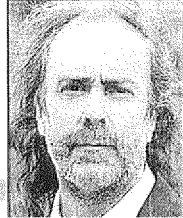


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WRITE TO JOHN AT The Irish Mail on Sunday, Embassy House, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

So who are you? A whole being with a full life or a nobody frying in the sun?



A LONG the seafront at Rimini on the Adriatic coast of Italy, hundreds of hotels stretch one after another into the horizon. On the beach, each hotel has its own special colour of deckchair, all arranged in perfectly straight lines, pointing south. In the morning, before the crowds appear, you can look along the lines of deckchairs and marvel at the straightness and symmetry of them, varied only by the waves of colour receding ever backwards.

But as the people begin to emerge for the day to take their places in the sun, the tableau assumes a somewhat grotesque overtone. More so than elsewhere, you might pause to wonder how to explain this phenomenon to a visiting Martian. Why do people lie out in straight lines all day, slowly turning themselves in the rays of the sun, like chickens in a carvery? Is this not a strange way for human beings to spend their time, lying in a tanning factory to change the colour of their skins?

A short distance way, in the Rimini Fiera, a vast complex about 20 times the size of the RDS Simmonscourt, can be found an entirely different mode of human behaviour. Here, it is possible to take a rest from the tanning factory and explore some of the most profound and pressing questions of the day, in an atmosphere coloured by a striking combination of commerce, culture, curiosity and faith.

The 20th Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples has as its title this year, 'Protagonists or Nobodies', issuing a challenge to the basting humans on the beach but without judgment or compulsion.

The Meeting engages the freedom of the holiday-makers by issuing an invitation unlike any other: come and consider yourself in the totality of your humanity, have fun, be happy, reflect, be yourself.

This is life expressed in its most modern manifestation but in the light of the possibility that life may be more than you think.

It is strange that the supposedly rational-scientific position on human existence invites me to believe that my life is a fleeting and random engagement with reality, that I am a purposeless organism briefly cast on the swell of time. Yet it also insists that I am the master of my own destiny, the nearest thing to a God that exists. This paradox makes me dizzy, because it casts me constantly between despair and a sense of omnipotence, between lack of confidence and egomania, between no belief at all and a supreme belief in my own powers and potential, or at least of the power and potential of mankind as a whole on my behalf.

CHRISTIANITY, on the other hand, tells me something coherent, unified and constant. It points me in the direction of an event in history that makes sense of everything and invites me to become fully alive and free in the drama that is my own life. By opening fully the connection between me and the Mystery, I

become connected to Absolute Reality. To respond to this invitation is to become a protagonist, to implement my human will in a way that adheres to the Plan that makes itself visible

moment-to-moment, to respond to each call or sign that reality places before me. To decline is to become a nobody, truly cast adrift on the sea of time.

This, approximately, is what this year's theme implies. It fits exactly the mood and ambience of the Meeting, this extraordinary gathering attended by about three-quarters of a million people through the last week of August.

The Meeting has about it a quality which is elusive, manifesting in the people you meet and the difference in how they strike you. It is an event organised by humans that seems to move beyond the merely human. The Meeting is run by members of the Catholic lay organisation, Communion and Liberation, founded more than 50 years ago by Fr Luigi Giussani, increasingly troubled by the reality of the culture in which he was required to convey the message of Christianity.

Every year for the past 29, several hundred members of the organisation, mainly young people, have given up two weeks of their summer holidays to work without pay to make this one of the most engaging events in the world.

This year, the programme included magnificent exhibitions on the question of climate change, the life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and

the story of the Prague Spring. There were interventions by an assortment of people, but spectacularly by a number of prisoners released for a day from long sentences to talk about how they have achieved freedom while in prison. Through the week, hundreds of events embraced culture, politics, science, sport and art but without an underlying ideology or agenda other than the excavation of truth.

The climate change exhibition, for example, concluded that, although the human contribution to global warming is relatively small, there is no room for complacency because the chaotic nature of the earth's system may well be responding in a disproportionate way. This was pure science, unspun fact, without ulterior motive or judgment. At the Meeting, you are not invited to sit around decrying the drift of the modern world but, instead, to look at how better to relate to that reality.

This remarkable mix of commerce, culture, art, politics and science, with its implicit reminder of the ultimate Meaning, insists that faith is the only thing that makes sense of everything. God is not an idea but a reality that intervenes in earthly space and time, invisible but detectable moment-to-moment. Central to the proposal of Fr Giussani is that there is a wound in the soul of modern humankind, an abyss of the heart that renders us incapable of seeing ourselves as we truly are.

He called it the Chernobyl Effect, a kind of psychic meltdown which left intact the outward structure of the human but hollowed out the inside. Imagining ourselves in sight of human omnipotence, we lost contact with our true natures. In pursuit of a particular form of progress, we broke away from any sense of dependency but failed to encounter the freedom we expected to follow. Faced with almost limitless choices, we do not know what we want. We are passive in the face of our own possibilities, which seem to reduce the more we advance, and yet imagine ourselves more engaged with society than we have ever been.

EVERYTHING has about it a sense that it is not enough, because it isn't. Having closed ourselves off from the ultimate answer, we are no longer surprised by life, and bored by ourselves. We are nobodies. The protagonist is one who is open to the totality of his own nature, who minute-to-minute sees himself as something surprising, who remains conscious of the irreducibility of his own uniqueness, who perceives an infinity of possibility for himself, who has his own face and is, therefore, free.

Conscious that his being comes from outside himself, he is constantly surprised, not least by himself, and is therefore more connected to his life.

Thus, Giussani described the conflict at the centre of human existence in modern society, between man as the creation of something greater or man as the product of his own stratagems, relying entirely on his own resources.

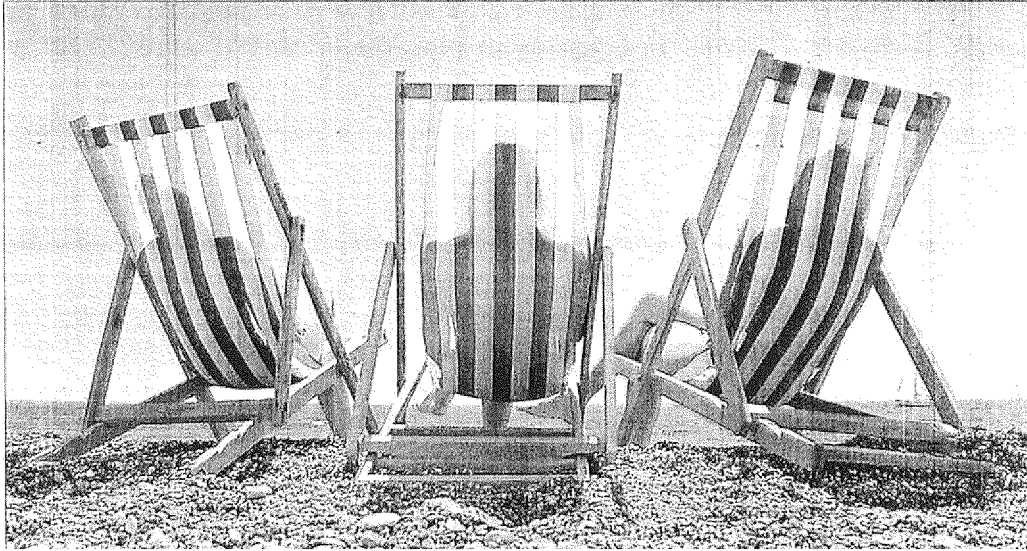
Giussani was talking not about secularisation, a clichéd and misleading concept that confuses more than it clarifies, but about de-absolutisation, the erosion of mankind's consciousness of itself as created and therefore dependent. Man, he insisted, needs to be connected to the cosmic as much as to the local. Our souls are greater than the universe and therefore cannot breathe without stretching out in infinite space and time.

What, therefore, allows human beings to be themselves, to broaden their desires so that they become fully human and fully alive?

Christ.

By opening up and allowing Him to enter our lives through our needs and words, we become full of marvel and astonishment. We resign as the Gods of our own existence and become beggars again, and in this way become happier than we ever imagined, unleashing in ourselves a new kind of love which looks, and is looked at, in a new way.

Thus, paradoxically, man becomes a protagonist who adds to the world rather than simply waiting in it, stretched in the sun while being rendered medium-rare.



SUN WORSHIPPERS: Many of us forget there is something much greater than what we venerate, believes Fr Luigi Glussani, below

