

13. God passes through human reality

by Luigi Giussani*

The first individuals who spread Christianity were perfectly aware that the divine shone forth in the world from what they said and did, that their words were insufficient, their gestures weak, their personalities inadequate, their human condition wretched. However, this did not mean that they were acquiescent and resigned. No, they proudly ran the race, fought the daily struggle, constantly reaching out for the gift of salvation.

Moreover, it was not merely the people through whom God communicated himself who were human in a perfectly ordinary way. The circumstances were also unexceptional. We are reminded that in the day-to-day life of the first Christian communities, man's encounter with God – the supreme aspect of the problem of life – and his participation in his being took place, above all, in situations we might call vulgar, in the most normal of suppers, a simple, shared meal. This was the context in which the deepest, most mysterious involvement with the Lord transpired, the communication of divine life with all its gifts came through eating bread and drinking wine. Certainly, man may well feel such a method to be the most banal of approaches; he may show a type of subtle resistance to God's mysterious method of wanting to pass through human reality (while man, in contrast, tends to codify all his thinking and doing as divine!).

[And furthermore,] even the word that pardons sin (and who can pardon sin except God?) is a human word, channeled through a pathetic human voice. "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."¹

It is not so easy to realize in existential terms that this is precisely the problem of the Church: God *wants* to pass through the humanity of those he has taken hold of in Baptism.

Charles Péguy expresses God's unimaginable method in the following way:

"Miracle of miracles, my child, mystery of mysteries.
Because Jesus Christ has become our carnal brother
Because he has pronounced, carnally and in time, eternal words,
In monte, upon the mountain,
It is to us, the weak, that he was given.
He depends on us, weak and carnal,

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*From the book by L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, McGill-Queens, Montreal 2001, pp. 126-128.

» To bring to life and to nourish and to keep alive in time
 These words pronounced alive in time.
 Mystery of mysteries, this privilege that was given to us,
 This incredible, exorbitant privilege,
 To keep alive the words of life,
 To nourish with our blood, with our flesh, with our heart
 The words which, without us, would collapse fleshless.
 [...]
 O misery, o happiness, that it would depend on us
 Shivers of happiness,
 We who are nothing, we who spend a few years of nothing on earth,
 A few wretched, pathetic years,
 (We immortal souls),
 O danger, the risk of death, it is we who are responsible, we who are incapable of anything,
 who are nothing, who are uncertain of tomorrow,
 And even of today, who are born and who will die like creatures of a day,
 Who pass through like mercenaries,
 And yet it is we who are responsible,
 We who in the morning are uncertain of the evening,
 And of the afternoon,
 And who at night are uncertain of the morning,
 Of the following morning
 It's folly, it's still we who are responsible, it depends of us and us alone
 To ensure the Words a second eternity
 An eternal eternity.
 A remarkable perpetuity.
 It belongs to us, it depends on us to assure the words
 An eternal perpetuity, a carnal perpetuity,
 A perpetuity nourished with meat, with fat and with blood.
 We who are nothing who will not last,
 Who practically speaking won't last at all
 (On earth)
 It's folly, it's still we who are responsible
 To preserve and to nourish the eternal
 On earth
 The spoken words, the word of God.'''2

Let us summarize: the Church is characterized by the divine which has chosen human reality to communicate himself. This implies that we accept human factors as part and parcel of the definition of Church. Given our human limitations, it seems absurd that God would choose us in this way. But if we recognize that *this* is the Church's definition of itself, then no objection to Christianity that makes a point or pretext of the disproportion, inadequacy or error of the human reality which forms the Church, can ever logically be raised. In the same way, in reverse, a true Christian will not be able to use his limits as an excuse, even though, by definition, he will have limits. [...] A Christian, while being intent on asking for the Lord's goodness, will, at the same time, be sincere and sorrowful in judging his own incapacity, which, nevertheless, is used by God. »

» [...] If the Church is a human reality, then we might well find in it unworthy men, incapable parents, rebellious children, liars, cheats. And the list could go on and on, starting from the long series of grave shortcomings to be found even in the first Christian texts. But anyone seeking to verify the announced presence of the divine in the midst of this human wretchedness cannot dwell on this wretchedness and conclude that the divine cannot possibly be present. For this reason, another criterion will have to be adopted, for there is no wretchedness that could ever annul the paradoxical nature of the instrument chosen by God.

¹ Jn 20:23.

² Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, translated by David L. Schindler, Jr., William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 59-60.