

Youth of today face to face with Christ and the Church

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I have never found a more succinct and imaginative description of the situation of young people today than that which arose during a discussion between Don Giussani and a group of university students: *"It is as if the youth of today were victims of a kind of Chernobyl nuclear explosion: their organism remains structurally the same but dynamically different. There has been a sort of physiological subjugation operated by a dominant mentality. It is as if the only facts in evidence are those in fashion, and fashion is a concept and an instrument of power. Never before has the environment - understood as mental climate and way of life - had at its disposal instruments of such invasive and despotic power over our consciences. Never before has the educator - or the sovereign "diseducator" - been the environment with all its forms of expression. That is why it is even more difficult for the Christian message to be accepted as a convincing way of life, and to become life and conviction. What is heard and seen is not really assimilated: our surroundings, the dominant mentality, the all-invasive culture, power. These cause us to feel estranged from ourselves, and we remain, on the one hand, abstracted in relation to ourselves and emotionally discharged (like batteries that last for minutes instead of hours); and on the other hand, by contrast, we escape into a community for protection".*

These cause us to feel estranged from ourselves, and we remain, on the one hand, abstracted in relation to ourselves...

That is because reason - which requires knowledge of reality, that is, experience that takes all factors into account - has been replaced by feeling. This means that a person is not what he/she is but what he/she feels him/herself to be, and that reasoning is the ability to justify a reaction that says: "go wherever your feelings take you". The result is that opinion rather than sense prevails.

Evidence of the inherent weakness in a person has been removed. Rousseau's declaration, "do what you want because human nature tends to do good", has been taken as dogma and diffused by the social communications media. Therefore exertion and sacrifice are regarded as futile and are no longer a condition of life.

...and emotionally discharged (like batteries that last for minutes instead of hours)...

Affection has become the satisfaction of pleasure and is no longer true attraction. Therefore everything is fickle and insecure, and the discharged batteries make life become a kind of wandering instead of a journey, intermittent flashes instead of the light of dawn.

Juvenile piety is often a fluctuating sense of God rather than a recognition of God, so that makes all religions the same because they correspond to the individual's own spontaneity and not because they bring further fulfilment of one's nature.

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That is when gatherings of youth arise in order to share sensations and feelings rather than to help self-growth, thus becoming the new kind of ideology, the transmission belt of fashion and the dominant mentality.

Don Giussani also said in "Porta la speranza": *"Because of its place in the chronology of life, youth of all eras have seemed to be in crisis. So if we now say that there is a particular and exceptional youth crisis, in the final analysis, the cause must be found in a crisis in education and educational factors. The crisis of educators can be seen as follows:*

In the first place, unawareness makes educators themselves collaborators, probably unconsciously, in the deficiencies of the environment."

There is a loss of the personal meaning of what it is to be Christian - the making of a new being in history. It is not a question of being just like others with the addition of some kind of extra commitment, as Cardinal Ratzinger said at the Meeting in Rimini in 1990: *"It is common around the place today, even in higher ecclesiastical circles, to have the idea that people are more Christian if they are more committed to church activities. This spurs them on to a kind of ecclesiastical therapy of activity, to keep doing things. A committee is found for each one or at least a task within the Church. [...] It can happen that someone could carry out church group activities over a long period of time and not be truly Christian. [...] The Church does not exist to keep us occupied like any association whatsoever or to keep it alive. It exists to help us all reach eternal life".*

Within contemporary society, Christianity often appears to be tied to structure. As these structures are not always vibrant with personal witness, when there is rejection or indifference to these structures, it coincides with rejection or indifference to Christianity, as if to say that participation in the structures was enough to justify one's being Christian.

Many Christians are lacking in witness of the new being that pertains to Christianity which is needed in order to make the structures life-giving. Awareness of the personal dimension of the Christian call has been lost, that which corresponds with the human.

Thus the Christian message remains abstract, estranged from life and the normal world.

"Secondly, there is a kind of lack of vitality in the educational approach that prevents it from using sufficient energy to combat the negativity of the environment, insofar as it is presented with its schematically traditional and formalistic positions instead of carrying it forward to renew the eternal redeeming Word in the spirit of the new struggle".

It can bring about a rift between Christianity and life.

Society tends to reject Christianity or to relegate it to the private sphere: that is to say, a detachment from God as the origin and meaning of life, and therefore of experience.

It is as if God responded to "piety" and not to the demands of life. Therefore, unconsciously, we accept the role that society has decided to reserve for Christians, and that is to be the religious supplement, the soul for the fulfilment of one's own plans, instead of using our judgment and so sharing in the common aspiration of humanity for their happiness.

The children's difficulties are a dramatic interrogative for the parents. Therefore we should ask ourselves, like T.S. Eliot in *Choruses from the Rock*, "Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?"

Christ and the church

Christianity is a fact, an event

Christianity is an event; a person entered history: Jesus Christ, whom some have met and accepted.

The Church is the possibility to repeat this encounter today, the possibility that can be repeated by everyone, as the Holy Father said for the 18th World Youth Day: "*Dear young people, you know that Christianity is not an opinion nor does it consist of empty words. Christianity is Christ! It is a Person, a Living Person*".

It is not a theory, then, but a fact that concerns us, and the magnitude of this fact is given by a personal Presence, the Presence of Christ: of the Emmanuel, "God-with-us", the God who has become our Companion, friend of humankind.

As Fyodor Dostoevski wrote in "The Demons", "*Many believe that it is enough to believe in the ethics of Christ in order to be Christian; neither the ethics of Christ nor the teaching of Christ will save the world. What will do so is this: that the Word became flesh*".

The event is method

The "event" is not only the moment in which this fact happened but indicates a method, the method chosen and used by God to save mankind: the Incarnation, when God saves mankind through the human.

Christianity is not the revelation of the existence of God but the amazement that God is Man, the amazement of Kafka: "*The one we have never seen but for whom we wait with true yearning, yet who quite understandably has been considered forever unreachable, here he is sitting here*" (F. Kafka, *The Castle*)

Salvation will not happen: it is happening. The value of the present moment

If God is with us, there is salvation now; not only that, but it is among us; therefore it can be used and experienced right now, because God is salvation, and he is committed to humankind for all life and all history. Salvation is companionship: the companionship God gives to each human person, and in which each one can find fulfilment, the substance of their lives and of themselves, their true image, the wholeness of their person.

Our fulfilment and redemption is not the result of our humanly consistent efforts, but is the consequence of accepting this companionship.

"To save" means that human individuals understand who they are, understand their destiny, know how to direct their steps towards their destiny and set out on the road.

It is in encountering this Presence that individuals begin to understand themselves, to understand their destiny, to understand how to reach this destiny and what energy to use on the road.

To adhere to this Christian "fact" and to proceed along this path is to follow the way of conversion. To be converted does not mean to analyse the message, but to commit oneself to it, that is, to a "Fact", an event.

The substance of the proclamation lies in the fact that it penetrates existence and changes it. The experience of a renewal of life and of an unsuspected "new me" is the existential proof that the work of salvation is taking place, and it grows a hundredfold here below.

As the Holy Father once again reminded young people for this World Youth Day, *"My dear young people, only Jesus knows what is in your hearts and your deepest desires. Only He, who has loved you to the end (cf. Jn 13:1), can fulfil your aspirations. His are words of eternal life, words that give meaning to life. No one apart from Christ can give you true happiness."*

As Cardinal Giacomo Biffi said at a theology convention in Bologna, *"We are not the 'people of the book' and we are not even 'people of the word': we are 'people of the Event' [...] Hapless is that theologian, that exegete, that reader of the holy book for whom Jesus is primarily a literary figure, and who therefore speaks of the Christ of the synoptics, the pauline Christ, the Christ of John, and does not speak of his Saviour"*.

There is no way of understanding Christianity if one does not realise that Christianity was born out of passion for humankind, for each individual person, or rather, passion for the destiny of each individual person.

A person can be reborn as a result of an encounter

God was made man and entered into history, so the way of getting to know him can no longer be the same as it was before his coming, the way of all other religions based on research and human effort.

At first it was based entirely on effort, study, geniality and religious feeling, but now it is Someone to meet. It does not require particular ability but just a simple encounter.

As the Holy Father wrote to Don Giussani for the twentieth anniversary of the Fraternity Communion and Liberation, *"Christianity, more than being a collection of doctrines or a rule for salvation, is the 'event' of an encounter. It is this insight and experience that has been transmitted during those years to so many people associated with the Communion and Liberation movement, more than offering something new, it aims to rediscover Tradition and the history of the Church, to re-express it in a way capable of speaking to and calling the attention of the people of our times"*.

The "I" finds itself in an encounter with a presence that carries this affirmation: "Does that of which your heart is made exist? You see it exists, for example, in me".

Encounter with a presence does not ontologically form the essence of a person: the encounter reawakens something that was dark, something that was existentially there, unthought and unthinkable.

The individual rediscovers his/her own original identity by coming into a presence that attracts and arouses a reawakening of the demands inherent in his/her nature, a complete upsurge in reason insofar as there is a response to the demands of life in all its dimensions - from birth to death.

Paradoxically, the originality of the self emerges when one realises that there is something in oneself that is also within all other individuals.

Therefore this is an experience one should have. The great biblical scholar, Ignace de la Potterie said: "*Christian faith is a process of seeing*".

Without experiential commitment one cannot understand what the "process of seeing" means. The most difficult thing to accept is, that what reawakens us to ourselves, what reawakens us to the truth of our lives, to our destiny, to hope, to morality, is an event.

The word "event" describing encounter indicates a "coincidence" between the experienced and the supernatural realities.

The fact of encountering is greater than the fact of existing: that unique critical moment on which all history depends, a moment in time, in which a being says, "I am You who makes me".

Our responsibility is to render possible an encounter with Christ who is present in our witnessing.

It is therefore necessary to identify ourselves well with the real meaning of the affirmation that Christianity "is" an event, not "was" an event; it "is" an event now.

It is a paternal presence that generates an Encounter, that is, an impact with an Event that communicates a life to you because real paternity implies an offer of life is communicated. It is a paternity and therefore an encounter if it arises from a response to what the other is.

The encounter becomes companionship: encounter generates companionship as emotional assurance, a family, a place in which there is hope for life. For youth, this emotional assurance is in adults.

As the Pope stated two years ago: "*An encounter with certain people generates affinity and this affinity generates companionship, communion, a movement. To live this communion is to participate in the Mystery of the Spirit*".

From our encounter with these people we feel needed and attracted, and we want to join them.

The encounter therefore remains as companionship. This is the human, geographic and social place in which we are called back to the One who has called for the encounter: Christ, destiny become man.

Companionship is the place for that friendship that is born of the intuitions of destiny and is sustained by Christ who is the way of destiny. This friendship assists on the way that leads to self-fulfilment and not self-alienation.

This is what we should bring about, for otherwise it is useless because we do nothing but have meetings. It is the experience of Something that we carry within, and we are so immersed in it that it fills our lives with ideas and plans that can be words, ways of organising time, initiatives to be taken and especially relationships to be established, something that makes others realise that they have never seen humanity to be so human as now.

You can say that, in an analogical sense, there is a miracle here. It is like what happened with Jesus when he performed miracles. He did not come to perform miracles, but he performed miracles to

show why he came and who he was. Likewise our aim is to live this Presence so it will be a Presence for all humanity.

The method is an existential encounter, as John Paul I said, "*the true drama of a Church that likes to call itself modern is the attempt to correct the amazement at the Christ event with rules*".

The environment

A presence cannot but be in the environment.

This is how Don Giussani described it right at the beginning of Communion and Liberation in "Il cammino al vero è un'esperienza" (The road to truth is an experience): "*The call made to us cannot go directly to the conscience: to reach the genuine me it has to go through a mentality that is like a wrapping. This superstructure is made up to a large extent of exasperation at the environmental influence today through the latest means of invasion of a person: propaganda, school, television, etc. To try to resist or neutralise this influence is useless if one cannot reach the person right there where they are most influenced, that is in their environment. This 'environment' evidently does not coincide with a 'place' in the material sense of the word. More than a place it is an ambiance, a whole way of living, a scenario with the conditions for existence. Even in present-day society this ambiance of life has its fulcrum right in a material and physical place that becomes the point of reference or the necessary crossroads of that surge of relationships and the consequent pouring forth of ideas and sentiments. The places of reference are the school and in varying degrees, the workplace*".

The ability to educate is in crisis when it does not create environment and does not pass through a confrontation with the environment. It cannot be called an ability to educate when it consists of giving talks and organising, but it is confrontation with the environment, that is the scenario of human problems that arise from being together, a reflection of society.

Commitment with the environment, which is an encounter, generates culture. That means to allow reality to be judged in the light of faith, from the standpoint of a total horizon that enhances details and shows up the untruths in the totalitarian claims of the ideology.

As the Pope said at the MEIC congress in 1982, "*A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not fully thought out, not faithfully lived*".

Let conviction grow by verifying it, that is, notice the connection between the message of Christ and the demands of individuals.

God is God, and therefore is manifest as the capacity to respond to humankind more than as an explanation of doctrine.

It is the hundredfold here below, not that invented by mankind, but that life lived with the awareness of a great Presence, as it was for Peter, "*Lord, where shall we go? Only you have the words that explain life*".

The starting point

A Christian, the one who lives everyone's problems, who suffers the injustice inflicted on all, who is involved in the contradictions of the whole of society and who feels linked with his/her humanity, asks what he/she can do for the world.

Can they do something different that will give life and make present that which they have found?

Authentic Christianity is the proclamation of the Incarnation: where the mystery and the infinite meet in a particular spacial-temporal reality: the person.

To set out, nothing else is needed: there is no need for analysis to be done, no need to have a required amount of strength and ability, no need to be sure that you will be listened to and that the enterprise will be carried to conclusion.

The first condition is that this awareness of the event should produce a change in us: it should be noticed by companions at school, the people we meet, the friends and colleagues, that is, we too are personally involved in this path of self-realisation: they educate who allow themselves to be educated.

If it does not start like this, it rolls round in the void: there can be moments of efficacy if there is a personality that is humanly fascinating and actively constructive, but when that person goes away, so does the deception.

Young people need to relate to individuals who live up to their human demands and know how to give the reason for their faith.

There are two signs that tell us if we are with them in this respect:

- The youth themselves become participants in this experience, that is, they are missionaries.

Once they discover for themselves how the intensity of Christian life corresponds with the intensity of passion for oneself, insofar as they are persons going towards their own destiny, once they discover this self, they realise that this goes for any person they meet, even for their own enemy, and they cannot but communicate it.

- we learn from them.

As education is reciprocal - it is not doing for, it is doing with - so adults get to experience what they offered to the others.

The greatest discovery that I have made and make every day is that we grow as we teach, and we realise we are first to learn, and we want what is being learned to be clear and persuasive also for those who are with us.

As Pier Paolo Pasolini said, "*If anyone has educated you, they can only have done so with their being, not with what they said*" (from the chapter "Genariello" in "Lettere Luterane").