

# TRACES

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01



## Persecuted for their faith



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Vol. 28

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Survivors of Yelwata village,  
in central Nigeria.

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ENCOUNTER

2026

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WHERE  
"EVERYTHING  
IS WAITING  
FOR YOU"

DAVID WHYTE

## A new humanity

**A**round five billion people worldwide (sixty-four percent of the global population) suffer serious violations of religious freedom. Christians are among the most persecuted groups: Over 380 million believers are discriminated against or suffer violence because of their faith. This phenomenon affects one in seven Christians and was further exacerbated in 2025 by ongoing conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and religious extremism. These are striking figures from a reliable source: They were presented by Pope Leo XIV in his address on January 8<sup>th</sup> to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See. In view of the Jubilee, in July 2023 Pope Francis established the commission “New Martyrs—Witnesses of Faith” to preserve the memory of those who have given their lives for Jesus in the last twenty-five years. In just a few months, more than twelve thousand stories of martyrdom were collected. “They are more numerous in our time than in the first centuries: They are bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, lay people and families, who in the different countries of the world, with the gift of their lives, have offered the supreme proof of charity,” said the Argentine pontiff.

**Beyond the numbers**, the silence surrounding persecution is equally striking. It does not mobilize crowds. Claiming the right to religious freedom does not fill the streets. Silenced in life and ignored after death: The fate of those who have been unable to exercise what Benedict XVI called “the first of human rights, for it expresses the most fundamental reality of the person,” seems bitterly ironic. The millions who are persecuted and the thousands of martyrs are people who do and did not want to perform heroic deeds. They do and did not seek death but a full life, lived in fidelity to what they believe. They do not provoke violence; they suffer it. They remain when it would be easier to flee. They are not tragic heroes but silent witnesses. Shahbaz Bhatti, the Pakistani minister assassinated in 2011 and now Servant of God, wrote in his will: “I want to live for Christ and it is for Him that I want to die. I do not feel any fear in this country. Many times the extremists have wanted to kill me, imprison me; they have threatened me, persecuted me, and terrorized my family. I say that, as long as I am alive, until the last breath, I will continue to serve Jesus and this poor, suffering humanity, the Christians, the needy, the poor.”

**In Tertullian's *Apologeticus***, written over eighteen hundred years ago, we read these words: “Refined as it is, your cruelty serves no purpose. On the contrary, for our community, it is an invitation. We multiply every time one of us is mowed down. The blood of Christians is effective seed.” This is another reason why persecuted Christians are so dear to us: They are the visible sign of a new humanity. “This is the first miracle which is worked when because of their faith believers are put to the test. Their unity, rather than being jeopardized is strengthened because it is sustained by steadfast prayer,” said Benedict XVI at the General Audience on April 18, 2012. In moments of trial, unity is strengthened.

## Anna and Tullio

edited by  
**Paola Bergamini**  
*lettere@tracce.it*

### The link between suffering and destiny

I am a dentist in a local dental practice. One day, a patient asked me to help his bedridden mother who was unable to move without help. The woman had had a stroke and was not able to sit up. Given her need for a dental visit and considering her condition, her son said he was ready to organize her transportation to our office by ambulance supported by personnel trained to transport via a gurney. I realized that this would have exposed the woman to further risks to her health. What to do? Prescribe medication to temporarily relieve the pain and possible infections and postpone the problem until the next flareup or visit her and do something to help her feel better? I thought of St. Giuseppe Moscati, whom I look to as a teacher and a doctor and is a point of reference in my profession. I decided to visit the patient in her home. I brought with me the instruments I might need for any necessary treatment, as much as one can do in a home visit, of course. In my car, I found myself thinking about the holy doctor, his dedication to his patients, always ready to help them find the link between their suffering and the destiny for which they were made. Upon entering her room, I smiled to see an image of Moscati on her bed. He had wanted to accompany me all the way there! As complicated as it was, with the help of her son, I tried to give her the necessary treatment. And not only that: This was an opportunity to keep the woman company. In order to love as Christ loves, we must encounter Him, experience His embrace. It's the embrace that I have experienced in my life through friends and the people He has put on my path and that I experience through my husband and our children. When I meet people,

I am glad to tell them about myself, about my life, as a sign and a witness to His presence. As St. Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

**Anna**, Pescara (Italy)

### Here is the answer to what we are

I went with a group of Knights (the Christian experience for middle school kids) for a meeting in another city. During lunch, we chatted about which high school they were planning to attend: They were girls and boys in the sixth and seventh grades and so the choice was not immediate. In spite of that, some of them already had rather clear ideas, not so much about the school but rather about what job they wanted to have when they grew up that in some way would connect with aspects of their character, with characteristics of their persona. For example, the girl who wanted to be a doctor told us that she often found herself interested in the needs of others, and the boy who wanted to become a policeman spoke of always having had a profound sense of justice. We then began singing a few songs and I proposed "Il Seme". At the end, I felt that I had discovered something new in that song and I wanted to tell everyone: The seed that the Lord has put into each one's heart is the relationship with Him, and the flowering of the seed is the fulfillment of our lives, which is exactly what had emerged in our conversation about their future. Or rather, if before we had discovered that an interest in others could lead one to become a doctor, now we discovered that, mysteriously, according to surely unforeseen paths and times, it's actually the Lord who is the origin and the motor of the dynamic. Returning home, I thought about that phrase from the new School of Community from *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*: "Christ proposes Himself as the answer to what I am." That day, this phrase, which I have recognized so many times as true, emerged in a new and unexpected way.

**Tullio**, Aosta (Italy)

## The embrace of Leo XIV

*Letter from Davide Prospero and Alberto Brugnoli to the entire movement of Communion and Liberation following the private audience with Pope Leo XIV.*

Dear friends,

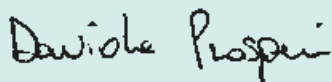
We wish to share with you our great joy at the audience with His Holiness Leo XIV, which took place on Monday, January 12.

We are deeply grateful to the Holy Father for granting us this meeting, a true gift for our journey. We had the opportunity (together with Fr. Andrea D'Auria, who accompanied us) to recount the steps that the Fraternity and the *Memores Domini* are taking at this time, and the many good fruits that, by the Lord's grace, we see maturing in the life of our communities in the various countries around the world where we are present. The Pope listened to us attentively and showed that he knows and deeply esteems our experience, expressing particular gratitude to Fr. Giussani and for what he, through the charism that God wished to give him, was able to generate for the good of the whole Church and of the world.

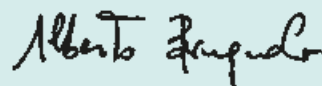
With great cordiality, the Holy Father expressed his complete trust in us and confirmed us in the process of revision that we are undertaking. He told us that important signs of the maturity that the movement has achieved in recent years are already visible today. He therefore encouraged us, with fatherly affection, to take further steps along this same path, urging us to work in close collaboration with the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, the point of reference for our following of the Church. Finally, the Holy Father asked us to convey to each of you his affectionate embrace and his warmest wishes for a happy New Year.

Filled with gratitude and comforted by his welcome and his words, we ask Mary, Mother of the Church, to watch over our journey, strengthening us in faith in her Son Jesus, our hope, and sustaining us in the task that the Church entrusts to us of helping to foster the growth of her presence in the world.

Thanking you for your friendship, we send you our affectionate greetings,



**Davide Prospero**, President of the  
Fraternity of Communion and Liberation



**Alberto Brugnoli**, President  
of the *Memores Domini* Association



## “Religious freedom is the foundation for global peace”

“States must ensure that no one is obliged to act in violation of their conscience. Christians are persecuted because they challenge totalitarian powers. The world ignores them to protect their geopolitical interests, but the Church never abandons them.” The words of Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, a key figure in Vatican diplomacy.



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Stefano Filippi

**T**he world's persecuted Christians are at the forefront of the Church's concerns, as confirmed in this interview with Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, the Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations, the “Foreign Minister” for the Holy See.

**Speaking at the UN General Assembly last September, you said that “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is another cornerstone of peace.” It is not simply another individual right, but a fundamental principle for peaceful coexistence and the relationships among states. Could you elaborate on this?**

In my speech at the UN, I wanted to stress that religious freedom is not simply an individual right, isolated from social existence, but an essential foundation for global peace. The

1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights places the right to religious freedom almost like a hinge between the individual rights of conscience and those of expression and participation, between the person and society. Benedict XVI insisted that the right to religious freedom is “the first of the human rights, because it expresses the most fundamental reality of the person.” It is the “cornerstone” because it is inscribed in the very dignity of the human person, created in the image of God and endowed with reason and free will. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion allows each individual to seek the Truth, which is God, and to order one's own life without external constraints. When this freedom is denied, civil coexistence is undermined.



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States become oppressive, societies fragment into ideological or ethnic divisions, and international relationships are poisoned by suspicions and conflicts. In contrast, respecting this freedom promotes interreligious dialogue and brotherhood, as taught in the Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate*. It is an invitation to shared responsibility. States must ensure that no one is forced to act against their conscience or hindered from professing their faith publicly or in the community. Only in this way is an authentic peace constructed, rooted in justice and charity, capable of countering contemporary threats like extremism or indifference. In the context of religious freedom, it is imperative to keep in mind the Second Vatican Council declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, a significant step in the promotion

of religious freedom as a fundamental aspect of human existence. Women and men all over the world deserve freedom from any form of coercion regarding faith, be it expressed through subtle social pressure or through explicit government mandates. It is up to governments and communities to abstain from forcing anyone to violate their own deeply rooted convictions or from preventing anyone from living them authentically. The state must be the guarantor of this freedom. In this, the Holy See continues to raise its voice in the name of all those without a voice who suffer from injustice, promoting a multilateralism centered on human dignity.

**What is it about Christians that bothers certain regimes? Why do they not tolerate their presence?**

Prayer in front of a mass grave in Yelwata, central Nigeria. The victims were massacred in June 2025 by Fulani shepherds armed with machetes.



Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, the  
Vatican Secretary for Relations with  
States and International Organizations.



© Alessia Giuliani/Catholic Press Photo

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As witnesses to the Risen Christ, Christians incarnate values that challenge the rationales of absolute or totalitarian powers. Their faith makes them “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13–14). They promote the inviolable dignity of each person, social justice, forgiveness, and nonviolence, which clash with ideologies that absolutize the state, politics, or the dominant ideology. In many nations, the Christian presence is seen as a threat because the faithful do not submit blindly to authority, but obey God before men (cf. *Acts* 5:29). Often Christians are persecuted not only for their faith, but because they incarnate a holistic humanism that denounces injustices, corruption, abuses, and violations of fundamental rights. This intolerance arises from a moral collapse fed by economic and political interests, where religion is exploited to divide rather than unite. And yet, exactly this

faithfulness to the Gospel makes Christians a leaven of hope for freer and more just societies.

**Christians do not respond to their persecutors with the same methods. What makes them this way?**

What distinguishes persecuted Christians is the logic of the Gospel, which teaches us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek (Mt 5:44–48). This is not weakness, but rather, the strength of the Resurrection. Christ overcame evil not with violence but with the Cross, revealing that true victory lies in forgiveness and reconciliation. This radicalism makes Christians “this way” because they are animated by the Holy Spirit, who instills patience, humility, and eschatological hope, the promise of a Kingdom of eternal peace. We see this nonviolent testimony in Church history, from the Roman martyrs to the persecuted Christians today

in various parts of the world. They pray for their persecutors, build bridges of dialogue, and continue to serve everyone, even the oppressors. It is an invitation to conversion. They are convinced that nonviolence is the measure of true interior strength. By nature, Christians are peace builders, promoters of a culture of encounter, rejecting the hatred that perpetuates the spiral of violence. This choice is not passivity, but active prophecy that disarms hearts and sows seeds of justice.

**You stated that persecutions affect 380 million Christians in the world. Why does the international community mostly close its eyes to this situation?**

In my UN address, I denounced precisely this “blindness” of the international community, which ignores the fact that



*“The international community ignores the fact that Christians are the most persecuted group in the world, with over 380 million people who suffer discrimination or extreme violence, a fact confirmed by reports from groups such as Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need.”*

Christians are the most persecuted group in the world, with over 380 million people who suffer discrimination or extreme violence, a fact confirmed by reports from groups such as Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need. Often this ignorance and indifference is motivated by geopolitical interests, such as strategic alliances with oppressive regimes for economic or security reasons, fears of “Islamophobia” that paralyze balanced denunciations, or secularization that minimizes religion as an irrelevant factor. In addition, there is a global moral collapse in which the power of international law is being substituted by “right through might”; such violations as attacks on churches, kidnappings, and executions are tolerated when objections would not serve the short-term political agendas of the states.

But closing their eyes does not bring peace. Rather, it heightens instability and undermines fundamental human rights. The Holy See calls for shared vigilance because defending religious freedom means defending all of humanity.

**How does the Church support persecuted Catholics? What efforts does it make to stop these persecutions?**

The Church is a mother and teacher, and never abandons her persecuted children. She supports them in three ways—spiritually, humanly, and diplomatically. On the spiritual level, the answer is incessant prayer and the sacramental presence, concrete signs that strengthen faith even in places where it is threatened. On the human level, local communities and realities like Caritas show their closeness through concrete actions like distributing food and medicine, rebuilding destroyed villages, and providing for-

mation programs for young people. In the context of conflicts, priests and missionaries stay alongside the faithful, incarnating divine providence with their own lives. But the Church does not stop at providing support: She also works to eliminate the causes of persecution. The Holy See intervenes on the diplomatic level, dialoguing with governments to promote laws that safeguard religious freedom, actively participating in the work of the United Nations and the Human Rights Council, and supporting treaties against all forms of discrimination. In his first meeting with the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope Leo XIV stressed the urgent need for “full respect for religious freedom in every country, since religious experience is an essential dimension of the human person. Without it, it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring about the purification of the heart necessary for building peaceful relationships.” ■

## NIGERIA

# Faith stronger than violence

Jihadism, corruption, and the struggle for resources: this is how Nigeria became a land of martyrdom for thousands of Christians. But also a place of hope.

**“M**ore than a victim, I consider myself a survivor.” Justine John Dyikuk had been ordained a priest for two years when, in 2011, he was sent to work in the parish of St. Francis Xavier in Azare, in the Diocese of Bauchi, one of the many cities in northeastern Nigeria where Muslims represent over ninety percent of the population. It was here that he “met” in person the group that would become the focus of his study: Boko Haram. “It was the night of December 4, 2011,” the Catholic priest tells *Traces*. “I had just arrived in town after a three-hour drive and, exhausted, I fell asleep immediately. Around midnight, I was awakened by the terrified screams of Christians and jihadists shouting ‘Allahu Akbar.’” The militiamen had stormed the city and destroyed the police station with rocket launchers. “I escaped by crawling through the bullets and spending the night outdoors in the bush. I was saved. The next day, as usual, I celebrated Mass—but there were only seven faithful in the church.”

**The close encounter with jihadists**, who have terrorized northern Nigeria since 2009, convinced Father Dyikuk to analyze in depth the roots of violence in the country, with particular attention to its media implications. After studying Mass Communication at the University of Jos, he served for eight years as editor of the Caritas newspaper in Bauchi, documenting the attacks suffered by the Christian community, before moving to Scotland where he will complete his PhD in Journalism, Media, and Communication at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow this year. “Religious persecution in Nigeria was not invented by Donald Trump—it is real,” he explains. “But the phenomenon is more complex than in other areas of the world.”

In most countries where Christians are persecuted, they are a small minority. But in Nigeria—a mosaic of differences made up of 36 states, over







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250 ethnic groups, and more than 400 languages—Christians make up fifty percent of the 220 million inhabitants and have long lived in harmony with Muslims, who represent the other half. Yet, for over fifteen years, Africa’s most populous and richest country has been synonymous with instability and anarchy: Boko Haram and the local branch of ISIS (ISWAP) are shaking the northeast with spectacular attacks and mass kidnappings, holding it hostage to armed banditry. However, the local (and global) epicenter of Christian persecution is the Middle Belt, a long strip of fertile land that forms the natural border between the Muslim north and the Christian south of the country. Here, terrorist groups of nomadic Fulani herders, mostly Muslim, repeatedly commit massacres, plunder Christian farmers’ villages, raze them to the ground with sophisticated weapons, and slaughter civilians with almost total impunity.

**Ethnic clashes between nomadic** herding communities driving their herds south and invading the plantations of settled farmers are certainly not new and date back to before the country gained independence from the British in 1960. But the levels of violence have reached such proportions that it is no longer sufficient to speak of mere “clashes.” In 2018, for the first time, Fulani terrorists claimed more victims than Boko Haram and ISIS combined. It is impossible to find completely reliable statistics on the violence. According to the Nigerian NGO International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, often cited by the US administration, approximately 19,000 churches have been destroyed

Inhabitants of Yelwata  
in front of a house devastated  
by the Fulani.

The Pulka refugee camp in Borno State (northeastern Nigeria) hosts 130,000 refugees and is one of the largest in the Sahel. The photos on these pages are by the Italian photojournalist Carlo Cozzoli.



© Carlo Cozzoli

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since 2009—an average of 1,200 per year. In the last ten years alone, 30,000 Christians are believed to have been killed. During the same period, 250 Catholic priests and 350 Protestant pastors have been kidnapped or killed. That is an average of more than one per week. Beyond the figures, the most important international reports on violations of religious freedom—compiled by Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors, and the US State Department—agree: the situation is alarming.

**Not only for Christians.** In Maiduguri, the city where the Boko Haram insurgency began, in the northern state of Borno, one of twelve where Sharia law is in force in Nigeria and Christians are discriminated against in many areas of daily life—five Muslims were killed on Christmas Eve after a bomb exploded in a mosque. “There are many factors behind the violence, which many go so far as to call genocide although it is difficult to prove the intentions of those who carry out the attacks, but the main one is the Islamic fundamentalism of the terrorists. Initially, they only attacked Christians, but now they also target Muslims who do not share their views,” continues Father Dyikuk. “The religious nature of the attacks cannot be denied; otherwise it would be impossible to explain why Christians are the most affected group even in areas with a Muslim majority.”

Let us look at the large-scale kidnappings: Most of the girls kidnapped in Chibok in 2014 were Christian, and in Dapchi in 2018, of 110 female students kidnapped, the only one still captive is the only Christian, Leah Shari-

bu, who refused to convert to Islam. The latest large-scale kidnapping of over 300 students took place at a Catholic school in Niger State. And then there are the seminarians and priests kidnapped throughout the country—it cannot be a coincidence.”

Nigerian Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, Secretary of the Dicastery for Evangelization, agrees. Commenting to *Fides* on his country’s sad record—the place where, according to the Vatican, more missionaries and pastoral workers were killed in 2025 than anywhere else—he said: “All of this is a cause of great sadness. And also a bit of shame, because Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. A people of believers, Christians and Muslims. We all say we are people of peace. Even our Muslim friends constantly repeat that Islam is the religion of peace. And in the face of certain facts and situations, I would like to see our Muslim friends denounce and reject the use of their religion to commit acts of violence. Insecurity in Nigeria is widespread, it is true, but there are groups intent on systematically targeting Christian communities.”

Fundamentalism, however, is only the framework on which other causes are built—the warp and weft of the fabric of persecution in Nigeria. In fact, the anarchy that has been ravaging the African country for years is the result of a broader mix of corruption, crime, poverty, and political incompetence.

Nigeria has the tenth largest oil reserves in the world, yet sixty-three percent of the population lives in pov-



*Michael Nnadi was kidnapped from the seminary and during the captivity he incessantly preached to the terrorists to ask God for forgiveness, and to follow His will.*

erty on less than two dollars a day. Poverty, combined with unemployment (around forty percent), drives thousands of young people to join armed gangs to get involved in the lucrative kidnapping racket. Corruption and ethnic divisions then push many army contingents to turn a blind eye to the attacks, and also result in police avoiding investigating crimes and the justice system not prosecuting criminals. Finally, politicians are committed to ensuring security only when intervention brings votes.

**“Supporters of the violence** have infiltrated government offices and agencies,” Father Dyikuk explains. “When it comes to arresting the perpetrators of violence, the judiciary, the government, and the army proceed very slowly. There are sponsors of terrorism who speak openly in the media and are not investigated. Above all, there is a lack of political will to stop the crisis of insecurity that is destroying the country.” For this reason, the Nigerian Bishops’ Conference, in a recent statement, called on Christians to vote for leaders capable of “guaranteeing peace,” stopping “the impunity that invites further bloodshed,” and “limiting the impact of Sharia law” on the civil life of Christians. Finally, welcoming the US decision to include Nigeria among the countries of greatest concern for attacks against Christians, the bishops called on the US and other partners to “use targeted sanctions and visa restrictions against officials credibly linked to tolerance or facilitation of persecution.” Even air raids such as those ordered by Trump on Christmas Eve can be useful if carried out to help Nigeria combat extremism: “A country may find itself unable to deal with its own crises and divisions without outside help,” admits Archbishop Nwachukwu. According to Open Doors’ World Watch List 2025, Nigeria is the country where seventy percent of all

Christians killed for their faith worldwide lose their lives. Yet, despite the violence, attachment to the faith continues to grow, thanks to the witness of the many martyrs who offer their lives. The martyr, the Secretary of the Dicastery for Evangelization emphasizes, “is not someone who commits suicide. A martyr is someone who bears witness to God’s love for all, in imitation of Christ. By participating in His love.”

This seems to describe Michael Nnadi. The eighteen-year-old seminarian was kidnapped, along with three others, from the Good Shepherd Seminary in Kaduna, in the Middle Belt, on January 8, 2020, by a group of armed men. The four seminarians were taken into the bush and tortured: they were beaten on the head and back, especially while they were forced to call their families to ask for ransom, so that they could hear their cries. In the evening, the terrorists forced them to moo like cows or bleat like goats. At other times, they forced them to dance like clowns. During their captivity, Samuel Kanta Sakaba, vice-rector of the seminary, testified in an interview with *Tempi*, “Michael incessantly preached to the terrorists to repent, to ask God for forgiveness, and to follow His will. And this made them angry.”

**One of the terrorists, however,** was drawn to the young man and asked him to teach him how to pray the Our Father. This was on January 27<sup>th</sup>. The next day, according to Father Sakaba, Michael was taken away “and shot dead.” The other seminarians were released. “Michael is a martyr,” comments Father Sakaba. “Like Saint Stephen, he gave his life to bring Christ’s message to the terrorists, to urge them to repent. Just as Jesus thought of saving those who were crucifying Him. We hope to be able to open his cause for canonization. It is Michael’s passion and courage that give us the strength to move forward and remain steadfast in our faith in Nigeria.” ■

## NICARAGUA

# Silenced. Reported. Incarcerated. Expelled.

Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega has been relentless for years—every religious manifestation must be authorized by the regime, including homilies. Even altar boys are threatened.



Matteo Matzuzzi

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**I**t is forbidden to celebrate Christmas outside the designated places, meaning the churches “authorized” by the regime. No Christmas plays or ostentatious decorations. Also, no celebrations are allowed for the *Purísima* (the Immaculate Conception), the patroness of Nicaragua. Those who celebrated it with their families, with “domestic altars” that did not comply with official regulations, were reported by security forces. Their files, including their photographs, ended up in a pile with all the other files dedicated to opponents of the regime. Prior to this, in the winter of 2022, the papal nuncio, Monsignor Waldemar Sommertag, was expelled from the country, followed by the expulsion of the Little Sisters of Charity of

Mother Teresa and the “nationalization” of Catholic universities. Now, there is a ban in place on importing Bibles and other religious publications, as well as cameras and drones throughout the country. With each passing year, the anti-Christian persecution in the country led by Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo becomes more pervasive, with more and more elements added that are aimed at frustrating the resistance, which, since 2018 when the first uprisings broke out, had found in the Church a safe shelter from attacks by the security forces. The notice reminding the population that it is prohibited to bring Bibles and other publications into Nicaragua, including newspapers and magazines, is posted in large letters on trucks and buses that travel between Mana-

gua and neighboring countries. For weeks, clandestine online channels have been warning that it is better to avoid bringing in “uncomfortable” objects, so as to avoid “mishaps.” The news was confirmed by photos shown on several independent portals that provide updates on the evolution of the regime.

**Rather than a** Central American country, it seems like we are talking about North Korea, a country where it is forbidden to believe in a supreme being other than the “Father of the Nation,” Kim Il-sung, and therefore no sacred texts are allowed. In Nicaragua, however, it is not so much about ideology. Ortega did not make a reference to atheistic principles. On the contrary, according to propaganda, the Sandinista





A photo of Bishop Rolando Álvarez. He spent more than a year in prison prior to being exiled to Vatican City.

© Inti Ocon/AP Photo/LaPresse

Republic is “Christian, socialist, and in solidarity.” It is simply yet another reprisal against the Church, which has not agreed to comply with the demands of the country’s leader. The main demand has called for the Church to distance itself from the protests of young university students and to demonstrate clear and explicit support for government policies.

All of this has resulted in what we see today: bishops imprisoned and exiled (four out of ten are abroad) and hundreds of priests sent to the United States or Rome on planes, while the clergy who have remained at home have been victims of vengeful acts and been deprived of every possible right, starting with their health. Two years ago, the government chose to block the pensions of religious, and declared that from that moment on, the ecclesiastical authorities would be responsible for paying them. Nicaraguan priest Fr.

Edwin Román, who for some time has been living in exile in Miami, has not held back on his social media accounts when describing what he sees happening in his homeland. He has called the Sandinista dictatorship “diabolical” and stated that it claims to “eliminate God because it perceives Him as a direct threat to absolute control over citizens.” In any case, the government’s measures are not very effective. Although these measures were originally designed to punish Protestant pastors, who are very active against the regime, they do not take into account the fact that there is already a Bible in more than seventy percent of Nicaraguan homes, according to statistics updated to 2020. In fact, the theologian Rafael Aragón told the newspaper *La Prensa* that Ortega’s only goal is to show the world that he is still firmly in charge and is ready for anything. It is “a way to manifest his authority aimed at

imposing control over popular religious culture.”

**There is a constant search** to control Christian leadership, in particular that of Catholic Church, which has remained faithful to the pope. It is no coincidence that as part of the constitutional reform the presidential couple wanted to create a sort of national Catholic Church, totally disconnected from Rome and controlled by the government. The principle is that “religious organizations must remain free from any foreign control” and the Holy See, it goes without saying, is foreign. Various human rights organizations have denounced Ortega’s aims to directly appoint the bishops for Nicaraguan dioceses, or at the very least to influence the pope’s choice of prelates to be placed at the top of the Church hierarchy in Nicaragua.

In response to Ortega, Pope Francis decided that Cardinal Leopoldo

José Brenes Solórzano should continue as cardinal of Managua (he will turn seventy-seven in March, two years past the canonical limit for succession). Now, Pope Leo XIV has made it clear that he wants to continue on the same path, a path without compromise with the regime. In the few months of his pontificate, he has already met in private audience with the exiled bishops Rolando Álvarez, José Báez, and Monsignor Carlos Herrera, the president of the Bishops' Conference; all three were expelled a year ago and were on the first plane to leave Nicaragua. Despite the fact that Rome has kept a very low profile as compared to the fearless attacks of the Sandinista duo—there have been very few public statements from Church leadership, both local and Vatican, because the risk of causing even worse reprisals is very high—Church leaders have tried to create an even deeper rift between the Church and Managua.

**The regime has used both** false accusations and insults on social media and ad hoc measures to limit the exercise of religious freedom as much as possible. A year ago, when Archbishop Rolando Álvarez gave his first and only interview since his exile, the reaction was very harsh. In 2023, Bishop Álvarez was arrested and sentenced to twenty-six years and four months in prison after he was found guilty of conspiracy against the government and “treason of the homeland” (a sentence that Ortega had announced on TV before the judge pronounced it in court), then was transferred to Rome after a long negotiation with the Secretary of State that led to the

exile of another bishop and fifteen priests. He spent months in absolute silence before his appearance on EWTN.

The Sandinista president's response to the interview was immediate. “Having no supranational political authority, the Vatican State seeks to assign positions and powers that it purports to grant, in Nicaragua, to people who ceased to be Nicaraguans as a result of improper, intolerable behavior promoting politically instigated crimes, as well as constant calls to break the peace with all kinds of violence, falsehoods, and calculated slander, inflicting anguish, suffering, and pain on the families of our country.” The Foreign Ministry in Managua, in an official statement, accused the Vatican of being a “depraved” and “pedophile” state, as well as having a “history of abominable, perverse, inhuman inclinations and practices in concert with infamous colonialist monarchies.”

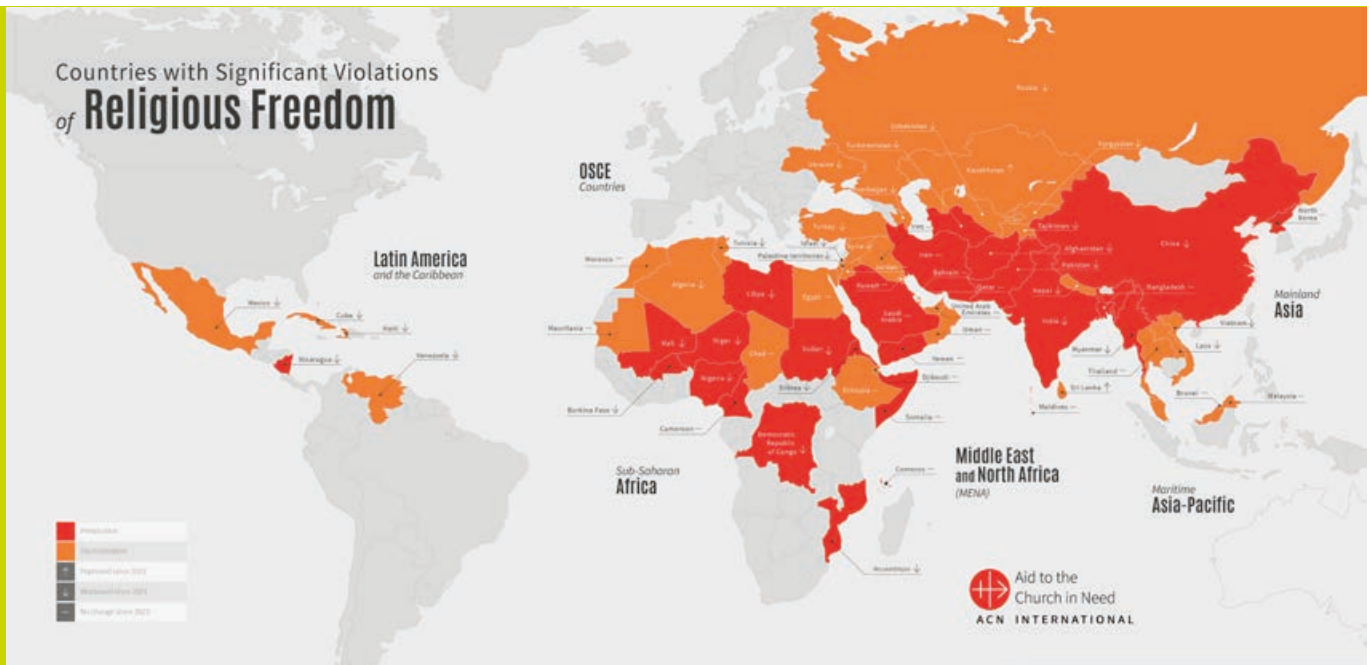
The new measure it is using to punish the Church is the censorship of homilies. Before Sunday Mass, priests must go to the nearest police station and show the text of the homily they intend to pronounce in front of the faithful. It must not contain political references, much less any criticism of the government. In some cases, security officers visit priests and ask for a detailed schedule of their weekly activities. Not even the bishops are exempt from reporting to the security agents. Homilies, Eucharistic celebrations, missionary activities, pastoral meetings... everything must be recorded and reported to the police. Some priests have been assigned a personal “overseer” to

monitor their movements.

It is thus becoming increasingly difficult to guarantee the continuation of religious activities in individual parishes since priests and religious are prevented from leaving their community of residence without prior authorization. This situation is not sustainable in the long run, so much so that the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus has issued a press release in which it notes the need “to emphasize that this aggression is framed in a national context of systematic repression, which lamentably continues to this day, against any person or institution suspected of not agreeing with the regime, including religious institutions.”

**According to the latest** report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, in 2024 alone there were 222 documented violations of religious freedom and 46 cases of arbitrary detention of clergy members. In seven years, the government has closed more than 5,000 civil society organizations, of which more than 1,000 were religious in nature. The law imposing customs import limits on ink and paper meant that the newspaper most critical of the regime, *El Nuevo Diario*, was forced to cease publication. Not even altar boys are left in peace. As documented by activist Martha Patricia Molina, underage children are often summoned to police stations or “visited at home” for questioning or to make them sign complex documents relating to their service in the liturgies. The purpose, always the same, is to intimidate anyone who wants to have anything to do with the Church. ■





According to the Report on Religious Freedom in the World, 5.4 billion people live in countries that do not safeguard it. Director Marta Petrosillo says, “The nonviolent response of Christians is amazing.”

**“These martyrs have changed my life”**

15



**Giuseppe Beltrame**

**“T**he suffering of any member of Christ’s Body is shared by the whole Church,” Pope Leo XIV told a delegation of the “Aid to the Church in Need” (ACN) Pontifical Foundation last October 10. On that day the pope received a preview of the 17<sup>th</sup> biennial Report on Religious Freedom in the World, the most important document on the topic, published on October 21 by ACN. Since its first publication in 1999, “this report does more than provide information; it bears witness, gives voice to the voiceless, and reveals the hidden suffering of many,”

the pope said on the occasion. The numbers speak clearly. The most violated human right in the world is that of religious freedom. Two-thirds (5.4 billion) of the world’s population live in countries where it is not protected. The general conditions have worsened since the previous report. Slight signs of improvement have been shown only in Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka. Of 196 countries considered, 62 present grave violations: in 24, cases of persecution primarily against Christians were observed, and in 38 there were episodes of discrimination. Twenty-four countries are “under observation” due to growing signals of alarm. “The document photographs the situation between January 2023 and December 2024,” Marta Petrosillo, the editor-in-chief of the report, told *Traces*. “The data collected concerns not only Christians but believers of all faiths who suffer persecution, because as Saint John Paul

*“In both Europe and North America there is growing intolerance of religion. There have been thousands of reports of acts of vandalism, profanation, and attacks on churches.”*

II said, respect for religious freedom ‘is the litmus test for verifying respect for all the other rights.’ However, it is necessary to distinguish the various forms of violence, because there can be many different causes.”

#### **What is the main cause?**

The main cause is political authoritarianism in countries like China, Iran, North Korea, Eritrea, and Nicaragua, where the regimes adopt systematic strategies for controlling independent faith communities. This is happening in fifty-two of the sixty-two countries where there are grave violations, because in many cases this has proven to be a very useful instrument for maintaining political power through digital surveillance, restrictive laws, and arbitrary imprisonments.

#### **What are the other causes of persecution?**

One of the main ones is ethnoreligious nationalism; that is, the imposition of the idea that one ethnic and religious identity confers authentic citizenship in a nation. For example, this is the case in Myanmar with Buddhism or in India with Hinduism. In the latter, the majority religion is elevated to the detriment of the others by the government authorities, who use anticonversion laws and permit violence against religious minorities. Then there is the constant increase in religious extremism of jihadist terrorists in Asia and Africa. In recent years the global epicenter of this phenomenon has shifted from the Middle East to the sub-Saharan area of the Sahel, mostly in Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Nigeria. In this area, fundamentalist groups like the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) and JNIM have caused tens of thousands of deaths, the displacement of millions of people, and the destruction of churches and entire Christian communities.

#### **There is also a strong increase in limitations on religious freedom due to organized crime.**

Yes, above all in contexts where religious leaders or the communities themselves are the only institutions that defend human dignity. In addition to Nigeria and Haiti, reported for years by ACN, this year a new entry is Mexico, where armed groups kidnap priests and attack religious leaders in order to consolidate their power. In addition, ongoing wars and conflicts contribute to worsen the loss of freedom of worship in countries like Myanmar, Ukraine, Russia, Israel, and Palestine.

#### **Is freedom of religion also threatened in the West?**

Certainly. In both Europe and North America there is growing hostility and intolerance of religion. There have been thousands of reports of acts of vandalism, profanation, and attacks on churches, in particular in France, Greece, Spain, Italy, and the United States. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has brought to these countries a considerable increase in episodes of antisemitism.

#### **What testimony is given by the Christians who decide to remain in places of persecution?**

First of all, it is a source of hope for all of us, which inevitably must strengthen our faith. Christians are witnesses to peace and it is no coincidence that people are amazed by their nonviolent response even to very harsh attacks. I see it daily in the meetings for testimony or the presentations we organize in parishes and prisons, but also in places of official representation. It is very important that interest in this theme be shown not only by popes but also by insti-





Marta Petrosillo in Pakistan.

tutional figures, as we have seen with Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, together with Davide Dionisi, special envoy of the Italian government for religious freedom.

### **How does one work on a report that is so challenging and full of data?**

The ACN work involves thousands of contacts throughout the world and takes two years to compile. In fact, we are already working on the 2027 report. I coordinate the authors in 196 countries who collect data and conduct interviews in the field. Together with a group of experts we verify the information, and then the report is finalized in English and translated into five other languages. The English version for 2025 comprised 1,250 pages, while the year 2000 volume had somewhat under 400, a testimony to the increase in cases of violations of religious freedom in recent years.

### **What other activities does ACN engage in throughout the world?**

Since its establishment in 1947, the foundation has

supported the pastoral life and material needs of persecuted Christians. Every year it finances over 5,000 projects in about 140 countries, rebuilding churches, forming seminarians and catechists, providing means of transport for pastoral workers, and organizing emergency aid for displaced families.

### **What motivated you in your professional life to dedicate yourself to this theme?**

My road was marked from the beginning. On March 2, 2011, two days after I began my first job for ACN-Italy, after years working for the SIR agency (Religious Information Service), the Pakistani minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated in Islamabad. The first communiqué I wrote was for this man, who fought to the death for his countrymen's right to religious freedom. Over time, the testimonies of many followers of the Gospel, some of whom I also had the good fortune to meet, changed my life. One example is Asia Bibi, the Pakistani Christian unjustly condemned to death for blasphemy, and later absolved in 2018, who spent 3,420 days in prison without ever ceasing to bear witness to her faith to the whole world. ■

# “We seek the only One who saves”

A career as a lawyer, a vocation as a Dominican, a presence in Algeria: “Being in the minority often requires extra intelligence. And hope.” An interview with Cardinal Jean-Paul Vesco.

**I**n the run-up to last May’s conclave, Vatican reporters were intrigued by a cardinal who was known for going out for a morning jog before joining his colleagues in the General Congregations. This habit earned Jean-Paul Vesco, Archbishop of Algiers, the nickname “cardinal runner.” But what was truly astonishing was his response to the question that was on everyone’s lips during those weeks: “The one we will elect has long been prepared by the Lord. We are not the ones who make the pope. We discover him. We must find the one among us who has already been chosen.” Among the countless analyses and predictions, his words—springing from a gaze directed solely at the heart of the Church—bounced around the media as something so original that it disrupted worldly logic. It is the same impression one gets when looking at this man’s résumé. Born into a French Catholic family, he worked as a lawyer until the age of thirty, opening two law firms, one in Paris and one in Lyon. Then, as he himself recounts, he was “struck by lightning”: he closed everything and joined the Dominicans. This choice soon led him to Algeria in an attempt to renew the Dominican presence after the death of his brother Pierre Claverie, bishop of Oran, who was assassinated in 1996. Together with his driver, Claverie was the last martyr of the nineteen religious killed in the “black decade” of civil war, including the seven monks of Tibhirine, whose story is recounted in the film *Of Gods and Men*. Cardinal Vesco has embraced their legacy and today, together with the church of Algeria, is preparing to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of their martyrdom. “These blessed souls are a light for our present and for the future,” he says. “They are ordinary men and women, placed in extraordinary circumstances, who still tell us today that hatred is not the answer to hatred. But that there is a subversive power in simple, unarmed presence.”

## **The path that led you to Algeria has been a long one. How did it begin?**

Ever since I was a child, I had dreamed of becoming a lawyer. At the age of eleven, I went to court to follow trials. I wanted to fight against the death penalty. At university, my passion became politics. At the age of twenty, I was already a municipal councilor. I have always been a committed person. When I opened my own law firm, everything I had always wanted came true: work, friends, and a personal life. And faith, too. Yet I felt dissatisfied. Something was missing. It seemed to me that life was flowing under a heavy glass ceiling.



Anna Leonardi





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### **Was that where you were “struck by lightning”?**

Exactly. It was August 14, 1994. I was on my way to Lisieux for the weekend to visit a monk friend with whom I had shared some spiritual retreats in my youth. I remember driving my Saab with my head full of work problems. The idea of becoming a priest had never crossed my mind before that day, but while attending Mass for the ordination of some monks, I had the intuition that this was exactly my “battle” too. My restlessness had led me there. And there was Someone calling me. The next day, returning to Paris, I said, “Yes, this is what I want.” I gave myself a year to close my business and then I joined the Dominican Friars.

### **Why the Dominicans?**

That is not easy to answer. Could you explain to me why you married your husband? Was he the best, the most handsome, and the most intelligent? Probably not, but he was the *one*. You preferred him, certainly, but there is always something that escapes us. It could have been someone else, but it was him. That is how it was for me. My law office was right across from the Dominican convent on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. I would visit them from time to time. So, for me, it was natural to choose them: I wanted to be ordained a priest and at the same time live a religious life. The rule of life of the Preachers made this possible. This is the closest thing to an explanation. But it is not everything; there is a part of the story that remains a mystery. Because it is God who leads us. When I look back, there is a thread that, in total respect for my freedom, has traced my entire path.

Jean-Paul Vesco, Archbishop  
of Algiers.

**And how did that thread lead you to Algeria?**

When the monks of Tibhirine and Bishop Claverie were killed in 1996, I had just completed my novitiate. I remember being deeply struck by their story. It kindled a small light within me. A mysterious feeling bound me to their lives. Four years later, when the Dominicans began to wonder about the possibility of returning to Algeria, it was easy for me to offer myself. So, after another four years of preparation and study, I settled there in 2002.

**Then, in 2015, you were appointed bishop of Oran, the diocese where Monsignor Claverie lived until his martyrdom. There, in 2018, the nineteen martyrs were beatified. What was that experience like for you?**

What struck me when I arrived was this church made up of blessed people. Those who gave their lives unto death, but also the blessed who gave their lives by remaining, suffering, and sharing everything with the people. In their humble service, they were witnesses to the Gospel, and this, together with the blood of the martyrs, became the hallmark, the face of the Church in Algeria. At first, it seemed impossible to organize the beatification here, because it had never happened before in a traditionally Muslim country. It was difficult to present nineteen murdered Christians when the country had suffered two hundred thousand victims, including more than a hundred imams. But in the end, we made this choice, with the support of the country's authorities, and we decided to organize it in Oran, at the shrine of Notre-Dame de Santa Cruz, on the "Esplanade of Living Together in Peace," as the vast seaside space above the sanctuary was renamed. It was a gesture that involved everyone and left a mark on the country's conscience. Everything that happened on that day spoke of the presence of a living God, present among us, Christians and Muslims together.

**What is coexistence like today? What does it mean to live the Christian faith in Algeria?**

The recent history of the Church in Algeria is one of a gradual loss of power and usefulness, but it has lost none of its meaning. We must not fear fragility, nor a certain precariousness. Christianity was built on martyrdom—etymologically "witness"—and it is never so

faithful to the Gospel as when it is in a minority and, at times, even persecuted, because it generates authentic witnesses. It is a paradox. No one seeks this fragility, but if we happen to experience it, that is when we can experience our strength. Because we seek the only One who saves. Being in the minority often requires an excess of intelligence. And above all, hope. And so, through our mere presence, we are called to make the desert bloom.

**In a recent book entitled *Far cadere i muri* [Breaking down walls], in which you dialogue with a Protestant pastor, you say that "the Church needs witnesses more than it needs experts." What then is mission, proclamation?**

The question is not so much how we do things, but why we are here. The Gospel is woven with Jesus's encounters with people thirsting for meaning. He spends His days answering existential questions, pressing cries for help. This thirst is always present, even today, and waits to be quenched. Our Church is awaited there. Not with ready-made answers, but with a desire to bring what we have: a faith that gives life. In this sense, mission differs greatly from proselytism. The latter arises from the fear that the other, so different from me, provokes in me. So I do everything I can to make him like me, without looking at the part of truth that dwells in him. A missionary Church must take the time to meet the other person, every person, as they are and with what they bring. As a Christian, I profess Christ as true God and true man, the bringer of salvation for all humanity. But I cannot claim to have the last word on this Christ and on His plan of salvation for the world, so infinitely does He surpass any understanding I may have of Him.

**What does this mean in terms of our relationship with Muslims?**

The diversity of religions is a mystery that belongs to God. Becoming aware of this mystery is the first antidote to proselytism. It is what makes me want to enter into relationship with anyone who seeks me out and asks for my friendship. Or has questions about my being a Christian. Every now and then,



*“The question is not so much how we do things, but why we are here. The Gospel is woven with Jesus’s encounters with people thirsting for meaning. This thirst is always present, even today, and waits to be quenched. Our Church is awaited there.”*

during various conversations, I hear people say to me, “It is a shame you are not a Muslim, you are a good person.” This hurts me deeply, because they do not recognize or respect what lies at the core of my being and makes me the “good person” they see. I do not want to do the same thing; I do not want to look at them and dismiss their history, because that distorts and breaks the relationship. The true missionary needs the truth of the other, as Bishop Claverie argued.

**Last summer, you attended the Rimini Meeting for the first time, where you spoke at the presentation of the exhibition, *Called Twice: The Martyrs of Algeria*. What was that experience like?**

It was impressive. I stayed for five days and met many people. I saw commitment, openness, and creativity. Everyone was there one hundred percent. And the result was a quality that I found even in the smallest details. There was a young man, Giovanni, who followed me around and helped me with everything. He was a student who dedicated part of his vacation to building a small part of this event, which for me is a sign of a living Church, of a truly incar-

nate faith that wants to mix with all aspects of reality. When I arrived at the exhibition dedicated to the martyrs of Algeria, I burst into tears. It would be wonderful if it could become a permanent exhibition for the thirtieth anniversary we are preparing to celebrate this year.

**To journalists who found it bizarre that a cardinal would go jogging, you replied that running brings freedom and breath. What is freedom?**

I have always run, ever since I was a child. I simply enjoy it. Of course, it gives me a feeling of freedom, but freedom is something greater. I hope to be free even if tomorrow I were in a wheelchair! Christ is my freedom. Some mornings I wake up feeling anxious, full of worries. But I am freed by the knowledge that my God is with me and will never let me fall. “I know that You are with me,” so I need not be afraid. This is an impregnable freedom, but one we must seek every day. Even as a Church, this is what helps us to be less worried about the future. We work hard to plan, but it is the moment that counts. The Lord is here today and He knows what He is doing. We must remember to live, to live fully what is happening to us. For me, this is the enduring question. ■

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

LUIGI GIUSSANI

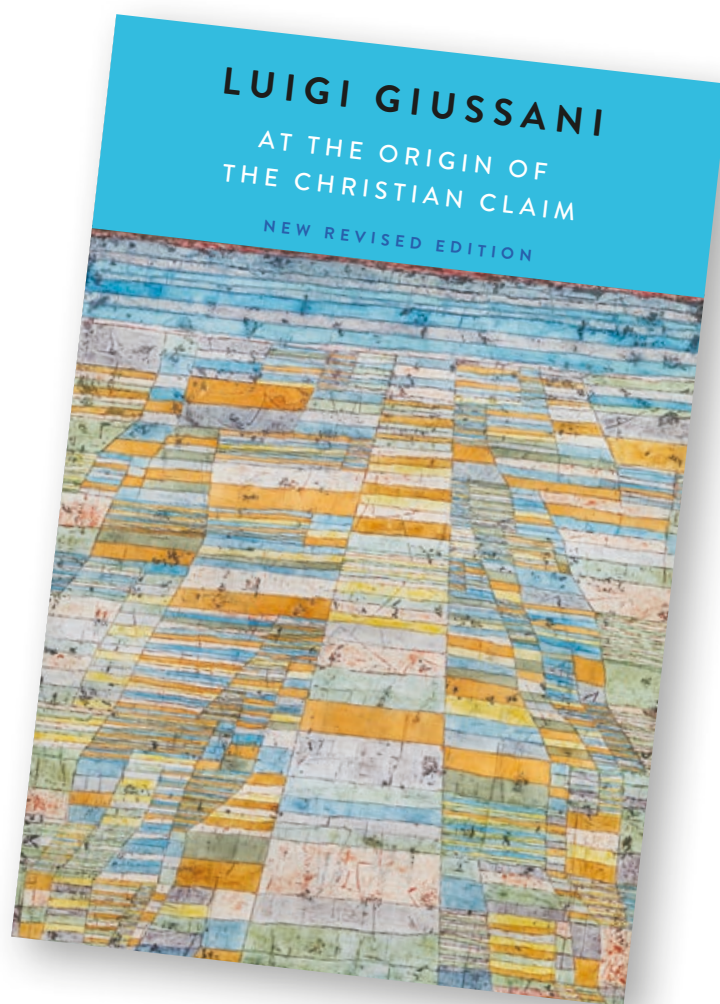
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LUIGI GIUSSANI (1922–2005) founded the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation. He is the author of more than twenty books, including *The Religious Sense*.

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