

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

8. A New People in History for the Human Glory of Christ

by Luigi Giussani*

The encounter with Christ, through that concrete historical form called “charism”, is made visible in people’s lives thanks to an experience of “unity” which was previously unimaginable. A unity not only with oneself, whereby one finds he is a more active protagonist in his own life, with no kind of censure about himself. A unity with other people who have been reached by the same encounter also emerges: in history, this is the origin of the “People of God.” This company along the journey reveals itself as a point of light, communion and human sympathy in the dreary background of the world and at the same time it remains the place generating and keeping regenerating the humanity of any participant, by embracing all the dimensions of life.

These weeks, as we are approaching the Easter Triduum, it might be useful if, while reading the text, we could deepen the dialogue through the challenge arising from a few questions: in the pandemic we are in today, where does my belonging to the GS path come from? What do I believe is different in this companionship compared to other groups I attend? What is “unity” for me? What forms (moments, gestures) of GS life are helping me most in my own path of life and would I like to share with all my friends?

We propose to continue the work until the end of March on the beginning of Chapter 3 (pp. 137–150), from the book by L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010.

Please note it is possible to send questions and contributions to the site:

<http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gscontributi/>

in the section “School of Community”.

1. A NEW PROTAGONIST IN HISTORY

The companionship of those whom Christ has assimilated to Himself in the Church, His Body, lives and reveals itself as a new people, the People of God. First, let us see what the characteristics of a people are, and then how this particular people, the People of God, are revealed in the history of mankind.

The existence of a people requires a bond between persons created by an event that is perceived as decisive for its historical meaning, for their destiny, and for that of the world. An »

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades,
Generating Traces in the History of the World,
McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 86-95.

» event gives rise to a people by pointing out a stable bond of belonging between persons who were unrelated up to that moment, just as the event of a child completes the beginning of a family. Let us take an example. Imagine two families living in houses built on piles in the middle of a river that periodically swells. The unity between these two families, then five, then ten as generations pass, is a continuous fight for survival, and ultimately for affirming life. The bond that grew between them makes them seek a greater and greater consistency of their life as it was started. The reality that is born is judged to be positive, a good, and this also implies a defence, with all the ingenuity and the operative energy needed, against whoever attacks it. A yeast among them keeps them united, supports their life—it is the dawn of a people.

The life of a people is determined by a common ideal, by a value that makes it worthwhile living, struggling, suffering and even dying for, a common ideal that makes everything worthwhile. It is a dynamic that St Augustine already sensed when he observed in *City of God* that “a people is the joining together of rational beings associated in the agreed communion of the things it loves,” and he adds that to know the nature of each people one needs to look at what it loves (“ut videatur qualis quisque populus sit, illa sunt intuenda quae diligit”).¹ Second, the life of a people is determined by the identification of the suitable instruments and the methods for attaining the acknowledged ideal, for tackling the needs and challenges that gradually arise from the historical circumstances. Third, it is determined by the mutual fidelity in which one helps the other on the journey towards the realization of the ideal. A people exists where there is the memory of a common history that is accepted as a historic task to be carried out.

So the acknowledgment of the ideal gives rise to a powerful commitment to work, which strives to create the tools needed as best it can. This expresses itself ultimately in the people’s charity, which has each one carry the other’s weight. In this sense, the “we” enters into the definition of the self. It is the people that defines the self’s destiny, its operative capacity and affective (and therefore fertile and creative) genius. If the people’s “we” enters into the definition of the “I,” then the “I” reaches its greatest maturity, as acknowledgment of its personal destiny and as its overall affectivity, identifying itself with the life and ideal of the people. Therefore, without friendship, that is to say, without gratuitous mutual affirmation of a common destiny, there is no people.

The most mysterious thing is that the successful formation of a people inevitably implies the prospect that its own good will be good for the world and for everyone else. This emerges clearly when the people acquire a certain security and dignity, and their ideal matures and is affirmed. This is the origin of every civilization, just as its disappearance marks its decline; a civilization declines when it is no longer able to live up to the ideal that generated it.

In this sense, the Hebrew people can be the symbol of all peoples. The people of Israel was born of an event in history,² born of the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sand on the sea-shore.³ Thus a covenant was established between Yahweh, who will be their God, and the Israelites, who will be his people.

In a mysterious continuity with this history,⁴ a new People is born from Christ, a People that shows itself on the streets of Jerusalem and under Solomon’s portico.⁵ The idea of »

¹ “Populus est coetus multitudinis rationalis rerum quas diligit concordia communiione sociatus, profecto, ut videatur qualis quisque populus sit, illa sunt intuenda quae diligit” (Saint Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XIX, 24).

² Exodus 12–15.

³ See Genesis 12:1–9; 15; 22:15–18.

⁴ See Matthew 1:1–17.

⁵ See John 10:23; Acts of the Apostles 3:11; 5:12.

» belonging, of being God's property, which defined the Hebrew people's self-awareness, is once again found as the content of the awareness of the first Christians. For from its birth, the group conceived of itself as the unity of those who belonged to Christ and were carrying on His mission. James, who was the first head of the Jerusalem community, says in one of his speeches, quoting the prophet Amos, "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has stated how from the beginning God wanted to choose amongst the pagans a people so as to consecrate them to his name. The words of the prophets agree on this as it is written, 'After these things, I will come back and rebuild the tent of David that was fallen; I will repair its ruins and raise it up so that all other men may search for the LORD and all the peoples over which my name has been invoked, says the LORD who does these things which are known to Him from all eternity.'"⁶

However, belonging to the Church brings a crucial novelty—the Christians are the People of God, but the criterion of belonging to this people is no longer based on ethnic origin or sociological unity. The new People is made up of those whom God has chosen and brought together in the acceptance of his Son, died and risen.⁷

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the generative and dynamic law of this People is election. The elect, those whom Christ has called, receive the mission entrusted to them as a task so as to carry out the Father's plan in the world. Being sent is inherent in being chosen through the fact of Baptism. A disciple of Christ, a baptized person, cannot be conceived of unless for the mission. One is born and baptized for the mission; the grace of the encounter and the education of belonging are given for the mission. And if someone does not reach the age of freedom and mature awareness, then we have to echo what Péguy said about the Holy Innocents: their greatness and their holiness are resolved in the fact that they were made, without knowing it and without having done anything, part of the Mystery of Christ's mission, which is the salvation of the world.⁸

There is a page of the Gospel that existentially documents the new People bursting into history, with the new task of belonging to Christ and of taking part in His mission.⁹

From Peter's "yes" a new people is born: "Feed my flock"

Peter's *yes* to Christ opens a connection between a person's vocation and God's universal plan. What is this connection between the personal moment and the mysterious whole of God's plan, and what does it produce? In answer to Peter's *yes*, Jesus expresses this connection with a phrase that is easy to understand: "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my flock."¹⁰ It is as if Jesus were to have said, "Lead my flock, I will lead my flock through you, the Rock on which my building in the world, my plan for the world, stands and will develop."¹¹ Peter's belonging to Christ thus becomes a participation in God's universal plan. "Feed my sheep": lead this new living group that becomes the protagonist of history, the instrument of the victory and of the human glory of Christ in history.

Peter's *yes* is the beginning of a new relationship of the individual person with the whole of reality. It is the beginning of a new relationship, not only between each person and Jesus but with the whole of reality. The relationship between man and woman, and between parents »

⁶ Acts of the Apostles 15:14–18; see Amos 9:11–12.

⁷ See L. Giussani, *Why the Church?* Viviane Hewitt, trans. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2001), 91–8.

⁸ See C. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, Pansy Pakenham, trans.; introduction by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper c1956).

⁹ See L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, 66–71.

¹⁰ See John 21:15–17.

¹¹ See Matthew 16, 17–19.

» and children, changes shape, the rules of education change shape. The way of looking at heaven and earth, of getting up in the morning and going to bed at night is different, and so is the way you go to work, the way you deal with things that don't work out, with a doubt that disturbs you, with questions that weigh on your heart. There is a change in your attitude to death and to birth.

At the root of this change of attitudes is the triumph of the pity that Christ had on man. "He turned and saw all the people following Him and He had pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd."¹² Peter was the first shepherd that He placed to lead His flock, in order that, in the various ups and downs in the relationship between men and reality what is seen to triumph should be Christ's pity for man. Peter, guarantee of the unity of this new People in history, ensures the permanence of the newness that Christ introduced into the world so as to sustain man's hope.

Through forgiveness and untiring activity

In the first place, Peter's *yes* to Christ produces a new reality through forgiveness. As Jesus asks, "Simon, do you love me?" He destroys all resentment, all remembrance of the betrayals of that poor man before Him. If Peter's *yes* is to produce a new humanity, a new people, a new current of humanity, one that is different, alert, vigilant, with a mentality and a gaze that sees, judges, and deals with things differently from the world, if this *yes* is to become evident in its fecundity, decisive for the history of mankind and protagonist of human events, then it must arise from, stand upon, and build upon forgiveness, accepting it. Accepting forgiveness is perhaps what is most difficult, even though it is very simple.

Peter's *yes* creates a new people on forgiveness. It is pronounced out of the awareness that that face that asks him, "Simon, do you love me?" is full of forgiveness. Peter's *yes* is built on this forgiveness and obtains this forgiveness for everyone. This is why the Abbot tells Miguel Mañara that all that he might have done in the past is as if reduced to nothing.¹³ It takes an infinite power to reduce something that is to nothing. Forgiveness is first a reduction to nothing of all the evil I have done, but even of all the evil I will do, because a month from now, a year from now, formally I should have to say the same as today. A true mother or father knows something of what this almighty power means when they cancel the record of the wrongs, great and small, done by their children. The comparison is blurred by our smallness and weakness, but it is the only comparison possible. A father and mother forgive their children continually; they must go on forgiving them if the children are to grow. And there will be no end to this forgiveness, it must rather increase with the passing of time.

Second, Peter's *yes* unleashes an activity that is in contradiction with the approximations and denials of worldly hatred. "Whoever has this hope in Him, purifies himself as He is pure."¹⁴ He is not purified all at once, he does not reach holiness straightaway, but his whole life is a purification: "purifies himself as He is pure." So he makes a habit of reciting the Angelus as he gets up in the morning, offering his day with the awareness that his own weakness, in the mistakes he will make that day, is already forgiven: "I offer You this day, my God, however it goes, so that You can forgive it, cancelling the memory of my evil, so that You keep it tending, striving towards You," like St Peter and St John running to see the tomb¹⁵ from which Jesus had risen. »

¹² Matthew 9:36.

¹³ See O.W. Milosz, "Miguel Manara, A Mystery in Six Scenes." Edward J. O'Brien, trans. In *Poet Lore: A Magazine of Letters* 1919 (summer), 247.

¹⁴ 1 John 3:3.

¹⁵ See John 20:3-10.

» The new People is born from this forgiveness and from this untiring activity, activity not paid for by what it builds (because it succeeds). Here there is no measuring, no success, no failure. In forgiveness, standing upon forgiveness, you start over and over again, a thousand times a day.

The People of God, one and manifold, affects history

The people of God that is born is *one*. "You who have been baptized have become one with Christ ... you are one (*eis*) in Christ Jesus."¹⁶ Peter's *yes* to Christ brings with it the beginning of a new world that is documented visibly in the unity amongst those who acknowledge Him. It is documented phenomenally as a unity that has an original, ontological depth. It is an organism in the real sense of the word: it is the mysterious Body of Christ. There is another word used for this ontology, *communio*, communion of being, for which "you are all one (*eis*) in Christ Jesus." The Christ Event goes on in history, it is present in every "present," documenting itself phenomenally as a unity of men who are together because of Him, because they have acknowledged being chosen by Him.

This unity is not a homogenization, a group of meaningless faces; it is made up of precise faces. The unity of the People is not a homogenization, it is rich in nuances because every reality that constitutes it is born of a history in which an "encounter" placed people together and marked out their road. From the moment of the encounter, the journey towards purity becomes easier to understand, to follow, and to love, and more fruitful. Every part of this People is born of a particular grace of the Spirit that is called a charism.

The unity of people who acknowledge Him in a particular environment, because they are linked with the communion of all those who believe in Christ present, has its effect on society, as the present, and on history, as the continuity of society. This unity makes the baptized person the new protagonist who, out of love for Christ, strives to create a more human world for everyone in His Name. Because of its very nature, this unity (whether it be of two or of two hundred million) has an effect on society, even as regards politics, and on history as culture and civilization. In this sense, the Gospel contains the clear and complete formula of the method for evangelization, "That they be one, so that the world may believe that You sent me."¹⁷

Cardinal Newman wrote of this visible and unceasing current of humanity in history, "Strictly speaking, the Christian Church, as being a visible society, is necessarily a political power or party. It may be a party triumphant, or a party under persecution; but a party it always must be, prior in existence to the civil institutions with which it is surrounded, and from its latent divinity formidable and influential, even to the end of time. The grant of permanency was made in the beginning, not to the mere doctrine of the Gospel, but to the Association itself built upon the doctrine; in prediction, not only of the indestructibility of Christianity, but of the medium also through which it was to be manifested to the world. Thus the Ecclesiastical Body is a divinely appointed means towards realizing the great evangelical blessings."¹⁸ »

¹⁶ Galatians 3:27-28; see Romans 10:12; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11; see also L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, 119-22.

¹⁷ See John 17:21.

¹⁸ J.H. Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: Longmans Green & Co 1908), 257.

» *Defence of the life of the people and mutual help*

Tenderness for Christ¹⁹ makes us become new protagonists in society, even in politics and in history, to the extent of creating a new civilization. This is the most sensational consequence that sprang from the invisible nucleus that the Holy Spirit created in the womb of a young woman, and then developed to take on the dimensions of a people.

Christians are men who, in acknowledging themselves in companionship, in friendship, live a struggle, striving with their whole selves towards the aim of life as the common ideal of the people. For these times, in which, as T.S. Eliot says, "men have forgotten all gods, except Usury, Lust and Power,"²⁰ these gods count less than the striving for the ideal. Christians live therefore without being scandalized by their own mistakes, or by betrayal—the most painful drawback of incoherence—but continuously recovering the horizon of the ideal. Life is conceived as striving towards Destiny, as a struggle for the good, thus it becomes easy to join together to help each other.

The Event that suddenly unites those who meet it and accept it, expresses its unifying principle first as the realization of subsidiarity. Each one helps the other and tries to make up for what the other lacks. It is a concrete subsidiarity, a daily one if possible, which makes life easier and provides defence against the enemy that threatens the life of the people. This enemy is the "world," in other words, human reality when conceived programmatically as opposing all reference to Christ.²¹

The awareness of being chosen to participate in the building of the Kingdom of God unleashes a new wave into our hearts, which—through that narrow path that is called the cross, sacrifice—makes loving feeling become genuine mutual charity. To live this is to work together for peace and therefore for conscientiousness, for the support of life, for the perception of life as full of meaning, as we await the fulfillment of its final meaning.

In achieving these aims, the meaning of the people is fulfilled. It is fulfilled in view of eternity; in other words, to live the eternal within one's normal activity. In this way, the people collaborate in the aim of creation, collaborate with Jesus on the Cross, experiencing the gradual intensification of the final light, love and joy, in which Christ's Resurrection, as the fulfillment of the Cross, penetrates and assimilates all that we know, use, and live together.

The new People that Christ has generated in the world, this irresistible torrent—despite the tragic events that it must pass through—is made of people who in some way accept living these things. Whenever they don't understand, they ask God for the grace to understand, and ask their brothers for the grace of assistance.

The Christians' responsibility is that of being what they have known, what has become part of their mind and heart. So we are responsible for being what we are, what we have been called to by Jesus in Baptism and in the encounter that made it blossom. Our responsibility is that of being friends according to the encounter we have had.²² And this friendship cannot fail to have its effect on the relationships that are formed in the family, at work, and in social and political life. So we see the present-day relevance of what Alasdair MacIntyre said of the situation in Europe in the late Roman Empire:

"A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were »

¹⁹ See 2 Corinthians 5:6–9.

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, Chorus from "The Rock," in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber 1974), 178.

²¹ See John 15:18.

²² See L. Giussani, "Tu" (*o dell'amicizia*) (Milano: BUR 1997).

» doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.”²³

The friendship of those called by Jesus in Baptism is the beginning of the community MacIntyre speaks of, the beginning of a new culture, of a new understanding of society and State, and of the world. In this way new human communities were born, which, to use the words of John Paul II, are the only possible means for overcoming the desolation of much of modern society: “The re-awakening of the Christian people to a greater awareness of the Church, building living communities in which the following of Christ becomes concrete, affects the relationships of which the day is made and embraces the dimensions of life: this is the only adequate answer to the secularising culture that threatens Christian principles and the moral values of society.” This threat mainly affects two things. First, the pledge of human happiness, which the bible calls “heritage,” and the certain expectation of this constitutes and defines the true man; second, the existence of the people. The aim of power seems to be the elimination of the people, as the unity of men who have a common ideal and who identify the means for reaching it, in particular, the Christian people, which pursues its true destiny in the companionship generated by Christ.

²³ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth 1981), 244–5.