

# “He took the human person seriously. He took Christ seriously”

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**T**o mark the twenty years since Fr. Giussani's death, I have been asked for a reflection on his contribution to the Church and the world. Rather than delve into a deep historical analysis, I'll concentrate on what comes spontaneously when I think of his person and his work in one thought, which I would formulate in this way: “He took the human person seriously. He took Christ seriously.”

Ever since his youth, Fr. Giussani had the gift of a marked human, existential, and I would say philosophical sensitivity, which enabled him to grasp the depth of the human soul. He was able to perceive the greatness of the aspirations of the human heart, present in everyone, and bring them to light, making them the object of reflection, and spoke of them with admiration, wonder, and respect. Listening to him, many young people became more self-aware and arrived at a deeper understanding of their own interior world, the greatness of their own heart. Perhaps they had never perceived the dignity of their soul, the heights to which they themselves unconsciously aspired. They identified with Fr. Giussani's description of the human person, of every human person, the starting point for the journey in search of the meaning of life. I think that in their first encounters with him, many young people must have felt a surge of joy mixed with surprise, and must have thought to themselves: “What this priest says is true! It's just what I feel; it's the reality I'm living. This is me! I've sensed it at times but was never able to express it this way!” In this sense, I say that Fr. Giussani “took the human person seriously”: he explored the deepest human reality, one that never changes, one that is not bound to a historical era, a culture, or a geographic place.

**Fr. Giussani was able to speak to the human person** as such and to people with irrepressible questions about meaning, with a desire to live with fullness every aspect of life: love, friendship, relationships, work, social engagement, etc. People who, in the final analysis, are open to a transcendental dimension of life and feel restless until they find a “global answer” to their questions, some-

thing that gives everything meaning, that presents itself as so “charged” with being, goodness, and truth that it can satisfy every desire, can ground every aspect of reality and give heft to every human experience, including the most ordinary and “lay” aspects of existence: affections, friendship, study, science, work....

Fr. Giussani united this “taking the human person seriously” with “taking Christ seriously.” He presented himself to his first students as a “priest in a cassock,” someone who spoke openly and frankly about his faith in Jesus Christ. He never hid his identity, his mission, or his convictions. The discovery of Jesus as the center of history and the cosmos, the fulcrum of all that exists and the fullness

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of meaning for the human person, was a true “lightning strike” in his youthful years, and he never ceased communicating and announcing this personal “discovery” to all those he met. Fr. Giussani placed great emphasis on God's free and surprising initiative in coming to us, made “encounterable” and “experienceable” in the concreteness of the human life of His Son, in the historical Jesus of Nazareth, who remains forever “a historical fact.” This prompted his strong emphasis on Christianity not as a sentiment, a philosophical intuition of sublime truths, or a rigid set of ethical demands, but as an “event” perennially present in history. God, His reality, His existence, His love, came to us in the “human flesh” of the Word made man, who remains to this day and forever, concrete and “incarnate” through the Church, which is the “body” of Christ, His visible extension in history. Fr. Giussani never feared speaking of Christ, even in settings unfavorable to religious conversations. And he never feared saying that Christ is encountered in the Church, not in solitary experiences of presumed “spirituality.” He is encountered in

the Church, understood in her concreteness, made up of women and men, believers who live their faith together; made up of pastors, made up of "Tradition," the global interpretation of reality that the Christian creed provides us; and made up of "traditions," the historical, liturgical, and devotional ways in which faith is expressed, which Fr. Giussani wisely valorized and re-proposed to his young people. All the rest, I would say, followed on its own. Once people discovered in Christ the fullness of human existence and embraced Him, almost naturally, by "overflowing abundance" and by "interior coherence," they expressed the new presence of Christ in themselves, in everything they did: in the world of work, in professional and academic spheres, and in the gestures of charity that blossomed over the years.

Thus Fr. Giussani was able to unite "the questions of the human person" and "God's answer," showing the reasonableness of the Christian announcement inasmuch as it is the complete fulfillment of the human. His charism as an educator meant he was able to elicit the great questions of

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the heart, bring to the light the aspirations of the human person, and show how Christ is the definitive answer to those questions. This fascinated thousands of people in the course of his lifetime.

On further reflection, we can see in this aspect of Fr. Giussani's charism a providential initiative of the Holy Spirit, anticipating in him what He would later inspire in the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the Council fathers proposed to speak anew with truth and frankness to contemporary women and men and propose the perennial validity of Christ. Consider the well-known passage in *Gaudium et Spes* listing the fundamental questions present in us: "What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist

despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?" (GS 10). The Council fathers answered these questions by affirming that "The Church firmly believes that Christ... can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny... under the light of Christ... the council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man." (ibid.) This is exactly what Fr. Giussani did throughout his life, and it remains as his great contribution to the Church.

**The extraordinary work of education** and evangelization of this passionate priest and faithful servant of the Church, which I have summed up in the expression "take the human person seriously—take Christ seriously," is still a "directional indicator" for the Church today. In fact, on the one hand, the Church runs the risk of "not taking the human person seriously" when she banalizes people, reducing them to their most superficial needs, and thus ends up proposing in her activities vacuous and fleeting experiences of religious emotionality, or limits herself to assisting the world in promoting only the psychological and material well-being of the collectivity. On the other hand, and even more seriously, the Church always runs the risk of "not taking Christ seriously," because she is silent about Him, because she does not place Him in the foreground, reducing His announcement to "values" or "civic duties" or extrinsic "moral rules," at times even going so far as to seem almost "ashamed" of Christ, in the false conviction that she should not "impose" her ideas, not wanting to be "dogmatic" and "arrogant" in her proposals.

Fr. Giussani teaches us, still today, not to have these false fears, not to hide our light, which is Christ, under a bushel basket, but to set it full in sight on the candelabra of the Church. Fr. Giussani's charism and untiring apostolate are both a gift for the Church and the contribution he gave to the world, because the whole world is awaiting the Truth, reconciliation, and hope that can only come from Christ.