

# GROWING HUMAN: THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND OF MAN IN THE WORK OF LUIGI GIUSSANI

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an objective reality that moves the person toward  
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The late Italian priest Luigi Giussani (1922–2005) adopted the concept of “experience” as one of the architectonic principles of his thought.<sup>1</sup> We can locate Giussani’s treatment of experience between Pius X’s condemnation of the modernist interpretation of the concept, and the revised understanding of the term that emerged in the Second Vatican Council, which attempted to overcome the yawning gap between faith and reason, praxis and theory. Although

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<sup>1</sup>Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* in *The Doctrines of the Modernists (The Encyclical Pascendi of Pope Pius X) and Modernist Errors (The Decree Lamentabili of July 4, 1907)*, ed. L. Watt (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1937). In Vatican II see *Gaudium et spes*, 21; *Dei Verbum*, 8. For a balanced reflection on experience and Vatican II see Alessandro Maggiolini, “Magisterial Teaching on Experience in the Twentieth Century: From the Modernist Crisis to the Second Vatican Council,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23, no. 2 (1996): 225–43. For an introduction to the life and work of Msgr. Luigi Giussani see: Massimo Camisasca, *Comunione e Liberazione*, 3 vols. (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2001–2007); id., *Don Giussani. La sua esperienza dell’uomo e di Dio* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2009); *A Generative Thought. An Introduction to the Works of Luigi Giussani*, ed. Elisa Buzzi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

he was familiar with North American Protestant theology and Jean Mouroux's work on experience, Giussani says that his understanding of experience is "totally original."<sup>2</sup> This "originality" does not consist in taking up the concept at a time when it was viewed with suspicion, or in assigning it a predominant role. Experience has been one of the main themes of philosophical and theological discussion for the last two centuries. Rather, the originality is in Giussani's view of "experience" as able to address the existential, theological, and metaphysical impasse of the last century. His intention is to retrieve the unity and catholicity of Christian experience, and to illustrate that Christian experience is the fulfillment of human and religious experience.

To begin with, an inadequate or reductive understanding of "religious experience" has grim results: faith will be irrelevant to man's existence; Christian dogmatics will be detached from its christological origin and ecclesiological context and be reduced to value-theory; and the Christian life will evaporate into common-sense ethics. Giussani is clear that "religious experience" is not simply a *preambula fidei*. It is instead a permanent dimension of human existence. He writes: "Jesus Christ did not come into the world as a substitute for human freedom or to eliminate human trial. He came into the world to call man back to the depths of all questions, to his own fundamental structure, to his own real situation. He came to call man back to true *religiosity*, without which

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<sup>2</sup>Luigi Giussani, "Seminario con Msgr. Luigi Giussani (6 gennaio 1984)," in *Annuario teologico* (Milan: Istra-Edit, 1985), 131–35, at 134. For his work on Protestant theology see: "Atteggiamenti protestanti e ortodossi davanti al dogma dell'Assunta," *La Scuola Cattolica* 79 (1951): 106–13; "L'eucaristia nella Chiesa anglicana," *Ambrosius* 29 (1953): 164–74; "Da Amsterdam ad Evanston (Cronaca Ecumenica)," *La Scuola Cattolica* 82 (1954): 133–50; "Il problema dell'intercomunione nel protestantesimo attuale," *Ambrosius* 30 (1954): 258–63; "Il ricupero dei valori religiosi nel personalismo americano e la filosofia di Edgar Sheffield Brightman," *Filosofia e vita* 8 (1967): 71–85; "Aspetti della concezione della storia in Reinhold Niebuhr," *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica* 60 (1968): 167–90; *Teologia protestante americana* (Venegono: La scuola cattolica, 1969); *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1969); "La teologia protestante americana" in A.a.V.v., *Problemi e orientamenti di teologia dogmatica* (Milan: C. Marzorati, 1979): 691–98; *Grande linee della teologia protestante americana* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1989). For a comprehensive bibliography from 1951–1997 see id., *Porta la Speranza* (Genoa, Italy: Marietti, 1997), 205–260. Jean Mouroux, *L'expérience chrétienne. Introduction à une théologie* (Paris: Aubier, 1952). English translation: *The Christian Experience: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954).

every claim to a solution of the human problems is a lie.”<sup>3</sup> For Giussani, religious experience is understood in light of the “original.” This means that both human and religious experience (or experience *tout court*) are grounded in original experience as he conceives it and are used interchangeably. Religious experience is at the origin of what are commonly called “natural religions” and finds its unexpected, unforeseen fulfillment in Christian experience.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I will attempt to show what it means, according to Giussani, for man to experience God and himself, and in what sense Christian experience fulfills man’s original experience while also preserving it.

In order to approach the relations between God, man, and reality through the concept of experience, we will first address the primary problem of (post-)modernity: that is, the impossibility of arriving at truth in its original dimension of affirming reality, reality’s ground, and the knowing subject in a unity where mediation does not mean the end of difference (as in German idealism) or where *différance* takes the upper hand and dissolves unity (as in post-modern reflections).<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, Giussani’s work was never intended to be an “academic” response to modernity’s problems (at least in the current sense of academy). It is necessary to resolve this issue, however, in order to maintain the claim that faith is pertinent to human existence.

### 1. What is original experience?

A glance at the historical horizon of Giussani’s work may be helpful. It is often said that modernity attempts to ground reasonableness (and hence truth) in reason alone, i.e., in identifying the act of thinking with its content. Absolute certainty would presumably

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<sup>3</sup>Luigi Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* (=AOCC), trans. Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 97. This is also the task of the Church. See, e.g., id., *Why the Church?* (=WC), trans. Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 147–62.

<sup>4</sup>See AOCC, 11–28. Original and revealed experience should not be confused with Christian experience.

<sup>5</sup>This pedagogical emphasis is not the same as a “pastoral” theology such as Karl Rahner suggests in, e.g., “Practical Theology Within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9: *Writings of 1965–1967* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 101–14.

be the result of this identification, and Christian dogmas could then be relegated to a set of historical truths, to be obeyed perhaps but having no universal value. The pioneering Cartesian claim to ground truth in thought with reference to nothing other than the human mind not only inaugurated the transcendental turn to the subject and the methodical, controlled experimentation of empirical reality; it also introduced a separation between reason and its object that still haunts much of our thought today. Ultimately the Cartesian claim could not reconcile the subject's attempted immediacy to itself with the unalterably mediated character of human subjectivity. Idealism attempted to overcome this separation between reason and its object by rehabilitating mediation by way of dialectics and speculative thinking (Hegel) in order to preserve difference within the absolute spirit (thus eliminating the Enlightenment's claim to immediacy and freedom from presuppositions, on the one hand, and a positivistic reading of being on the other), but the integrity of difference could not be maintained through the theoretical or practical process of the constitution of the Absolute. Modernist thinkers, very much under this shadow and also influenced by Schleiermacher's account of religion in terms of a feeling of absolute dependence, pick up the attempt to eliminate conceptual and historical mediation and locate the perception of truth in an ineffable, incommunicable, interior experience that, however, lacks any content. Phenomenology attempts to retrieve the original experience prior to the opposition of subject and object but comes to a halt (at least in Heidegger) because its reading of metaphysics as onto-theology hypostatizes the appearing of being in an event of reciprocal belonging that undercuts both being and *Dasein*.<sup>6</sup>

A shortcoming common to all of these attempts is the incapacity to account for the ontological unity-in-difference between God and the world. The result, which has determined much of Christian theological reflection on experience, has been the inability to discover the originary status of truth, and the subsequent generation of a systemic uncertainty about the nature of man, God, and the world.

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<sup>6</sup>Gadamer's attempt to continue phenomenological reflection through hermeneutics still accentuates the separation between ontology and history. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998).

For Giussani, through experience one can perceive reality, reason (and with it, all of human nature), and faith together as an organic whole. Certainly, there are necessary distinctions to be made, but the great temptation has been to convert the things distinguished through reason into abstract concepts that can then be pieced back together by means of a dialectic that, rather than retrieving the original whole that unites all without confusion, can offer only a kind of sphere of proximity for a-historical, self-referential parts. Giussani's proposal is rather that experience relates to the human capacity to grasp the meaning of something, that is, its "objective link to everything else," and to the awareness of this link.<sup>7</sup> He cautions against understanding this awareness reductively as the dialectic, subjective counterpart to the objective content of that awareness (oneself, the world, or God).

Experience is thus neither one way of knowing among others, nor a practical implementation of a theoretical ideology, nor a neutral instrument with which to gather information whose value and meaning can then be assessed through heuristic, extrinsic criteria. "Experience is reality's emerging into man's awareness; it is reality's becoming-transparent to man's gaze."<sup>8</sup> The fact that reality emerges into man's awareness shows that what is at stake in original,

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<sup>7</sup>"Experience demands an I, an object, the relationship between the I and the object; but this is not enough: [these three elements are to be perceived] within an ideal horizon that colors in different ways the relation that God establishes between me and the thing. This is the mortal sin from Descartes onwards: to speak of reason forgetting that from which one extracts the concept of reason: experience. Doing this one fabricates, pre-fabricates the concept of reason and with it judges the concept of experience. In this way one confuses everything" (Luigi Giussani, "Tu" (o dell'amicizia), (= "Tu") [Milan: BUR, 1997], 84); *The Risk of Education. Discovering Our Ultimate Human Destiny* (=ROE), trans. Rosanna M. Giammanco Frongia [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996], 98–102, at 99). This chapter was originally published as *L'esperienza* (Milan: Gioventù Studentesca, pro manuscripto, 1963), 12 pp. For an introduction to Giussani's concept of experience cf. Angelo Scola, "Esperienza cristiana e teologia. Note introduttive," in *Questioni di antropologia teologica* (Rome: Mursia, 1972), 199–213; id., "Esperienza, libertà e rischio," in *Un pensiero sorgivo. Sugli scritti di Luigi Giussani* (Genova: Marietti, 2004), 71–89; and Roberto Sani, "L'educazione tra rischio e libertà," in *Sperare nell'uomo. Giussani, Morin, MacIntyre e la questione educativa*, ed. Giorgio Chiosso (Turin: SEI, 2009), 5–27, at 21–23; Michael Konrad, *Tendere all'ideale. La Morale in Luigi Giussani* (Genoa-Milan: Marietti 1820, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>Luigi Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino. In cammino* (=USD), (Genova: Marietti 1820, 1999), 107.

elementary experience is a proposal made to man and his response to it. Consequently, “elementary experience tends to indicate totally the original impetus with which the human being reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates it from within.”<sup>9</sup> Man’s original access to truth is thus always-already offered to him by the objective and historical self-presentation of being, the full disclosure of which requires the engagement of the entire person. This polar unity, as we shall see, is kept in dynamic tension by the fact that the “ideal image” that reality carries within itself and that suggests itself in man, is the echo of the “Word of Another.” For Giussani, therefore, every original human experience is either a religious one or it is not an “experience” in the first place: ultimately, experience is the living affirmation of God as that “unitary meaning which nature’s objective and organic structure calls the human conscience to recognize.”<sup>10</sup> Experience, for Giussani, means the dynamic unity of the encounter between reality and all of man whose *telos* (and fulfillment) is the affirmation of God.

In section two, we will take up the “ontological” side of experience in order to sketch out what Giussani means by “reality’s emergence.” Section three examines experience’s “anthropological” pole. The fourth section looks at the “affirmation of God” (the meaning of judgment), and the final section looks at the meaning of “growth,” since experience means “to live what causes man to grow.”<sup>11</sup> Giussani’s understanding of the specifically Christian experience will be left for another occasion.

## *2. The inexorable presence of the sign: the objective side of experience*

As mentioned at the outset, Giussani’s fundamental concern is to show the pertinence of Christian faith to human existence. Toward this end, and inspired in part by a 1957 Lenten Pastoral

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<sup>9</sup>Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (=RS), trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>10</sup>ROE, 99. Giussani proposes an understanding of man’s access to truth that avoids both naive realism and critical idealism.

<sup>11</sup>ROE, 142.

Letter from Cardinal Montini, he begins a systematic reflection on what the future Pope Paul VI called the “religious sense” and which Giussani understands as “the capacity to enter in relation with God, (that) characteristic feature of our nature, which disposes the soul to aspire toward God.”<sup>12</sup> He is not setting out on another philosophy of religion, but rather on an “existential investigation” that examines human being in action in order to discover who man is and who God is. This existential inquiry is directed at the broadest human activity: the religious experience.<sup>13</sup>

The starting point of religious experience is the encounter with finite being, “an encounter with an objective fact that is independent of the experience that the person has.”<sup>14</sup> Finite beings send man into a state of ongoing wonder, presenting themselves attractively (beauty), carrying their own logos (truth), and introduc-

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<sup>12</sup>Luigi Giussani, “Il Senso Religioso,” in Giovanni B. Montini and Luigi Giussani, *Sul Senso Religioso* (=SSR) (Milan: BUR, 2009), 77–127, at 80. This text, originally published in 1957, is the first of the three versions of *The Religious Sense*. The second edition of *The Religious Sense* was published in 1966 and the third in 1986. Each is, in a sense, a different, thoroughly revised work. For G. Montini the religious sense is what enables us to establish a co-responsibility to faith: “the religious sense, synthesis of the spirit, receiving the divine word, engages all the other human faculties along with reason. It also gives a crucial contribution: that response that we call ‘heart.’ In this way, the religious sense becomes sense of presence and communion, precisely of religion, and it thus makes possible that the divine word be not only received passively, but received in such a way that it (=the divine word) effects in the one who receives it an act of life (or, more literally, a ‘warm act of life’)” (SSR, 55). In Giussani this remains a constant preoccupation. “I insist, there is an irreligiosity in our time that begins, without anyone noticing it, with a detachment between God as source and meaning of life (origin and meaning ‘of life,’ and hence relevant to the things that happen, to the events that we undergo) and God as a fact constructed by thought, as a fact of thought, understood according to the needs of man’s thought. This results in a separation of the meaning of life from experience. The denial of God, up to the denial of its extremely reasonable and evident consequence that ‘God is all in all,’ implies a detachment of and a distance between the sense of life and human experience. This is the case because the meaning of life is God” (USD, 105).

<sup>13</sup>RS, 5. In the background of Giussani’s understanding of experience lies Blondel’s understanding of action and Daniélou’s account of the difference between Christian religion and religious experience. See Maurice Blondel, *L’action* (1893) (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1993); Jean Daniélou, *Dieu et nous* (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1956).

<sup>14</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Il Rischio educativo. Come creazione di personalità e di storia* (Turin: SEI, 1995) (=RE), 130.

ing him to a perception of and response to the good. Finite beings are not sheer data waiting for the subject's manipulation. "Being," Giussani writes, is "not some abstract entity," it is "a presence that I do not myself make, that I find. A presence that imposes itself on me."<sup>15</sup> Thus for Giussani, in some similarity with Balthasar, the "objective side" of the religious experience requires perceiving the concrete analogy of being through its transcendental determinations and not through an abstract reflection on being.

In an attempt to overcome a modern, limited understanding of finite being, Giussani does not speak of it as an object laid out before a knowing subject, but rather in terms of "presence," by which term he wishes to illustrate the interiority of finite beings and their relation to the knower (primarily man, but ultimately God). "Presence" indicates something that is present to someone and that comes from someone else but is distinct from both. Giussani characterizes "presence" in terms of a gift given to man from another. "Presence" thus illuminates finite being's threefold connotation of "gift," "alterity," and the dynamic interrelation among the receiver, being, and their mysterious source (which always remains other).

To study the ontological difference (between being and beings) through man's experience of himself and the cosmos illuminates the finalization of being in man. The fact that the ontological difference does not end in a confirmation of being's giftedness (its created dual unity of *esse* and *essence* in a third) but rather in man's welcoming of the irreducible alterity of the gift, does not mean that reality is subservient to man's appropriation of it.<sup>16</sup> It shows instead that reality as presence comes to itself in man when man's awareness reaches its fullest form, which Giussani calls

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<sup>15</sup>RS, 101.

<sup>16</sup>The ontological and anthropological depth of "welcoming" finds its truth in theology: "Welcoming is the embrace of what is different. For this reason, welcoming is true of every relationship. The embrace of the difference is called 'forgiveness' because in order to embrace the difference one first needs to forgive it. To forgive means to affirm, underneath all the debris, whatever truth, good, right, and beauty is in the other: the other's being. Your being is greater and deeper, more important than your thousands, and thousands, and thousands of your sins. This is a concept that John Paul II expressed in his encyclical letter *Dives in Misericordia*" (Luigi Giussani, *Il miracolo dell'ospitalità. Conversazioni con le famiglie per l'accoglienza* [Casale Monferrato: PIEMME, 2003], 59).

“offering”: the recognition that the divine mystery is the ultimate consistency of all that exists, and an entreaty that this mystery reveal itself. We will return to the meaning of offering in the concluding section. Being’s “destination” in man does not mean that man is being’s ultimate shore, but it does mean that being cannot reach that ultimate shore without the free participation of the human being. Let us first explore how Giussani conceives being in terms of presence and then its evidence.

Giussani writes that being’s gift character and alterity (its irreducibility to oneself) can be discovered through a passionate, insistent, and complete observation of reality and of oneself in action. “Complete” in order to make room for all the factors of reality, without allowing ideology to censor any of them; “passionate” because freedom and knowing are co-originary; and “insistent” because a moral way of knowing requires that freedom be adequately open to what presents itself.<sup>17</sup> This “observation” or existential analysis afforded by experience shows that the perception of givenness is always mediated: the encounter with finite beings elicits first a generic sense of alterity; the perception of otherness then becomes more specific in the otherness of “faces and things”; and lastly, faced with these others, one discovers oneself as given to oneself. Giussani says that one “cannot deny that the greatest and most profound evidence is that I do not make myself, I am not making myself. I do not give myself being, I do not give me the reality that I am; I am ‘given.’”<sup>18</sup> That man is not reducible to his historical and biological antecedents, that in him there is a spirit irreducible to nature, indicates the most fundamental and permanent feature of his own nature: “there was a time when the person did not exist: hence what constitutes the person is a given (*datum*), the person is the product of another.”<sup>19</sup>

The perception of being as gift (presence) opens further to the threefold dimension of intelligibility, history, and moral order. Being as gift shows that gift is also the *logos* (“a word and invita-

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<sup>17</sup>SR, 3–33.

<sup>18</sup>SR, 105; Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generare tracce nella storia del mondo* (=GTSM) (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 77ff.

<sup>19</sup>ROE, 98. That man depends, that he is “the product of another” is “the original condition that is repeated at all levels of the person’s development. The cause of my growth does not coincide with me but is other than me” (98).

tion”) that speaks of another. In fact “that gift whose meaning we are not also given is not really a gift.”<sup>20</sup> Gift, in other words, carries its own intelligibility in itself. This means that reality’s own light enables man to see it not only as gift but also as the “word of another,” a mystery, always present and ever greater, that speaks to man in infinitely different ways. Every finite being-gift is a whole, integral singular being, a word infinitely other from the mystery on which it constitutively depends; and yet it is a word that communicates this Other. The gift is then that of a word, and the word says that being’s nature is gift.

The dual unity of gift and *logos* is expressed by Giussani with the term *sign*: “the sign is a reality whose meaning is another reality, something I am able to experience, which acquires its meaning by leading to another reality.”<sup>21</sup> Finite being is a sign, a word-gift that brings man to the transcendent ground of both reality and the human being. While some of his christological writings use “sign” and “sacrament” interchangeably, Giussani does not use “symbol” to refer to the dual unity of gift and *logos* that characterizes finite beings;<sup>22</sup> it does not indicate the intrinsic link between gift and *logos* as clearly as does “sign.” “Symbol” can quickly take on a different understanding, such as a reality whose meaning is culturally determined and so imposed on human experience. In this sense, “symbols” are historically conditioned and have no claim to universality or ontological depth. This understanding of symbol easily leads to affirmations such as the statement from Michael Lawler, “experience and not ontology makes reality.”<sup>23</sup> For Giussani,

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<sup>20</sup>Luigi Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience* (=JTE), trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 71. Translation modified. The text continues: “And we would not be able to recognize that life and the cosmos are gift if we did not await the revelation of its meaning.”

<sup>21</sup>SR, 111.

<sup>22</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio. Dio e l’uomo* (Milan: BUR, 1995), 11–35; id., “Ogni cosa. Mistero e segno,” in *Tracce. Litterae Communionis* (1999), n. 6, i–xvi; id., “Mistero e segno coincidono,” in *Affezione e dimora* (Milan: BUR, 2001), 241–301. For his understanding of sacrament see WC, 179–200.

<sup>23</sup>Michael G. Lawler, *What Is and What Ought to Be* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 48. Karl Rahner does have an interesting theology of symbol, but it remains problematic because it does not integrate his trinitarian ontology with Christology. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4: *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 221–52; id., *The Church and the*

instead, the sign is “a word that shakes up because it is through the sign that the presence of the transcendent *touches* the flesh.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas the culturally determined understanding of symbol leads to endless interpretations, for Giussani experience is “bumping into a sign, an objective reality that moves the person toward his *telos*, toward his destiny.”<sup>25</sup>

This understanding of finite being as presence is at the heart of Giussani’s understanding of religious experience. From this ontological pole, “experience” is man’s experience of the self-communication of the mystery through the sign and its dual nature of *logos* and gift. This is why, for Giussani, there is no understanding whatsoever until one discovers the link uniting oneself, the sign, and the ultimate mystery. Furthermore, precisely because religious experience allows man to perceive the constitutive dependence of any finite being (sign) on its mysterious source, experience shows that the mystery’s presence not only safeguards the alterity of finite beings, it also suggests that being is communion. Undoubtedly, we arrive at the perception of communion disclosed by experience only through divine revelation. Nevertheless, the dogma of the Trinity, Giussani says, clarifies and strengthens that to which man’s experience already witnesses: the positivity of being and the unity of the many, which is at the root of the surprising experience that the more one loves and affirms another, the more affirms oneself.<sup>26</sup>

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*Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964).

<sup>24</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano* (=RVU), (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995), 114.

<sup>25</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Un Avvenimento di vita cioè una storia. Itinerario di quindici anni concepiti e vissuti* (=AVS) (Rome: Il Sabato, 1993), 351.

<sup>26</sup>“The mystery that makes everything is communion within the Trinity. Reality, from stones all the way up to us is an echo of this communion. Existing is the communion of God with us. Existing is God’s communication to us. God is more interior to us than our own heart, our own I, than ourselves. Prayer thus is the only gesture that is totally intelligent. Prayer is nothing but the realization that life is communion” (“Holy Week Exercises,” 1964, unpublished). More recently he stated that “the mystery of the Trinity explains further—it is not that the dogma says everything: it says something definitive about the nature of the self and of things, something of which the human mind would have never had the faintest perception or knowledge—that Being is communion. Communion should imply a plurality, pluralism. But where is unity? The greater the communion, the greater the unity. The more a relation is multiplied, the more that relation affirms itself as a profound unity. Instead, the definition of unity as isolated, as singularity, is like abandoning something in the desert; it is a fragment of something that has neither

If, as Giussani writes, “experience is time inasmuch as it identifies itself with a present event,” and being is understood as an inexorable presence, history is the dramatic interplay between the giver and the gift, where we see a harmonious ordering of events and circumstances guided by the ultimate source of being.<sup>27</sup> Beyond and within every historical circumstance, history has to do with this permanent dialogue between the mysterious source and its human addressee. In this light, tradition and, hence, continuity “is the retrieval of the origin”; it is the appropriation and deepening of the source. We will return to this later.<sup>28</sup>

For Giussani, then, an attentive examination of one’s own experience reveals a unity binding the self together with its mysterious and permanent source. Since the source revealed in the sign is the source from which one’s own self and every sign is ultimately, continuously begotten, the mystery may be described by the word “father.” Unlike a human father, the mystery is “Father at every moment. He is begetting me *now*.”<sup>29</sup> Although paternal, at the level of religious experience the mystery always remains mystery and the attempt to define it inevitably ends up as ideology.<sup>30</sup> Because of the dialogical aspect of the mystery’s self-manifestation (through the sign that is both gift and *logos*), Giussani also designates the mystery with the second personal pronoun. Both reality itself, and as we shall see, man’s own dynamism, attest to the existence of the mystery, that “Thou” which speaks to man. Once again, although to speak in terms of dialogue presupposes ascribing personhood to the divine mystery, this “Thou” remains “inexhaustible, evident, and not ‘demonstrable’”; that is, beyond man’s comprehension.<sup>31</sup>

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nexus nor relation; it is therefore something that has no meaning. That Being is communion explains how it is that the more man loves, affirms the other, the more he affirms himself” (“Tu,” 69–70). See also JTE, 69–77.

<sup>27</sup>Luigi Giussani, *L'autocoscienza del cosmo* (=AC), (Milan: BUR, 2000), 50. For the category of event in Giussani, see AVS, 473–502 and GTSM, 15–18.

<sup>28</sup>Luigi Giussani, “Condizioni per una rinascita dell’esperienza del movimento nei luoghi di vita,” *Litterae Communionis* (1977) 11/12, 7–8, at 7.

<sup>29</sup>SR, 106.

<sup>30</sup>RS, 95–97, 132–40.

<sup>31</sup>RS, 161.

In addition to revealing the relation between gift and *logos*, and the unity-in-distinction from the source, human experience also reveals that the being-given (or being-made) of every thing carries within itself the dimension of the good. The perception of the good that emerges in human experience is not merely a perception of the mystery's creative generosity, and hence the ontological positivity of all that is. The category of the good indicates being's "ultimate destination, its response to the link with destiny," and as such also touches on the capacity given to man to discover the goodness (or evil) of things and actions.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up, the elementary experience is the perception of finite beings as a sign whose content, the Word of another, is addressed to man. As noted above, "experience" also enables man to perceive the "*evident*" nature of the sign's dual unity of being and *logos*. For Giussani, to encounter something's "evidence" means "to become aware of an inexorable presence. I open my eyes to this reality which imposes itself upon me, which does not depend upon me, but upon which I depend; it is the great conditioning of my existence—if you like, the given."<sup>33</sup> Clearly, "evidence" here does not mean logical (univocal) or empirical evidence. It is thus neither the result of physical observation nor a necessary deduction from logical premises. Rather, evidence indicates the particular ontological and epistemological nature of truth, according to which truth presents itself as anticipating the meaning for which man searches, and eliciting from him a free decision. The self-presentation of the truth is such that it offers meaning and invites man to receive it. While truth's self-presentation is unequivocal, the meaning of being cannot be disclosed until it is embraced; as we said above, reason and freedom are co-originary. We will turn now to the "anthropological side" of experience, in order to examine more closely what we mean by "evidence," as well as the relation between truth and freedom in the affirmation of the mystery that accompanies the comprehension of a sign.

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<sup>32</sup>RS, 107. Translation modified.

<sup>33</sup>RS, 101. "Man depends, not only in an aspect of his life, but in everything: whoever observes his own experience can discover the evidence of a total dependence on Another who has made us, is making us, and continuously preserves us in being" ("Paternità ed appartenenza: un'esperienza personale," in *Tracce. Litterae Communionis* (1999), n. 9, i–iv, at i). See also GTSM, 77.

### 3. *Original experience and the exigent character of life*

The previous section attempted to show how Giussani explains man's original experience as the encounter with the sign (of and in reality) that sets man on the path toward the affirmation of that other, of whom the sign is the word. Yet this movement toward the infinite other that is at the heart of every human experience is also due to the "exigent character of life."<sup>34</sup> It is not only the gift-*logos* character of being that requires an affirmation of the mystery as the ultimate meaning of reality: there is also what Giussani calls "heart" or, what for him comes to the same thing, original experience: "a complex of needs and 'evidences' that sets man into a comparison with all that is."<sup>35</sup> This complex of needs and evidences makes up the very fabric of man's gift of being. Every judgment and act of understanding, and so every religious experience, comes about only by comparing the meaning perceived in the sign to the original evidences and exigencies that constitute the self's very core. We will turn now to take a closer look at these constitutive needs and evidences. In the following sections, we will look at what this measurement of needs with reality means for making a judgment; what are the adequate criteria for a true judgment; and what role Giussani assigns to authority and tradition in this regard.

Giussani orders the original evidences, needs, and exigencies that constitute the human heart in four fundamental categories: truth, justice, happiness, and love. The first is man's search for the meaning of everything; that is, the idea or form that gives to everything its identity and relation with the whole, with the ultimate: "the need for truth always implies singling out the ultimate truth, because one can only define a partial truth in relation to the ultimate. Nothing can be known without a quick, implicit comparison, if you like, between the thing and totality. Without even a glimpse of the ultimate, things become monstrous."<sup>36</sup> Giussani places a heavy emphasis on this first category, to the extent that it forms the ground for his understanding of reason. Here again, it is experience that yields the adequate content of reason: "reason is that singular event of nature in which it—reason—reveals itself as the

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<sup>34</sup>RS, 113. Translation modified.

<sup>35</sup>RS, 7. Translation modified.

<sup>36</sup>RS, 113.

operative need to explain reality *in all its factors* so that man may be introduced to the truth of things.”<sup>37</sup>

As experience discloses, there are many methods reason can follow: logics, mathematics, scientific, moral.<sup>38</sup> Yet it is the last one, the “moral” sense, that gives the others their own significance and integrity. These other methods are different manifestations of this deeper rubric, the affirmation of the *ultimate* meaning of all of existence. For Giussani, the religious sense is the most authentic expression of rationality precisely because (1) the religious sense posits man’s most fundamental need: the need for meaning; and (2) since it discloses the ultimate horizon of this meaning, the religious sense indicates how reason is always open to the ultimate threshold of the other: the infinite mystery. Contrary to the claims of the Enlightenment, reason does not contain within itself the meaning of reality; it has to receive it. To speak of finite being as a sign means addressing human reason and its capacity to perceive reality in the entirety of its factors in terms of openness and receptivity. Giussani writes that the word “given,” as in the givenness of reality, “is also vibrant with an activity in front of which I am passive: and it is a passivity which makes up my *original* activity which is receiving, affirming, recognizing.”<sup>39</sup> What the Enlightenment would view as an undermining of reason’s exalted status, i.e., the notion of a form of passivity as the original human activity, is actually its greatness. Since there can be no subject without relation, the structure of reason has to affirm the ultimate meaning to which everything tends if it is not to deny itself.<sup>40</sup> The affirmation of the ultimate meaning is never done alongside, so to speak, what is given to man through his own original experience, but rather takes place within it. The meaning of particular circumstances, persons, and the cosmos can only be adequately grasped in the affirmation of their intimate link with the luminous mystery.

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<sup>37</sup>RS, 97.

<sup>38</sup>RS, 12–22.

<sup>39</sup>RS, 101; emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup>“Without an object there is no subject. That is to say: an I without relation is nothing. It is like a man who is dying of *angina pectoris*. He lacks air. Without relation there is no I. All of modern philosophy has affirmed the exact opposite of this, and with this contention it has crushed man” (“Conversazioni su un’esperienza,” in *Tracce. Litterae Communionis* [1992], n. 6, 4–11, at 7).

It is important to see that Giussani is proposing a renewed sense of mediation, which brings together truth's particular evidence and man's access to it without confusion. Through the encounter with the dual unity of the sign (gift and logos in a third) and one's own original needs, it becomes clear that "the proper characteristic of man's being is that of being transparent to himself, aware of himself and, in him, of the horizon of the real."<sup>41</sup> Man's mediated transparency to himself means that the attempt to identify and eradicate all unexamined presuppositions turns out to be the attempt to cobble together an understanding of a whole without reference to the unfathomable mystery that provides the wholeness in the first place. It is not surprising then that, as Bruaire says, modernity has done everything possible to replace the origin present in finite beings with names and concepts that permit man to move along without reference to the mysterious source, and thus eternally to swing back and forth between formalism and materialism.<sup>42</sup>

Without a perspective of the Origin as "the unitary meaning which nature's objective and organic structure calls the human conscience to recognize," human justice is impossible; love is sentimental, fruitless possessiveness; and happiness (*satis factus*) is merely a momentary illusion.<sup>43</sup> Positively stated, the original needs or exigencies always seek a totalizing response, a response that does not stop short of the ultimate. They therefore root man in relation with the mystery that reality and man's own structure pronounce. Original experience is the search for and affirmation of the ultimate mystery as the meaning of everything. Only in relation with this mystery, with the whole, can there be understanding.

Giussani does not speak of man's needs and exigencies in the search for the ultimate in terms of "rights" or of a "claim" on God. Man is interiorly ordered to the vision of God in whom alone he finds fulfillment, but these needs, precisely as needs, do not present a claim on this vision. Man is not on an equal footing with God, who remains other. Giussani sees the original needs expressed as questions, not claims. These questions seek a "total answer, an answer which covers the entire horizon of reason, exhausting

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<sup>41</sup>RS, 97.

<sup>42</sup>Claude Bruaire, *Schelling ou la quête du secret de l'être* (Paris: Seghers, 1970).

<sup>43</sup>RS, 99.

completely the whole ‘category of possibility.’”<sup>44</sup> Here we find the category that best defines human reason: not the measure of technology but rather “possibility.” “Possibility” is not simply a logical category regarding the actuality or not of a thing. It indicates reason’s true structure, its being open to being, and a stance that does not determine ideologically or beforehand what the mystery is and how it will appear. Stated positively, it shows reason’s patient pursuit of and openness to the manifestation of the mystery. In fact, if these evidences were not exigencies, reason would not be fundamentally open but would instead content itself with what it could measure and manipulate on its own.

It might be helpful to mention a few things that distinguish these categories from other figures on the contemporary scene, in order to draw out more clearly the specificity of Giussani’s proposal. The four categories are not drawn from any anthropological or eschatological system that might tend to downplay the integrity of human nature for the sake of shoring up the primacy of God’s salvific will. Nor are they an expression of Rahner’s supernatural existential; they do not indicate an original bestowal of grace.<sup>45</sup> They rather delineate human nature’s twofold being-given and openness to the mystery. The human end of seeing and being in communion with God does not lead Giussani to reduce history to the categorical, or religious anthropology to an a thematic orientation toward God. The religious sense, which constitutes man’s original experience, is not spontaneously or capriciously set in motion by itself. If being were not a sign, no need would awaken. These needs are awakened only in the encounter with the sign. This is why, on the one hand, contrary to the modernist contention, the religious sense is not a feeling (of absolute dependence), which would lack both subject and object. On the other hand, contrary to any sort of ontologism, God does not make his presence evident to man directly. The human

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<sup>44</sup>RS, 47.

<sup>45</sup>Giussani’s concept of experience, as may be seen from the foregoing, has little to do with Rahner’s, for whom the experience of God and man is passive, transcendental, non-thematic, and non-reflexive. For Giussani experience does not have to do with “conditions of possibility” but rather with actual understanding in which history is neither a subsequent moment nor the history of God. See Karl Rahner, “Experience of Self and Experience of God,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13: *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1975), 122–32.

spirit lacks a direct intuition of God.<sup>46</sup> It is the world as sign, and the structure of human life as marked by need, that demonstrate the existence of the mystery. The attraction the mystery exerts through the sign is perceived by man through the exigent character of life: reality is a sign and binds man to his destiny through the original needs.

The fact that Giussani calls them “needs” and “exigencies” does not imply that God’s definitive self-revelation in Christ is demanded by man’s given structure. There is no forced arrival of grace. One way to avoid a dualistic reading of nature and grace is to note that God’s fundamental intention in creating man, in giving man to himself, was to communicate himself to man in the incarnation of the Logos. Man’s original structure cannot be conceived as though it were independent of God, as though man were not a being-gift. Giussani, echoing Cardinal Montini’s interpretation of the religious sense, reminds the reader that Augustine’s dictum at the beginning of the *Confessions*, *fecisti nos ad te*, means that God has created man already turned to him.<sup>47</sup> This being turned toward God (“ad”) is part of the gift of human nature. The ultimate ground of Giussani’s treatment of Augustine and Aquinas on man’s constitutive desire to see God, is creation in Christ. This does not make God out to be needy (à la Hegel) precisely because in giving man to himself God makes him free, that is, God wants man’s happiness to be truly his, man’s, own. Far more than a capacity to choose—it is only God who chooses, man only embraces—freedom is “the possibility, the capacity, the responsibility to fulfill oneself, that is to say, to reach one’s own destiny.” Freedom “is the comparison with destiny: is this total aspiration toward destiny.”<sup>48</sup> God affirms man as free, and as such, as capable of arriving at satisfaction in communion with him if he embraces God’s gift of grace. Freedom is thus “relation with the infinite.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>SSR, 82–83.

<sup>47</sup>Augustine, *Conf.*, 1, 1. See also ST II–II, 68, 4, and G. Montini’s comment on Aquinas in SSR, 51.

<sup>48</sup>RS, 80–93.

<sup>49</sup>Giussani, *Si può vivere così?* (Milan: BUR, 1994), 81. Giussani says that “paradoxically, it is not possible to choose: Only God can truly choose because he creates what he chooses; he gives being to what he chooses” (“Tu,” 99).

Man, for Giussani, is thus called to live in a vertiginous existential condition, that is, in a tension between poles due to the paradoxical human nature (to speak with de Lubac): man cannot give himself that without which he cannot live. In concrete human experience, both inner-worldly goals and eternal striving leave the original needs unsatisfied; what these needs seek instead is an inexhaustible response. Giussani indicates, then, that the human being always experiences a sense of “structural disproportion” at a finite response to the totalizing human needs. The sign always moves beyond what human reason grasps. Reason, in faithfulness to experience, asks man to affirm that the exhaustive response to the ultimate question lies beyond the horizon of one’s own existence. If man’s encounter with the world is this interplay of “sign” and original needs, which are awakened and set in motion by the sign, we can say, according to Giussani, “that the world ‘demonstrates’ Something Else, demonstrates God as a sign ‘demonstrates’ that of which it is a sign.” God’s existence is implied in the dynamic proper to human experience. With a remarkable trust in human nature’s capacity to perceive the evidence, Giussani continues that “the answer exists because it cries out through the constitutive questions of our being, but experience cannot measure it. It exists but we do not know what it is.”<sup>50</sup>

At the anthropological level we see again what the ontological side of experience demonstrated: God remains beyond human grasp. What this means for man and his constitutive needs is that they are not really understood until man is encountered by God. What man really needs is discovered only in Christ. It is then that he realizes that he is thirsty because God, more profoundly and in a way unthinkable to man, is thirsty for him.<sup>51</sup> When we mentioned at the beginning that God comes to allow man to live his own religiosity, this does not mean that Christ causes man to remain simply a natural being. Christ’s incarnation, instead, allows man to be in relation with the source without possessing it. Christology, for Giussani, is the truth of philosophy, not because Christ submits himself to the ontological structure of being, but, more fundamentally, because his person illumines the meaning of man and of the

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<sup>50</sup>RS, 116. Translation modified.

<sup>51</sup>Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers. From Clement of Rome to Augustine* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 86.

dual nature of being. While there is a sense in which faith can be understood naturally, with Augustine, as knowledge through a witness, the difference between recognition of the mystery and the affirmation of Christ is that faith, says Giussani, “is when something is said to you by a Thou, by God’s Mystery, as the book of Wisdom writes: ‘God has created man for happiness.’ This is faith because it is Another who speaks.”<sup>52</sup>

The discontinuity between revelation and man’s affirmation of the mystery is also why the original needs by which man judges the truth of everything should not be understood as “*potentia oboedientialis*.” Indeed, they indicate man’s creaturely dependency. As Balthasar says, “obediential potency” does not give God the priority that is proper to him and it would be better to dispense with this term.<sup>53</sup> It is better, then, not to think of the original needs in abstract terms (nature’s capacity to receive grace) but rather in personal ones, i.e., these needs are an expression of the relation between God and man that is always initiated by God and within which man’s existence (and nature) comes to be understood. One could still ask, however, why, if things are so evident to human experience, do we fail to recognize this presence of God that “demonstrates itself” through the presence of the sign (being-gift-*logos*) and the structural needs of man? And, in light of this frequent failure to see, what does it mean to judge something?

#### 4. *The affirmation of God and the dynamic of experience*

In considering what it means to judge something, we can start by asking how one arrives at the stance of judging in the first place. It is part of the original experience, which we can now define as the encounter between the wonder-causing self-presentation of truth in the dual unity of being (gift and *logos*), and the original needs that constitute the human heart. This encounter or experience takes the form of a judgment in seeking to express the correspondence between the truth radiating from the sign and man’s constitu-

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<sup>52</sup>AC, 182.

<sup>53</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 40.

tive needs. Since both the sign and man's needs have their ultimate ground in the divine mystery, the correspondence is not simply an affirmation that a subject is truly bound to a predicate. With a judgment of "correspondence," Giussani seeks to offer an existential, ontological, and theological rendering of the classical conception of truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus*. It is important not to reduce "correspondence" to instinctive satisfaction or to align Giussani's concept of experience here with Schleiermacher's. The judgment of correspondence is not the attempt to make God "fit" into man's "heart" or to make the latter the measure of the former. For Giussani, judgment, and hence understanding and knowing, has its most fundamental expression in the affirmation of the ground that binds together the subject and the predicate. In this regard, to judge something is more than to state whether, e.g., it is in fact the case that today is Wednesday or that the content of a given book advances scientific knowledge. At the level of "elementary experience," judgment has to do with acknowledging the meaning of the sign and man, that is, with the ultimate meaning of both and as the meaning of all that is. "Correspondence" then is the acknowledgment that takes place in a particular experience that God is all in all and the discovery that in that "all," one (and the whole cosmos) can truly "be." A judgment is said to be true if it grasps how something or someone and the meaning present in them "corresponds" to the original needs. The judgment of correspondence indicates that the self has become aware that and how a circumstance, person, or being is part of the dialogue within which God is always-already addressing man.

Because the transcendentals are coextensive, all that exists co-responds to a certain extent to man's original needs. That is, through judgment man experiences that reality responds with and in man to the ultimate Source. However, since reality is a sign of the ineffable mystery, the response is always inadequate. For Giussani, religiosity cannot be fully lived in history. What would respond adequately and totally to man's exigencies and original needs would be a sign that coincides completely with the mystery. This is why, Giussani says, only "something exceptional corresponds," that is, only Christ, the sacrament of the Father, the one in whom mystery and sign coincide, adequately responds, i.e., addresses and fulfills

without satiating the needs of man's heart.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Giussani's understanding of judgment (and therefore reason) has its truth in faith.

There are two additional aspects to "correspondence." The first is the *unity* between man, reality, and the whole. For Giussani, elementary experience is true if it "throws us into the rhythm of the real, drawing us irresistibly toward unification with the ultimate aspect of things and their true, definitive meaning."<sup>55</sup> We will return to this theme later. The second aspect is that the purpose of knowing is to become a person.<sup>56</sup> "To know" does not mean the acquisition of information that can further man's desire to manipulate reality, and "to understand" is not to comprehend something in the sense of completely grasping its meaning. It is rather to acknowledge the integrity and the fullness of presence.<sup>57</sup> To acknowledge this fullness, to know, always involves all of the human person. "Judging" draws on the understanding of oneself, of reality, and of any claim on the meaning of life as such in light of being-given. The person's engagement in knowing has even deeper roots: the criterion for judging the truth of any thing has to be independent of his wishes and limited cognitive capacities and, at the same time, it has to be truly his. To emphasize the latter without the former leads to subjectivism; to affirm the former without the latter leads to alienation. For Giussani, the criterion for judging given to man is not outside of him. It is given to him and, as such, it is his; it coincides with him. Yet, since it is given to him with his own nature (in a sense it is his own nature), the criterion is greater than

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<sup>54</sup>SPVVC, 36–49. On the subject of heaven, Giussani indicated once that "the permanence of the question is the permanence of the human being to whom the Mystery answers eternally (*senza fine*). This will be evident in paradise. Heaven will be a question pregnant with its answer. Sometimes I draw this comparison between one who is thirsty and goes to the well to drink, and one who, with all his thirst, is already there, drinking. Heaven will be a continuous quenching and with a continuous satisfaction. But it will be the quenching of one 'who thirsts!'" ("Intervista a Monsignor Luigi Giussani di P. Antonio Sicari," *Communio. Strumento internazionale per un lavoro teologico* 16 (1988), n. 98/99, 182–217, at 202.

<sup>55</sup>ROE, 99.

<sup>56</sup>Jean Mouroux, *Je crois en Toi. Structure personnelle de la foi* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1949). English translation: *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959).

<sup>57</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Vivendo nella carne* (Milan: BUR, 1998), 20–22.

he is, and so is never subjective. The *infallible* criterion is, as we mentioned earlier, the inextricable needs that constitute the human heart. The contention that the original needs are the infallible criteria man is given—“infallible as *criteria* not as judgment”—seeks to liberate man from alienation, that is, to keep man from jettisoning the responsibility of “seeing for himself.”<sup>58</sup> Man is equipped by nature with the capacity to see for himself the truth of any claim to meaning, to see the correspondence between the fact that has been encountered and the meaning of his own existence. The true judgment, therefore, welcomes the word spoken through reality to man. The correspondence takes place only when “one gives a judgment on the link between this reality and the desire of the heart”; that is, on how a given sign allows man to live the relation with the mystery and become more deeply aware of the meaning of the whole. It is important not to reduce this reality to something man can grasp with the “windowy net,” to use John Donne’s phrase, of conceptual knowledge. If understanding means to grasp the link between something and reality, Giussani means “the whole of reality.” Since this wholeness is always beyond man’s grasp, to understand something means to begin “a very long search in order to reach that threshold from which—participating in the eye of Another, in the heart of Another—one can see and love everything.”<sup>59</sup>

Giussani does not conceive reason abstractly. There is no judgment that takes place independently of man’s bodily condition and the other human faculties. Contrary to modernity’s claim that feelings prevent reason from seeing its proper object, Giussani argues that they actually bring the object of vision closer to man’s reason. Granted this defense of feelings and their rightful role, he also avoids making them the epistemological criterion for truth: he says that feelings serve to make it easier for man to embrace the mystery present in the sign. Signs, in fact, always provoke an affective echo in man. Reality touches and affects reason and impels it toward the

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<sup>58</sup>Giussani writes that “without religiosity man is used by man and destroyed by man. The power that operates in this way is not only the power of multinational companies or well-known dictators: it is mainly the power of man over woman, of woman over man; it is the power of parents over children, and of friends over friends” (“Esperienza cristiana e potere,” in *Tracce. Litterae Communionis* [1986], n. 6, 17–19, at 18).

<sup>59</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così?* (Milan: BUR, 1996), 59 (=SPVVC).

meaning with which man is bound together and to which he is destined. For Giussani, reason's grasp of meaning does not take place without affection. Reality moves a person (*commuove*) because it recalls him to that mystery from which he himself is inextricably tied, commixed: his own destiny. An affirmation, e.g., "the Rockies are beautiful mountains," entails having been touched by their beauty and having an "affection" for them. Giussani presses the unity of affection and reason further and states that "without evidence we would not be moved, and without being moved, there would not be evidence."<sup>60</sup> Thus, affection bears the passive meaning implied by its etymology: to be touched, to be struck. Yet, it also has an active meaning: to love something. Reason desires to know; it is provoked, moved to know and love what gives itself to be known. "Curiosity," for Giussani, synthesizes both the passive and active sides of affection. The first move of reason vis-à-vis reality, that is, man's fundamental attitude before being, is curiosity.

For Giussani, the process by which reality emerges or "comes to itself" in experience is also a sign of the capacity of reason and should naturally lead to a recognition of the mysterious destiny with which all things are bound. To repeat what was said above, no particular can be understood until its ultimate meaning, God, is welcomed for what he is, which is the meaning of oneself and of everything. Why is this so often not the case? One answer is that reality emerges through experience not only by way of human reason and affection, but also through human freedom. The originary dimension of truth, as experience reveals, solicits reason and freedom to affirm God precisely as that "unitary meaning which nature's objective and organic structure calls human conscience to recognize," but without predetermining their response.<sup>61</sup> From the point of view of freedom, reality is not only a sign; it is also a "parable," it seeks freedom's adhesion.

Freedom, for Giussani, plays a fundamental role in the very act of knowing, and not merely in a subsequent act of automatically adhering to the truth that reason has shown. Man's freedom can either adhere to what reason perceives as evident or deny it. Giussani contends that only this adhesion grants vision. This, of course, does not mean that freedom "decides" whether God exists or not, which

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<sup>60</sup>AC, 277; SPVVC, 58–64.

<sup>61</sup>ROE, 99.

would reduce God to the level of finite creatures and contradict the ontology and anthropology manifested in man's original experience: God gives himself to be known and loved by man and yet remains always utterly other than man. Freedom, rather, embraces or rejects the meaning that gives itself to the human person. "To know (*conoscere*) is to recognize (*riconoscere*) what exists, in a comparison with one's original needs."<sup>62</sup> Freedom, however, can also come between reason and affection and separate them. By drawing the two apart from each other, freedom negates the ultimate and evident meaning of things. This alternative that human freedom faces is never, for Giussani, a choice between two equally relevant options. The positivity of being (one's own being and that of reality) requires that reason acknowledge being's priority over nothingness. The fact that one *is*, as we saw in the previous sections, indicates that there is a meaning and that one is made for and always toward this meaning. Freedom is not an act of choice. Only the affirmation of the "evident" corresponds to being's self-presentation and subsequent anthropology. To separate reason from the affective adhesion to the mystery is freedom's way of declining to embrace the evident.

Reason's task is to read the sign, while freedom's task is to "interpret" the parable that reality is and what it says to man's original needs. Freedom exists always as "risk." To "risk" oneself is to adhere to the evidence that appears. Here "risking" does not have to do with acting without sufficient reason for certainty: it is not that there are inadequate reasons to affirm God as having everything to do with all things at all times—to "risk" in this sense would simply be fideism. Risking rather is the act of overcoming the fear of being (*fascinatio nugatitatis*) and of saying *fiat* to the evident: "true experience," writes Giussani, "involves saying yes to a situation that attracts us; it means appropriating what is being said to us."<sup>63</sup> Just as unaided reason cannot stop identifying the mystery of the whole with a particular, so the fear of affirming being simply because it is (in its givenness) cannot be overcome through a sheer act of willpower. Although a community is not a guarantee, outside the milieu of a community (since being is communion) freedom cannot say yes to "the possession of the link that binds one thing to the

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<sup>62</sup>Luigi Giussani, "Per lo sviluppo della dimensione culturale dell'esperienza cristiana," in *Tracce. Litterae Communionis* (1978), n. 7, 39–40, at 39.

<sup>63</sup>ROE, 99.

other and all of the things together.”<sup>64</sup> The inability to keep from reducing the divine mystery to a particular graspable by human reason, as well as the inability to affirm being in its givenness, indicate that man’s religiosity cannot be fully lived in history. In his fallen condition the human being is unable to live the organic relation with God and the cosmos without distortion.

It could appear that experience and judging are a static event in human life. Quite the contrary, Giussani’s originality (*vis-à-vis* Mouroux, for example) consists in affirming the *dynamic* nature of experience. Judging is not an individual, ahistorical act. To see the historical dimension of experience, we will turn now to the categories of “sign” and “parable,” which in Giussani’s work do not only have to do with the world and beings. They have much more to do with the tradition of meaning that is conveyed by an authority. Human experience has to verify the truth claims of a given tradition in order to see whether its meaning corresponds to the needs of the heart and, thus, whether this tradition enables man to live his religiosity truly. Obviously “tradition” here has a wider meaning than the theological concept of tradition: it also includes the understanding of human nature as given to itself to adhere to the Incarnate Logos through and for whom it is made, and every educative phenomenon. Angelo Scola writes that for Giussani, “tradition is not the transmission of a set of concepts and doctrines that would bind the educator and the child to the past. Tradition, as Blondel says, is a place of practice and experience, lived and proposed by the teacher to the always-already historically situated freedom of the one being educated.”<sup>65</sup> The affirmation of the ultimate meaning, which reaches every human being through the received Christian tradition, requires verifying the validity of the comprehensive form that one has articulated as a response to the self-manifestation of the mystery.

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<sup>64</sup>JTE, 20. For Giussani, culture, like time and communion, is fully understood christologically: “‘The Word became flesh’ means that the rationality that saves the universe from the absurd is not an abstract idea or a mechanism but a *person*: Jesus Christ.” In this regard, “the experience of Pentecost constitutes the advent of a *Christian culture*, the definitive discovery of the ‘true light that enlightens all who come into this world’ (Mt 16:17; Jn 1:13)” (JTE, 70–71).

<sup>65</sup>Angelo Scola, *Un pensiero sorgivo. Sgugli scritti di Luigi Giussani* (Genova: Marietti, 2004), 74.

Man is a historical creature and as such is born in time and receives a tradition of meaning that he must make his own. Parents communicate to their child a complex of ideas, rites, customs, values, and art, which hold various claims to account for the meaning of reality.<sup>66</sup> In our society that, as Robert Spaemann notes, has homogenized experience and hence evacuated a priori any sense of real novelty, it is hard to understand why the answer to boredom is not simply to “cut the cord” with the past: it is no longer easy to see that to stay in continuity with the past and the retrieved tradition is actually the only way to experience, that is, to understand the present and to hope for real novelty. To be deprived of the chance or duty to verify the “working hypothesis” that the inherited tradition represents prevents us from perceiving the depth of the present and of the intervening historical development. With no tradition, man is fragmented, separated from the past, and so not free at all.<sup>67</sup>

Just as there is no experience without a tradition, so there is no experience without an authority who conveys and helps the person to see and to adhere to the meaning of reality. Contrary to many subjectivist versions of experience, Giussani’s concept of experience not only allows room for tradition and external authority; he shows that experience cannot be understood without them. There is an opposite extreme, however, to be avoided as well: authority and tradition cannot replace the process of verification. Authority is there to help the person judge the extent to which the proposed comprehensive meaning corresponds to the needs of the heart.<sup>68</sup> It is only a false sense of mediation that causes authority and tradition to devolve into clericalism. Clericalism is, in fact, the alienation of the person because it exempts him from setting out on the liberating and excruciating task of judging. At the same time, moralism can be avoided only when authority helps the person to verify the adequacy of the reasons of any given tradition. Moralism can be described as action deprived of adequate reasons.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>ROE, 52–53.

<sup>67</sup>RS, 80–93.

<sup>68</sup>ROE, 87.

<sup>69</sup>USD, 106–117.

The verification of the working hypothesis communicated by the educative authority has to be carried out in light of the fundamental truth experience reveals about the human person: a person is continually being “made” to exist and is given an infallible criterion for judging. This attitude of fidelity to one’s own being-created permits us to approach a tradition in order to appropriate it and carry it forward: it enables a stance of expectation of and continuous attention to that which appears. The reception of a “tradition” of meaning has nothing to do with relativism. The tradition one receives is the present from which one can begin to live out one’s own religiosity. To say that tradition is just one interpretive hypothesis among others, which a person must assess critically from a distance, is a rejection of one’s own giftedness and an attempt to separate the dual unity of gift and *logos*. It is the introduction of a deductive conception of experience in order to impose a meaning (ideology) that is foreign to it. This is not to say, of course, that every religious tradition is equally valid; as Ratzinger shows, natural religions are open to each other and progress toward higher, more adequate expressions of human religiosity.<sup>70</sup> Without risking oneself, without fully engaging a proposal put forth from authority, true religious experience is impossible: that is, there is no way to verify in what sense any segment of reality or circumstance corresponds to human needs (and why), and so whether it affirms God, oneself, and the world for what they are.<sup>71</sup>

To oppose tradition and authority against experience and a free affirmation of God is to miss the rich sense of unity revealed in original experience. Giussani notes that it is a false understanding of unity, often due to preconceptions that assign a priori meanings to things and proposals, that underlies the most common and reductive senses of experience. As the brief survey of the modern philosophical situation at the beginning of this paper pointed out, the separation of God, man, and the world into three fragments to be re-assembled into a new whole has resulted in a number of inadequate definitions of experience.

For example, experience understood as “sheer trying-out, the proliferation of initiatives, and undergoing [something]” loses the

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<sup>70</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 45–109; AOCC, 11–20.

<sup>71</sup>RVU, 110–111.

link between experience and judging. Experience as the “mere reaction to circumstances and events” has no notion that the encounter with reality always invites freedom to recognize its ultimate ground. If experience is understood as an “experiment” on something that waits at the absolute disposal of man’s intention and manipulation, this eclipses the fact that both man and reality are continuously being made or held in existence and confuses conversion and novelty with power and repetition. To “insist on one’s own plans and ideas” instead of embracing the true novelty that arises in experience is to give in to the fear of affirming being for what it is, as well as to refuse to make the risk of oneself that man’s dramatic existence demands. “Insisting on memories of the past that have no value in the present, or even referring to a particular event in order to block aspirations or stunt ideals” means adopting a concept of tradition, obedience, and authority that are incompatible with original experience.<sup>72</sup> To reduce experience to a subjective, indisputable, or even “graced” event is to sever its integral relation with the objective, transcendent side of experience (sign, authority, tradition, God). To circumscribe experience to the limits of one’s own sexuality is to neglect the meaning and universality of the original needs and evidences. Finally, the separation of meaning from experience, and the imposition of the former on the latter through cultural mediation, loses sight of the dual unity of gift and *logos* that characterizes all that exists.

##### 5. *Growing human: offering, work, and original experience*

In his short essay on experience (1963), Giussani writes that experience connotes “*becoming aware that one grows*, and that in two fundamental aspects: the capacity to understand and the capacity to love.”<sup>73</sup> Building on what we have said so far about original experience, we can say that, because experience has to do with understanding the meaning of something (its intrinsic relation with the whole), and because understanding is the affirmation of the ultimate mystery in relation to which the meaning of anything can be grasped, and because this judging is a dynamic and historical

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<sup>72</sup>ROE, 100.

<sup>73</sup>ROE, 142. Translation modified.

action in which the self is always at stake in engagement with the ever-greater mystery, then the experience of the relation with the mystery allows one to grow as a person. I would like to conclude by indicating two aspects of this growth, “prayer” and “work.” Man grows as person inasmuch as he responds to the authoritative Logos and, in his affective response (prayer), contributes to bringing reality to its fulfillment (work). Rather than isolating the self, religious experience “personalizes” by allowing man to grow in the original communion with God, the world, and others. This growth in personalization, however, cannot be precisely measured or sought for its own sake. Human experience is never an end in itself. As with the fact of being created, this growth in personhood can only be viewed a posteriori and as a surprise that exceeds man’s own capacities.

We saw that human freedom can come between reason and affection to separate them, or it can support man in recognizing the mystery as the unifying meaning of all that exists. This is never a merely intellectual exercise: the ultimate awareness of self and reality as dependent on the ultimate source does not fall into place as the logical conclusion to indisputable premises. The way that freedom binds reason and affection to embrace the mystery present in the sign, is prayer. In this regard, for Giussani, the depths of original experience are reached only when, recognizing that one is made and that everything is given, one prays to the paternal source to “be made,” to be. Prayer is the truth of man’s experience of self and of God. This fundamental perception of prayer is present from the beginning in Giussani’s work. In a short article written in 1958, Giussani translates John Damascene’s definition of prayer, *elevatio mentis in Deum* as follows: “raising the mind to God. We might also translate this phrase as ‘being aware of God.’ What does it mean to be aware of God? Fundamentally, it means to recognize our own original and absolute dependence on him. Not dependence on something that belongs to the past . . . . But a dependence on God that is total, that belongs to every instant, that is continuous, and is at the heart of every gesture.”<sup>74</sup> When the judgment becomes prayer

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<sup>74</sup>RVU, 141. This text on prayer first appeared as “Alcune cose sulla preghiera,” in *Ora et Labora*, 13 (1958): 3; 13–15. It was then included in *Moralità: memoria e desiderio*, 23–26 (English edition: *Morality: Memory and Desire*, trans. K. D. Whitehead [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986], 29–36).

it asks for that which is fitting to God. In this sense, prayer is *petitio decentium a Deo*, says Aquinas. “But,” asks Giussani, “what is fitting to God if not *being*, the fulfillment of our being, the fulfilling of that design for which one is made?”<sup>75</sup> A person asks the mystery, simply and most fundamentally, to be. Prayer is “the prayer to be. God wants there to be one who asks to be, who says so truly, so sincerely that He is everything that one asks Him what He has already given him: to participate in Being.”<sup>76</sup>

The first degree of prayer is, for Giussani, objective mysticism. “Devout wonder, respect, loving subjection are all contained in this act of awareness: this is the soul of prayer. Reality, perceived as fascination, is the very first level of this mystical attitude, which is the most natural to man.”<sup>77</sup> A true transparency of self, in contrast to the modernist understanding of immediacy, is a grateful self-entrustment to the Source of Being. The entreaty “to be,” however, is aimed at more than simple self-perpetuity. Prayer cannot be the full awareness of life as a whole if it places God in a position of fulfilling human wishes. God remains the ever-greater mystery. Since God is the mystery of being itself, to ask that one may be is also to ask him to come, to show his face. The true actualization of the self, through prayer, is asking God to reveal himself, and, in Christian prayer, to have his Kingdom come. “That the self be what it has to be, is to be what He wants.”<sup>78</sup> What original experience reveals is therefore the exponential circular relation proper to love. The more man asks God that he might be, the more he affirms God and his will. And the more he embraces God in gratitude, the more man becomes himself. Man’s happiness is God’s glory; and God’s glory is communicated to man so that man might be like him.

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<sup>75</sup>RVU, 142. Aquinas, *In Psalmos. Proemium*, Pars 24, n. 11; ST II–II, q. 83, aa. 1, 5, and 7; ST III, q. 21, 1.

<sup>76</sup>USD, 20. These reflections on prayer could be expanded through a reading of Giussani’s works on ecclesiology and the fundamental importance of the liturgy. See his *Dalla liturgia vissuta: una testimonianza* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1973); *La familiarità con Cristo. Meditazioni sull’anno liturgico* (Milan: San Paolo, 2008); *Tutta la terra desidera il tuo volto* (Milan: San Paolo, 2000); and *Che cos’è l’uomo perché te ne curi?* (Milan: San Paolo, 2000).

<sup>77</sup>AOCC, 90.

<sup>78</sup>RVU, 142.

In Giussani's thought, prayer and work go together as two different but not separate operations. Giussani sees St. Benedict's adage *ora et labora* as expressing the creative unity for which man is made. I would like to indicate here a single aspect of Giussani's teaching on the subject of work: that the definition of original experience also shows us the nature of work. He says, as noted earlier, that original experience "tends to indicate totally the original impetus with which the human being reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates it from within."<sup>79</sup> The full affirmation of God as the meaning of the whole represents the gradual transfiguration of the cosmos. This transformation, of course, will never be complete or perfect. The transfiguration of the cosmos entailed in the affirmation of God, obviously, is not a case of bending the world to one's own will, but rather bringing it to its telos. Let us briefly explore what this understanding of experience means for human work.

As we have seen, man's original experience reveals that man and reality are united in their being-given. Human nature expresses that native (from *nascor*, to be born), original unity that binds man together with all that exists. This is why "the self-aware I is the self-awareness of all of nature." At the same time, while being one with reality, man is also called to become ever more one with it. Reality as a sign awakens the needs that constitute man and that launch him into the search for the ultimate meaning of all that is. This "unity" can be seen at many different levels. Knowing and loving are the way man's soul unites with the rest of reality (*anima quodammodo omnia*). Yet this becoming one with reality comes about by means of a "project," that is, through work. The very same evidences that launch man toward reality and make him aware of what reality is force him "to imagine that reality according to a plan that makes of reality an actualization of the ideal image that is within the original stimulus of those needs and evidences."<sup>80</sup> The process of becoming one with reality, which is a sign and parable of the divine mystery, introduces in man a desire to transform that reality according to "an ideal that the original self-awareness of reality has introduced in him, an ideal which coincides with the exigencies of truth, beauty, and

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<sup>79</sup>RS, 9.

<sup>80</sup>AC, 84.

love.”<sup>81</sup> Here the dynamic nature of experience takes on a transformative aspect. The relation between man and the mystery not only includes the task of becoming aware of what things are and affirming them in their existence; it also elicits in man the desire to bring historical reality closer to its fulfillment. In this regard, reality is not simply open to man; it needs his transformation in order to reach its truth. On the other hand, since man is a being made to worship, his transformation of reality does not bend or use it according to a private idea; he transfigures reality according to the “ideal” (the present source and *telos*) whose form is disclosed in the encounter between reality and the needs that constitute the human heart. The “project” by which man *informs* reality and history is a creative response to the presence of the ideal. To “experience” is, in this sense, to work with the memory of the original donation and to seek to affirm the ultimate truth in one’s actions, while also aware that one’s work is only a small step into the infinite mystery.

Giussani says that “offering” best defines the dynamic of this transfiguration and transformation that we call work. Prayer and action come together in man’s offering of himself and reality to the One who unites, calls, and binds them together. Offering, in this sense, is not an activity that takes place before or after human action. It is rather its very core and as such finds its plenitude in Christian offering. “Offering is the most fundamental modality of Christian work. Thanks to offering even the most banal activity shines forth its link with the ultimate and has the consistency of the Eternal.”<sup>82</sup> The non-technological engagement with reality for what it is consists precisely in this twofold act: (1) the recognition that the consistency of what exists lies both within and beyond it; and (2) this recognition is man’s entreaty that the one who is the most profound depth of all beings would come and reveal himself—as in any true religious prayer—or would show himself to be the origin and *telos* of all that is—as in Christian prayer.<sup>83</sup> Offering is neither

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<sup>81</sup>AC, 40.

<sup>82</sup>RE, 77–78.

<sup>83</sup>“Toward the end of his life, Giussani fulfills his reflection on work by affirming that man’s activity has its source in the mystery of the Trinity: the Father, from whom everything originates, the Son that represents the design, the magnificent plan prepared by God, the Holy Spirit, who is the energy through which that design is extended in the history of the world up to the creation of the Church”

the spiritualization nor the relativization of work. It is the full, loving awareness in which reality, transfigured, is given back to the Creator. This twofold dimension of prayer and work is what permits original experience to overcome Western thought's contemporary fragmentation that, as we saw at the beginning of this study, emerges from a false understanding of the unity between God, the human being, and the world, and of the originary self-presentation of truth. □

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