

“What brought you here? What bonds you to this experience?”

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

1. The Human Experience

by Luigi Giussani*

Even after sharing their lives with Jesus for such a long time, after the disaster of Calvary and the mystery of Easter, after all that, the apostles understood little of Him. Only a few hours before His ascent into Heaven, they still asked Him when he would establish the Kingdom of Israel, such as everyone conceived it at that time: a kingdom of earthly and political power.

“So when they had come together they asked Him, ‘Lord will you at this time restore the Kingdom of Israel?’”¹

If they did not understand Him, why did they follow Him? And among them were those who had left wife, children, home, boat and nets, offices, business. Why did they follow Him?

They followed Christ because He had become the focus of their affections. Why?

Where they had been unaware and confused, they were enlightened, for Christ was the only one in whose words they felt their whole human experience understood and their needs taken seriously, clarified. Thus, for instance, those very people who used to believe that their only need was bread began to understand that “Man does not live by bread alone.”²

Christ introduces Himself to them in just this way, as *an Other*, who surprisingly moves in their direction, helps them, explains their troubles to them; He cures them if they are crippled or blind, heals their souls, responds to their needs, is within their experience. But what are their experiences? Their experiences, their needs, are their very selves, those men and women, their own human nature.

Thus Christ is right here, in my attitude and disposition as a human being, in my way, that is, as one who expects, awaits something, because I sense that I am entirely wanting. He »

¹ Acts 1:6.

² Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4.

* Source: *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 53-54.

» has joined me. He has proposed Himself to my original needs.

Hence, to meet Christ we must first formulate our human problem seriously.

First, we must open ourselves to ourselves. In other words, we must be acutely aware of our experiences and look on the humanity within us with sympathy; we must take into consideration who we really are. To take into consideration means to take seriously what we experience, *everything* we experience, to discover every aspect, to seek the complete meaning.

We must be very careful, because all too easily we do not start from our true experience; that is, from our experience in its entirety and authenticity. We often identify our experience with partial impressions, truncating it, as often happens with affective matters, when we fall in love or dream about the future.

Even more often we confuse our experience with the prejudices or schemes that we absorb from our environment, perhaps unawares. Therefore, instead of opening up to that attitude of expectation, sincere attention, and dependence that our experience suggests and fervently demands, we impose categories and explanations that constrict and distress our experience, while presuming to resolve it.

The myth that “scientific progress one day will solve all our needs” is the modern formula of this presumption, a wild and repugnant presumption, because it does not consider or even know our real needs. It refuses to observe our experience clearly and to accept what it means to be human, with all the needs that this implies. For this reason modern civilization causes us to move blindly between this desperate presumption and darkest despair.