



From the Religious Sense to Christianity: The Fundamental Works of Msgr. Luigi Giussani Founder of Communion and Liberation

FIRST LESSON: THE RELIGIOUS SENSE, AT THE CORE OF OUR BEING

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DATE: TUESDAY, APRIL 12, 2005

PLACE: CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF POMPEII, 25 CARMINE STREET, NEW YORK

Chris Bacich: This work was introduced to me when I was 19 years old. At that time the first edition of the Religious Sense (RS) from Msgr. Luigi Giussani (MG) was published in English by Ignatius Press - and for me it was really the shift in my existence I have to say - I picked up the book, I started to read it (I was a college student at the University of San Francisco) and I did not put it down till 3 a.m., till I finished it. And the importance of that work for me is even difficult to express and the reason for that is, and this is really the point from which I would like to begin our discussion this evening, the reason of this is that MG does not present a set of ideas in this work, he presents a proposal about how to face human existence, how to face our individual, personal, human existence and also how to conceive human existence in its communal dimension as well. And so, just as an introductory remark, on this night as I begin the entire series I would very much like to underline this aspect of our work, this aspect of what MG proposed to his students, proposed to his friends, not so much a line of thought, but how to stand in front of reality and in particular in front of the reality of myself and ourselves as human beings.

To begin at what MG begins with, which is the RS, he cautions us as far as method is concerned, the method of how we should proceed in this investigation of what he calls the RS, and he starts reminding us that the RS is first and foremost a human experience, it is a fact that belongs to the realm of humanity and, for this reason, we must be careful as we begin this investigation, as we begin to follow him: to the things that he wrote, he proposed to us. Keep this in mind: we are dealing with an eminently human experience. For this reason MG always indicated a particular method of approach in trying to get to know, in trying to discover this element in our experience as human beings. MG was first and foremost a high school teacher and he finds himself in a context not very much like the context we find ourselves here in the US. Here in US, because of certain historical factors, philosophy really does not belong to the secondary educational curriculum; it is not true in Europe and in Italy as well. Philosophy and the study of philosophy is something that takes place at the secondary school level, and so, when MG, by choice, went to speak with young people, in high school, about the faith, Catholicism and Christianity, he met a group of students who already had very well formed, well

articulated positions in front of the problem of human nature and questions dealing with what humanity and existence is all about. For this reason he always cautioned his students and he cautions us as well, to be very careful not to be alienated, and by alienation MG means to take another person's ideas and make those ideas the way we conceive of reality. And MG very passionately argues that this was a tragedy when it comes to ideas about ourselves, about what we as individual people are, for we as human persons are. For him, the methodological attention springs from this concern that each one of us develops an authentically personal understanding of our individual persons. Thus, if we don't want to be alienated and not be manipulated by those who are influential in our society, those who hold power, if we don't want to look at ourselves and understand and conceive of ourselves as we are encouraged to by those who hold the power, such as the media, or even academic power, we must be faithful to the object. And the object, as we said before, is located in our individual and personal human experience. Thus, MG always encouraged his friends to begin from their personal experience, as human beings. From this point of view, and even today when I speak with high school students, in my work, or when I speak with my friends, MG inculcated a sense in the people who were his friends, and in the people who followed him, the sense that I am as much an expert on humanity as Freud, as Shakespeare, I am capable of forming judgments and opinions about the human condition as much as Socrates, or any of the greatest ancient figures or Buddha, or Mohamed, any of the greatest figures in history, because in the end the subject matter is myself, is my I, is what it means to be human, what it means to be this thing that we call a "human being", a "person".

MG always qualified this work of caution by alerting those who were his friends to the fact that even if we attempt to begin from our own experience, this too could be deceptive. Because if I look at myself and my life and how I experience the world and reality, I cannot help but notice that if I begin from past experience, it is very easy that I project into the past a vision that I hold now; it is easy to deform the past with the opinion that I hold now. It is normal to talk about, we see this all the time; we speak with each other with exactly the same concern, "don't look with the rose color glasses into the past". Thinking about the 50's or the 60's as a better time than the one we are in now, it is really to deceive ourselves; this is really nothing new, but MG alerts us to this dynamic even within our own personal experience, our own humanity, and our experience as human beings.

Thus we must begin from the present; our personal experience must begin from the faithful observation of ourselves now, as we exist, now. And the things that MG will propose to us, as elements that we can discover in our human experience as human beings, are elements which he holds and which he proposes and affirms all present in ourselves now. Not only in the past, but now, so the best way to really understand ourselves and to understand this thing that MG refers as the RS, is to begin with ourselves in action. We must begin from an observation of ourselves in the present, in action. Right away, therefore, we can see that this is not so much intellectual work. I will distinguish between what MG encourages us to do, as not intellectual or philosophical work, rather, from a certain point of view, a scientific work, scientific in as much as it is a work of observation: what is it that we are now? And how is it that we discover reality and discover ourselves in the impact with reality now, in the present?

By the way, after this premise I would like to introduce an aside, which is that I would like that everybody knows that these lectures are taken from MG's work, the RS, the pieces that we are going to be speaking about tonight are largely located in chapter 5 of this work. The methodological points that I just made now, actually much extend to

chapters 1 to 4, but mostly, tonight we are going to be dealing with chapter 5. I also would like you to know that the outline that I am following is taken from a course that MG himself gave, as are all the outlines in these series. They are being taken from a course that MG gave in 1978 in the University of Bologna and they follow very closely, they are very faithful to what MG proposed to the students.

So what is the RS? MG proposes that the RS is the nature or the essence of the I. MG affirms that this is what makes us a human being, it is what makes us persons; it is what distinguishes us from every other form of nature that we find in our experience. He argues that this level of ourselves expresses itself in certain questions like, “What is the meaning of life?” or “What is the consistency of things?” or “What is the origin of things?” “What is the destiny of reality?” MG proposes that any human being, in his or her impact with reality, sooner or later, will experience a “sense”, the “religious sense” within him or herself, which expresses itself in questions at this level, “Why is there pain and death? Why do I have to suffer?” “Why does this or that thing have to happen?” MG always proposed to the students that he was not inventing these questions or this level of the human person. In fact, in this series of lectures he says to the students in Bologna, “Forgive me for all the quotes I’m going to use, but I learned from literature those things of which philosophy didn’t convince me.”

So, as we go through tonight we will see that MG quotes from a vast range of literary sources and that these were very important to him, because he believes that they attest to this universal experience of this level of our person, which again, sooner or later will manifests with these questions.

And now I am quoting from page 46 of the McGill edition of the RS. MG begins with a quote of very famous Italian poet from the 19th century, Giacomo Leopardi and this is a quote that is taken from the “Night song to of a nomadic shepherd in Asia”. In this song the shepherd addresses the moon, and he addresses the moon as he wonder with his flock, underneath the starry sky in this way:

*And when I gaze upon you,
Who mutely stand above the desert plains
Which heaven with its far circle but confines,
Or often, when I see you
Following step by step my flock and me,
Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky,
Musing, I say within me:
“Wherefore those many lights,
That boundless atmosphere,
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning
Of this vast solitude? And what am I?”*

MG proposes this as a beautiful example of this kind of questions: “*What is the meaning of this solitude and what am I?*”

He also proposes a way of understanding human life, which we find in many literary expressions from around the world, but he takes an example from A.V. Arnault in his poem “The leaf” and Arnault says:

“We are like leaves .../away from our own branch, poor frail leaf, where are you going?”

MG proposes that this sense of ourselves as leaves being tossed by the wind, disconnected from our origin and from what gives us life, which will be the branch, the tree, unfamiliar with what it is that gives our life consistency, this sense of ourselves springs from that same level of us that MG calls the RS. He also proposes that these questions are not tangential to our experience as human beings, these questions instead arise from the very core of our being, they are inextricable, they cannot be rooted out, no matter how great an effort one makes, to eliminate or ignore them, to cover over or to suffocate these questions, and the level of ourselves from where these questions arise, and, nevertheless, sooner or later, they spring up again, whether in front of the death of a person or a tragedy, like 9/11, or something incredibly beautiful, like falling in love and being in front of the face of a person whom I may have fallen in love with, who tells me "I love you too." "Who are you? Where did I meet you? Where did you come from?" This level of question cannot be ultimately rooted out from ourselves; it is there, at the very bottom of the self, at the very heart of the self, it is what makes the self a self, it what makes the self a human self. In an aside, in his lecture in Bologna MG said that he had heard recently, and this is back in the 1970's, that a medical student went to him and told him that the art of medicine was progressing the fastest and, in which there was the most research at the time and energy, was in the art of anesthesia and anesthetics, and he said that he believed that this was so indicative of the kind of society that we live in, a society which is ever more hopeful in anesthetizing, not only the physical person, but this level of the person, the heart of the person. Numbing, dulling this level of the person from where these questions spring forth, and so he says that, in order to become familiar with this level of our person, it takes an immense work, to uncover, to dig into ourselves, to rediscover this level of ourselves, that even if it cannot express itself in such fantastic lines as those of Leopardi or Shakespeare or any of the great poets or artists or musicians, composers, that we all know, nevertheless, this is in me, this is in you, this is in us and cannot be openly eradicated. It can be anesthetized and it has been numbed by the culture in which we live, the culture which can numb this level of ourselves and therefore which tents to separate ourselves from this kind of questions, encouraging ourselves to rather follow goals and fantasies, which those in power place in our minds. MG quotes that piece in Acts 17 when Saint Paul travels to the Aeropagus in Athens and he is looking for a way to introduce Christ to these philosophic intellectual people and as he is walking around the Aeropagus sees the statue to an "unknown god" and Saint Paul launches "Brothers, I see that you have a statue here in your beautiful city to an unknown god. Let me speak to you about this god and - at a certain point Paul says - this god is the god that gives to each one life, breath and everything" and Saint Paul goes on and says, "It is this god who is responsible for all human movements, the movements of all people in all history is traceable to this god" and so MG uses this to say this is the level about which I am speaking, this level from which all human movement is born. He also refers to a poem by Rilke:

*Put out my eyes, and I can see you still;
Slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;
And without any feet I can go to you;
And tongueless, I can conjure you at will.
Break off my arms I shall take hold of you
And grasp you with my heart as with a hand;
Arrest my heart my brain will beat as true;
And if you set this brain of mine afire,
Then on my blood I yet will carry you.*

“On my blood I yet will carry you.” MG proposes this poem indicative of how much - what he calls the RS - is identical to who we are as people. And he continues saying that these questions which express this level of ourselves, which he calls the RS, these questions’ decisive aspect are in certain adjectives or adverbs that tend to go along with these questions, and so MG says, really what matters in these questions are adjectives like this: “What is the *ultimate* meaning of life? What is the *final* destiny of things? *At its core* what is reality made up?” And so MG says that these questions don’t stop at partial answers, the meaning of my existence, the meaning of life and the meaning of reality, that the man that there is, me, to know the answer to these question does not stop at the meaning of only, for example, my existence but they tend to extend themselves indefinitely. What is the meaning of my existence? How is that meaning linked to the meaning of my children’s existence? And what the meaning of my existence and my children’s existence have to do with the existence of this nation, the USA, or of the time in which I find myself in history, and by extension, of all of history, and by extension to the Big Bang, and beyond? These questions are questions that claim to exhaust all of reason’s energy for searching. What meaning could possibly link me, and Napoleon Bonaparte and my children and the cave man and the Big Bang and whatever will happen after I am dead? These questions tend to exhaust the entire category of possibility. When I begin seriously looking at these questions, I have to admit that anything is possible, because the answer is so far beyond my ability to imagine. No matter what the answer is, I have to be open to any form of answer, any possible answer, because the only thing I can say about these questions is that when I begin to look at them seriously, I feel myself on the ocean, floating, and the search for any answer ends to be trying to swim to an unknown goal in the middle of the ocean. MG says, in this lesson back in 1978, reason is awareness of reality, but it is awareness of reality in its entirety. That is the capability of knowing everything, of discovering the answer to everything. And he says, but if reason has to know the entirety of reality, all of its factors, the final meaning of reality would be nothing other than the *synthesis* of the entirety of the factors, or the *emblem* of the entirety of the factors. And he gives this example, imagine a child, a very intelligent child, who is 5 years old who reaches up, on top of a piece of furniture, in the living room, and pulls down an alarm clock, and let’s imagine that this child was capable of pulling the clock apart, going to find his daddy’s tools, taking out the screws, pulling apart the entire clock, piece by piece, taking out every spring, and laying them out on the floor, he says, when the child is done, pulling every piece out and laying them carefully all around him, on the floor, what would the child probably do? MG says he probably burst out in tears. Why? Because he cannot put it back together. Why? Because he does not have the idea, he does not have the meaning, he does not know the synthesis of all the pieces, he does not know what relates each piece to the other piece, he does not know the object of a clock. And so MG says, the meaning of everything, the meaning of our existence as people, of all history and all of reality, the meaning of everything would have to be like that, would have to be a synthesis which would properly express the relationship between everything that is, everything that was, and everything that will be in me and outside of me in the universe. In order to explain this with my experience I give you another example: if I were to say to you, what do you think links a glove, the smell of fresh cut grass, a hotdog, a cup of beer, the sun, warm weather? And I think somebody already in the audience got the answer, and he is correct: baseball. The game of baseball links fresh cut grass and baseball hats, and hotdogs and beer and parking lot and an a mound of dirt and 4 bases, but let’s take out baseball, now and let’s look at those things individually, again: the smell of fresh cut grass, four white bags with dirt. Imagine in fact that we were from some place in Africa or in another culture and imagine if somebody puts on a big poster a picture of each of those items, and imagine that someone would say to us, what brings together these items, what is the meaning of all of those

items that you see on that poster? And let's imagine that we put as many as we can think of, parking lot, the stadium, flags, insigne, the ball, the bat, everything on that piece of paper, but we come from South Africa or some place deep in Asia and we have never seen these things before, or we recognize some of them, but we have no idea as to what could possibly link, even though we put a 100 items on a piece of paper. This is a pale analogy of the problem of the meaning of reality, because onto that piece of paper we would have to throw everything, everything and imagine what could link everything. And yet, MG says, the passion to know what that thing is, that would link everything, the need to discover what is it that links my life to your life, what is it that links all history to me and to everything else, to my health, to my emotional state, to my psychology, to why I have the parents I have, to why I should be born in the year and in the place, to the family that I was born to. We need to know these things; it is what in the end counts in human history and animates it, that question, that research, that struggle is the heart of what makes humanity so fascinating and lovable, so treacherous often times, as we will see later on, also, oppressive and evil. MG says, that for one who is becoming ever more human, this becomes like a dominant thought and he quotes again from Giacomo Leopardi, and for Leopardi this thought was the thought of love and MG says, we could have applied these lyrics, these lines, these verses to this need to discover these meanings,

*Mighty, belovedest,
Lord of the inmost secrets of my breasts;
Thou terrible, but dear
Gift of the gods; companion
Unto my days of dole,
Thought that so oft doth visit me and console.
Of thy mysterious nature
Who speaks not? Who its immemorial spell
Hath felt not?...
How solitary becomes
This soul of mine, whene'er
Thou hast resolved to make thy dwelling there
At once all other thoughts it doth contain
Fade, as in heaven above
The flash of lightening fades. Thou, like a tower
On some deserted plain,
Standest alone, gigantic, amidst thereof.*

MG affirms that once one really begins to take this problem seriously, once one really discovers this level of his person, it begins to dominate everything, it begins to be the thought, the preoccupation, the passion, that drives one ever more to seek its answer. He also gives the example of Chopin's *Raindrop*. I don't know how many of you are familiar with that, I encourage you to listen to it, it is a relatively short piece and it is made up an incredible and beautiful melody, which notes above one note (ding, ding, ding...) that repeats itself, that never leaves, of course it is the raindrop and you can imagine, as Chopin was perhaps composing the work, was beating on his window. And MG says, you see, our life as human being, if we look carefully, is like this piece by Chopin, life is like that beautiful melody, in which we can be very distracted, in which we can be very involved, very taken, but that note, that need to know the reason for my existence and the meaning of life and things does not go away, it can be buried; I can be distracted by the beauty of life and my engagement with it but this does not fade, does not disappear. Then MG continues, the more one looks these questions in the face, the

more he will discover his disproportion to the answer, and he affirms that this disproportion is constitutive of the person. He quotes another piece by Giacomo Leopardi, which is taken from one of his works entitled “On the portrait of a beautiful lady” and actually that title is not fully translated, because the entire title is “*Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna scolpito nel monumento sepolcrale della medesima*”. This is Leopardi who looks at a beautiful woman and her portrait on her tombstone, and he says:

*Learned consort of sounds,
By virtue of their being,
Creates for truant thought
High visions and desirings infinite:
Mysterious, the spirit of man may thus
Wander delightful seas,
As a keen swimmer goes
Among the ocean waves in his disport;
But let one false note strike
Upon the listening ear –
That moment, Paradise is turned to naught.*

*If, Human Nature, then,
In all things fallible
You are but dust and shade, whence these high feelings?
In any part if noble,
How is it that your worthiest thoughts and passions
Can be so lightly stirred
And roused and quenched even by such base occasions?*

I remember MG speaking of this mystery, later on, on the poem, Leopardi refers to the “*eternal mystery of our being*” and MG says, is it not true that we can be lost in a thought of love, or on the thought of the beloved, the beauty of life because the one whom we love has told us that he or she love us as well, as we walk up the stairs we stub our toe and scream, and curse? And he says, that is exactly what it is that Leopardi was talking about: in ourselves can be such noble thoughts and feelings and questions about our existence, but if we stub our toe, all will disappear, if we have to go to work in the morning, it is gone. MG uses this to say, you see, while all these questions are in us, and while there is a level of ourselves that seeks the answer to these questions, the more one looks at these questions in the face and the more one preoccupies himself with the search for the answer – again if we put a huge piece of paper on the floor of this auditorium, and place tiny little icons of everything that has ever been in history and we search for the answer, what could unite all of these things? The more we look at the problem, in its true depth, in its real proportion, the more we understand that we are not up to the task of discovering the answer. In fact, the answer is utterly beyond us. Hence one feels the sense of total disproportion, although there is a question in us that cannot be answered, it cannot be answered at least according to our own means, the means that we have at our disposal to engage in this search, to deal with this problem. MG graphically illustrates this in his book speaking about an Italian scientist and friend of Einstein, who talks about his experience as a scientist. And he says that every time he was doing research, as a scientist, what he was looking for “would set itself in opposition like an elastic barrier to its being overcome by cognitive means” and so MG graphically expresses this: even in

the experience of science, if we represent reason as “r” we seek a value, that we can call “x”, that value, every time we get close to it, needs to move further away.

$$(r \rightarrow \dots x \dots x \rightarrow x\dots)$$

And let’s imagine that I am in the scientific field, where the answer to one question leads to 10 more questions, the answer to which leads to 10 more questions, so every single answer, even to scientific question, is as though reality always reveals itself to be deeper, more profound, phantomlike in the end, we can’t get to the bottom.

And so MG says, this is part of our structure as human beings, we have within ourselves at the very core of our being, this level which demands the answer, and yet, the energy we have and the tools that we have at our disposal, are not commensurate with any possible answer. He quotes Einstein, who says “... he who does not admit to the unfathomable mystery cannot even be a scientist”. Then he quotes Shakespeare “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. He also quotes a philosopher from the 20th century, Paul Ricoeur, who says “What I am is incommensurable with what I know.” What I am is incommensurable with what I know. Because what I know is so limited, what I am demands everything. And so MG says, because of this situation, in the man or in the woman, in the person who takes this level of him or herself seriously, there is a profound sadness, a sadness that determines the personality and, without which, according to MG, the person has not yet arrived to maturity, to be consciously himself. But MG says that this sadness is also a sign of what makes us great as human being, because to be aware of the value of such sadness is to be conscious of the greatness of life and to intuit life’s destiny. He also argues that the opposite of sadness is despair, because sadness is to say, I don’t know what the answer is to that would unite me to the entirety of all reality, that would give me my proper meaning, and reality’s proper meaning, I don’t know what that might be, but it must be, even if I don’t know it, so I can be sad, because I don’t know it. The things that exist ultimately, all I am, is sad, whereas, desperation is to say, it does not exist, this level of myself is nothing other than absurdity, is the extreme affirmation that modern philosophy came to at the end of 20th century, existence is absurdity. This is the limit of human philosophy, or rather it is the expression of a human philosophy that does not take into account something other than the human, something beyond human reason, something that reason must seek, it is the extreme limit of humanity which says, the “x” does not exist, what I structurally seek is nothing. In other words, it is the extreme limit of a position that some human beings choose in freedom to take. MG argues instead that human nature is not an absurdity, it is, rather, a promise or, to use the Hebrew term, it is a covenant. He cites from an important Italian author and poet, Cesare Pavese, who was awarded Italy’s highest price, this is the equivalent of being crowned the “poet laureate” in England, it is called the “*Premio Strega*” and Pavese writes in his diary, “You also have the gift of fertility. You are the master of yourself, of your fate. You are as famous as any man can be who does not seek to be so. Yet, all that will come to an end. This profound joy of yours, this glow of super-abundance, is made of things you did not take into account. It was given to you. By whom? Whom should you thank? Whom will you curse when it all disappears?” Later on, in his diary, Pavese says, “What a great thought it is that nothing is due to us. Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?” And MG comments, “perhaps he did not realize that expectation is the very structure of our nature, it is the essence of our soul”. Sometimes with the kids, in order to help them understand what he says, I tell them, be honest now, when you go to the mail-box and you open it up, and you see mail in there, you cannot help, but expect that there may be something that you are waiting for, even if you did not order anything from Amazon, even if you did not order anything, you have a hot sense, when you open

the mail, that there may be a letter, there may be a package, there may be a something in there that would be great. And MG says this kind of experience is indicative of how we are made as people. Another thing I tell my students is, can you imagine taking a test with me, a test that you felt that you did very well on and you get it back and you get a 50 out of 100 and you say, “Mr Bacich, how did I get a 50?” And I say, “I just felt like giving you a 50.” And you say, “This is a joke, right?” And I say, “No, it is not a joke. Really, I just felt giving you a 50.” And then you start getting worried, “But Mr Bacich, it looks like I did not do so much wrong on this exam.” And I say, “Yes, in fact you only got one question wrong, but I want to give you a 50.” And then you start sweating and getting angry, “Mr Bacich, what the heck you are talking about? I am going to call my mother.” I say, “Listen, grades are not objective, they don’t really mean anything. What’s the big deal? I felt like five, zero, five, zero.” And as we go on like this you are going just angry, more and more, but who ever told you to expect that I would be just when I give you your grades? Who ever taught you to expect that another human being should treat you justly, should give you anything, who ever taught you to expect justice? It is there, it is in you, you expect justice; nobody teaches you. When I was a kid, in the kindergarten, and I have an older brother, and he loved insects, and he taught to love insects, but I was not too much into it. But there was an insect that I thought was the coolest insect in earth, which is the praying mantis. I don’t know if you know what a praying mantis is, but it is a green thing that hops and he goes like this, it has a head that looks like an alien head and it is a very cool looking bug, especially if you are a 5 year old boy, and so I learn to love praying mantises. And so one day I came out the playground of the kindergarten and I found a bunch of kids in a circle and I broke into the circle, just in time to see a praying mantis on the ground, a big one – that I would like to capture for myself – and just in time to see the big idiot of a kid, I don’t remember his name anymore, I think his name was Robby, to go “squish”, he squished with his foot, I jumped on him and I immediately started to pummel him; nobody told me to pummel Roby, I pummeled Roby because I felt that what he did was unjust. Why should I expect that he was going to do anything differently? It was not that my mom sat me down and gave me lessons on justice. When somebody does something you don’t like, you throw a punch. I was 5 I was in the kindergarten. And yet MG says that this is exactly our nature, our nature is to expect the good, our nature is to expect the beautiful, our nature is to expect something great and wonderful, our nature is to expect happiness. He quotes Dante: “Everyone confusedly understands that there is a good that would give rest to his soul; everyone desires it and fights in order to reach it.”

MG finishes his thought in his lesson saying that the RS is a dimension of the I, it is man’s capacity to express his own profound nature in the ultimate question. This question is within every expression of a person and every expression that the person makes, is like a step: the last step will be to reach destiny, to reach the end of the journey. He gives the example of the Noble Price for literature for 1951, Par Lagerkvist, the author of many books, including Barabbas,

*My friend is a stranger, someone that I do not know.
A stranger far, far away.*

*For his sake my heart is full of disquiet
Because he is not with me.
Because, perhaps, after all he does not exist?*

*Who are you who so fill my heart with your absence?
Who fill the entire world with your absence?*

I remember when I was 15 years old, I lived in California, in a very beautiful part of California, called the Napa Valley, where the wine is made, and I had a very good friends who had, on top of one of the hills of Napa Valley – you guys will call it a mountain down here, because it was about 2,300 feet, but we called it a hill in California, but in any case, this is another story - so he had this house and we are used to go up there and spend the night and we used to purposely stay up until about 1, 2 or 3 in the morning and then we would go out hiking on the mountain at night, by moonlight and we would go in adventures, hoping to meet things like cougars or something that we could beat up and kill. But in any case on one of those nights that I was out with him, I remember we have gotten to the top of a ridge, and we were looking, instead of east into the Napa Valley, we were looking west, toward the Sonoma Valley, and the succession of hills was kind of going lower and lower down toward the Sonoma Valley and we sat and we just stared out at this starry night and this crescent moon, hanging low in the horizon, and it was the spring time and it was probably 70 degrees at 2 in the morning or so, and I remember thinking, “What is it I am missing? What is missing?” Because this is so beautiful right now, and yet all of its beauty, and I did not think in these terms, but I remember the experience, clearly, all of this beauty, all of this beauty, it uncovers a lack, it tells me that I am missing something and that something should be here with me, like the last piece of a puzzle, something should be here with me, that finishes the puzzle, with me, with this guy, with the night, with the warm air, with the smell of the dry grass and dry leaves in California, smell of the earth. All of this is perfect, but it is not perfect because is missing something, it lacks something. What is it that is missing tonight? What is missing? That much I remember thinking to myself, what is missing? And MG says that, since the I is a promise, since we, as human being experience human existence as promise, that the promise has to have an answer and he says, all that we have said can be summed up in this mathematical observation (on the board: $A \rightarrow A^1$). Rilke’s or Lagerkvist’s, Dante’s or Leopardi’s poetry, all attempt to say this: the factors in play, as they emerge in experience, call for another thing. What this other thing must be, the rational value of the thing and how this thing must be conceived of – which is what the history of religion calls “God” – we will see.

In explaining this observation, what MG says here is, if A is me, myself and if it impossible for me to change, if it is impossible for me to make a step, if it is impossible for me to move forward something that would answer to the kind of question we are talking about, if there is an authentic change in A, so then A is no longer A, but A^1 , it means that there must be a third factor that has helped determine this step. And this step, MG says, is provided by the existence of a mystery, a mystery, which in the history of religions is called God. And he hesitates to use that word, because we associate so many images and so many ideas and so many preconceptions with this world God and so he prefers to use another term, the Mystery with the capitol M. All of our life as promise, indicates that there must be a response to it, but what the response is? Is utterly beyond my power, my ability to grasp and this is what people historically calls God, this is the Mystery to which all human beings, all movements of human beings tend. And MG finishes, saying, it is the purity of this idea, the idea of “God”, of this concept that can put us in the condition to understand what Christianity is. Otherwise, we don’t understand what it is, because for too many of us Christianity is just a ‘religion’. So it is with this observation that I finish tonight the lecture.

QUESTIONS

Question: how can we perceive that we are not just “predetermined” by our DNA or environment?

Chris: Thank you for your question, I think I will make some distinctions to start, the first is: even if you think in Aristotelian terms, this is, we can say, not new, because Aristotle would say that – if we were to think of Aristotle talking of this problem – Aristotle would in fact say that there is identity between A and A¹, because really change has been, that something that was potential in A has now come in act in A¹. And I think that MG probably has somewhere in his thought this observation, that is true, either everything about us as human being, ultimately is traceable to what we are, when the sperm and the egg come together, and really this is it, and the way that thing interacts with the circumstances that he finds himself in, in fact, much of modern science today will tell you that you are nothing other than a mixture of your DNA and your environment and that this is a pretty complex mixture and so it is very difficult to kind of identify and determine exactly how your life is going to be. Right now it would be almost impossible to kind of articulate your predetermination, but fundamentally you are predetermined, you are predetermined by the fact that you are nothing other than a biochemical reaction which finds itself programmed in a particular way by your DNA, in a particular set of circumstances which you don't decide. Thus, in the end, you are nothing other than a mechanism. What MG is talking about here is: if instead we - and remember, this is very important: he is no talking in general about humanity, he is talking about you and the observation that you can make about yourself - if you can register in your experience, an authentic change, change which you consider to be ultimately not traceable to your biological antecedents or to your environment, if you can discover something in your experience then you can affirm along with him, that there is not only you, and not only the universe, but that there is this mystery, that there is this “something beyond” to which our nature calls. Or you can say, from another point of view, that our nature feels the call to from its impact in reality, as though reality was the voice of this mystery calling to me through reality.

Question: is our need of meaning more “original” than the original sin?

Chris: I think that what you can say, from a Christian point of view, that this is more original than the original sin. To speak in Christian terms, I can say with certainty that MG would say that this is more original than original sin, because original sin, and he speaks of it later on, in these series of lectures, will be something that introduces itself, as a weakness in being faithful to this dynamic. In fact, already in the next lecture MG is going to say that the problem is so urgent, because I must live for something and therefore I must identify something for which it is worthy living. The problem becomes so urgent and since, I cannot even begin to imagine, again, I really like the example of baseball, because you can really put down 100 or so factors, and we all know what baseball is, we all know how it is that baseball links those things, but then if you think about putting those pictures in front of an aborigine in Australia and saying, what links these things, forget about it. How long will he have to live before he gets to the game of baseball? But we are not talking 100 or 200 factors on a piece of paper, we are talking about a quasi-infinite amount of factors and trying to imagine the link between all those. And so MG says, and we will talk about it next week, we give into a kind of dizziness, and we say, THIS is why I live, something I can grab, something I can hold, something I can understand and it is the urge to identify the mystery of everything with one thing that is the urge to idolatry, that is that urge that he identifies as the urge, which is the wound of original sin. Which is, if you look in Genesis, in the end, what they identified as the

reason of existence was the apple, was the possibility to become like God, in other word something they could understand, something they could grasp.

Question: What is the reaction of high school kids, do they reject it?

Chris: absolutely not, on the contrary I would say that this is the most provocative thing that I ever heard, and, in fact I am the director of an educational center in Brooklyn, it is kind of dedicated to raising exactly this question in high school kids and they love it, because they are at that time of life when these question are there. You talk to high school kids and you find that many of them stay up late at night, sometimes drinking, sometimes smoking pot, but speaking with their friends about these things and try to get to the bottom of these things and often times is expressed in a way which is immature and kind of undisciplined and really, in this country, in particular, there is huge disservice done to young people because they have no tools whatsoever to even begin to approach these question, so that they are thirsty for authentic teachers. For me and for MG a teacher is one who introduces you to reality and you cannot be introduced to reality without having a hypothesis about its meaning, because, otherwise what you find is the clock on the ground, you find the clock on the ground, taken apart, and then you go and you sit with the pieces and you put the pieces together as you like. This is not only what people do, but it is also what our education system currently encourages students to do, theoretically even. There is a very much in vogue position called constructivism: young people should construct their own meaning, how terrible! Especially if I am a young person who comes from an socio-economic background which is terrible, or I have a family that is broken, or if I have anything in my life that really authentically pushes me to this level of myself, and to these questions and I am told: put together whatever answer you want? No wonder we have teenagers who cut themselves, and they say that the pain they feel is the meaning of their existence. No, when I speak with high school kids about these things, they love it. But again, it is not only a question of speaking; it is a question of being familiar with this level of ourselves. I can only thank God that I knew that I had the opportunity of becoming friend with MG, but even before I had met MG, as I said, at 19 years old I picked up this book and I could not put it down, I found it so provocative and I think that with young people in particular the problem is, a young person must find somebody who is younger than them from a certain point of view, that is, a person, an adult who takes these questions more seriously than they do, so who therefore that can be always the one who provokes them, one who calls them back to, and encourages to stand at this level. But it is in you that there is a particular moment where these questions comes alive and I will challenge anybody in this room to tell me the opposite, when he or she was 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 that these things were not more pressing, did not belong more naturally to the horizon of his or her experience of the human person. But then, as we go along, the anesthesia kicks in and, by the way, it kicks in earlier and earlier and earlier, that is one thing I can say as high school teacher. And then, since your question was not at theoretical level, I am just going to tell you that I am always looking for people to help. So if you work with young people, you can come and see me and we can talk more about this.