

POPE FRANCIS. THE CHALLENGE OF BEAUTY

An interview with Julián Carrón, by Michele Brambilla, *La Stampa*, May 12, 2014, pp. 26-27.

They speak the same language, even though one is a Spaniard from Estremadura and the other Argentinean. Today, at the Book Fair, Fr. Julián Carrón, 64 years old, since 2005 the successor of Fr. Luigi Giussani in guiding Communion and Liberation, will present *La bellezza educerà il mondo [Beauty Will Educate the World]* (Emi, pp. 64, € 5,90), a collection of speeches by then-Archbishop of Buenos Aires Jorge Maria Bergoglio. It will be an opportunity to take stock of the situation of the Church a year after the conclave that seems to have revolutionized it. “The first question,” Carrón tells me, when I meet him at the CL headquarters in Milan, “is the power of a fact that all of us has surprised.” He speaks this way, like Francis, first “all of us”—or “only,” or “always”—and then the verb. We are sitting at a table, on the wall behind him a portrait of Fr. Giussani, the “Gius” as his own still call him—while Carrón, even though his Italian is excellent, cannot help but betray the Castilian accent, in calling him “Iussani.” He is a kind man, always smiling.

Fr. Carrón, what is the first result, if it may be called such, of Bergoglio’s papacy?

“In a short time Pope Francis has succeeded, with his gestures, in presenting himself as a disarmed witness to the power of faith.”

Why disarmed?

“Because he relies exclusively on the power of witness. He does not rely on a politics of hegemony. Francis believes that witness has in and of itself a power that can be understood by everyone. With his simplicity, he is able to engage with the heart of every person.”

Do people perceive him as sincere?

To me it seems evident that they perceive him as sincere. People have understood that his gestures are not showy, but bear within the accent of the truth. The human heart is able to perceive the truth. Thus, people understand right away that Francis is not acting, that he is truly this way. There would be too many things to act!”

Did you know him before he became Pope?

“No, I had never had contact with him. I know that in Argentina he presented a few books by Giussani. But we feel a particular accord with him, a strong accord. First, because of the centrality of Christ the Pope has insisted on so much in these months, because of his great desire that the announcement of Christ reach every person. Furthermore, Francis underlines what he calls the existential peripheries. We were born in the “normal” environments of living, so to speak, in the everyday experience in which life is played out. We desire to see that faith is able to enter into the reality of all things, and to show all its power for change.”

Does it seem to you that this Pope also insists on such a “centrality”?

Certainly! By insisting on how it is essential to announce Christ, he indicates a method to the Church. In this moment, he thinks it is crucial that all people be reached by the embrace of Christ.”

I’ll try to translate a way of speaking that perhaps is very much “yours.” You’re saying that, like Giussani, Bergoglio also announces Christianity not as a moral discipline, but as a fact.

“Exactly. Out of all the things that he could have chosen as a starting point, he chose one that I think is crucial. The announcement of Christianity as a fact that has happened and that still happens has always been a characteristic of ours. Be careful though: I am not saying that this Pope follows CL. On the contrary, I am saying that we perceive Francis as someone who forcefully calls us to conversion: to make us live more and more the essential, that is Christ.”

Is it true that Francis is very well liked by non believers as well?

“Yes, it is a new fact, and it shows people’s need to find, in the moment of history in which we are living, a person who revives hope.”

Some Catholics say that the world likes him because he panders to it.

“I do not at all think that he is trying to please the world by pandering to it.”

People say that he has reduced the figure of the Pope, that he no longer keeps the people at arm’s length.

“Jesus did not keep the people at a distance! He was in the midst of the fray! If there is a God who is not distant, it is the God of the incarnation. He became man to become like us and to be in our midst.”

Another criticism is that he resorts to pauperism to gain the approval of the liberals.

“Francis’ gestures of breach and of poverty are not an act: this is the way he is. He has always lived in the midst of the people, in the outskirts.”

In the Church, is there need of cleanup?

“I don’t know how things really are. For a fact, there is a desire for change, so to put the great structure that is the Church at the service of evangelization. After all, the Church is by definition *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed).”

Don’t you think that we—the media—are trivializing Pope Francis?

“The risk of reducing the significance of such a figure is always lurking. But I think the fact we are observing is much more important than anything some journalistic strategy could produce.”

Fr. Carrón, just two weeks ago, in Rome, two Popes canonized two other Popes. It seemed like a triumphal moment. Yet many Catholics remark that this triumph covers a mediocrity, a weariness in the everyday life of the Church.

“Yes, there can be mediocrity and weariness. But the current situation is not less favourable to the Christian announcement to a humanity that is ‘wounded,’ as Francis said. Everything depends on whether we embrace the gift Christ has given us with this Pope, so we can follow him and offer hope to many people who are waiting for a light in the darkness.”

A final question, Fr. Carrón. Did you ever expect to be in a Church with two Popes?

“Benedict XVI’s resignation was a shock, there is no use denying it. But the coexistence of two popes, which seemed a potential danger, has instead proved to be a witness of communion that has surprised, amazed us all. Not just because of the discretion of Benedict XVI, but also because of the way Francis has encouraged him to participate in the life of the Church. The outcome is something that we will always remember and that demonstrates great freedom.”