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01

**What
remains
of the
human
being**



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Alex Huanfa Cheng, *Untitled* (detail),
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and displayed at the Photo Vogue Festival 2023.

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GIUSSANI

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Hallucinations

Artificial intelligence is at the center of the world, the protagonist of debates in every sphere. Even for the pope, who dedicated his Message for Peace to it, it is among the priorities for reflection, raising urgent questions about its impact, from the dignity of the individual to international dynamics to armed conflict.

While these “intelligent machines” are causing people to discuss the need for global governance, they already boast computing power that is a million times greater than before, which has surprised and frightened even those who created them. They provoke excitement and fear precisely because they are no longer conceived merely as tools. They reproduce or imitate human cognitive capacities and (when trained) generate content; they provide answers but do not ask questions; they threaten authenticity with verisimilitude and so-called “hallucinations” that are plausible but not necessarily true.

The Close-up section is therefore dedicated to this avatar of unstoppable progress, offering several perspectives on the radical questions it opens up with respect to the meaning of knowledge and our relationship with reality and truth. We asked various interlocutors how artificial intelligence challenges our conception of life, what it reveals about the fact that the person is a “unitary being, [which is] irreducible.” This is how psychoanalyst Miguel Benasayag defines the person in the dialogue that opens the issue. To the question, “What remains of the person?” when so much is delegated to algorithms and machines, he replies: “Everything.” It is not just a question of affirming this: it is decisive to see that in the face of artificial intelligence, the human is not lost if we are present with our whole selves. It is interesting that the key to everything is, more and more, examining in greater depth the nature of the only subject. Only thus will persons also be able to program and use the formidable power of these instruments and to do so responsibly, loving the truth, without manipulating or allowing themselves to be manipulated. Accepting and not running away from the unprecedented provocation of this revolution causes the constituent factors of life to emerge more powerfully. In the fourth episode of the podcast *Il senso religioso* [The religious sense], Fr. Giusani—whose unpublished speech we publish in this issue on its nineteenth anniversary—says: “If I am engaged with my experience, if I look at my subject in action in the present, two types of factors emerge that are irreducible to each other. The great philosopher Jaspers said: ‘All empirical causalities and biological processes of development... would seem to apply to man’s material substratum, not to himself.’ There is something in man that exceeds.”

We are well aware that not everything can be predicted and calculated, but what is it about us, at this moment, that emerges as truly inaccessible to even the most prodigious instrument?

Dennis, Brigida Laura

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“Young man, the sun is there”

After the death of José Carrascosa, a friend of his wrote these lines for him.

Dear Carras, I lived almost a year of my life with you in 2020. For me, it was a very difficult year in which everything seemed very difficult and the problems insurmountable. You would arrive at the International Center, where you were the director and I was responsible for external relations. You would open my office door and look at me as if you loved me in spite of everything, and in your typical Spatalian, you would say to me, “Young man, you look a little worn out!” You would start to tell me everything you were doing, which for the most part, were absolutely normal things. However, you did them as if they were adventures from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. It was like watching a movie! With you, it was literally like that: even going to buy fish at the trusted fishmonger was the most important thing in the world. I was worried, fearful of what would become of my life. You, not at all worried about the things that overwhelmed me, invited me to your house. “Young man, some journalists will be at our house, and I thought to invite you because you will have to deal with them as part of your job.” At your suggestion, I arrived a little early and found you cooking with a glass of wine beside you, actually two glasses! One was for me. You said, “What are you doing in the doorway?! *Bueno*, come on in!” I did, and you told me to start talking about the things that were troubling me. You listened and I exclaimed, “Understand? It’s a very difficult situation!” And while you were slicing a little of that Spanish salami (one of the many marvelous things I enjoyed with you), you lifted your gaze and nodded. Then you looked at me

and replied, “Yes, yes, yes, I understand! Eat, so in the meantime you can clarify your ideas so that they don’t become too heavy.” As I ate the salami, my worries persisted. And you said, “Chop this onion.” I started chopping, and I continued with my worries. And you; “Taste this wine! You are ignorant! You don’t know about the good things in life and then you complain!” You laughed and I laughed too, and trusting you more and more, I savored the good wine. The guests arrived. Sometimes the discussions were hard, sometimes passionate. I was at my first job and you looked at me, and while people were shouting and were distracted, you winked at me, laughing. And then, everything seemed simpler. On one of those evenings, before going home, you said to me, “Young man, the sun is there. When it’s cloudy, you don’t see it. But the sun is there even if you don’t see it. When it’s cloudy, we act as if it weren’t there. But obviously, we know it’s there. In fact, what do we see when the clouds pass? The sun! You see? It’s there and not because we have decided so.” For a year, you embraced me to my very marrow, teaching me to look at the world in such a human way, without fear, so that I could no longer shake off that embrace even though fear... is still there. I think you also felt fear, but you didn’t feel ashamed. In these years, I have continually traveled abroad for work, and we haven’t heard from each other very often, but each time we do, it’s as if not even a day has gone by. So, in reality, I experience this “separation” as one of the many pauses between one of our encounters and the next. We will see each other again in that place where the word “Father” has a definitive depth. For me, you are “only” the beginning of a great adventure of love into which you have dragged me, along with so many others.

Dennis

That monthly phone call

For more than ten years, I have known a family to whom I used to deliver a package from the Food Bank. With time their economic situation improved slightly, so they no longer needed the support, but the mom has always appreciated my monthly phone calls. She would always ask me, “Please call me again. It’s such a pleasure to talk with you.” She had great difficulty in communicating with her adult children, who have made choices she doesn’t agree with and who have caused her much suffering. For me, that phone call has always been the grace of our Lord who makes Himself present; I also have difficulties with my children and my family, even though they are not in such difficult situations. Talking with her and offering certain judgments I’ve learned in our company was, for me, to hear them again, not as a discourse, but as a judgment that we verify together. In fact, I have always said to her, “Let’s try to verify this path together and then we can talk to each other about it.” Lately, after a period of calm in which a grandchild was born and her children seemed to have stable jobs, the situation has again become complicated and so she asked me to come and visit her. We hugged each other, and to celebrate, she had bought a small tray of pastries. Before leaving, I proposed to her, her husband, and her son that we say a Hail Mary. We prayed together and we promised to see each other at the Food Bank’s Christmas Luncheon. I called her to confirm and to tell her that I wouldn’t be at the Mass before the luncheon because I had a commitment to bring communion to two elderly parishioners. She unexpectedly told me that she desired to receive Jesus and so, on that occasion, she would go to communion. I was moved by this desire to receive Jesus that had sprung up in her heart from the depths of a great anxiety, which, by the way, had manifested itself in a health issue. I said to myself, “Here is where you are, Jesus, like a satellite navigator that continually resets in order to find another route to save that soul too, one by one; each and everyone in their own freedom.”

Brigida

Pumpkins and the caress

A year ago, my friend, Luca, provoked me to take seriously the proposal of charitable work, which had stopped with the pandemic except for fundraising

for AVSI. I was immediately in crisis: How could I add yet another activity to the calendar? Even though my objections seemed legitimate, I couldn’t ignore the turmoil in my heart. My husband and I began talking about this at our School of Community and with our friends. In particular, during a meeting with our Fraternity group, it became clear that, even though my husband and I were aware of the importance of the gesture, we were still hesitant, trying to reconcile the proposal with our objections about time and commitment. But when God calls you, He takes no half measures. In fact, during our conversation, Giulia told us we should do charitable work once a month, as Fr. Giussani invites us to do, and not just once in a while. At this point, what had been unrest in me became a storm. One afternoon in talking with Miriam, a mom from the community, I asked if she did charitable work. She responded that they hadn’t started up again, but they would be interested in starting, even once a month. “But how?” I thought, “You who have five children are willing and I who have only three am not?” Here is God’s caress; He puts a friend by my side to walk my path with me. I immediately got going. Last September, we began going to a nursing home near my daughter’s school. Once a month, each family proposes an activity to do with the elderly and then we sing. Before going in, we say a prayer and we read *The Meaning of Charitable Work*. Our friends’ generosity is astounding: in October, Marc and Meaghan, who were also initially hesitant, brought lots of pumpkins to decorate! Little by little, I noticed that the hour spent with the elderly doesn’t only give them joy, but it fills me up. That hour makes me experience simply being there, present, observing them. And the more I observe, the more I see with what joy and anticipation they look at us and especially our children. But do I look at my children this way? Simply because they are there? So many times I do not. But I see that the time spent with the elderly changes the way I look at my children and my husband... making it more tender. In giving of my time, God gives me the hundredfold. The words from the Beginning Day define my experience: “Why do I follow even when something does not correspond, maybe throwing me into a crisis? I follow out of faithfulness to the encounter that happened, that is, the way the mystery of Jesus knocked at my door, at your door.”

Laura, Boston (USA)

The machine of the world

Technological developments that revolutionize everyday reality reopen radical questions: Who is man? What becomes of the human after having delegated many functions to the computer? **Miguel Benasayag**, psychoanalyst and neurophysiologist, provides answers.



Stefano Filippi

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Miguel Benasayag, Argentinian by birth and French by adoption, is a psychoanalyst and neurophysiologist. He works specifically on problems in childhood and adolescence, and has been studying the changes brought about by the digital revolution and their impact on the human for years. There is a high risk that, with the development of artificial intelligence, the human being will be reduced to a sum of functions, he says. But “the life of man is to exist, not to function as a machine.” What remains of the person after delegating certain functions to machines? “Everything remains.” Because the human is “irreducible to the elements and processes” of which they are made. And what about transhumanism, which fantasizes about a person without limits? “Delusional theories.”

The impact of artificial intelligence has been compared to that of the industrial revolution. Two hundred years ago, production automation took manual tasks away from the person, and now AI is taking away some of their intellectual activity: it writes, analyzes, decides for them. What then is the person? Is there not a risk of defining them “by subtraction” as the remnant of what remains after being placed in the hands of machines?

That is the temptation. But we must say who the person is positively, not after the machine has stripped them of certain functions. Today, the human being is defined as a sum of modules, of parts. This is a weak point of view, originating from a “modular” philosophical conception that does not consider the fundamental difference between an aggregate and an organism. An aggregate is a sum of functions; the organism, on the

other hand, is a unitary entity and is not defined simply by the way it functions. In biology, in epistemology, we look at Kant’s definition in the third *Critique*, where he says that an organism functions “for” and “through” all of its parts, which are not conceivable on their own. Each part of an organism functions according to a dual principle: according to its own nature, but also according to the nature of the whole organism. For me, this is the central problem of our age: the confusion between what is organic and what is aggregate. Machines can do a lot of things; they can fascinate or frighten. But the basic problem is to understand the difference between organism and artefact and the particular singularity of the living.

The oneness of the person, their true “I.”

The person is a unitary being, irreducible to the elements and process-



© Courtesy Refik Anadol Studio

es of which they are composed. An organism participates in life insofar as it has relationships and belongs to a long-lasting species. I work with the concept of a “biological field”; i.e., a permanent interaction between living beings.

Do you think the word “intelligence” is appropriate for what we now call “artificial intelligence”?

Not really. The machine is not intelligent in itself: it can predict, calculate, do a lot of operations, but intelligence for the living—not only for the human being—is always a matter of integration between the brain and reality, not just the ability to make good calculations. The rationality of artificial intelligence is very poor. For example, it cannot accept the inherent negativity of life, or the fact that bodies desire, are subject to drives, and do not always act positively. Even thirty years ago when I began this research, I wrote that we

were talking too much about “intelligence” related to machines, and that this would have negative consequences.

What would you call artificial intelligence?

An interesting artefact. Machines. Conversely, by constantly talking about intelligence and artificial life, today we have an artificial conception of biological life. The discourse has been turned upside down. In my field of research, the majority says that there is a natural consensus between intelligence and artificial life, and biological and cultural life, while the difference is only quantitative. I say the opposite; i.e., that there is a qualitative difference but that this is very difficult to affirm scientifically because we reason only in terms of measurability. People like me are considered idealists, “vitalists,” who want to include a nonscientific element in the definition of life.

The photos in this Close-up were exhibited at the Photo Vogue Festival 2023, entitled *What Makes Us Human? Image in the Age of A.I.*

Here, a work by Refik Anadol, entitled *Quantum Memoire*, 2020, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Miguel Benasayag (Buenos Aires, 1953) was imprisoned and tortured by the regime of General Videla; after liberation, he fled to France. Among his books is *The Tyranny of Algorithms: Freedom, Democracy, and the Challenge of AI*.



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In your research you have always praised the limit. The person can make mistakes and has a sense of their limit, but the machine does not.

That is how it is. For me, limit does not have a negative meaning: it is what defines my way of being in the world. We are limited because we have points of view, affections, responsibilities. On the contrary, it is antiscientific to program a machine with limits: the machine must not have any because it must always function perfectly. Instead, the human being, and more generally the living being, is defined by its limit, which is not a boundary that prevents it from living, but, rather, the condition of life.

A life without limit is the myth of the contemporary world.

It seems unbelievable, but all these delusional transhumanist theories, which speak of a life without limits, really do have a huge audience. The idea that limits are arbitrary, that human beings have no reason to accept them, is absolute madness.

How do you explain the success of these theories?

Everyday life is steeped in them. The removal of limits is the basis, for example, of neoliberalism, which wants to deregulate and deterritorialize everything.

Deterritorialize?

For example, I like to eat my country's seasonal fruits. But there are those who want those fruits all year round and are willing to have them flown in from abroad, or use huge amounts of water to grow them in unsuitable but closer locations. However, if I say that this makes little sense, that life is made of cycles, rhythms, and even rituals, I have no place in postmodernity. I am considered an obscurantist because I want to set limits. Deterritorialization starts with the idea that the human being must not accept any limits. That is suicidal.

Does the person today also reject limits because they no longer recognize that they were created?

The human being considers itself as having been made like a machine. This is a plastic creationism. Why suffer the limit of organicity? Thirty years ago, this question was only asked by psychotics and psychiatric services: Why must I accept limits, why must I accept death? There is a very funny play by Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King*, in which the sick protagonist does not admit that he must die. Ionesco wanted to mock Western individualism, but today the common feeling is this: limits are arbitrary boundaries. And we have an enormous, fantastic power in our hands, but for the moment it

causes changes that we cannot master because we do not know how to tame it.

What do you mean by that?

You compared machines to the Industrial Revolution. I rather compare them to the discovery of agriculture in the Neolithic period: intensive cultivation initially caused the death of a third of humanity at the time thanks to deregulation, deforestation, plague, and tuberculosis. We are in a similar situation: a powerful revolution of which we do not have full control. For anthropologists, we are even on the eve of a new great extinction. And the poor, little human being finds itself truly frightened.

Should the machines be stopped?

Impossible. One cannot look at the future through a rear-view mirror. In reality, we are already

hybridized, even if we do not realize it. It is a hybridization that is not anatomical but physiological, related to functioning. For example, I worked for years to understand the influence of digital devices on the brain. It was very easy to see how the brain structure of those who delegate certain brain functions to GPS has changed, both physiologically and anatomically.

If some faculties are lost, are others improved?

Not possible. This is how the central nervous system works: it delegates certain functions and recycles the freed brain region. We saw this when writing was invented and the part of the brain that had until then been dedicated to mnemonic activity was then used for reading and writing. These are very slow processes, taking even hundreds of years. And today, with the speed of machines, neurophysiology shows that the delegation of functions causes an atrophy of the freed brain region. In the case of satellite navigators, there are subcortical nodes that deal with time and space and therefore with cartography: the nodes that delegate the function to the GPS do not have time to recycle themselves for another function and atrophy, at least for the time being.

Does this mean that artificial intelligence can cause natural obtuseness?

A weakening, sure. We also see it in children who spend a lot of time with video games or in front of a screen. I do not say this in a technophobic manner, because I am not

a technophobe, but simply because we are not aware of it. It is not for nothing that Silicon Valley geniuses send their children to schools without computers and make them study Latin and Greek. Neurophysiology says that before the age of three we should not put children in front of screens. But families are not aware of this, especially those who have no access to culture or lack discipline.

So are machines our enemy?

No. But we need to know them and reestablish an otherness. The machine is the machine, living is living; living should not be defined as what remains after having delegated certain functions to machines. Losing this distinction is very dangerous because it puts the person and the artefact on the same level. But the person's life is to exist, not to function as a machine. What remains of the person after having delegated certain functions to machines? Everything remains. We simply have to learn to exist, cohabiting with this new power, which, since we do not have full control of it, can be dangerous.

What then is our task?

The problem has two aspects. The fundamental thing is to understand that we must be able to identify what we are, what our singularity is, and that we cannot define it as residual. We must return to an otherness: the difference between man and machine is radical. The second step is to regain the ground we have left to the machine. I often recall how the invention of the elevator

did not take away the possibility of and taste for walking. It is best to abandon the somewhat stupid idea of happiness as motionless comfort, doing nothing, being served by the new slaves; i.e., the machines. We must rediscover a desire for happiness that is different than this idle vision, which very much reflects the American way of life.

The flip side of the coin is that today we are often measured by performance. The machine runs and the human must keep up.

The current aesthetic is to become an increasingly high-performance machine. So, happiness would be on the one hand doing nothing while the machine does everything, and on the other, functioning as a machine while also shedding the anxieties associated with existing and the search for meaning. We must all actively resist, not against the machine, but against stupidity.

In his message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis says that artificial intelligence can magnify inequalities. Do you agree?

The machine produces a world of cold calculations, which do not provide for sharing, in which the strongest remain the strongest and others are excluded. Statistics considers the averages, the masses, and cuts out those on the margins. But the number of these minorities in the world continues to increase. I believe that the pope wants to warn against the paradox whereby machines are believed to be at the service of everyone while in reality they work for those who govern them. ■

The double challenge

Promoting critical thinking and adapting legal systems are necessary steps in the face of new technological scenarios. This is also the pope's invitation.

It is undoubtedly the hot topic of the moment, the number one priority in all economic, political, and scientific agendas around the world, from the G7 to Davos, from the European Union to the United Nations. It is so important that even the pope decided to dedicate his message for the World Day of Peace to it. (... and today what could be more important than peace?) It is the topic of artificial intelligence. One might ask: Are the issues really so crucial? Are we living a sort of collective hallucination, or are we actually facing “a risk to our survival and endangering our common home”?—the latter question posed by Pope Francis.

First of all, technological evolution is not to be feared; quite the contrary. Such evolution is the way in which the person's reason unleashes all its creative capacity for resolving the questions and problems that life poses. The human has always used knowledge to create more powerful, useful, faster, and more efficient tools to achieve what is needed.

Where then is the novelty? The transformation is subtle, but radical.

Until now, we have asked technology to accomplish what we set out to do. Think of the Industrial Revolution—the discovery of new forms of energy (thermal and electromagnetic) made it possible to perform tasks, until then carried out by humans or animals, with a speed, power, and accuracy that was infinitely superior to any human capacity. What changes, then, with the arrival of AI? The point is that today we no longer ask machines to do what we have decided to do, but instead we ask *them* to decide. How could this have happened?

The secret of artificial intelligence lies in the new source of “energy” discovered since the 1980s: data. Today, almost without realizing it, we produce an endless amount of data (personal and otherwise) that ends up on the internet. This is what is called the “internet of things.” The digital revolution, in reality, consists in the fact that an increasing number of everyday things (telephones, cars, lifts, televisions, shopping trolleys, etc.) are, in reality, technical devices that continuously produce data.

Now, just as happened with oil, for data to be exploited as energy, it first must be refined, developed, “processed.” This is how artificial intelligence



Andrea Simoncini



Rozemarijn Borkent, *Ada and Amara*, from the *I Am That I Am* project. Image generated by AI.

was born; it is a series of analytical, mathematical and statistical tools (algorithms) capable of processing this data and using it as the basis for making “predictions, recommendations or decisions influencing real or virtual environments” (as defined by the OECD—Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). It marks the beginning of a new world. Through massive amounts of data analysis,

a machine can be asked to do what until recently we thought was the exclusive prerogative of humans, or at least intelligent beings. Until a few years ago, it would not have occurred to anyone to sue a car for a road accident because, materially, it was the vehicle that hit the person and injured him or her; the person responsible has always been the driver, the “user” of the vehicle. But today, as we know, there are cars in

which there is no longer a human at the wheel; it is the vehicle that decides its speed, direction, and when to brake, and decides this “autonomously,” as stated by the OECD. Therefore, we begin to understand why this type of technology is not just like all the others and why the pope poses a number of questions to all mankind. The person increasingly entrusts his or her decisions to artificial technological systems,



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thus inevitably becoming dependent on them. Let us ask ourselves: After years of using satellite navigators in cars, who would be able to do without them today? Or, even more trivially, after decades of electronic address books, who can remember a phone number by heart anymore? As long as it is a question of which route to take to visit a friend, it matters little, but if the question is whether or not to grant a loan to a client, or assess whether an image shows a tumor, or decide how many years in prison to sentence a defendant to, then things change.

So, what to do in the face of this possible scenario of technological substitution? The quintessential reaction of our time is to divide into opposing camps: the pros and the cons. The techno-enthusiasts and the techno-catastrophists. Those who see artificial intelligence as the new absolute evil and those who see it, instead, as the solution to all of our problems. In his January 1 message, the pope outlined a different proposal. He does not see technology as good or evil in itself, but sees it as a double “challenge.” The first challenge is education. Faced with this turning point in civilization and the possibilities for progress in our living conditions, it would be against human nature to oppose it prejudicially. “Intelligence is an expression of the dignity with which we have been endowed by the Creator, who made us in his own image

and likeness, and enabled us to respond consciously and freely to his love.” The point is that every new possibility that research uncovers is always an opportunity for the person’s freedom and responsibility; that is, for the person’s ability to adhere to what truly makes us human. This is why a correct education in relation to technology is crucial in the first place.

Pope Francis adds: “Education in the use of forms of artificial intelligence should aim above all at promoting critical thinking. Users of all ages, but especially the young, need to develop a discerning approach to the use of data and content collected on the web or produced by artificial intelligence systems.” Today there is a widespread tendency to offload responsibility. Everyone is looking for someone else to blame or to lodge complaints against. The most serious risk, therefore, is that these technologies, designed precisely to make decisions, end up relieving the person of all responsibility. This is a mortal risk, because without responsible action, ultimately, the subject no longer exists.

The second challenge, says the pope, relates to the law. Juridical systems are the instruments that humanity has devised to try to provide order to social relations and actions that can harm people; it is

Until a few years ago, it would not have occurred to anyone to sue a car for a road accident because the person responsible has always been the driver. But today, there are cars in which there is no longer a human at the wheel...

therefore inevitable that in the face of these possibilities and risks, the law is asked to intervene. Let me say more: today there is an absolutely disproportionate confidence in the ability of law to defend us from what can harm us. Faced with the problems and injustices that life increasingly places before us, people think that enacting a law is enough to fix everything. Instead, the pope clearly places the educational challenge before the juridical one.

Europe, among the global institutions that are most attentive to the issue of regulation, has announced an important regulation that will come into force in the coming months on this very issue, the AI Act. The Biden administration has responded by adopting a directive on artificial intelligence; even China has introduced regulations to curb and guide these developments in technology. Each country does so in its own way because law is the child of societies and cultures. Caught between America, which favors the free market and seeks to restrict monopolies, and China, and concerned about maintaining its internal digital sovereignty, Europe instead proposes an approach based on risk mitigation, to be achieved through the imposition of rules placed on technology producers who want to market their systems. In doing so, Europe is taking a big risk because estab-

lishing a different rule for different types of AI means correcting, supplementing, and clarifying the rules as soon as something new is discovered; that is, constantly. Think of the arrival of ChatGPT—a general artificial intelligence that can be used for any task and not only for the specific ones for which it was designed—while the AI Act was being discussed: this novelty forced a hasty integration and highlighted how the speed of technological change can result in the creation of rules that are already old before they are even approved.

Obviously, this is not a good reason for the institutions in charge of the common good to give up on the task; if anything, as the pope says, they must ask themselves the question of how to regulate this very special technology. Therefore, Europe's is an ironic attempt to apply some measures to this new power that we see emerging, which ultimately challenges our freedom and responsibility. For this reason, the prophetic judgment that Romano Guardini expressed about the future in 1951; that is, our epoch, remains true: "The future epoch will not have to deal with the problem of the increase of power, even if it increases continuously and at an ever-accelerating rate, but that of its domination. The central meaning of this epoch will be the duty to order power in such a way that the person, making use of it, can remain a person." ■

Artificial ignorance

The dawning age of so-called AI has given rise to a host of well-founded dystopian anxieties. Worrisome scenarios that conceal a less obvious but more essential problem: “In seeking to become more than human, we become less than human.”



Michael Hanby

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One Friday evening last spring, my wife and I decided to pay a rare visit to a neighborhood restaurant for dinner and a drink. It was Lent, and neither of us had really eaten all day, so she decided to forego a cocktail and instead just ordered tonic water with a twist of lime. (I, alas, am not so healthy or holy.) As we endured an unusually long wait for our drinks, we noticed in the busy area around the bar the bartender

and a group of four or five servers huddled around the computerized register and carrying on a highly animated conversation. Finally, the group dispatched a waiter to our table to inform us that the bar did not have any tonic water, a dubious explanation considering that the bar was pouring drinks hand over fist. The almost certain truth is that the computer system used by the corporately owned restaurant to process its financial transactions and

monitor its inventory did not offer a way to sell tonic without gin. The restaurant staff, paralyzed in the face of this absurdity and lacking any authority or means to attach a reasonable price to our request, declined to do the obvious human thing—ignore the computer and simply give a patron a glass of tonic. Instead, they chose to lie and say that the restaurant had no tonic, because according to the program that runs the place, it didn't.



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The dawning age of so-called “artificial intelligence” has given rise to a host of well-founded dystopian anxieties, even eliciting a warning from the pope. We worry at the great disparity in power between the digital “haves,” those with the power to determine what the rest of the world sees and thinks about or to open and close financial spigots, and the digital “have-nots.” We shudder still more at the thought of a government by algorithm responsible to—and ultimately controllable by—no one in particular, presiding over an “internet of things” mostly unresponsive to human agency. We fear the ways that such powerful human actors or such inhuman systems might use the vast amounts of data already being collected on each of us in the existing system of universal surveillance, which monitors our history, our habits, our purchases, our medical profiles, our innermost thoughts, and our whereabouts. We dread

Togo Yeye, *Simélan (Fish from the water)*, 2023, from *My Chest Has Reasons* project.

“The triumph of artificial intelligence over our imaginations will likely prove inversely proportional to the demise of the great questions—Who is God? What is good? Who am I?”

the day when a process of automation that is already well underway offloads even the most sophisticated of human functions onto supercomputers and robots, exponentially increasing the class of “obsolete people” to include most all of us. The pandemic has already shown us a glimpse of the brave new world seemingly destined to emerge from the fusion of information technology, biometric data, and bioengineering. All of these are real concerns, and there is no shortage of people thinking and writing about them.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that these dystopian scenarios conceal a more essential if less obvious problem with AI, a problem illustrated in a banal and mostly harmless way by our experience at the restaurant. It is not simply that technology is a regime of necessity for us or that AI, in taking on a “life of its own” may cease to be our servant and become our master, or even that it could spell the end of properly human self-government. This tragic irony inhering in this most breathtaking of human technical achievements is certainly true enough, and it confirms the ancient insight, older than Christianity, that in seeking to become more than human, to magnify human power beyond a human scale, we become less than human. The deeper problem lies precisely in this last point. Each of these astonishing feats of human power is also radically disempowering, minimizing human agency, often to the point of neutralizing it altogether, and offloading human functions onto complex systems that exercise causality without responsibility, emptying *us* in the process of the capacities that heretofore distinguished us as human and signified the presence of the *imago dei* in us. Each of us no doubt has firsthand experience of this phenomenon. We have long

since grown accustomed to the attempt to shortcut moral formation by finding technical solutions to the problems of the human soul and medical solutions for the abuse of our bodies. Why cultivate human concern or self-restraint when we have a pill that obviates the need for them? Most of us, I suspect, have found our attention to the world around us attenuated by the fact that reality is now mediated to us through our phones. We look on helplessly as our capacity for remembering is diminished by the outsourcing of our memory to the cloud, and our sense of direction is diminished by our reliance on global positioning systems. One wonders about the fate of aviation or human medical expertise once the knowledge and skills that once comprised these arts come to be more fully automated. Will surgical skill and piloting go the way of penmanship? What will become of human thought once our machines finally do all our thinking for us?

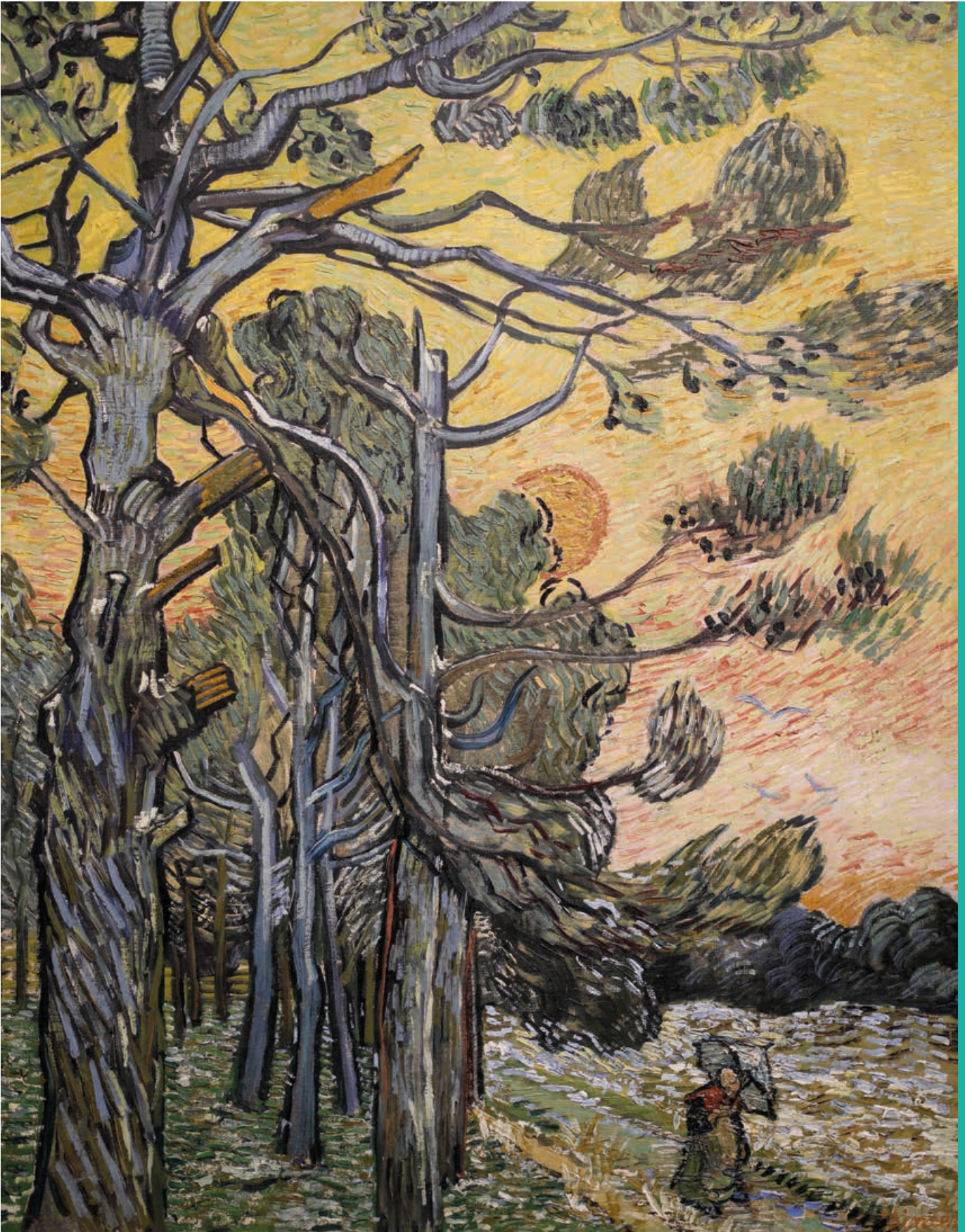
This is not merely a problem of excess, of employing these new technologies beyond their proper limits or entrusting them with too much responsibility. This typical way of framing our dystopian anxiety implies that we can solve the problem of AI by somehow maintaining control over a technology that by its very nature defies it. Whether or not this is possible, it is secondary to the deeper crisis signified by the notion of “artificial intelligence.” The philosopher Hans Jonas once observed what he called our irresistible temptation to understand our machines in the image of the human functions they replace, and then to understand the human functions in the image of the machines that have replaced them. So it is with AI. The very idea of “artificial intelligence” rests on



Michael Hanby, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy of Science at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, Washington DC.

the reduction of intelligence itself to the computation of mathematical functions. The dawning age of artificial intelligence thus signifies a reconfiguration of the meaning of “intellect” and the emptying of intelligence itself of the very quality that once defined it and determined the goal and destiny of Western humanity: the capacity to apprehend and contemplate the true meaning of things. The triumph of artificial intelligence over our imaginations will thus likely prove inversely proportional to the demise of the great human questions—Who is God? What is good? Who am I? What is my purpose and destiny?—and of the two forms of thought, heretofore regarded as the highest, most godlike, and therefore most human of our intellectual powers, in which these questions have been asked: philosophy and prayer. There is no algorithm for contemplating these questions, no app to do our praying for us. The absurdity of the idea shows what is

really at stake in the idea of artificial intelligence. Were the contemplative soul to be buried beneath an avalanche of computational data, depriving the human person of a transcendent horizon and emptying reality of its depth, the consequences would be devastating. Some of these we can see already in the blithe and superficial ways we treat the most profound human questions, in the pervasive thoughtlessness that accompanies our extraordinary technical power, and even in the church, when it subordinates contemplation to activism or substitutes psychology and sociology for philosophical and theological thought. But the devastation would fall hardest upon the human heart. Artificial intelligence threatens to erase the image of God in us and to extinguish, as far as this is possible, that which made natural intelligence natural and human: the religious sense. The only thing that would be worse is when we no longer recognize what we are missing. ■





Vincent Van Gogh, *Pine Trees at Sunset*, 1889, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands.

February 22, 2005
February 22, 2024

“Christianity as an event today”

On the nineteenth anniversary of his death, notes from a talk by Luigi Giussani organized by the Charles Péguy Association and the San Carlo Cultural Center (Milan, October 28, 1992). The full text, which also contains a moment of conversation, will be available on clonline.org.

edited by **Davide Prosperi**

Objectively, it seems that the meaning of the topic (“Christianity as an Event Today”) is shaped by the fact that today the word Christianity is more easily identified with a series of moral values or the preaching of moral values, with a concern for moral values. I am not saying that Christianity does not care about moral values, but I do want to say simply that Christianity does not coincide with the preaching of moral values. If we were at Mass last Sunday, we heard the beautiful parable of the Pharisee and the publican (cf. *Lk* 18:9–14), which once again surprised us. It always surprises us, in the end, when He says that the publican left the temple forgiven, “justified,” set right, at peace, while the Pharisee, who

had boasted about all the good things he had done (and he was not lying—Christ did not say “the Pharisee lied,” not at all), left the temple condemned. It is not immediately necessary to elucidate the ultimate reason for this contrast. Maybe it came as the conclusion to other thoughts. But I would like to say that for someone who has to speak about Christianity, to think about it or live it, the main thing, the important thing is that you cannot reduce what you want to be concerned with, or what you want to live, to some moral values that you manage to translate into action through the force of your own willpower. Christianity is a fact, an event, an objective fact, and even if the whole world did not believe, it would no longer be able to blot it out. There is no line of reasoning

“If we look at ourselves, we feel shame, boredom, shame to the point of boredom, and yet we cannot deny an impetus, an irreducible impetus that constitutes our heart, an irreducible impetus toward fullness...”

that can hold. *“Contra factum non valet illatio”*: it is useless to oppose a fact with a line of reasoning, with the power of a line of reasoning.

Christianity is an event in the sense that first of all it is not preaching about morality. Given that an event points to God, an initiative of the Mystery in the life of the human person, in the history of humanity, I believe that the most important premise is the type of attention or tenderness people have for themselves. If they lack attention and tenderness for themselves, a mother’s tenderness for her child, I say they are necessarily in a position that is hostile to the Christian event. I often use a line by Rainer Maria Rilke as a point of departure for meditation on myself: “All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope.” (*Duino Elegies*, vol. 2, in *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, Vintage International, 2009, p. 13, verses 42–43). I have never found a synthesis of what human beings existentially feel about themselves if they think with attention, a minimum of attention that leads to themselves, that is comparable to this line by Rilke. If we look at ourselves, we feel shame, boredom, shame to the point of boredom, and yet we cannot deny an impetus, an irreducible

impetus that constitutes our heart, an irreducible impetus toward fullness, let’s say toward perfection or satisfaction, which etymologically are identical: “perfection” has a more ontological meaning and “satisfaction” is more eudemonological, speaking of sentiment. I believe that God moved precisely to be the answer to this perception that, I repeat, I consider to be the one realistic perception that human beings can have about themselves if they think with attention and maternal tenderness. If God moved, He moved to respond to human beings, to human beings who feel shame, shame and boredom with themselves, who find limits in themselves, limits with which they are complicit, while at the same time, they cannot suppress this cry in their hearts, this expectancy they have in their souls.

So, God moved to respond to the human situation. For this, He took the initiative, becoming the savior of the human person. He is the savior of the human person. He is the redeemer of the human person. But I do not want to insist on just these details, though I think this premise is necessary. God took initiative for me. Saint Paul says exactly this when he refers to

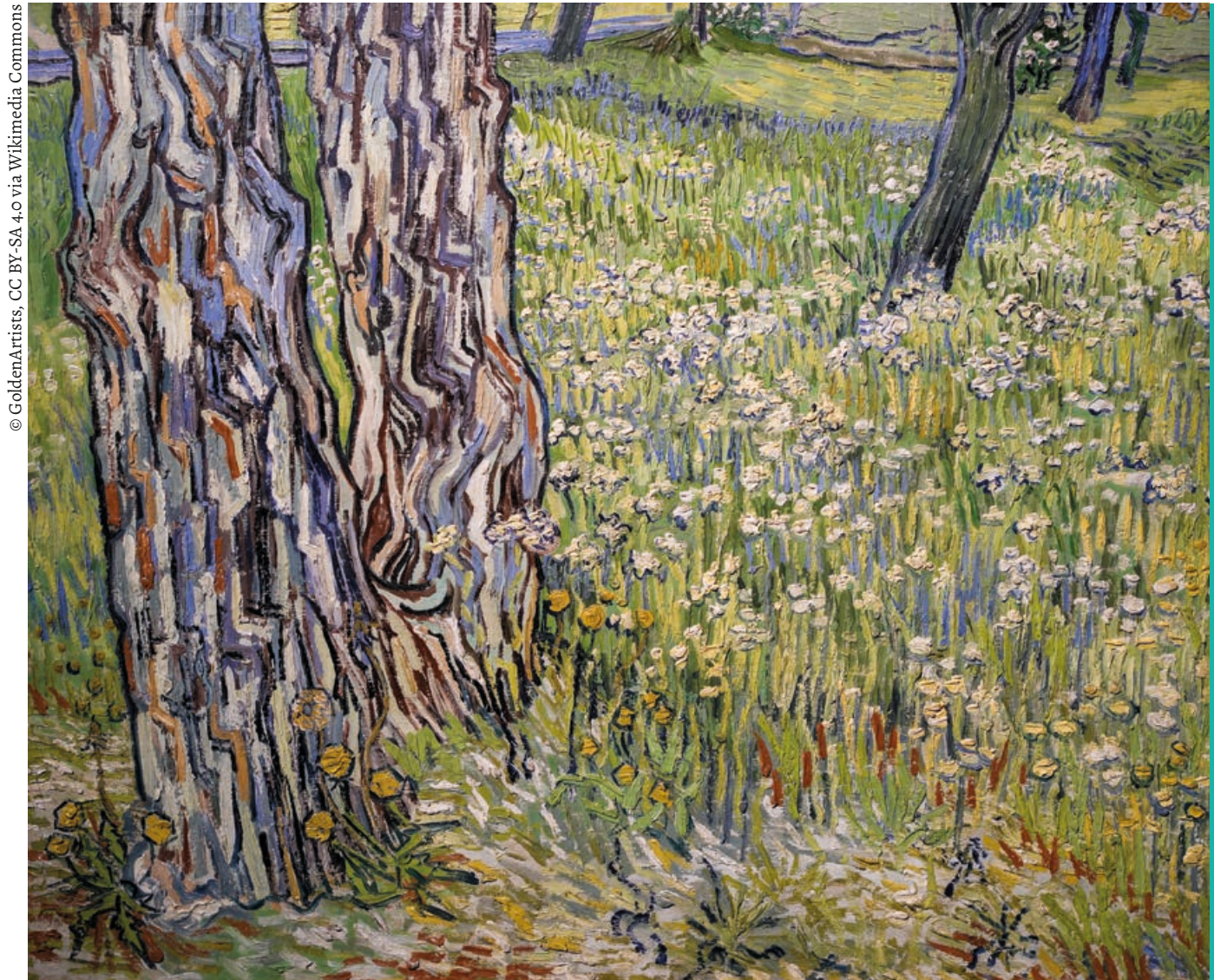
“the Son of God who has loved me and given Himself up for me” (cf. *Gal* 2:20). And excuse me for saying this, but everyone here can and must repeat this line: “For me”; that is, to free me. To free me, yes, to free me from boredom with myself and from the weight of this limit that I find within everything I do. From this point of view, Christianity has a pessimistic point of departure regarding the human person. It is no coincidence that it speaks of original sin as the first mystery, without which nothing else can be explained. It is a mystery, but without this mystery there would be no explanation for the inexorable contradiction of human life. However, while it is initially pessimistic, it ends up in optimism, in deep optimism, deep and demanding. This optimism enables us to say with Saint Paul: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (cf. *Rom* 8:31). God’s initiative consists of the fact that the mystery of God became a real man, took the reality of a true man, a man conceived in the uterus of a woman, and from this little and almost invisible clump developed into an infant, a child, a young boy, a teenager, and a young man, and then He became the center of attention of the social life of the Jewish people, drawing crowds wherever He went until the crowds turned against Him because of the attitude of those in power, and then He was crucified, killed, and then rose, rose from the dead.

Therefore, the initiative of God is a wholly human fact. I explain the meaning of all this to students by saying: “Think of a husband and wife who for two years could not have children. Imagine how easily their life could be ordered, how it expressed itself. After two years they have a child, and this child disturbs their whole life and they can no longer live as they lived before.” Well, the Christian fact is like a child born into a family. In fact, Jesus was born as a child. The Christian event is God who enters into the life of the human person and into human history, just as a child is born to a woman and enters into the life of her family and into human history. In his first letter, Saint John told the early Christians: “What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life”; that is, the truth,

and “we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim it to you” (1 *Jn* 1:1–3). The truth was made touchable, visible, hearable, just as you listen to someone who speaks, just as you see someone who becomes a presence, just as you touch the hands of a friend.

At this point I could stop here; what remains to be done at this point is just to look this event in the face, look at what happened. And all your responsibility is truly challenged, whether to acknowledge Him or not, because you can acknowledge this or not. Many people who had seen Him acknowledged Him and then did not acknowledge Him, and cried “Crucify Him!” (*Mk* 15:13–14). But this is understandable for us because we know from ourselves what the human person is, how the human person can behave. And then the rest are suggestive insights, which in a faith education must be communicated to young people and which everyone can redo on his own. I say I can stop here because I would like to know what can be said beyond this: that God became a man! So then, Christianity is touching, seeing, listening, adhering to, following this man, as it was for Saint Peter.

That time in the Capernaum synagogue Jesus had spoken at length and was moved because the people



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who had been with Him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee the day before had walked all the way around the lake to go get Him. He had eluded them because they wanted to make him king: He had multiplied the loaves and fishes! They entered the Capernaum synagogue and He was moved in front of their fierce desire to seek Him. He said: "You are looking for Me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. [...] I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (*Jn* 6:26–58). Exactly because Christ was a man, images came to Him from His experience as a man, and the most inconceivable image that came to mind, that of remaining with us in the sign of the

bread and wine, this thing that is the most inconceivable of those He could have thought of, came to His mind then, with the emotion evoked in Him by the (at least exterior) faithfulness of those people, those people who sought Him. But His response did not correspond to what the people expected of Him. So, under the influence of the intellectuals as well, all those people slowly, slowly left, until in the silence of the evening twilight only those bound to Him by affection remained. Jesus was the first to break the silence: "Do you also want to leave?" Peter answered with his usual spontaneity: "Master, even if we do not understand what You say, if we go away, to whom shall we go? Only You have the words that give meaning to life" (cf. *Jn* 6:59–69).

Vincent Van Gogh, *Tree Trunks in the Grass*, 1890, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Paesi Bassi.

“But now? I do not say just “now,” but ten years after Christ died, a year after Christ died, one hundred years after, five hundred years after, a thousand years after, two thousand years after, now, because the question I ask myself is: Where is He now?”

I say that this little group of men who followed Him constituted the beginning of Christian history because they followed Him, acknowledged that there was something exceptional in Him, though they could not explain the why or how. In fact, when Christ asked them on another occasion: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” they answered “Some say You are the son of Beelzebub; others say You are a great prophet.” “But who do you say that I am?” “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” responded Peter. And right away, Christ said: “You are blessed Peter. You are fortunate, because you gave Me an answer that you cannot understand and you gave it because the Father suggested it to you” (cf. *Mt 16:13–17*). In fact, Peter had done nothing more than repeat the words Jesus had said about Himself on other occasions. They followed Him, drinking His words, adhering insofar as they understood, doing what He said, as far as they could manage. Just as they were, they acknowledged Him, following Him. They followed Him. Well, Christianity is the story of men who in some way, coming into contact with this event, with the event of Christ, with this fact in history, followed Him, each one as they could, each as they can.

Actually, there is another thing to add before drawing the two corollaries I want to stress.

God’s initiative is that the Mystery became a child in the womb of a woman, a clump of flesh in the womb of a woman, part of the body of a woman, born like any other child. I always think, I am always very struck, at the beginning of the Gospel by the angel’s annunciation to Mary because there is the whole speech and then at the end Mary says: “*Fiat*, may it be done to me according to your word.” Then after that point there is a line that says: “The angel departed from her” (*Lk 1:38*). I am truly struck and think almost daily about the situation of that fifteen-year-old girl, absolutely alone with the Mystery she held within. She could not even sense its presence because it had just begun. I imagine her like that, having to tell her parents and fiancé. “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (*Lk 1:45*), her cousin Elizabeth would say to her when Mary hurried to her because the angel had told her that Elizabeth was six months pregnant (cf. *Lk 1:36–45*).

So then, the mystery of God took initiative toward humanity, becoming a child. This is the fact. Christianity is an event, “it is” this event.

But now? I do not say just “now,” but ten years after

Christ died, a year after Christ died, one hundred years after, five hundred years after, a thousand years after, two thousand years after, now, because the question I ask myself is: Where is He now? The first Christians also asked this, those who were still living in the time of the apostles, after Jesus had left. A person, contacted the day after His ascension into heaven, asked the same question that I ask myself today. And yet He said: "I will be with you 'all' days." Pay attention to these key words in the Gospel, which are always very important. "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Cf. *Mt 28:20*). I am a Christian because He, God, is present among us and will be present always until the end of the world. I am a Christian because of that. I could have committed a thousand errors yesterday and ten thousand crimes, but if I say this, I am a Christian; I will need the mercy of Christ more than others, but I am a Christian, and a person who committed no crimes, who paid tithes, who celebrated all the feasts of the Jewish liturgy, the Pharisee, no!

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Christ has remained present in the world, in history, and will be present until the end of the centuries through the unity of those He seizes and brings within His personality. He created a gesture by which He takes people and brings them within His personality; it is called baptism, the sacrament of baptism. His presence is visible, tangible, hearable, like the unity of the believers in Him, which historically also has a name—"church"—which means nothing more than gathering. The objectivity of His presence is saved, is assured, precisely by this unity, as if it were a tent, a tent that is the dwelling place of the mystery of God, the tent erected in the midst of the Jewish people. It is like a tent, this unity among people who believe in Him, who acknowledge Him, whom He has seized and brought into His personality. This unity in which He really is present is like a tent. And the Eucharist is simply the extreme concrete expression of His concrete presence.

Saint Paul emphasized more than anyone that the presence of Christ, of God made man, could be seen in the unity of the believers in Him. He understood it when he was thrown from his horse and heard: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (*Acts 9:4*). He had never seen Jesus of Nazareth. He had never seen Him; he was persecuting the Christians: he was persecuting Christians.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" This must have been the intuition that made clear to Paul the identity of which we are speaking. But this identity was already visible in the times of Christ Himself. Since He could not go everywhere Himself, He sent His men, two by two, into the villages that asked for Him, and they returned enthusiastic, saying: "Master, what You do, we have also done; the miracles You perform, we have also performed. The people listen to us, too" (cf. *Mk 6:7-13*). The same phenomenon that happened where He went happened in the villages where the pairs of men went. In the village where the two men went, how was Christ present? Through those two men He had sent. The method Christ used to continue His presence among us, His method, was already used when He was alive. Through the presence of those who believe in Him, He is present, in the literal sense of the term.

Therefore, Christianity as event is God made man and present in history within (to express myself clearly) the unity of those who believe in Him. This unity does not have an affective value. It cannot be defined using the term "companionship." It cannot be identified as people who have the same views. As

“What leads us to God is not our opinion, or our way of thinking, or a dialectical comparison with others, or the outcome of a theological study: it is following a presence.”

Saint Paul said: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person”; that is, the great social and cultural divisions of the time, and “there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (cf. *Gal* 3:27–28). He uses the term *eis*, which in Greek means “one” in the personal sense, of the person, but male. “You are one, *eis*...”. “You are *me*,” He had said to Saint Paul. “Why are you persecuting *me*?” Undoubtedly, this is the most difficult aspect for me, and forgive me if I dare say for all of us, because the way we have been educated forgets or skips this a bit. I also said this to a journalist the other day at Lourdes (cf. “Don Giussani: il potere egoista odia il popolo” [Fr. Giussani: The egotistic power hates the people], interview by G. da Rold, *Corriere della Sera*, October 18, 1992, p. 3; now in *L’io, il potere, le opere* [The ‘I,’ power, works], Genova: Marietti 1820, 2000, pp. 214–19). But I can know Christ through something present. This is the genius of God, who made Himself present in order to make Himself known to us and to save us.

The unity of believers is the contingent, even banal face of this divine presence. And just as back

then, those who followed Him became Christians and changed, so today a Christian is a person who changes, changes as a person, and follows this unity to which Christ gave a sign of absolute objectivity, which is the bishop of Rome, the head of the community in Rome, because everything, everything converges here (even an ecumenical council is not valid, would not be valid if it lacked the signature of the bishop of Rome). This is exactly the opposite of what we imagine for ourselves, or love to imagine ourselves as: what leads us to God is not our opinion, or our way of thinking, or a dialectical comparison with others, or the outcome of a theological study: it is following a presence. The first corollary I wanted to bring up is this—following a presence.

But “follow a presence” also explains the moral journey, not only the appearance from the point of view of membership, but also the moral journey a person makes. There is a beautiful comparison in nature: How does a child acquire her own personality? The more a family is humanly rich, intense, attentive, and respectful; that is, the more a family is human in the way it treats the child and the more it is faithful to its task, the more the child grows with her own personality, becomes herself,



acquires a personality following the parents and the fact, the event, of the family. Following the event of the family, absorbing its provocations, almost by osmosis, almost by osmotic pressure, at fifteen years old she is different from the others because she had a family like this, and she is herself because she can explain the reasons for what she chooses, for what she does. The moral problem for the Christian is analogous.

Just as being Christian is adhering to a presence, similarly, it is in following this presence, participating in the provocations of this presence, that one changes, one changes oneself, one changes and transforms. With a beautiful conclusion that the Lord stressed with His formula of perfection when He said: “So be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (cf. *Mt 5:48*). And who can be perfect like God? Thus, Christ indicated that true morali-

ty is a lived striving as a journey, life as journey, *homo viator*. The people of the Middle Ages understood this well: life is a journey, and for this reason the value of a person lies in being faithful to this striving to learn and follow. If you fall a thousand times in a day, you get up and start again a thousand times. The second corollary I want to stress then is this concept of morality as striving. Saint Ambrose wrote in a letter that a saint is not someone who never makes mistakes, but who tries continually not to fall (cf. Saint Ambrose, *Explanatio Psalmi* vol. 1:22; *Explanatio Psalmi* vol. 36:51). Reading this passage to the students at school, I observed: “Imagine a man who made mistakes every day because he had a very grave and strong defect, and every day he erred, every day, and every morning when he rose he said, ‘God, I humbly beseech You, help me to surpass myself, help me to correct myself,’ and ev-



Vincent Van Gogh, *Tree Roots*, 1890,
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

ery day he erred, and for fifty years it went on like this, getting up in the morning with this sincere new start, this sincere cry, and every day he erred. He is a saint! A saint! A saint whose days would be full of errors.” This is the concept of morality born of Christianity as event: morality is striving that happens like following, and you follow as well as you can, as you are able, according to the grace given to you.

Within a frame like this, the Mystery takes on a figure, a face. Christ said: “He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (*Lk* 20:38); that is, He is not the God of our thoughts but the real, true God who exists before everything else, incommensurable with any thought of ours. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (*Is* 55:8). But in a similar frame, this Mystery does not remain entirely mysteri-

ous and unknown. That child who grew to manhood, who died and rose, and in rising inhabits history irresistibly, attracting people to Himself, whose unity constitutes His Body, mysterious Body, mystical Body—as it is said—O People of God, which is like (I took the liberty of making the comparison earlier) the tent of the Jews in the desert that contained the Ark of the Covenant, this truly present Mystery, in a similar frame, truly explains the Mystery to us, in the sense that it shows the precise, perfect, powerful, evocative, very tender correspondence of the Mystery with our life, as Rilke said, weakened but full of ineffable hope: it is called “mercy.” The supreme definition of the Divine, of Being, that Christ introduced into the world and that through the unity of believers He causes to remain as proposal to the poor person of any era and any condition, is the word “mercy.” God is mercy, a word that would otherwise be inconceivable for us. ■



“The sun is there”

We publish some excerpts from the testimony of **Jesús Carrascosa**, who died on January 9th, presented during the Easter Triduum for GS in Rimini (Italy) in April 2019.

In my youth, I did not get to the point of loving Jesus, because I thought He had come and then gone away again. I did not have the thought that He had lived on (I only discovered this many years later). There is a poem by León Felipe, a Spanish poet who was forced to flee to Mexico after the civil war. It says: “Because He, Christ, came and gave us our task, and left.” I thought: “It would have been better for Him not to have come at all, because I’ve already got so much to think about!” In other words, despite going to a Catholic school, I had not reached a certainty about my faith.

In Spain, Francisco Franco’s dictatorship lasted for forty years, until 1975. There was no freedom; meeting in a group larger than twenty was a crime, and one could not speak freely because of the risk of prison. At that time I met a group of intellectuals who were fighting for freedom and had lost their positions in universities because of their opposition to Franco. They made a living giving private lessons to children; even though they were very distinguished professors who had taught mathematics to dozens of students, they could not even teach in high schools. Through them, I discovered anarchy and the love of freedom. In *The Religious Sense*, don Giussani says

Fr. Luigi Giussani and
Jesús Carrascosa, called Carras.

that anarchism is the desire for freedom, but that the anarchist “affirms himself to an infinite degree.”

I thought: “If what I desire is true, it must be possible to experience it now.” This is different from what the Communists would think: “We must fight so that others can experience what we never can.” It seems much more human to me to seek an experience which says: “If what we are living is true, we must be able to see it today.” I lived a beautiful experience of community: we lived together, and each person put half his or her salary toward the communal income. A publishing house was eventually set up to disseminate culture, because anarchy loves culture, and it was a way to travel around Spain, giving courses on politics and unionism. I met exceptionally interesting people who desired everything. It was incredibly idealistic; we even rotated leadership in the publishing house to avoid temptations of power. I thus also became director for a while.

During that time, though, I fell into a profound crisis because I said to myself: “I am giving my life for something that has not asked itself the most fundamental of questions: Why does evil exist?” My wife was very concerned. In this situation, José Miguel Oriol, who managed the publications of our publishing house, went to a book fair in Frankfurt and saw a stand there belonging to an Italian publishing house—which was called, and still is called, Jaca Book. Its publications were very interesting. After we had got to know them, the directors of Jaca Book said to him: “You must come to Milan to meet the old man.” The old man was Giussani. They called him “the old man” affectionately because he was only fifty years old! Oriol went. When he returned to Spain, I said to him, “I also want to meet this man.” So, we went to Milan; Giussani waited for us with a few others in a nice restaurant. That evening, I discovered his love for reason and freedom, which won me over. Don Giussani offered to host two Spanish people in Milan.

I spoke about it with Jone (my wife), who had studied nursing, worked in a big hospital, and was a month away from starting a full-time position. She saw that I was in such crisis that she said, “Let’s go to Milan!” So, we went.

In Milan, Giussani introduced us to the family of an architect. Having arrived in Milan on Thursday, they called us on Saturday: “Spaniards, what are you doing this weekend?” “This weekend? We’ve just arrived, we will go and see Milan.” “Why don’t you come with us?” “What are you doing?” “We are going to a house in the countryside. Come with us?” “OK, we will come with you. We have plenty of time to get to know Milan.” We went and found a group of Italians, recently married with very small children. They were friends; some went to do the shopping, others cooked, others prepared drinks. We had lunch on the grass. The children played, and we ate, drank, and chatted enthusiastically; but our conversations did not divide us, they unified us. At the end of lunch we went home, and my wife said to me: “The Italians in this movement are better friends to us than our Spanish friends.” This was the key to everything. They used a book of prayers, and my wife said, “I am going to buy it. We should begin to pray too.” This is how we started: following those people because we saw something different in them. We saw the things Giussani had said to us made flesh in that group of people: they were friends because they lived for something greater than themselves, together; something far greater than themselves but that was *for* them. We saw communion among them, but also liberation, and the desire to change soci-



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ety, to communicate Christ to the world. This was our first experience.

After two years, when we took our leave of Giussani, he said to us—I will never forget it—“I am very happy I have met you, and I wish you all the best”; he did not ask us: “Will you set up the movement in Spain?” No, there was not such a request, only “Happy to have met you.” I remember asking him: “When will we see each other again?” He was surprised by this, and everything changed. “When you wish. The 26th of December is a holiday in Italy, so on the 27th I will be in Madrid.” He came to Madrid to see only a few of us; Oriol and his wife, Jone and I. Just for the four of us. We came back determined to start the movement in Spain, but I began to struggle again; so much so that I had a further crisis (crises are very interesting—the challenge is to stay alive to recount them; something greater always arises from crises if one knows how to confront them). In any case, I was very unhappy. In those days Giussani called me: “They have invited me to Barcelona. Should I accept?” Imagine; he called me, and asked: “Should I accept or not?” “Accept. Will they pay for your travel?”—we had no money—“Yes.” “So I will see you in Barcelona, and then you can come to Madrid.”

In Barcelona, I had one of the most important experiences of my life. I was profoundly unhappy because I had thus far proved unable to commence an experience of the movement in Spain. That day, there was awful fog. The airport was closed, and you could hardly see the purple lights of the runway; the planes that had landed the night before could take off, but no one was landing. I was telling Giussani how I was feeling: “I should change my plan for the movement in Spain. I can’t manage, nothing is happening.” He said to me: “But it is sunny.” What was he talking about? There was terrible fog! The more I shared my struggles with him, the more he said to me: “Yet it is sunny.” “What is he trying to say to me?” We got onto the plane, surrounded by fog. We took off, and after ten seconds, the sun appeared; Giussani looked at me and said, “it is sunny.” This moment has remained with me for the rest of my life! When the fog is closing in, I think “yet it is sunny.” If one has seen the sun, even only once in one’s life, one cannot doubt that it is there. “Carras, the sun is there.” I replied: “So?” Listen to what he said to me: “Carras, I have one thing to say to you. If you wish to do what I have done, why do you not do what I do?”

Cobacha, Extremadura (Spain), 1984.
Fr. Giussani with Carras
and José Miguel Oriol.

“What do you do?” “I went to teach in a school.” I was thirty-seven years old (The last fifteen-year-old person I had interacted with was myself! In fact, as soon as one turns sixteen, one does not think about the fifteen-years-old). I replied, “OK, I will start to teach.” I began looking for a job, I found a school, and started.

At a certain point Giussani named me the international leader of CL; I went to Milan every Monday, I stayed for a couple of days, and then I came back to Madrid. Then he asked the leaders of the movement in Spain if anyone was prepared to move to Italy to open the International Center of Communion and Liberation in Rome, on the occasion of the Jubilee in 2000. Jone had discovered physiotherapy during our first stint in Italy; she had studied it and then opened a studio in Madrid with six other physiotherapists. It seemed crazy to leave everything! But my wife said something unforgettable to me: “Carras, I am praying Moses’ prayer.” “What is Moses’ prayer?” “Moses says to Yahweh: ‘If you are not going yourself, do not make us go up from here’ (cfr. Ex 33:15). I was left speechless, and then said: “This is beautiful. I have an amazing wife!” When the time came, we looked at each other and said, “He is with us,” and we left for Rome.

I will tell you about something else that happened. It was July in Milan: incredibly hot. It was the first time Carrón had accompanied me to an international event of the movement. We went to Giussani’s house. On the table, there was bottle of water with lots of condensation on it because it had just been taken out of the fridge and was very cold. Seeing it, Giussani said to us: “For me, Christ is as present as this object.” As he said this, he stroked the bottle, and the condensation dripped onto the table. I watched his hand as it touched the bottle, and said to myself: “I want Christ

“This is how we started: following those people. We saw the things Giussani had said to us made flesh in that group of people: they were friends because they lived for something greater than themselves.”

to one day be as present for me as it is for him.” It was an unforgettable memory. Giussani said that faith is the recognition of a Presence; in other words, it does not merely concern someone who came and went, like I thought when I was a boy. He also said that to pray is to engage in the memory of this Presence, which is the answer to all our questions. I have understood all of this thanks to don Giussani and to young people like yourselves who followed him. I have discovered that the unifying factor is this You: the You of Christ is the unifying factor, which gives us this capacity for friendship that we call communion: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” (cfr. Mt 18:20) “and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (cfr. Mt 28:20). This being at one together, thanks to Him, is the key to happiness in life because we are not made to live alone; we are not made to say, “Brilliant, no one wants me!” I have never found anyone who claimed this; rather, I have encountered so many people who cried because they believed no one loved them. ■

The Religious Sense: New Revised Edition

LUIGI GIUSSANI

With a new translation by John Zucchi

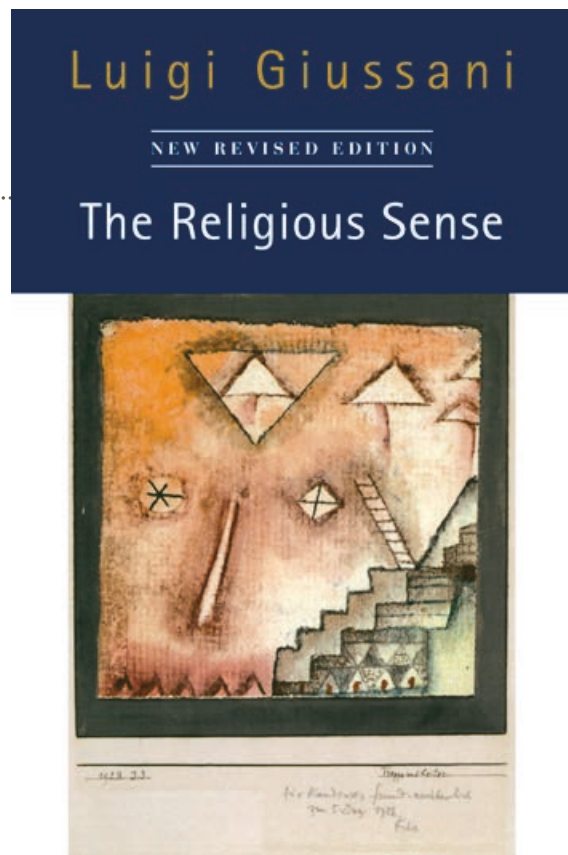
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