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***Catholicism's Most Influential Thinkers***  
***The Pope's visit to Egypt built bridges and tore down walls***

Interview with Julián Carrón  
By Sayed Mahmoud

*Religion is not the problem but a part of the solution. The aim of our spiritual movement, our mission, is to give full witness to our faith, spreading beauty in the world. The Church traveled a long path of increasing awareness of the importance of freedom. The Pope's visit to Egypt built bridges and tore down walls. We need spaces of open dialogue to overcome prejudice.*

When Pope Francis reached his position at the helm of the Vatican in March 2013, the media described him as “a man capable of bringing change.” In the years since assuming this very important position, he has fashioned a kind of “spiritual diplomacy” that works to address crises in a new way.

It is striking that he works together with a team of brilliant thinkers to establish a new kind of discourse to counter the forms of hateful rhetoric common in the world today. He works to propagate shared human values and bolster the religious establishment with the help of influential social movements. Among these movements, Communion and Liberation is one of the most significant, thanks to the thought of its spiritual leader Julián Carrón, who took up the reigns of the organization in 2005. In his new book *Disarming Beauty*, which was discussed last month at UN headquarters, Carrón proposed a collection of stimulating reflections on the state of religious movements today and on ways of nurturing opportunities for communication between Christianity and Islam.

It is also interesting that Carrón acknowledges the role European society plays in making youth susceptible to radicalization, regarding terrorism as a new expression of European nihilism. In addition, he defends the right to migrate and to seek asylum, seeing the presence of migrants as a fundamental part of the renewal of the human spirit in Western society.

Below, we are reprinting my dialogue with him after our brief encounter at Rimini last August, in which I asked him to send written responses to my questions.

**How could we describe the Communion and Liberation movement to the readers of Al-Ahram in the Arab world?**

CL is an experience *of* life and *for* life. It is a friendship that has the aim of educating each other in the Catholic faith within the context of the life of the Church. It is a never-ending journey, because the desire for what is true, beautiful and good; and the search for happiness belong to every man and woman, of all ages and from all traditions.

People are totally free in their participation in CL. The life of each community is lived out in the places they work or study, in their neighborhoods and where they spend their time. They aren't founded according to a set plan, but because of an encounter among people who want to share their faith where they are, praying together and facing day-to-day life with faith as their starting point.

The proposal offered by Fr. Giussani, who founded the movement at a Milan high school in 1954, was very simple: that life (work, relationships, school, etc.) could become 100 times more beautiful and attractive in companionship with Christ. When he began, Fr. Giussani was aware that if a person didn't understand the human advantage of being Christian and how it could help one to live, his or her faith wouldn't survive in a secularized world going in the completely opposite direction.

Because of this, Communion and Liberation's primary aim is to educate people in how to face reality with all its problems and challenges; in other words, to form adults who don't just live out their faith at church, but also at home and when they go to work.

### **What is the relationship between the movement and the Vatican?**

We are an apostolic movement, officially recognized by the Church in 1982. Under the leadership of Pope Francis, members of our movement participate in the life of the Catholic Church and are collaborators in witnessing to Christian life in every environment.

### **Usually, spiritual and social movements are born out of ideas; instead, here [at the Meeting] I've observed that the ideas are born out of your movement. What is the secret behind this distinctive characteristic?**

There's no secret. Christianity is first a life, not an idea; it's something that *happens* and carries a message. It's the development of this life that generates thoughts and reflections, as documented by the Meeting in which you participated. Our movement did not originate with an idea or a predetermined plan; its origin was the encounter between Fr. Giussani and a group of young people for whom Christianity was no longer interesting, and whom Giussani wanted to show the beauty of being Christian. This is how it has happened from the beginning: Christianity wasn't born with an idea but with a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who set the people he met along the way into motion.

### **Every time you speak, you insist that freedom is the only path to God. How can you reconcile that idea with religion's invitation to adhere to strict rules?**

Precisely because Christianity is a life that is fascinating and beautiful, those who discover it desire to participate in that life. Nothing challenges a person's freedom like finding something beautiful. When something attracts us, there's no need to impose anything. It is we who don't want to miss out on what attracted us. The only rule, therefore, is following this fascinating attraction.

Jesus' disciples were so amazed at seeing how attractive His life was that they exclaimed, "We have never seen anything like it!" And the longer they were with Him, the more they desired that life. Jesus, seeing this desire for life, gave them the one rule needed to participate in it: following. "Whoever follows me will receive the hundredfold in this life and eternal life in the age to come." Anyone who is willing to follow Him can verify, today just as 2000 years ago, the truth of those words. Charles Péguy, then, was correct in writing, "To this freedom, I sacrificed everything, says God, to this taste I have for being loved by free men, freely."

Let's consider the call of Abraham, our shared father in faith. God took account of the fact that he could have said no. Abraham, however, welcomed the Lord's invitation to leave his homeland... That method has not changed.

I remember the conversation I had with a taxi driver who was reading a book of theology. At a certain point, he told me that he was scandalized by certain things that had happened because God had given men and women freedom. So I asked him, "Would you rather have a wife who loves you freely, or one who is 'programmed' to love you so there's no risk?" "I'd rather have a wife who loves me freely." Then, I added, "And do you think God has worse taste than you?" That taxi driver was aware that an instant of being loved freely by his wife was worth the entire universe.

The Church's long path in clarifying the concept of "religious freedom," lasting all the way up to the Second Vatican Council, led her to the declaration that "the human person has the right to religious freedom." It was not that the Church decided to compromise, seeing as She wasn't able to convert everyone. She said this, instead, thanks to a greater awareness of the nature of and only road that leads to truth. "Truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth." Consequently, Christians renounced the violence that had, however, marked some moments of their history.

### **What has made it possible for the Rimini Meeting to grow into a cultural and intellectual event of such scale?**

To understand this, you have to look at how it began: it all started with a group of friends in Rimini who were passionate about life and realized that, over the summer when thousands of tourists from around the world flocked to its beaches, the city lacked a Christian presence for them to encounter. They therefore took up the initiative of creating the "Meeting for Friendship Amongst Peoples," a space for people to encounter one other. Everything followed from that. Certainty in one's own faith makes you open and curious to seek out the beauty, goodness, truth and justice present in everyone. This has made the Meeting into a place of openness where the most distant religious and cultural experiences can encounter one another, sharing in each other's lives.

### **Is it time to conceive of a new framework for encounter and exchange, in contrast to the formality of so-called interreligious dialogue?**

Yes. During a recent event, a well-known Spanish intellectual who is not a believer invited Christians to “come out of the closet,” to offer their contribution to the life of society. He said, “Even if we may not all share their faith, we are all in need the light they bring.”

Just look at what Pope Francis did in coming to Egypt: his very presence was a space of dialogue, in line with this culture of encounter that builds bridges instead of walls.

**Today, it seems like religion is the cause of many global crises that result in war and conflict. How do you see the role of religion, and how can it make itself into a solution, rather than a problem?**

Religion or the instrumentalization or politicization of it?

Pope Francis’s words and gestures during his visit to Egypt were the unarmed witness of a man who does not use religion to impose something on others. I was struck at hearing him, in speaking to the Christians in Egypt, clearly state, “The only fanaticism believers can have is that of charity! Any other fanaticism does not come from God and is not pleasing to him!”

This is the kind of witness that moves people of different religious beliefs to live together peacefully. In fact, it’s not coincidence that Francis chose Egypt as a place to witness to this culture of dialogue and encounter, because your history is full of examples of Christians and Muslims living together peacefully.

**How would you describe religion’s role in the public square? Do we need to correct our way of relating to God?**

Religion’s one role is that of educating people to be a witness.

Yes, maybe we do need to change the way we live the religious experience...

**Right now, our countries are fighting against terrorism. What message can your movement offer to promote opportunities for dialogue between the West and the world of Islam, and to confront terrorism together?**

Our future depends upon this: knowing how to create places of authentic encounter between people from different backgrounds and traditions. This happened for centuries in many countries in the Middle East, where men and women of various religions and cultures lived together in peace.

We need spaces of freedom where each person can communicate his or her vision of the world and way of life, overcoming prejudices in order to be enriched by each other’s experience.

I am thoroughly convinced that the historical situation in which we live, though difficult and dramatic, is an extraordinary opportunity for all of us.

**When will we be able to overcome the mutual lack of understanding between Islam and the West?**

When the culture of encounter becomes the method those seeking the truth use to relate to one another. Important steps have been taken; now we need to continue, patiently and without getting

discouraged by difficulties, along the road indicated by Pope Francis during his visit to Egypt. Speaking to a delegation of Muslim leaders from Great Britain a few weeks before the visit, he said, “I like to think that the most important work that we have to do today, among us, in humanity, is the work ‘of listening:’ listening to each other. Listening to each other, without rushing to give a response. Welcoming the words of a brother, of a sister, and then thinking to offer my own. We all must speak, listen to each other and seek the path together. And when you listen and you speak, you are already on the right path.”

And during the 2015 meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies, Pope Francis, once again, stated that, “Dialogue, thus, begins with encounter. The first knowledge of the other is born from it. Indeed, if one begins from the premise of the common affiliation inhuman nature, one can go beyond prejudices and fallacies and begin to understand the other according to a new perspective.”

Let me give you a few examples: an Pakistani refugee who arrives at an Italian welcome center, totally exhausted, encounters a volunteer who calls him by name and asks if he’d like sauce or no sauce on his pasta, and meat or fish. The refugee breaks out into tears. “Why?” they ask him. Because no one had called him by name and, before, all he ate was rice. Now, there were these “infidels” calling him by name and asking him what he’d like to eat. It’s enough to make him ask himself, “How could these people ever go to hell?” All this because of a plate of food! The humanity of a simple gesture shifted the image he had of Westerners.

Another example: a Muslim teenager who attends a study skills center tells one of the volunteers that he used to carry a crowbar in his backpack, and had a potential for violence, but now, after his experience being helped at the center, everything has changed. And now that young man is the director of the center! I believe that this is the road to true interreligious dialogue: an encounter.

I always think back to the way we met Professor Wael Farouq. A young man from Communion and Liberation in Florence went to study at a university in Cairo, where he met an Egyptian professor: Wael. A Western Christian runs into a Middle Eastern Muslim, and each has his preconceptions about the other. But what happened next? Something neither of them had anticipated. They became friends, getting to know each other better, and the dialogue that started carried them all the way to the Cairo Meeting a few years back, dedicated to beauty. This is interreligious dialogue: a space for reciprocal witness that’s capable of embracing those who are different than you with human gestures that change hearts.

### **Will this new generation of immigrants in Europe be able to find a solution to the conflict between civilizations, transforming it into true dialogue?**

Once again, for this question, we have to look at reality. One of the exhibitions at the Meeting was organized by a group of young Christians and Muslims. It was supposed to be called, “Young, Second-Generation Immigrants,” but at a certain point the young Muslim women and men said to their Christian friends, “Don’t call us second-generation immigrants; we’re Italians!” What made it possible for them to say that? An encounter in which the ‘other’ was no longer

perceived as a threat, but rather as a friend for the journey who has the same questions and same desire for truth, beauty, justice and happiness. So the title for the exhibition, which tens of thousands of people visited, was changed to, “The Young Faces of Multiethnic Italy.” From this, you can see it’s not a matter of abstract discussions, but of looking at what is already happening.

**The founder of the movement maintains that the two pathways to religion are reason and reality. How can that be the case if the object of religion that which is beyond reality and religious principles cannot be tested by scientific experiment?**

They can’t be tested in a scientific experiment, but they can be—and they must be, because otherwise belief wouldn’t be reasonable—tested in our experience. When Fr. Giussani started the movement of Communion and Liberation in Milan in the mid-1950s, young Catholics knew all the Christian principles by heart, but they had nothing to do with their lives. They didn’t add anything to help face the questions that came up at school or at home. Seeing this, Fr. Giussani gave up his career in theology to go teach in a public school, so that he could demonstrate how faith is relevant for life’s needs. He didn’t impose his ideas by virtue of the fact he was a priest and therefore the students had to passively accept what he said during (Catholic) religion class. On the first day, he said to the teens that he didn’t want to impose his ideas. “I’m not here so that you can take my ideas as your own; I’m here to teach you a true method that you can use to judge the things I will tell you.” That method was the invitation to compare everything they heard with the needs of their hearts, because only then could they discover and verify if Christianity was a help for life, or just a burden—a heavy load of lectures and moral norms—to cast aside in order to really live.

**How can you explain the transformation of young people born and raised in Western societies into terrorists? Are these societies in any way responsible for it?**

Definitely! Many of the attackers are not coming from outside, they are second-generation immigrants; they were born in Europe and studied in our schools and universities. Therefore, we have a good deal of responsibility. What do these children of immigrants who are by all measures Italian, French, English, etc. encounter in society? Do they see something beautiful that attracts them, something true that challenges their reason and their freedom? This goes for our children, as well; after bringing them into the world, what do we offer them? The frantic pursuit of a comfortable life or something that really rises to the level of their desire for meaning? Too often, our young people see the emptiness of a life without meaning, leaving them desperate and alone. I can see why they would choose violence. This is an epochal challenge for us: how can we respond to the emptiness that eats away at young people to the point that they prefer death over life? Ethical reproaches are not enough; they have to feel accompanied in order to discover they can change, as happened with the student at the study skills center who then became the director. Those teens belong to the same generation of those who are committing violence, but they have encountered something that changed their lives, that made them better Muslims, as some of them have said.

This is why, in his speech at Al-Azhar, Pope Francis invited everyone, Christian or Muslim, to, “An education in respectful openness and sincere dialogue with others, recognizing their rights and basic freedoms. We need to accompany young people, helping them on the path to maturity and teaching them to respond to the incendiary logic of evil by patiently working for the growth of goodness: young people that, like well-planted trees, can be firmly rooted in the soil of history, and, growing heavenward in one another’s company, can daily turn the polluted air of hatred into the oxygen of fraternity. For all these reasons, especially today, religion is not a problem but a part of the solution.”