawaken everything is a gaze or a line from School of Community. "They come to mind while I'm at work, and I'm drawn to treat my colleagues, money, and time in a different way." In an instant, she realizes how deep her need to be truly happy is. "The encounter made me more human, full of desire to keep hold of His hand." ■



## “An interweaving of friendship and prayer”

Last year I spent a few months in Reims, France, for the Erasmus student exchange program. While there I had the opportunity to meet a community of young Catholics and the Ad Altum Association they had created a few years before in their desire to follow in the footsteps of Piergiorgio Frassati, a figure who had struck them very much.

Drawn to their informal way of living the faith within an experience of friendship and sharing, I began to get involved in the parish where the Ad Altum association was active. Every week they proposed various moments, from *aperò fraternelle* (fraternal aperitifs), to testimonies or evenings of karaoke, all as part of a Christian life centered on daily Communion in the evening at the end of a day of studies at the university.

During Communion time at these Masses, I noticed some young people who went up the line with their hands crossed over their chests to receive a blessing instead of the consecrated host. I discovered that some of them were catechumenates, while others had been invited to the Mass by university friends. Both things struck me greatly. I spoke about it with the priest responsible for Ad Altum, and he introduced me to Maia, a medical student who would be receiving baptism at Easter. She told me, “The reason I decided to take this step is simple, though it is the fruit of a journey that took time. Step by step, I grew in love for God and the church, and so at a certain point the choice to belong became almost natural. The more time passed, the more I discovered that God was truly present in my life. I began going to Mass every week. I met people at catechism and at the Ad Altum gatherings, and I experienced beautiful moments. Bit by bit, faith

became the center of my daily life.” She continued, “There was a day when I realized I could no longer go back: Within that interweaving of friendships and prayer, I came to acknowledge the existence of God, and this awareness made me live my life with joy. For this reason I decided to immerse myself one hundred percent in the life of faith, even though there are still things I can’t explain. I accept the mystery of God and I accept being guided by Him in my daily choices. I’m convinced of His existence because I receive His grace in my life. I’m no longer afraid, because I can face everything with faith. I think to myself, ‘I prefer this life with Christ a hundred times more than my life without God.’ Now, not everything is easy, but it all has meaning.”

I am amazed by the increasing numbers of baptisms in France, but I am even more amazed by the similarity I observe between my story and Maia’s. It is not that I have experienced her same situations, or that we have the same sensibility. But I, too, have encountered a place and some friends who help me recognize Christ present in my days, inviting me to become aware of the benefits I experience in responding to Him. Step by step, I too am discovering that as I entrust myself to and adhere to the companionship of the Church, I experience liberation from the fear of being inadequate and also from the fear of circumstances. “Not everything is easy, but it all has meaning.” I no longer need to be distressed, trying to fix the circumstances or waiting for them to change. Christ Himself gave me these circumstances as a road, at times arduous, to gain a truer knowledge of myself and thus of Him.

**Chiara De Ponti**

# Accompanied step by step

Questions, encounters, and readings chased each other in Lisa's life. At Emmaus, all her doubts fell away.



Paola Ronconi

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**L**isa's story begins in China in the last century, when her mother's family embarked on a long journey to Europe in search of a better life, leaving behind the economic hardships caused by Mao Zedong's policies. They arrived in Graz, a town in Styria, Austria. "That is where my mother met my father and they got married," says Lisa, who is now twenty-five. Life for the family in Austria was not easy, especially for her mother. The language was a major obstacle, and finding a job was by no means a given. They were not religious at home. But when Lisa was born, her parents agreed to have her baptized at the insistence of her paternal grandmother. That was the extent of the Christianity in their home, partly because her atheist father was strongly opposed to the Kirchenbeitrag, a mandatory income-based contribution that registered believers have to pay to support the Austrian church. As Lisa grew up, a thousand questions about the meaning of life

and reality surfaced: How can one have a fulfilling life? And why were believing families, perhaps with several children, so happy? For example her teacher, whom she had run into outside high school. She had also met her husband... What made them so happy? "Faith in God," they replied to her direct question. At their home, over coffee, Lisa felt welcomed and at ease. Her friends told her about the Khg, the university chaplaincy in Vienna, with a student residence where about a hundred young people from different backgrounds lived.

When she moved to the Austrian capital, she listened to her two friends and went to the chaplaincy for a dinner, the Dienstagabend, organized by the chaplain, Fr. Christoph Mattisek, a priest of the Fraternity of St. Charles.

There, she met several Catholic students, some missionaries from Focus (Fellowship of Catholic University Students). She did not take to them immediately, but one evening she met Stefanie, a German girl who had come to Austria with Focus. "At first, I thought she wanted to convert me," says Lisa. "In reality, we

became friends very quickly, and she became very important to me. We often had lunch and studied together. I could talk to her about everything, even my questions."

Benni and Philipps, a CL family, live in Vienna. Through a chat among young people, Lisa learned that they needed a babysitter. She stepped forward. Being in their home felt good too; she felt free. Over a plate of pasta, the girl did not hold back: "How did you meet? Why did you want children? What is important to you? What does it mean to be a mother and father?" Ultimately, the same thing continued to happen: Lisa saw that these people were happy, despite the problems that life had thrown at them.

And so she asked herself: "Why did I not have a family like this? Why was my childhood not as peaceful?" She began spending time with the CL students at the chaplaincy, even though talking about Jesus made her a little uncomfortable: it was still a strange topic, like the prayers, singing together, and Mass. But by spend-



© Yves Cauchon

ing time with them, she began to understand that their sharing life with each other made her feel good. They talked to each other with honesty, and she liked that. That unknown Jesus began to become flesh and blood through her friends.

Her relationship with Fr. Christoph also gradually deepened: "I asked him lots of questions, too, from 'Are you really single?' to 'Why did Jesus allow himself to be killed?' He took my questions very seriously, even when I asked him if he was wearing a Halloween costume...."

Lisa loved to travel, as did Stefanie, and they never missed out on the opportunities offered by Fr. Christoph and the chaplaincy. In 2023, they went to the Holy Land. Those were days when Lisa, as a tourist, got to know the places of Jesus's life up close. But it was only when they returned to Israel in the spring of

2025 that "those stones spoke to me in a different way: It was like a religious awakening, led by Fr. Christoph, who was with me and explained what I was feeling." In Emmaus, where two disciples met Jesus after the resurrection, Lisa set aside her objections because, she says, a great love had opened up in her life: that of Christ through the faces of her friends. And there, in Emmaus, on April 21<sup>st</sup>, she received her First Communion. It was the day Pope Francis died.

Lisa's life reached a turning point. Her parents did not understand what was happening to her and were not very happy with her friends. But one thing was clear: Their daughter had changed, they could see it, and she was no longer alone. After months of tense relations, Lisa decided to invite her parents to Vienna, and on that day

she received confirmation.

The travels continued, and last summer Lisa found herself in Barcelona for the CLU vacation. "I had read the diary of Marcos Pou (a Spanish boy who died in an accident eleven days after entering the seminary). He too had many questions and a depth that struck me, because it was my own. Where could I truly feel like myself? What do I want from life? Marcos had died so young—why? How can one understand death? 'Marcos was a great gift,' Fr. Yago, the boy's uncle, told us in Barcelona. 'You cannot be angry with someone who gave you a gift. There is beauty everywhere, and to discover it, you have to embrace all of reality.' That is my new life, and I want to take it seriously, with all its responsibilities. Because today I feel loved."

The story continues. ■



# At the Origin of the Christian Claim: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

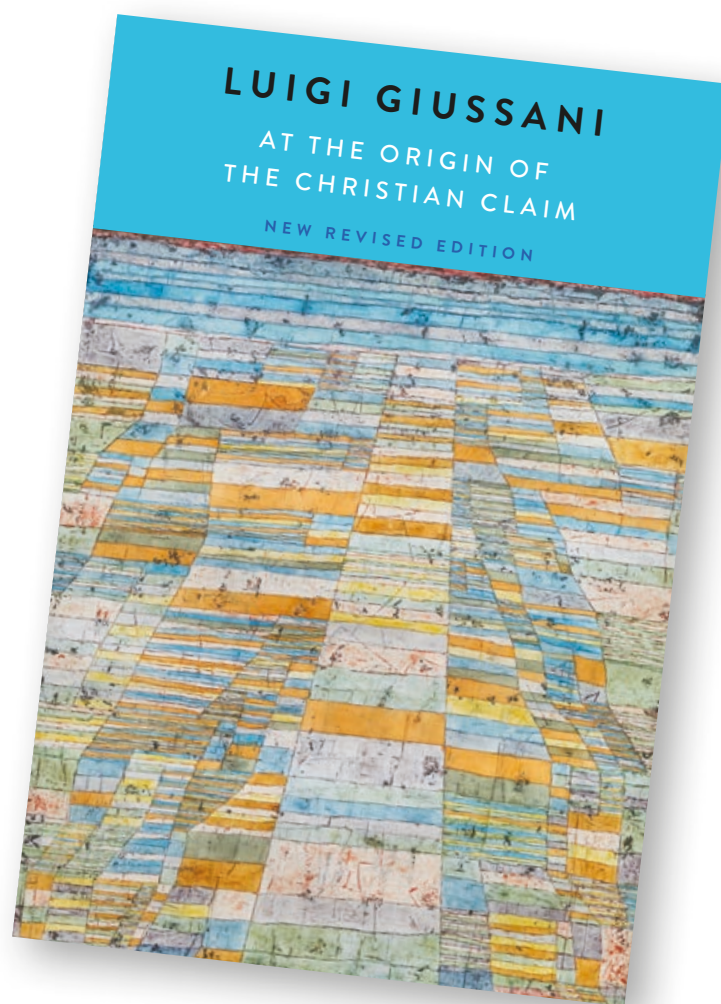
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LUIGI GIUSSANI (1922–2005) founded the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation. He is the author of more than twenty books, including *The Religious Sense*.

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