

Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth, and Freedom**Julián Carrón****Publication Date**

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JULIÁN
CARRÓN

*Disarming
Beauty*

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

The only way to truth is through freedom.
History is the space of dialogue in freedom;
this does not mean an empty space, void
of proposals for life, because nothing can
live off of nothingness. Nobody can stand,
have a constructive relationship with
reality, without something that makes
life worth living.

Disarming Beauty

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The purpose of this interdisciplinary series is to feature authors from around the world who will expand the influence of Catholic thought on the most important conversations in academia and the public square. The series is “Catholic” in the sense that the books will emphasize and engage the enduring themes of human dignity and flourishing, the common good, truth, beauty, justice, and freedom in ways that reflect and deepen principles affirmed by the Catholic Church for millennia. It is not limited to Catholic authors or even works that explicitly take Catholic principles as a point of departure. Its books are intended to demonstrate the diversity and enhance the relevance of these enduring themes and principles in numerous subjects, ranging from the arts and humanities to the sciences.

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

JULIÁN CARRÓN

Foreword by Javier Prades

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Foreword

Javier Prades

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F O R E W O R D

Javier Prades

In a Connected World

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Angola for reasons related to my work at the university. My hosts took advantage of the moments of rest to tell me about some educational and charitable works in so-called *barrios*, the dry and dusty suburbs of the city of Benguela.

For a European like me, every opportunity to travel in Africa or Latin America generates a wide range of sensations. Certainly I feel nostalgia towards the freshness of a simpler way of life, free from the adulteration of what Augusto Del Noce has called our affluent society. I also envy the simplicity of a faith rooted in everyday life, able to sustain the effort and the suffering of so many privations, so different from the tormented and problematic faith that we know well. In people, especially in children, you can perceive the echo of a joy that is not easy to recognize in European societies.

On the other hand, and with the same force, the precariousness of this life provokes a feeling of injustice. It is undeniable that without the necessary human, cultural, economic, and social resources, these forms of society, exposed to profound and rapid changes, can get lost or become further impoverished. The solidity and density of Europe's

social, cultural, and economic life—even with all its wounds—seems to demonstrate its unique strength in human history. Indeed, the fresh and moving faith of these people is quite exposed to the antihumanist currents that exert so much influence in the West and from the West, the effects of which can already be seen in their societies.

These contrasts, which strike us when we travel outside Europe, recall the distinguished thinkers that have concluded that our culture has lost its way and cannot find effective remedies to recover the path. From Glucksmann to Habermas or Manent, they draw our attention to a divided West, fighting with itself, exhausted. Perhaps that is why, in the course of the twentieth century, many Europeans have come to question the value of the fruits of the civilization into which they were born. Nonetheless, we note a desire to not lose this precious European heritage of civilization and humanity, whose richness is almost unparalleled in history, a heritage that permits us, among other things, to speak today of “the person.”

We Europeans now seem to glimpse the end of an economic crisis that has been both profound and painful for millions of our fellow citizens. On the one hand, it has brought out with particular intensity that feeling of weariness and exhaustion I mentioned, as if a deep malaise were lodged in our hearts. Secondly, the same crisis offers us the opportunity to begin again, to change, to try to improve. It is up to us to discern the situation in which we find ourselves, together with the possible solutions. What is happening to Europeans? And, especially, what is happening to European Christians? I never stop posing these questions to the churchmen, academics, and people of culture, both believers and agnostics or atheists, whom I meet. It is not easy to translate the answer into a fully determined path, but the trail map that we hear Julián Carrón propose in the first part of this book will lead us along the “interrupted paths”—in the words of Martin Heidegger—of our society.

The European Malaise

Our starting point is that in Western society a real malaise has surfaced. What is the task that lies ahead, imposed upon us by the

episodes that strike us most painfully? It is precisely to properly interpret this malaise, which is expressed in ambiguous and often ideological ways. If we do not wish to close ourselves off from reality, we must seriously take this condition into account.

In my opinion, this malaise cannot be explained simply by the economic factors of the crisis, as serious as they have become in recent years. Think, for example, of the deep demographic crisis in Europe, with the dramatic decline in birth rates and the obvious difficulties in integrating immigrants. As known observers—from Böckenförde to Pérez Díaz—have lucidly noted, there is a moral and cultural subtext to the crisis in institutional participation we are experiencing. In addition, in order to identify the nature of the crisis we must understand it as a symptom of the ultimately infinite set of needs and evidence that constitute the common elementary experience of all people, needs and evidence whose full realization reveals man's foundational religious experience. The fact that young second- and third-generation Europeans succumb to the lure of Islamic fundamentalism should cause us to think about the lack of ideals that also touches the religious sphere.

The malaise of European society, and of European Christians, is not limited to superficial aspects, as plentiful as they are. Its roots are deep. It is a difficulty that we may describe, in the words of María Zambrano, as a crisis of “relationship with reality.” But how so? It is a sort of loss of trust in our own life experience. It shows itself in the struggle to simply recognize and embrace reality as it appears, that is, full of attraction, as a manifestation of a foundation that is within everything and to which everything refers beyond itself.¹

If, on the contrary, everything is reduced to mere appearances, our relationship with the real enters into crisis. We cannot ensure that knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of the world remains a sign of the foundation, of that good mystery that—in the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas—“everyone understands to be God.”² The risk is not small, because the way we use reason and freedom, and thus our intelligence about reality, about its ultimate foundation, is undermined. When reason, freedom, and reality are questioned, there is cause for alarm in any society. In the medium and long term it is impossible—or at least far more uncertain and risky—to work, to establish bonds of affection, enjoy rest, and build a peaceful society. Thus the malaise

we are experiencing gives rise to an existential weakness in humanity as humanity.

Examples of this process of weakening can be multiplied in each of the concrete orders of elementary experience to which we have alluded: love, work, leisure. Referring to young people in particular, Fr. Giussani coined the highly descriptive term “the Chernobyl effect,” referring to an effect that threatens humanity today. He described the Chernobyl effect in these words: “It is as if today’s youth were all penetrated by . . . the radiation of Chernobyl. Structurally, the organism is as it was before, but dynamically it is no longer the same. . . . People are . . . abstracted from the relationship with themselves, as if emptied of affection [without the energy of affection to adhere to reality], like batteries that last for six minutes instead of six hours.”³ Carrón uses these same words as a criterion for judgment, to understand the current situation of our pluralistic societies, precisely in formulating the question about what it means to be a Christian today (see chapter 5). The nature of this weakening process is not primarily ethical or psychological, though it also includes these factors; rather, it concerns the dynamics of knowledge and freedom in relationship to reality in its totality.

If this is so, and therefore the crisis is not only an economic, cultural, or moral one, but a fundamentally anthropological and religious one, then in order to foster coexistence and peace in Western society, it is necessary to analyze this category of issues. It is evident that what is happening in the West inevitably reflects on other cultures, and thus the road that the societies of and the Church in Europe ultimately take will also affect the rest of the world.

The Cultural Interpretation of Faith

How have we managed to reach this weakened human condition?

In a television interview at the end of his life, Giussani responded to the famous question of T. S. Eliot, “Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?”⁴ His response—perhaps surprising to some—was that both had happened. I believe that one

of the aims of this collection of essays by Carrón is to carefully explore the ways in which the religious experience has been proposed to contemporary people, born into a pluralistic, multicultural society, a society, to a large extent, without Christ. Let us enter the field of what we might call the cultural interpretation of the faith.

Pope John Paul II made a now-classic contribution to defining the value of dialogue between the Christian faith and pluralistic society when he stressed that “the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith. . . . A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”⁵ This indication highlights the need of faith to be converted into culture, into a concrete way of living. Pope John Paul II does not suggest, of course, a process in which faith is diluted to the point of becoming mere culture, according to the “horizontalist” or “humanist” tendencies that prevailed at certain times after the Second Vatican Council. On the contrary, he claims that faith is capable of profoundly changing human dynamics, because it results in a concrete way of living and addresses the major issues that touch people’s lives. If this process is not accomplished, we are faced with that separation between faith and life whose deleterious effects for the Christian tradition and for a fully human civilization were denounced by Vatican II and the postconciliar magisterium. A result of this separation is the inability to communicate the faith to people of different cultures and religious traditions.

On the contrary, when there is this indispensable “cultural translation,” the faith acquires a public dimension and retains its living capacity for transmission, for building society and a new way of facing reality. We should note that this formula does not directly suggest a particular social or political profile of the faith. I am referring instead to a concrete way, born of faith, to realize human life, a way that by its nature must involve all life’s personal and social dimensions. In the process different perspectives find space, not all of equal value, but all forced to measure themselves against the original nature of the Christian event, as it has been transmitted and confirmed by apostolic succession. If you do not accept this task of discernment, Eliot’s question is destined to remain unanswered.

Cardinal Angelo Scola has offered a useful reading of two widespread interpretations of the faith in Europe, bearing in mind national differences.⁶

A first interpretation sees Christianity as a “civil religion,” that is, as the ethical glue capable of generating social unity in the face of the widespread problems of coexistence in society. In this interpretation, the public implementation of Christianity means the defense and promotion of ethical values that underpin an increasingly faltering society. More specifically, the deterioration of the social fabric in its aspects most directly linked to moral life—of which we have countless examples—favors identification of a public implementation of the faith with efforts to recover the social validity of those values perceived to be more and more threatened. This conception can be promoted both by practicing Christians and by agnostics or nonbelievers, who expect just such an attitude from Christians. It is not hard to argue that this position reflects the tendency to identify the faith with a universal ethics, to ensure that some rational dignity is accorded to its public presence in the West.

Then there is a second interpretation, which tends to reduce Christianity to a “pure proclamation of the cross for the salvation of the world.” On this interpretation, for example, a concern with bioethics or biopolitics would mean a distancing from the authentic message of Christ’s mercy—as if the Christian message was ahistorical and had no social, anthropological, and cosmological implications. This interpretation asserts that the strength of Christian proclamation consists in a “pure” proposal of the mystery of the cross. In contrast to the first position, this one diverts attention from the ethical aspects, whether of the individual or of society, to emphasize the paradoxical strength of a Christian message, which, from the perspective of this world, is offered covertly, secretly; thus the strength of the divine power that is manifested in weakness is emphasized. It is perhaps possible to identify in this position the background influences of certain positions—originally Protestant, but later also Catholic—that reduce the universality of reason in favor of a faith life more dominated by sentiment or emotion.

What can we say about these two cultural interpretations of the faith? Both are based on elements that are, in themselves, essential for

a full understanding of the role of Christian faith in the pluralistic society: on the one hand, the importance of the cross of Christ for salvation, on the other, the obvious ethical and cultural implications of the Christian message. Nonetheless, neither of them comprehensively expresses the true nature of Christianity and the way it should be present in society. More importantly, neither is able to adequately respond to the anthropological weakness that lies at the origin of the fatigue and confusion of our European society.

The first interpretation would reduce the Catholic faith to its secular dimension, separating it from the force that is born in the Christian as a gift of the encounter with Jesus Christ in the Church. Moreover, the attempt to provide a universal ethics while bracketing off the event of Christ, for historical reasons that all can understand, has already failed to ensure perpetual peace, as Pope Benedict XVI keenly pointed out in his judgment on the European Enlightenment. Carrón has examined this phenomenon in detail in the first part of this book.

The second interpretation deprives the faith of its incarnated and historical depth, reducing it to an inner inspiration and the expectation of a fullness in the hereafter. This “eschatological” interpretation also fails to understand the anthropological weakening process with its historical consequences, nor does it offer an answer that is adequate to the situation.

To overcome the limitations of both of these positions we need an understanding of Christianity in which the advent of Christ—irreducible to any human interpretation—is shown in its originality and its supercreaturely origin. On the other hand, we need an understanding of the reasonableness of this singular event in history, an event that transcends any measure reason is capable of imposing. Christianity claims to offer nothing less than a kind of experience that corresponds to what is human in any culture, because it springs from an event unique in history, one that opens all cultures to come face-to-face with a transcendent truth. This is one of the keys to inter-cultural and interreligious dialogue.

There is, then, a third position, which we call “the personalization of faith.” Briefly, it comes down to choosing an understanding of the Catholic faith that implies its necessary existential verification, both

on a personal and communitarian level, as a way to become a Church that is fully human within the conditions of a postsecular and post-Christian society. If I'm not mistaken, this is precisely the thread that runs through Julián Carrón's educational and cultural approach, as reflected in his presentations in very different fields, from which this book was born.

Personalizing Faith: Existential Verification

The Christian message claims to generate an “unprecedented newness” that “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” This famous statement of Benedict XVI, taken up by Pope Francis, gives us an adequate understanding of the originality of Christianity.⁷ If we look at the life of Christian communities, especially in the southern regions of Europe, the initial impact of the newness is apparent in many places; indeed we often come across episodes of moving conversions, sometimes with almost miraculous consequences. We must thank God for all of that. So it is not the initial impact of the Christian message that is most lacking in Europe, although it is urgent that that impact multiply exponentially according to the Lord's mandate to reach all people. What is necessary, instead, is a type of education in the faith that can preserve, renew, and transmit this unexpected newness in all the circumstances of daily life. Christian experience, even when it is received with sincerity and generosity, often does not generate a human maturity sufficiently founded on its corresponding certainties so as to be able to work and love in the present and also keep the prospect of eternal life alive. Among those aware of this were some of the most acute observers of European Christianity, such as Newman in the nineteenth century and Guardini, Schlier, or Giussani in the last century, to cite the figures I am most aware of.

The anthropological weakness of Christians thus points to a weakness in the way we live and transmit the faith, one we could define as a “lack of verification” of the faith within Christian education. Faith is “verification” when it shows its ability to illuminate and bring to fullness the typically human dynamics of reason, affection, and

freedom, and so increases the existential certainty essential to an adult in all of life's circumstances. In the other, opposite sense of "verification," faith "cannot cheat because it is tied to your experience in some way; essentially, it is summoned to appear in a court where you, through your experience, are the judge,"⁸ to echo Giussani's bold expression taken up by Carrón in this book (on experience verifying faith, see chapter 6). If we skip this verification, we simply assume that faith is a rational and free adherence to the event of God in history, and the Church's action slips into the generous practice of its social, political, cultural, or charitable consequences, but does not effectively and profoundly form the Christian adult.⁹

If we wish to follow the indications of the magisterium and to consider the profound interconnection between faith, religion, and culture, the most serious methodological issue is that of the "personalization of faith," which is necessary in order to bring forth persons and communities capable of regenerating the Christian community. So we must more deeply understand the "circularity" between elementary human experience and faith.¹⁰ On one hand, the encounter with Christ awakens our relationship with reality in its original breadth; on the other hand, the vitality of human experience—including its fundamental questions about love, pain, death, and beauty, and its search for the meaning of life—protects it from a formalistic and ultimately rigid expression of faith itself. These are the decisive factors needed to accompany and address, over time and with the necessary patience, the human fragility of so many Church members. From a standpoint of method, this implies the art of knowing how to recognize the expressions of the quest for meaning reflected in many questions, frustrations, searches, and efforts of our contemporaries in the postsecular culture, thanks to the light that comes from the truth freely manifested in Jesus.

Only a faith subject to verification can address the root of the West's crisis, which strikes at our relationship with reality not in generic terms but in the concreteness of human life's basic dimensions, as the "Chernobyl effect" demonstrates. Let us return to this question of method, because its importance is crucial for achieving the sought-after goal of a faith that is neither formalistic nor spiritualistic, but

which perfects what is human. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for Christian education to have an effective impact on the understanding and maturing of each person's elementary experience, so that that experience, in turn, gives life to the believer's human position. Thus faith will, according to the famous gospel parable, show its value for every person "one hundredfold."

In this process, how we refer back to the elementary experience that is at the heart of the understanding of the religious sense is crucial. In fact, we can directly identify it in its formal characteristics, so to speak, abstracted from any concrete content, or we can describe a given situation or a particular action and recognize the elementary experience by its formal features and by the criteria for acting that result from it. In my opinion, the genius of education lies in not allowing these levels of understanding of the human experience to be separated. The irresistible force of an educational position emerges when one takes into account all the factors. It is not enough to accumulate examples, placing each of them in the category of "experience," as if this makes education more concrete. If you do not get to the "why," that is, a judgment in formal—universal—terms, the path is culturally less fruitful.

On the other hand, the criterion of judgment is not reached by deduction, but by starting from the description of concrete lived experience. So a good teacher is not one who simply repeats formulas, even excellent ones.

A "Culture of Encounter"

The primary task of the Church, from the dusty *barrios* of Angola to the corridors and classrooms of our European universities, from attending to those most affected by the crisis to participating in the daily lives of friends and families, is what I described briefly as personalization of faith. Only a lively adult, one whose experience is enhanced and transformed by the encounter with Christ, will be able to dialogue with others, whatever their cultural or religious position, within a pluralistic society.

Our world “asks Christians to be willing to seek forms or ways to communicate in a comprehensible language the perennial newness of Christianity.”¹¹ These words of Pope Francis in his beautiful message to the Rimini Meeting of 2014 continue to show us the way. In a society so marked by change as to be defined by Bauman as a “liquid society,” we need adults who can communicate the radical novelty of Christianity, without being paralyzed by changes in forms that might have been useful in the past. Francis’s message can be a contemporary echo of the words of Saint Paul commented on by Josef Zvěřina. “Do not conform! *Me syschematizesthe!* How well this expression reveals the perennial root of the verb: schema. In a nutshell, all schemas, all exterior models are empty. We have to want more, the apostle makes it our duty, ‘change your way of thinking, reshape your minds’—*metamorphoûsthe tē anakainósei tou̯ noós*. Paul’s Greek is so expressive and concrete! He opposes *schēma* or *morphē*—permanent form, to *metamorphē*—change in the creature. One is not to change according to any model that in any case is always out of fashion, but it is a total newness with all its wealth (*anakainósei*).”¹² Only then can the “culture of encounter” to which the pope tenaciously invites us spread. Dialogue then becomes an exciting opportunity for critical reception of the truth present in every human experience and of passionately communicating one’s own experience, transformed by the newness of the Christian fact. It is a fundamental issue that is before—or beyond—the wearisome debates between liberalism and conservatism.

“Disarming Beauty”

In the light of the analysis that Carrón offers in the first part of the book, you will better understand the range of proposals for a cultural and educational work appropriate to the crisis in which we are living in Europe. Carrón shows us the path he has taken in recent years, starting from his numerous talks in university, cultural, media, social, and business venues, almost as a type of program for the moment we are living in. Often his reflections are the result of an open dialogue with stakeholders from different backgrounds and cultural

sensitivities, without any other weapon than the “disarming” beauty of the mystery of Christ. He offers us some examples of his passionate quest to glimpse the basic outlines of elementary experience within all the spheres of human life, illuminated by the Christian event.

His concern to propose to us criteria for judgment, and thus for action, within the different dimensions of life—education, family, social and charitable works, and even politics—puts in our hands a very valuable tool for understanding and loving our European society on the basis of a positive hypothesis that makes us protagonists of the era in which we live, and therefore open to the realities of all continents. We will be protagonists only if along the path of our actions we mature because we understand what we are living.

I hope this book will provoke in readers the same gratitude and the same desire to encounter the author that it inspired in me.

Madrid, July 15, 2015

PART I

THE CONTEXT AND THE CHALLENGES

CHAPTER I

Is a New Beginning Possible?

What Is at Stake?

Europe was born around a few great words, like “person,” “work,” “matter,” “progress,” and “freedom.” These words achieved their full and authentic depth through Christianity, acquiring a value they did not previously have, and this determined a profound process of “humanization” of Europe and its culture. For example, just think about the concept of person. “Two thousand years ago, the only man who had all human rights was the *civis romanus*, the Roman citizen. But who decided who was a *civis romanus*? Those in power. One of the greatest Roman jurists, Gaius, defined three levels of tools which the *civis [romanus]*, who had full rights, could possess: tools which do not move and do not speak; those which move and do not speak, which is to say, animals; and those which move and speak, the slaves.”¹

But today all of these words have become empty, or they are gradually losing their original significance. Why?

Through a long and complex process, from which we cannot exempt the mortification of words like “freedom” and “progress” by the very Christianity that had helped create them, at a certain point along the European trajectory, the idea took hold that those fundamental achievements ought to be separated from the experience that had allowed them to fully flourish.

In a memorable talk he gave years ago in Subiaco, Italy, then-Cardinal Ratzinger said, referring to Enlightenment thinkers, that as a result of a troubled historical trajectory, “in the situation of confessional antagonism and in the crisis that threatened the image of God, they tried to keep the essential moral values outside the controversies and to identify an evidential quality in these values that would make them independent of the many divisions and uncertainties of the various philosophies and religious confessions.” At that time, this was thought to be possible, since “the great fundamental convictions created by Christianity were largely resistant to attack and seemed undeniable.”² Thus developed the Enlightenment attempt to affirm those “great convictions,” whose evidence seemed able to support itself apart from lived Christianity. What was the result of this attempt? Have these great convictions, which have laid the foundation for our coexistence for centuries, withstood the test of time? Did their evidence hold up before the vicissitudes of history, with its unforeseen elements and its provocations? The answer is in front of all of us. Cardinal Ratzinger continued: “The search for this kind of reassuring certainty, something that could go unchallenged despite all the disagreements, has not succeeded. Not even Kant’s truly stupendous endeavors managed to create the necessary certainty that would be shared by all. The attempt, carried to extremes, to shape human affairs to the total exclusion of God leads us more and more to the brink of the abyss, toward the utter annihilation of man.”³

To grasp the evidence of that setting aside, it suffices to consider the effect this process has had on two of the things that we modern Europeans hold most dear: freedom and reason.

“This Enlightenment culture,” Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, “is substantially defined by the rights to liberty. Its starting point is that liberty is a fundamental value and the criterion of everything else: the

freedom of choice in matters of religion, which includes the religious neutrality of the state; the liberty to express one's own opinion, on condition that it does not call precisely this canon into question; the democratic ordering of the state, that is, parliamentary control of the organs of state; . . . and finally, the protection of the rights of man and the prohibition of discrimination." Nevertheless, the ongoing evolution of these concepts already reveals the other side of the coin, the consequences of an insufficient definition of freedom that characterizes Enlightenment culture. On the one hand, any exercise of the principle of individual freedom or self-determination must take stock of the opposition between certain human rights, for example, the conflict between a woman's desire for freedom and the right of the unborn to live. And on the other, the concept of discrimination is constantly extended, without denying the inalienable benefits associated with it, with the result that "the prohibition of discrimination can be transformed more and more into a limitation on the freedom of opinion and on religious liberty. . . . The fact that the Church is convinced that she does not have the right to confer priestly ordination on women is already seen by some as irreconcilable with the spirit of the European Constitution." Therefore, Ratzinger continues, indicating the ultimate results of the trajectory: "A confused ideology of liberty leads to a dogmatism that is proving ever more hostile to real liberty." Thus we witness a singular and significant reversal. "The radical detachment of the Enlightenment philosophy from its roots ultimately leads it to dispense with man."

Secondly, we need to ask ourselves if the type of reason that Enlightenment philosophy hinges upon can legitimately be said to have reached a "complete self-awareness" so as to be able to give the final word on human reason as such. Ratzinger therefore invites us to remember that Enlightenment reason is itself conditioned by history, the result of a "self-limitation of reason that is typical of one determined cultural situation, that of the modern West." Enlightenment philosophy "expresses not the complete reason of man, but only one part of it. And this mutilation of reason means that we cannot consider it to be rational at all." It is not a matter of denying the importance of the achievements of this philosophy, but of objecting

to its self-absolutization, its pitting itself with a sense of superiority against “humanity’s other historical cultures.” Thus, Ratzinger can conclude: “The real antagonism typical of today’s world is not that between diverse religious cultures; rather, it is the antagonism between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures, on the other.”⁴

This does not mean assuming a prejudicially “anti-Enlightenment” position. “The Enlightenment has a Christian origin,” writes Ratzinger, “and it is not by chance that it was born specifically and exclusively within the sphere of the Christian faith.”⁵ In a memorable speech from 2005, Benedict XVI recalls the “fundamental ‘yes’ to the modern era” announced by the Second Vatican Council—without, however, underestimating “the inner tensions as well as the contradictions.” He thus emphasizes the overcoming of that situation of “clash,” in which “it seemed that there was no longer any milieu open to a positive and fruitful understanding” between faith and the modern era, as was typical of the Church in the nineteenth century.⁶

A few years after his address at Subiaco, Benedict XVI returned to the “real opposition” that cuts across the present day and treated the subject in more depth. “The problem Europe has in finding its own identity consists, I believe, in the fact that in Europe today we see two souls.” This is how he describes the two souls: “One is abstract anti-historical reason, which seeks to dominate all else because it considers itself above all cultures. It is like a reason which has finally discovered itself and intends to liberate itself from all traditions and cultural values in favor of an abstract rationality.” A clear example was the Strasbourg Court’s first verdict on crucifixes (in Italian classrooms), as “an example of such abstract reason which seeks emancipation from all traditions, even from history itself. Yet we cannot live like that and, moreover, even ‘pure reason’ is conditioned by a certain historical context, and only in that context can it exist.” What is Europe’s other soul? “We could call Europe’s other soul the Christian one. It is a soul open to all that is reasonable, a soul which itself created the audacity of reason and the freedom of critical reasoning, but which remains anchored to the roots from which this Europe was

born, the roots which created the continent's fundamental values and great institutions, in the vision of the Christian faith."⁷

At this point, in light of what he have discussed, we can better understand Europe's problem, the root of its crisis and what is truly at stake. What is at risk today is precisely man, his reason, his freedom, and the freedom of critical reasoning. "The greatest danger," said Fr. Giussani years ago, "is not the destruction of peoples, killing and murder, but the attempt by the reigning power to destroy the human. And the essence of the human is freedom, i.e., the relationship with the Infinite." Therefore, the battle that must be fought by the man who feels himself to be a man is "the battle between authentic religiosity and power."⁸

This is the nature of the crisis, which is not primarily economic. It has to do with the foundations. It is therefore clear that we need to recognize that, "in terms of the underlying anthropological issues, what is right and may be given the force of law is in no way simply self-evident today. The question of how to recognize what is truly right and thus to serve justice when framing laws has never been simple, and today in view of the vast extent of our knowledge and our capacity, it has become still harder."⁹ Without the clear awareness that what is at stake is the evidence of those foundations, the absence of which would make stable coexistence impossible, we distract ourselves in the debate over the consequences, forgetting that their origin lies elsewhere, as we have seen. Regaining the foundations is of the utmost urgency for us.

Responding to this urgency does not mean returning to a religious state or to a Europe that is based on Christian laws—a sort of new edition of the Holy Roman Empire—as if this were the only possibility to defend the person, his freedom, and his reason. That would be against the very nature of Christianity. "As a religion of the persecuted, and as a universal religion, . . . [Christianity] denied the government the right to consider religion as part of the order of the state, thus stating the principle of the liberty of faith." Therefore, it is important to add that "where Christianity, contrary to its own nature, had unfortunately become mere tradition and the religion of the state . . . it was and remains the merit of the Enlightenment to have

drawn attention afresh to these original Christian values and to have given reason back its own voice.”¹⁰ Therefore, what is necessary is not to return to a time gone by, but rather to undertake a path in which true dialogue about foundations is possible.

Given these new conditions, where can we begin again?

Man's Heart Does Not Surrender

Despite all of the prodigious attempts to set man aside, to reduce the needs of his reason (by reducing the scope of his question) and the urgency of his freedom (which cannot help but express itself in his every move as a desire for fulfillment), man's heart continues to beat, irreducible. We can discover this in the most varied efforts—sometimes confused, but no less dramatic and somehow sincere—that contemporary Europeans make to attain that fullness that they cannot help but desire, fullness that sometimes hides beneath contradictory disguises.

An example can help us understand the nature of the problem, the reductions with which we normally live reason and freedom. “Tonight,” a friend writes me,

I went to dinner with two high school classmates of mine who are engaged and living together. After dinner we sat and talked for a while, and the topic of whether or not to have children came up. My friend said, ‘I will never bring a child into this world. Where would I get the courage to condemn another wretch to unhappiness? I will not take on that responsibility.’ Then he added, ‘I’m afraid of my freedom. At best it’s useless, and at worst I can only cause someone harm. What I expect from life is to try to do the least damage possible.’ We talked for a long time, and they told me about a great many fears they have, and about how at this point they feel that they can’t hope for anything more from life. And they are just 26 years old.”

Behind the refusal to have children lies nothing but the fear of freedom, or perhaps the fear of losing freedom understood in a re-

duced way, that is, the fear of giving up oneself and one's own space. But how much will that set of fears that paralyzes the young man described in the letter determine his life? To talk about "great convictions" is to talk about the foundations, that is, the foothold that makes the experience of freedom possible, makes freedom from fear possible, and allows reason to look at reality in a way that does not suffocate us.

This episode demonstrates that "the bewilderment about the 'fundamentals of life'" does not eliminate questions. Rather, it makes them more acute, as Cardinal Angelo Scola says: "What is sexual difference; what is love; what does it mean to procreate and to educate; why should we work; why may a pluralistic civil society be richer than a monolithic society; how can we meet one another to reciprocally build a working communion among all Christian communities and the good life in civil society; how can we renew finance and the economy; how can we face the fragilities of illness and death, and moral fragility; how can we seek justice; how can we constantly learn and share the needs of the poor? All of this must be re-written in our times, reconsidered and, therefore, re-lived."¹¹ Rewritten, reconsidered, and therefore relived.

This is the nature of the provocation addressed to us by the crisis in which we are immersed. "A crisis," Hannah Arendt wrote, "forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgments. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides."¹²

Therefore, rather than being a pretext for complaints and closure, all of these problematic points in European coexistence represent a grand occasion to discover or rediscover the great convictions that can ensure this coexistence. That these great convictions may fade should not surprise us. Benedict XVI reminds us of the reason. "Incremental progress" is possible only in the material sphere. In the field of "ethical awareness and moral decision-making, there is no similar possibility of accumulation for the simple reason that man's freedom is

always new and he must always make his decisions anew. These decisions can never simply be made for us in advance by others—if that were the case, we would no longer be free. Freedom presupposes that, in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning.” The ultimate reason for which a new beginning is always necessary is that the very nature of the evidence of those convictions is different from that of “material inventions. The moral treasury of humanity is not readily at hand like tools that we use; it is present as an appeal to freedom and a possibility for it.”¹³

But what are these “fundamental decisions” about?

The Focus Is Always Man and His Fulfillment

Behind every human effort there is a cry for fulfillment. Listening to this cry is in no way taken for granted; it is the first choice of freedom. Rilke reminds us of the temptation to hush it up, which is always lurking within us: “And all things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope.”¹⁴

Those who do not give in to this temptation find themselves seeking forms of fulfillment, but are always exposed to the risk of taking shortcuts that seem to let them reach this goal more quickly and in a more satisfying way. This is what we see today, for example, in the attempt to obtain fulfillment through so-called new rights. The discussion that has grown up around them shows what the debate about foundations means and what its possible outcomes are.

Since the mid-1970s, the “new rights” have become increasingly numerous, with a strong acceleration in the last fifteen or twenty years. Their origin is that same yearning for liberation that was the soul of the 1960s protest movement—it was not by chance that abortion was legalized for the first time in 1973 in the United States, and laws regarding divorce and abortion began to appear in Europe around the same time, as well. Today we hear about the right to marriage and adoption for same-sex couples, the right to have a child, the right to one’s own gender identity, the rights of transsexuals, the right of an unhealthy child not to be born, the right to die, . . . The list goes on and on.

Many people feel these new rights to be an affront, a true attack on the values on which Western—and particularly European—civilization has been founded for centuries. To say it better: these new rights exert a great attraction on many people—and, for this reason, they spread very easily—while others fear them as factors of the destruction of society. The deepest social rifts and most intense political controversies are today created around these themes of “public ethics,” not only in Italy but in all of Europe and around the world.

Why this strange mix of appeal and aversion? Let us try to ask ourselves where the so-called new rights originate.

Each of these ultimately springs from deeply human needs. The need for affection, the desire to be a mother or a father, fear of pain and death, the quest for one’s own identity, and so on. Each of these new rights has its roots in the constitutive fabric of every human existence: hence their attraction. The multiplication of individual rights expresses the expectation that the juridical system can resolve these human dramas and ensure satisfaction of the infinite needs that dwell in the human heart.

Their common trait is that they are centered on an individual subject who lays claim to absolute self-determination in every circumstance of life: he wants to decide if he lives or dies, if he suffers or not, if he has a child or not, if he is a man or a woman, and so on. This is a person who conceives of himself as absolute freedom, without limits, and does not tolerate any sort of conditioning. Absolute self-determination and nondiscrimination, along with this cultural background, are, therefore, the key words of the new rights culture.

The contemporary self—like an eternal adolescent— . . . does not want to hear about limits. To be free means, then, to put oneself in the condition of always being able to access new possibilities . . . claiming to be able to reduce desire to enjoyments . . . to be pursued and seized, primarily in the form of socially organized consumption: of goods, of course, but also of ideas, experiences, and relationships. And yet, immediately after attaining them we perceive their insufficiency. Nevertheless, we start over again every time, focusing on another object, another relationship, another experience . . . , continuing to invest our psychological

energies in things that, when put to the test, cannot but reveal themselves to be disappointing.¹⁵

This culture carries within itself the conviction that the attainment of more and more new rights constitutes the path to the fulfillment of the person. In this way, it believes that it can avoid or render superfluous any debate about the foundations, which can be summed up in Giacomo Leopardi's question, "And what am I?"¹⁶ But not asking what the individual is, what the "I" is, is like trying to cure a disease without making a diagnosis! So, since debating about foundations is considered too abstract with respect to life's needs, we entrust ourselves to techniques and procedures. This approach gave rise to the race to obtain recognition of new rights from lawmakers and judges.

But the critical point of contemporary culture lies in the myopia with which it looks at the profound needs of man: not grasping the infinite scope of man's constitutive needs, it proposes—on both the material plane and the emotional and existential one—the infinite multiplication of partial answers. Partial answers are offered in response to reduced questions. But, as Cesare Pavese reminds us, "What a man seeks in his pleasures is that they should be infinite, and no one would ever give up hope of attaining that infinity."¹⁷ And a multiplication, even to the *n*th degree, of "false infinities" (to use Benedict XVI's term)¹⁸ will never be able to satisfy a need that is infinite in nature. It is not the quantitative accumulation of goods and experiences that can satisfy man's "restless heart."

The drama of our culture, therefore, lies not so much in the fact that man is allowed everything, but in the false promises and illusions that such permissiveness carries with it. Each person can verify in their own experience whether the attainment of ever-more-new rights is the path to their fulfillment or whether it actually produces the opposite result, because the failure to understand the infinite nature of desire, the failure to recognize the fabric of the self, leads to a *de facto* reduction of the person to a gender, to a set of biological or physiological factors, and so on. Here we can clearly see the contradiction inherent to a certain conception of man that is so widespread

in our advanced societies: we exalt, in an absolute manner, a self without limits in its new rights and, at the same time, implicitly affirm that the subject of these rights is basically a “nothing,” because he or she dissolves in antecedent factors, whether material, natural, or accidental.

What does all of this tell us about the situation of man today? What we have said also judges those efforts that oppose this tendency, but without bringing into question the common framing of the problem. Indeed, some of those who have put forth these efforts expect contrary legislation to solve the problem, and thus they, too, avoid the discussion about foundations. Of course, a just law is always better than a wrong one, but recent history demonstrates that no just law has succeeded in preventing the drift we see happening before our eyes.

Both sides share the same framework. For both, T. S. Eliot’s words ring true: “They constantly try to escape / From the darkness outside and within / By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”¹⁹ This applies to one group as much as the other.

But the attempt to resolve human questions with procedures will never be sufficient. Again it is Benedict XVI who says it best: “Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world. Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last forever is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom.” Rather, “If there were structures which could irrevocably guarantee a determined—good—state of the world, man’s freedom would be denied, and hence they would not be good structures at all. . . . In other words: good structures help, but of themselves they are not enough. Man can never be redeemed simply from outside.”²⁰

Is there another way?

Examining the Nature of the Subject

Only by focusing on man and the yearning for fulfillment that constitutes him, his profound need, will we be able to rewrite, rethink,

and relive values. In fact, “man’s religious sense appears as the root from which values spring. A value is ultimately that perspective of the relationship between something contingent and totality, the absolute. Man’s responsibility, through all the kinds of provocations that reach him in the impact with reality, commits itself in answering those questions that are posed by man’s religious sense (or man’s ‘heart’ as the Bible calls it).”²¹ It is the religious sense, it is the complex of those ultimate needs that defines the depths of every human being—needs for truth, for beauty, for goodness, for justice, for happiness—that measures what a “value” is. Only the awareness of the factor common to all men can open the path to the search for shared certainties.

Fr. Giussani said years ago that the solution to the problems life poses to us every day “does not come from addressing the problems directly, but from exploring more deeply the nature of the individual who faces them.” In other words, “You resolve the details by better understanding the essential.”²²

This is the great challenge that Europe is facing. The great educational emergency demonstrates the reduction of man, his dismissal, the lack of awareness of what man truly is, of what the nature of his desire is, and of the structural disproportion between what he expects and what he can achieve with his efforts. We have already recalled the reduction of reason and of freedom; to these we now add the reduction of desire. “The reduction of desires or the censure of some needs, the reduction of desires and needs is the weapon of power,” Fr. Giussani said. What surrounds us, “the dominant mentality, . . . power, achieves [in us] an extraneousness from ourselves.”²³ It is as though our being were stripped away from us. We are thus at the mercy of many reduced images of desire, and we delude ourselves into expecting that the solution to the human problem will come from rules.

Faced with such a situation, we ask ourselves: Is it possible to reawaken the subject so that he can truly be himself, become entirely aware of himself, further understand his nature, and thus free himself from the dictatorship of his “little” desires and all the false answers? Without this reawakening, man will not be able to avoid domination by all sorts of tyrannies that are unable to give him the longed-for fulfillment.

But how can desire be reawakened? Not through a line of reasoning or some psychological technique, but only by encountering someone in whom the dynamic of desire has already been activated. To this effect, let us return to the dialogue between the young letter writer and the friends of his who were afraid of their freedom. The young man, after having listened to the tale of all of his friends' fears, replied: "You're right to be afraid. You're smart, and you realize that freedom is something great and difficult, and that life is a serious thing. But don't you want to be able to enjoy your freedom? And don't you want to be able to desire happiness? I told them that I am not able to rid myself of this desire! They remained silent for a few seconds, and then told me: 'That's what we envy the most about you, that you're not afraid.' And, when we were saying our good-byes at the end of the evening, he said, 'Let's get together more often, because when I'm with you, I'm less afraid, too.'"

No one more than Fr. Giussani was able to see the value of this experience, an experience as simple as it was radical and culturally powerful, as an answer to the question about how to reawaken the "I." Giussani wrote: "What I am about to give is not an answer [that applies only] for our present situation . . . ; what I am saying is a rule, a universal law, as old as man's existence: a person finds himself or herself again in a living encounter [like the one we just heard described: "That's what we envy the most about you, that you're not afraid. . . . Let's get together"], that is, in a presence that he comes across and that releases an attractiveness, . . . provokes us to acknowledge the fact that our hearts, with what they are made of . . . are there, that they exist."²⁴ The heart is oftentimes asleep, buried beneath a thousand pieces of debris, a thousand distractions, but then it is reawakened and provoked to make a recognition: it exists; the heart exists; your heart exists. You have a friend; you find, on the street, a friend for life when this happens to you with him, when you find yourself in front of one who reawakens you to yourself. This is a friend—all of the rest leaves no trace.

"Our greatest need in the present historical moment," said Benedict XVI, "is people who make God credible in this world by means of the enlightened faith they live. . . . We need men who keep their

eyes fixed on God, learning from him what true humanity means. We need men whose intellect is enlightened by the light of God, men whose hearts are opened by God, so that their intellect can speak to the intellect of others and their hearts can open the hearts of others.”²⁵

In this way one can understand the good that the other person constitutes for him. Without an encounter with the other person—with that particular other—an “I” that opens itself to the fundamental questions of life, that does not content itself with partial responses, could never emerge or stay alive. The relationship with the other is an anthropologically constitutive dimension.

The Other Is a Good

It is on this foundation—that is, the awareness that the other is a good, as the dialogue between these friends demonstrates—that Europe can be built. Without recovering the elementary experience that the other is not a threat, but rather a good for the realization of our “I,” it will be difficult to emerge from the crisis of human, social, and political relationships in which we find ourselves. From here derives the need that Europe be a space in which different subjects, each with his or her own identity, can encounter one another in order to help each other to walk toward the destiny of happiness for which we all yearn.

Defending this space of freedom for each and every person is the definitive reason to work for a Europe where nothing is imposed by anyone, and neither is anyone excluded on the basis of preconceptions or affinities different from one’s own: a Europe in which each person can freely contribute to its construction, offering his own witness, which is recognized as a good for everyone, without any European being forced to renounce his own identity to belong to the common home.

Only in an encounter with the other will we be able to develop together what Habermas called a “process of argumentation sensitive to the truth.”²⁶ In this sense, we can become even more aware of the

significance of Pope Francis's statement that "truth is a relationship. As such, each one of us receives the truth and expresses it from within, that is to say, according to one's own circumstances, culture, and situation in life, etc."²⁷ "Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programs of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an *attentiveness* which considers the other "in a certain sense as one with ourselves."²⁸ Only in this renewed encounter will the few great words that generated Europe be able to come to life once more. Because, as Benedict XVI reminds us, "Even the best structures function only when the community is animated by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order. Freedom requires conviction; conviction does not exist on its own [nor can it be generated by law], but must always be gained anew by the community."²⁹ This recovery of the fundamental convictions does not happen unless in a relationship. The method through which the "fundamental convictions" (the significance of the person, the absolute value of the individual, the freedom and dignity of every human being, etc.) fully emerged is the same method through which they can be recovered. There is no other way.

We Christians are not afraid to enter into this wide-ranging dialogue, without privileges. For us this is a precious occasion to verify the capacity of the Christian event to hold up in the face of new challenges, since it offers us the opportunity to witness to everyone concerning what happens in existence when man intercepts the Christian event along the road of life. Our experience, in the encounter with Christianity, has shown us that the lifeblood of the values of the person is not Christian laws or juridical structures and confessional politics, but the event of Christ. For this reason, we do not place our hope, for ourselves or for others, in anything but the recurrence of the event of Christ in a human encounter. This does not at all mean that we consider this event to be opposed to the legal sphere, but merely that we recognize a genetic order among them. Indeed, it is the recurrence of the Christian event that reopens the human being to self-discovery and allows the intelligence of faith to become the intelligence of reality, so that Christians can offer an original and

meaningful contribution by bringing to life those convictions that can be introduced into the human community.

This is the clarification at the heart of *Evangelii Gaudium*: the observation that, in the Catholic world, the battle for the defense of values has become, over time, so important that it has ended up being more important than the communication of the newness of Christ and the witness of his humanity. This exchange of antecedent and consequent demonstrates the “Pelagian” error of much of today’s Christianity: the promotion of a “Christianist” Christianity (according to the definition of Rémi Brague),³⁰ deprived of grace. The alternative is not found, as some people complain, in a “spiritualistic” escape from the world. Rather, the true alternative is the Christian community—when not emptied of its historical substance—which offers its original contribution “by awakening in men, through faith, the forces of genuine liberation.”³¹

Those who are engaged in public life, in the cultural or political field, have the duty, as Christians, to oppose today’s anthropological drift. But this undertaking cannot involve the entire Church as such, since it has the obligation, today, to encounter all people, independently of their ideology or political affinity, in order to witness the “attraction of Jesus.” The engagement of Christians in politics and in the realm of decision making about the common good remains necessary. Indeed, the Church, through its model of social doctrine, indicates the formulas for shared coexistence that Christian experience has tested and verified over time. Today this is more important than ever, though we must never forget that, in the present circumstances, such an undertaking assumes, in the Pauline sense, more of a *katechontic* value: one that is critical and resistant, within the limits of possibility, toward the negative effects of mere procedures and of the mentality that creates them. This undertaking cannot presume, however, that, from its action, no matter how praiseworthy, the ideal and spiritual renewal of the city of man can mechanically arise. Such renewal arises from “what comes before,” what *primerea* (“comes first” in the Spanish term often used by Pope Francis): a new humanity generated by love for Christ, by Christ’s love.

It is this awareness that allows us to see the limits of the positions of those who believe that they can resolve everything through pro-

cedures or laws, and thus think that defending a space of freedom is not enough. Many would like politics to ensure the granting or restriction of rights. In this way, they would be spared “being good,” as Eliot said. What can we learn from the fact that “not even Kant’s truly stupendous endeavors managed to create the necessary certainty that would be shared by all”? What does our recent history teach us, given that good laws were not enough to keep the great convictions alive? The road to “shared certainty” is a long one.³²

The long journey that the Catholic Church has traveled in order to clarify the concept of “religious freedom” can help us to understand that defending the space of this freedom is not such a small thing, after all. After much labor, the Church came to declare in the Second Vatican Council that “the human person has a right to religious freedom,” even while it continues to profess Christianity as the only “true religion.” The recognition of religious freedom is not a sort of compromise, like saying, “Since we were unable to convince mankind that Christianity is the true religion, let’s at least defend religious freedom.” No, what pushed the Church to modify an approach that had been in place for many centuries was a deeper understanding of the nature of truth and of the path to reach it: “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.”³³ This was the firm belief of the Church in the first centuries, the great Christian revolution founded on the distinction between the two cities, between God and Caesar. This belief was destined to weaken after the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380), thanks to the emperor Theodosius. In a return to the patristic spirit, Vatican II could affirm that “all men are to be immune from coercion . . . in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.” If this is true for the most important of values, then it is even more so for all the others! And finally, “This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.”³⁴

Only if Europe becomes a space of freedom, where each person can be immune from coercion, make his or her own human journey, and share it with those he or she meets along the way, will an interest in dialogue be reawakened, an interest in an encounter in which each

person offers the contribution of his or her experience in order to reach that “shared certainty” that is necessary for communal life.

Our desire is that Europe become a space of freedom for the encounter among truth seekers. This is worth working for.