



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

SECOND LESSON: THE METHOD OF THE RELIGIOUS SENSE:
REALITY AS A SIGN AND THE DISCOVERY OF REASON

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DATE: TUESDAY, APRIL 19, 2005

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

Chris Bacich: This is the second lecture in a series of lectures which are based on a series of lectures given by MG to a group of university students in Bologna, Italy and they take as their subject the human person and the projectory of the human person - and its nature - to Christianity. They follow pretty closely his “trilogy” which has been published by McGill University Press, the first of which is *The Religious Sense*, the second, *At the origin of the Christian Claim*, and the third, *Why the Church?*.

In the first lesson, last week, we talked a little bit about how it is the MG defines the RS and he defines the RS as the nature of the I, that level of the person that expresses itself with questions, questions that attached themselves to the very core of our being: “what is the meaning of our existence? Why there is pain and death? In the end, why is life worth living?” And we talked last week about how these questions demand a total answer, an answer that doesn’t deny any factor in reality to myself and he gave the example of the little child that takes an alarm clock and pulls it all apart, puts all the pieces on the ground, carefully, one by one, until he discovers that he has taken everything apart, and MG then says that the child begins to cry, weeps, screams, because he lacks the idea how to put the pieces together, that is, he lacks the meaning of all those pieces, in the same way the human person, finds himself or herself in front of reality, in front of a myriad of pieces and yet, without the capability of imagining what could unite all those pieces, so then, the person senses, in the end, that he is disproportionate to the answer for the need for meaning, for the answer to these questions. So then, in the most conscious human being there is an experience of deep sadness – sadness being the recognition that an answer to this level of ourselves exists and yet it is unimaginable, that is, our energy, the energy given to us, and the possibility for us to imagine, follow, enter into this mystery is so limited, that in front of one’s limits, one feels the great and deep sadness, which is what MG stresses is the opposite of desperation. Desperation being the claim that, although I desire this answer, I need this answer, it does not exist. And so MG continues affirming that the person who is attentive to her structure discovers that she has been made as a promise. And we kind of left off last week with this affirmation.

I should mention one last thing before going on: MG’s point of departure is that what he proposes to us is not a bunch of intellectual affirmations. I quoted him as saying, “What never convinced me by philosophy, I find reasons for in literature.” So MG himself never felt that the most persuasive form of reasons was an intellectual or philosophic form for reason, rather the

most persuasive reason was a life that was lived attentively and so we stress very much that at the origin of these lectures is this affirmation that what MG proposes to us is not a clearly set up logical discourse, but what he proposes is an experience of human existence that one can recognize as true if he is attentive to his own existence as a human being, now, in the present.

He begins his second lesson, talking about the trajectory of our desire as human beings, and he quotes from a poem by an Italian poet, named Clemente Rebora, who writes in his poem “Sandbags for the Eyes”:

*Whatever you may say or do
There is a cry inside:
That is not why, that is not why!
And thus everything refers back
To a secret question:
The act is a pretext.*

MG says that we human beings attach ourselves to things, our desires pushes us to reality and we approach ourselves to things and our desires to things searching for an answer to our life, because, for example, if only this girl would say yes to me and she does and for a while everything is all right, but then a question arrives again and he says, commenting on this poem, that the relationship with your girlfriend or boyfriend is a pretext for what you seek and that is more than the perimeter of her face, more than the perimeter of her body, more than the perimeter of her presence as a woman, and then he says to these university students, look, I am talking right now with the people that agree with me, someone may disagree with me, but what I want to say, I say to the people who agree with me. I remember a story that I told many times to the young people that I work with. I am from the state of California, but for a brief period of my life my family lived in Washington State, just across the Colombia River in a town called Vancouver, not to be confused with the other Vancouver in British Columbia. We moved and lived there for 5 years, and I had a friend called Joe and I really did everything together 7 years old to about 12 years old. So at my 8th grade graduation my parents gave a fantastic gift to me, to go to Washington state, it was a particularly fantastic gift because they bought me a ticket on a train and I got to go in a train alone, from San Francisco, California to Oregon. I stayed up all night; I smoked cigarettes; it was a trip that lasted about 12 or 15 hours and it was wonderful. I stayed in the lunch car all night long because the car was built with windows and there was a beautiful moon there and we smoked and we had a beautiful time. And there was a man that told me an incredible story that he saw a UFO disconnecting electricity at the power station. Anyway, I got there and my friend Joe brought me to a place called Double Mount Lake, which is a small volcanic lake not far from Vancouver, Washington, and there we stayed for a couple of days camping. So we stayed there for first and second day and then, the next morning we went to the beach on this lake and at the beach, at about 45 or 50 yards away, there was this very beautiful short, little, dark haired, dark eyed girl with a hot pink bikini, who was about our age, 13 or 14 years old. I was on a quest for the perfect woman and I recognized immediately that she was the answer to my quest. I told Joe that she was answering my quest. “Did you see that girl? She is so fantastic, beautiful! I can’t believe it!” To make a long story short, we did the typical stupid teenage stuff: we started to hang out, play cards, then towards the evening play chicken fights in the water. So we were happy and we were just moving right down that road. That night we went to see her and at the time when I had to leave, we left and Joe kind of walked away and I turned and I kissed her and I was in heaven, I could not believe that that girl that was so gorgeous in that hot pink bikini had kissed me. The next morning was a very clear morning, I showed up at the

lake and she was there and we took a walk together and we set on the bench, close to the lake, looking at the lake and we were talking about things. At a certain point she reached up and grabbed my hand and I remember very clearly, a tremor going through me, with this vague thought, but now that she is my girlfriend, now that she loves me, now that she has grabbed my hand, is this everything I was looking for? When I first saw her yesterday I had this overwhelming sense that whatever I had seen in her the day before, had somehow eluded me, had somehow escaped me. It is not that I was not happy that she was holding my hand; I was very happy that she was holding my hand, I was very happy that she was my girlfriend, that she loved me, that she had kissed me, about all this stuff I was extremely happy, had you told me in that moment “she does not like you anymore” I would have been crushed. And it was certainly not that I was like, I wished I could embrace her and get really a lot closer to her, physically, what was missing was not that I had to have sex with her, it was not that at all, it was a sense that whatever I intuited in her presence the day before on the beach, had somehow escaped – this is the experience MG is talking about: the experience of grabbing something, something that you want, something beautiful, something good, and yet how can you explain that what you can grasp as soon as you grasp, whatever you were looking for when you grab it, deludes you. Later on MG takes the example of a miniature that he saw once, that it starts with a line of a phrase, with the letter Q, it is actually a biography of the life of San Francis, written by somebody, and inside the Q San Francis is standing in front of the rising sun and the Q begins the sentence “*Quid animus satis?*” “What can satisfy the soul?” and MG says that it is the sense that nothing can satisfy the soul. MG said, back in 1978, to these university students, we have to be open to this affirmation: man’s soul does not find anything to be satisfying, satisfying is a Latin term that means make complete in all of its reality, it has a synonym in Latin, *perfectus*, and so nothing in the life of man answers adequately and totally to the need that he has of being complete, being fulfilled, being realized. And he goes on and says the way in which a person impacts or touches reality, it is such that reality raises up questions, desires and fantasies, it stirs up an attraction to a thing that, in the end, never fulfills. He takes the opportunity to quote from Romeo and Juliet:

*Show me a mistress that is passing fair,
What doth her beauty serve but as a note
Where I may read who pass’d that passing
Fair?*

He also gave an example of listening to Beethoven, or listening to a piece of classical music. He says if one is reflective when he listens he would ask himself: what a strange kind of satisfaction this is? Because it deepens your thirst instead to satisfy, because this satisfaction amplifies the desire. During this lecture he invites ourselves as human beings to verify this in ourselves. If you think about, there are certain kinds of desires, if we talk about the intensities of these desires over time, if we plot on the board the intensity of the desires on the y axis, and time on the x axis, and we talking about first the material desires, such as hunger, thirst, desire for sex or for sleep, as time goes on, at any given point, if we think about hunger, when we have the opportunity to eat it is as though this desire returns to zero, at least at a time, then it starts to grow again. But MG says that there is another kind of desire in us, desires that are immaterial, and he says, it is strange, if you think about for example the desire for beauty, these kinds of desire when they meet something that can satisfy them, as if I go up a mountain and I have a beautiful view, so if I stand in front a beautiful view, or I stand in front of a beautiful woman, or I meet something that begins to satisfy me, instead to drop, this desire explodes, it rockets and the more I experience beauty, the more I long for beauty, or the more I experience love, the more I find that I need love even more. If I am curious about something, and I start to discover, think about the great

scientists of the world, or about ourselves when we are really interested in something. When I was 7 years old, I saw “Star Wars”, that was one of the first movies that my parents allowed me to see. I was absolutely fascinated by that movie. When you meet something that interests you, the more you find out, the more you want to find out, so then MG says that there is this other kind of the desire in us, which is like an angle open on the infinite and the more they meet an answer, the more your desire widens out. Having said that, MG continues his invitation to us, saying, what do you call reality that when you experience it, sends you on to something else, a reality that opens you instead to finishing in something else? Again I think of the experience that I had with Kristy on that bench, at that moment it was a moment that so clearly sent me on to something beyond her, and so I had to continue my search beyond even her. Actually, it would have been wonderful to continue my search with her, so whatever it was that escaped me when I found her and so MG says that we can call a reality that sends you onto something else, with a word that is kind of technical, we called that reality “sign”, sign is the content of an experience that if it is looked with intelligence sends you onto something else. And so MG says: imagine, I am in a forest with a friend, we are hiking, and at a certain point we hear coming from left: “help, help, help”. So that I turn and tell my friend, “Let’s go!” And my friend, “Why?” And I, “Don’t you hear that?” “Yes, I hear that. But, why should we got in that direction?” “Because if we hear the word, “help,” we can assume that there is somebody there who is crying out for help and in the English language “help” means ‘I need somebody helping me because I am in trouble’”. And my friend says, “How do you know that there is a person over there?” MG says that it is possible to stay in front of reality like this, to ignore the fact that its presence implies the presence of something else. How absurd would it be, if I am driving down the road and I would try to get to San Francisco and I see in front of me a street sign: “San Francisco 30” and I am on an interstate highway and I say to my friend, “Hey, we should get there in about 30 minutes.” “Why?” “Don’t you see the sign?” “Yes, but this doesn’t mean anything.” He gave one final example which he called grotesque. Imagine that there is a shipwreck and everybody in the ship dies except a baby that somehow gets to the shore, and is saved by wild animals, survives eating plant food and drinking the water on the desert island. Imagine this boy, reaching 12, 13, 14 years old, he starts to feel within himself a great urge, but he does not understand what the point of this urge is – because we know that he is experiencing puberty, he is beginning to feel the urge for a mate, for a woman – but he can’t imagine that, because he has never seen one, he has never experienced one. He says the boy may imagine, “What do I need? It must be a bird that is more beautiful. It must be a rock that is bigger, a mountain, something beyond the water, that I need.” MG says, if the boy were intelligent, he would say, certainly, since all this impetus in me pushes me toward something, there must be an object to which this impetus corresponds. And so MG says, I say that the world’s existence, welcomed by man’s consciousness, demonstrates the existence of God, exactly as a sign demonstrates that of which it is a sign. The sign is a reality that can be experienced which would no make complete sense without positing the existence of another thing. In this sense the world teaches God, if you think about it, teaching is based upon signs, the teacher uses words, the teacher uses the relationship with his students and gestures and all of these are signs. And so MG continues, somebody can object, it is not true that man has needs that cannot be met in this world. And he says that this is an objection I am not going to bother with, I am talking only to those persons who, in some form or another, have had awakened in them the perception that I have just outlined. From this point of view MG says to me as a person, if you are intelligent that experience with Kristy on the beach tells you that she was not the object that your desire was pointing you to, but that the object must exist, because otherwise everything that she is awakening in you does not make sense. I repeat, I knew very clearly that what I was looking for was not more sexually satisfying relations with her, so to speak, not even so to speak, this is exactly what I mean.

He quotes the Italian poet, Cesare Pavese, who says, “Man seeks an infinite pleasure” and it reminds me of Dante “Everyone confusedly understands that there is a good that would give his soul rest; everyone desires it and fights in order to reach it.”

He also says that the longing we find in an experience of love is as though that longing opens us up to a horizon that, in an embrace, or a kiss, or any other momentarily expression, does not find fulfillment. It is not resolved. The person that is attentive to his or her reality as a person, in this dynamic of desire, MG says that there are only 2 possibilities: either our nature as a human being is ill formed, in other words, either all of the desires for happiness that I feel, for love that I feel, for all these kinds of desires that I feel, either these desires ultimately are senseless and therefore, exactly because these desires are senseless, life is absurd, or there is an answer.

And here I like to add a *nota bene*, which is that, if you think about the 2 kinds of desire that we outlined before, is it not true that in the name of these desires (immaterial) we would fight and give up those other desires (material)? In other words, we recognize a priority in these 2 sets of desires that we experience as human beings, because how many of us don't go on diets, give up many things to eat, in order to be thin enough to be loved, how many of us don't go to the gym and watch carefully what they eat in order to get the right physique, in order to find love? In other words, we as human beings, are willing to give up our need for food, are willing to give up our need for sleep, are willing to give up our need for sex, are willing to give up this level of desire in order to reach this level.

In this sense, really, we would have to say that we are absurd creatures because in the name of pursuing something that does not exist, we choose to act suicidal, that is, we choose to go against that other level of physical desire in the name of things that fundamentally do not exist. In this sense MG is absolutely crystal clear and it is very difficult to challenge as a position, because it is true, the way we are structured would be an absurdity, we will be creatures that, fundamentally, from a certain point of view, hate ourselves, because in the name of something that does not exist, we attack ourselves. Or, MG says, the answer exists, but man does not know what is like, where it is, and he says, of these 2 possibilities only the latter is intelligent and reasonable, because, if reason is the need for a total explanation, and one does not find an explanation in experience, for the human dynamic of the desires described before, then in order to be coherent with reason, man is supposed to say that the answer exists, it exists somewhere. Last week we said that the problem of life is analogous to the problem of the child that takes the clock apart. Why does he cry? Because he does not know, he does not have the idea, he does not have the sense, and since he does not possess the sense of what reality is, he cannot put the clock together and so he cries. And then we said last week, imagine that I lay out on a huge sheet everything that there is in reality and I find within myself the impetus to discover the meaning of all of the things in the sheet, from Neanderthal man to evolution, to the first World War, to why my parents should be my parents, to why I should be born when I was born, in the culture in which I was born, but another thing that we have to lay there on that sheet that we have to find the meaning for is also the way that we are structured and this dynamic of desire that we tend to follow, so we have to find something to explain why as human beings we constantly seek for this elusive thing we named happiness. MG says, if our reason is that which allows us to discover the why, then in order to be coherent we have to say that there must be a reason why there is this dynamic, and therefore it is more reasonable to say that the answer exists even if I don't know what it is, even if it is a mystery. MG says, in this sense man can understand the existence of God, only according to a preeminent word, “mystery”. We are forced to say it exists, but it is beyond; that is also why we call it “transcendent”.

MG quotes again the poet, Rebora, in his poem “The poplar tree”:

*The stern poplar
Quivers with its leaves in the wind;
The soul convulses with its pains
In the anxiety of thought:
From the trunk to the leafy limbs
All stretched to the sky:
The trunk of the mystery is anchored
And the trunk is rooted where
The truth lies.*

He says our life is like this, you see our life, but you don't see the mystery in which our life is rooted. And he says that for this reason religion always uses negative to describe this mystery, negative either strictly speaking negative or negative for the point of view of experience, that is, when you use the words omniscient or omnipotent or all-powerful, or all-knowing. We use a word to indicate something about which we have no clue, what can possibly mean to be all-powerful or omniscient or infinite? All of our experience is of the finite, of the limited, what can it possibly mean something that has no limit?

So all the words that religions historically used to describe this mystery witness to the fact that is utterly beyond our experience as human beings. MG says that nevertheless all our impetus as human beings pushes us to get to know this mystery and he tells the story of Ulysses which is immortalized both in Dante, in the divine Comedy and then in Tennyson's great work entitled “Ulysses”, this man who has crisscrossed the Mediterranean sea, who arrived at home after 20 years has gone, but after a certain period of time, the legend goes, gathers his old companions together, gets on a ship and sets a trip – this time not in the Mediterranean sea, but into the Atlantic – beyond the pillars of Hercules, that limit that was set by the gods for man. And he says this is the true grandeur of human beings, the desire to go beyond. I think, in a more modern version, of the movie, *The Truman Show*, that movie about a man raised on a island that is the middle of a huge massive TV studio: he is raised as a baby and he does not know that he is the subject of an international TV program; everybody is an actor on the show and he does not know that, so there are microphone and cameras everywhere, and people watch his life and his development and, at a certain point in his life, he wants to leave the island. And the teacher asks him “what do you want to be when you grow up?” He says, “I want to be an explorer.” And the teacher (and actress) says to him, “Well, everything that has to be discovered has been already discovered.” And there is this impetus for him to go beyond, to make the long story short, he gets on a boat at a certain point and try to get across the sea, but at a certain point his boat crashes into the wall of the studio. MG says this is a human being's greatness, to always seek to go beyond, beyond what he has already conquered in his own experience, but he says, it is very difficult, because what would it mean to really penetrate this mystery? How is it that I could be like Ulysses or Truman? What is the boat that I should take? MG says what I should do is be utterly and totally faithful to the circumstances that this mystery allows in my life, blindly following them, and going through every circumstance to intuit, grasp, understand, realize what is it that this mystery is saying to me, following completely the way that the circumstances of our life present themselves. And MG says, there is an historical, existential situation, in which we find ourselves, which is that this kind of position is untenable; sooner or later it becomes impossible, impossible to hold off for something that is unimaginable. And he gives this graph, we think about ourselves as a point that has reason in the middle of our immediately perceptible

experience as human beings. Many things attract us: a girl, a boy, a car, a career. And we move to each one of these things and grab onto to it, but as we grab on it, we discover that it is not enough, and as we said already, the energy that is in us seeks to penetrate beyond the horizon of our physical experience. The problem is that this is very difficult; we experience a sort of dizziness while trying to await this mystery, so that sooner or later the person collapses and grabs the most fascinating thing within the realm of experience and lives for that thing. MG says that this is what the Bible calls idolatry, when a person grabs onto something, the family, the career, my wife, and makes that thing the reason for living: my country, this ideology which is going to save the world, Marxism, capitalism, this philosophy which explains everything. And he says it is called idol for a reason, because the person sooner or later starts to sacrifice things to it, time, friendship, money, energy, my high school teacher. This is particularly evident when girls or boys get girlfriends or boyfriends. When a boy has a girlfriend, the first thing another boy comes to tell me is, "Oh, man, Tom is such a jerk, we never see him anymore! It is like we've never been his friends." And from a certain point of view, he is right because they don't exist any longer for him from a certain point of view, because she has become everything, and his money and his time and his energy will be dedicated totally to her until that time when he finds she is boring or at the time he finds another idol. MG says that, from this point of view, atheism, in the etymological sense, that is, "no God", does not exist, because inevitably every man has his God to which he pays his tribute and unconditional devotion. So then the true alternative is between a meaning that is, that exists but which remains incomprehensible to the person, which goes beyond the human person, and transcends him, or the idol, that is the significance of everything identified with one aspect of life. He says that the real battle in culture is between those who affirm God as a mystery and those who affirm Him as an idol, here we find true religiosity and false religiosity, idolatry.

He goes on and he says according to the Bible the origin of war is the idol, he says that for this reason that the Nazis and the Communists had to go to war, because the Nazis had a view of reality and what the ultimate meaning of reality was that was totally different from what was the Communist view of reality and what their ultimate view of reality was, and he says this is the reason of all violence in human relationships. Because ultimately all violence in human relationships is traceable to the fact that I am pursuing my idol and you are pursuing your idol and God forbid that we meet, because in order to reach our goals, there has to be conflict between us and at that point is war.

He says, conversely, if the goal of life is what we must seek has a mystery, then reason, starting from any point of view, tends toward that mystery, and people find themselves as brothers and sisters who are all making an attempt, who are all on a path, everyone respects the other, because everyone understands that what he or she does or says is not everything, everything is changeable, everything is subjected to reform, everything is correctable, everything is an attempt, all people are in front of the one mystery.

He ends this lesson with one observation, which is that, if this mystery does not exist, there is no freedom for the human person. Let's go back to that possibility, that there is nothing other than the material universe in which we find ourselves. He says we can imagine the universe as a huge ocean. What are we? We would be like the foam on the crest of a wave in this ocean that is thrown together one moment and dissolved the next. If this is what I am, within me what do I have that tells me how to move, how to act? I have my DNA. I have a program; I am programmed and I will meet within this ocean circumstances that I don't choose. So I will meet A and when I see A and I go toward A. Then I will meet B and I will become afraid, so I turn

and I will see C and I will decide to go left and not right. All of these movements of mine will be determined according to my program. This would all be due to my DNA. Since I do not give myself the circumstances I meet and since I do not give myself my DNA, I am not free: I react. I am programmed to react and my movements are determined by this combination of my DNA, the circumstances I have met and the ones I will meet. Hence, even my feeling of freedom would be illusory. I would feel free when I could follow my program.

MG notes that there is also a corollary to what we said above. What is it that most closely surrounds me? What most directly influences the circumstances I will meet? In other words, within this immense circle of the universe, there is another, tiny circle in which I exist. This circle is human society. Human society shapes the vast majority of circumstances I meet within this universe. It is human society that tells me that at 5 I should go to school, that at 25 I should have a job, at 65 I should be able to enjoy myself, etc. Thus, without the Mystery, not only is there no human freedom but what tends to most forcefully determine human existence is power. Without the Mystery I am a slave to the universe – not in general – but specifically to other human beings who hold power. Conversely, the only limit to power is the existence of this Mystery that we were talking about before, if it exists, if somehow this Mystery has a relationship with me. Only if there is a transcendent Mystery beyond the physical universe – and therefore beyond my DNA and beyond my circumstances – in which I find myself, is it possible that there be a true principle of freedom and, thus, a real limit to human power. Otherwise, the most intelligent human society is that of Plato, Marx or Hitler: a totalitarian utopia. Given the fact that there is no freedom, given the fact that there is nothing beyond us as human beings, the most intelligent thing to do would be to give all power to the most intelligent, surrender this form of illusion called freedom and follow what the most intelligent say. So MG leaves us with this final provocation, and he makes us aware of an existential consequence to choose one or another position, to choose reasonably and to affirm the existence of a mystery to which all of reality points, to affirm the fundamental freedom of the individual human person in front of every circumstance and every form of natural power. To choose instead to say that reality is sign of nothing but itself, that this dynamic of desire is ultimately irrational and absurd, is also to say that there is no such a thing as freedom, as there is no such thing as love, no such a thing as beauty, no such a thing as truth, no such a thing as goodness, no such a thing fundamentally as happiness.

QUESTIONS

Question: Why does living for an idol lead to violence?

Chris: Let me read again the quote from outline “According to the Bible, the origin of war is the idol, inversely if the goal of life is what we must seek as a mystery, then reason, starting from any point of view, tends toward that mystery and people find themselves as brothers and sisters who are all making an attempt, who are all on a path, everyone respects the other, because everyone understands that what he or she does or says is not everything, everything is changeable, everything is subjected to reform, everything is correctable, everything is an attempt, all people are in front of the one mystery”. I think that what MG is saying here is that again we have seen this historically, in particular in the century that has just finished, in the 20th century, the problem, so to speak, and I start with the collective and I will end with the individual: the problem with something as communism is exactly that it pretends to identify as the reason for living the socialist state, the workers’ paradise, the image of justice that Marx had. And once

now we know what we are living for, it is defined, it is clear, it becomes the measure with which I measure everything, such as that she is giving her life for the revolution, she is a hero or heroine. If you are interested in your personal gain or if you are interested in your religious preferences, you are subjected to the Gulag. In other words, MG says that Marxism may be a noble desire for justice; when it goes wrong is when it says we understand it at all, when it says justice for the human race is this. That is where it falls: as soon as it is no longer correctable, as soon as it does not admit that it does not know everything, as soon as it becomes a system for solving all the problems in the world, it becomes a system for violence and restriction of freedom. Similarly, he says, if we as individuals think of what we pursue as something that is fundamentally identified, we are going to be violent with each other. To give an example, many of us know how in certain schools, I am thinking about certain law schools, certain universities, certain places of research, everybody knows that the problem is to exit these schools with a certain grade and so we all hear of stories where students who go to the library and to read in a book an article that the professor has suggested and a student goes and rips the article out of the book so that he can be the one who has read the article and nobody else can. Why? Because he or she has decided that that thing, the grade, is the most important thing and so I am willing to murder the rest of you to affirm my achieving the grade. Then, think about, again, the example of the teenage boy who cuts off the relationship with his parents, all of his friends, etc., and his life becomes this myopic kind of spiral around the same thing ever closed, shutting off more and more of life in a violent manner. MG says this is what tends to happen to us as human beings, we tend to identify the reason for which we live with something that is ultimately comprehensible and so become violent with others and reality itself. And that is why he says that the real cultural battle is not so much between atheists and those of us who believe in God, the real cultural battle is between those of us who conceive of God as Mystery, as something ultimately beyond all of us and therefore ultimately always surprising, ultimately always capable of correcting my position, and those that identify this Mystery in one or another aspect of human experience.

Question: Does the incarnation limit the Mystery?

Chris: Remember, what is corrigible is the conception of that for which I live, or, you could say, the definition of the mystery, from this point of view it does not annul certainty; it is not that every certainty is rendered an uncertainty; it is that, fundamentally, about many things I can be certain, I can be certain that is wrong to murder, but that is wrong to murder has a link to what this mystery is, but ultimately it is not a definition of this mystery and this is what we are talking about here, we are talking about how we conceive of this mystery, because by the way, our God is the God that did the unthinkable, and surprises human beings by becoming a man, when you began to consider seriously those things that we as Catholics affirm, they don't render the Mystery less mysterious but they render the Mystery more mysterious. Because how can the limitless, the transcendent, the infinite identify Himself with a finite? How can what is limitless, identify Himself with limit? This is one of the great mysteries of the faith, in particular in the beginning of the history of the Church, this is what caused more problems: who is Jesus, is he God or not? This was the question of the early Church, of the early Council: who is He? Because as we say that the limitless can become a limit does not render the Mystery less mysterious, on the contrary it renders the Mystery all the more and more mysterious. It is in this sense that, that for which I live, is utterly beyond me, utterly beyond my capability to pin down, which is interesting, because you understand that this can break apart a certain view of Christianity, which is living up to a moral code because a moral code is something that ultimately is at the mercy of my capability of understanding but the mystery is not. From this point of view MG has always strongly opposed every form of Christianity that ultimately is identifiable with a form of

moralism. I remember that MG once said that moralism is the final idolatry because if I live up to the moral code, I am fine, so then the moral code becomes in itself an idolatry, instead then an extension to a relationship with something mysterious that is utterly beyond me and which can ask of me things that are beyond my understanding, things like the sacrifice of my own son, like Abraham or the host of God in my womb, if we think about Mary. These are things that go beyond our capability of understanding, or even when Christ said "eat my flesh and drink my blood, otherwise you will not enter life", in other words, this Mystery that I have relationship with can say things and do things which go beyond my capability of understanding and can ask me to follow things which go well beyond even my capability of understanding.

Question: Is it not true that reality as a sign of "something beyond" becomes finally clear with the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth?

Chris: Ultimately your answer is in the 4th lecture, in the dynamic of the Incarnation. I will hold off on this question for now. But I will just point us back to what we have said tonight, because I think this is very important. Remember that MG says: that if we don't understand these things we just think of Christianity as another religion, and so he believes very much that, without an authentic reading of our experience as human beings, we reduce Christianity utterly, in fact MG believes that we are in a time where Christianity has been subjected to a myriad of reductions, that is why is no longer a persuasive force. From this point of view I would just redirect us to the fact that it is reason which sees that reality is beyond reason's own capability to grasp, not perhaps in its material elements, or even in its material mechanisms – and by the way when you get deeper into these mechanisms they too become incomprehensible. I have a friend who is astrophysicist who says that there is a limit to what we can know, we don't know what happened before the big bang, there is a limit between point something, something, something seconds after the big bang and what happened before, which we cannot go beyond, because of the way we are structured. What MG is trying to communicate is this sense of reality as fundamentally beyond me, not in itself, but inasmuch as it continually sends me on to something mysterious. The perception of reality as sign is the perception of reality of something attached to something that I don't know. In other words, if I see this sign, "San Francisco 30," I have a conception of the reality to which this (the street sign) points and I have some conception of the reality to which this (the city of San Francisco) points. That morning on a beach on a lake, the difficulty is, as I sat next to Kristy, I see a sign, but that to which she points I have no clue, so I am left wondering, what is it that was there yesterday when I did not know her, when she was laying on the beach that, soon as I grab her, somehow disappeared? Again, I am not unhappy to be here, it is not that I am not glad she is sitting next to me; it is that whatever she is sign of, I cannot conceive. It's this sense of reality, having its origin in something fundamentally mysterious, beyond my comprehension. And then how it becomes helpful in the encounter with the person, with the person of Jesus of Nazareth we will see in a couple of lessons, so I ask you to hold onto the question.

Question: What is reason and what is morality?

Chris: Reason is defined by MG as our capability of becoming aware of all reality, not just material reality, not just the reality of ideas, all of reality, and so again, do you remember the example of baseball I made last time, what is it that links beer, bats, a ball, fresh cut grass, a stadium, hot dogs? Baseball is what links all those things together and I said reason is the capability of understanding the meaning of things, ultimately, or their sense, if I put together all those things, at a certain point, somebody intuits that what I am talking about, that is the game of

baseball. So reason can become aware of a value that unites things, reason does not seek a value only that would unite a certain amount of things; reason seeks the value that unites everything, that is, reason seeks the ultimate meaning of everything and, in the end, we tend to identify that thing with something mysterious that we call happiness: it is the reason for which we accept to live. MG says if we live for 5 minutes, we live because we affirm that in living there must be something we are living for, that thing we pay devotion to, and so reason intuitively senses something that will give to all existence reason. Reason recognizes that there must be something that justifies its own existence, in this sense reason is the capability of knowing reality in all of its factors, reason seeks to know that which would justify its own existence as well.

MG says that this is such an original dynamic that happens without thinking and what ends up happening is that we live for our idols without ever becoming critical of them because it is impossible to hold off for. If we stretch out that relationship with Kristy and if I had the opportunity to live for 2 or 3 months with her, I can tell you where that relationship probably would have gone, notwithstanding the original intuition on the beach, notwithstanding that the original intuition, whatever I was looking for that first morning had kind of escaped me, most probably I would have pursued a more and more physical relationship with that girl, figuring that was what I was looking for. I was lucky that I left the next day and returned to California, because I never forgot that experience, so MG is answering your question by saying, there is such a deep wound in reason that we have to sooner or later identify what is this thing that we live for.

Morality, MG defines as striving to remain in the position which is most “natural” to us, which would be that position which would encourage us to seek a mystery beyond ourselves and not idolatry. In other words, had I been moral, let’s go back to my example with Kristy, let’s say that the relationship had lasted 3 months, the most moral way that I could have lived with her would be to say to her, “Listen, I know that this is going to hurt you, but whatever I found in you, whatever I was looking in you, the first morning I saw you, I did not find. Let’s look for it together.” Morality would be to remain in a position of a seeker, of a searcher, of one who recognizes this ultimate corrigibility, ultimate need for correction in my search for this ultimate. Immorality, that is to be idolatry, immorality is to say: this is the reason we live, the reason we live is “for the proletarians”, to be immoral is to identify with one particular aspect of my existence now, everything, this mystery. Conversely morality is to affirm the mystery always, in every circumstance, to search for the mystery in everything. Even an ethical code can become idolatry, if we identify the reason for our living with an adequacy to that moral code. The reason for our living is not adequacy to a moral code, the reason for our living is the Mystery, and that delineates itself in behaviors, but there is a way for which a moral code can become the new idol. This is exactly what happened with the Pharisees with Jesus of Nazareth. “Why do you heal on a Sabbath?” For them the sign that He was not the Messiah, the first sign that He was not the Messiah was the fact that He healed on the Sabbath. This for Him was the sign of their complete immorality, their moral code had become their idol, and was no longer open to whom the Messiah would be, how God would intervene in the Jews’ history.

Question: Can you explain better the dynamic of love?

Chris: Think about what I just said. Had I been moral, I would say, whatever I thought I was looking for that morning when I first saw her on the beach, “I did not find in you, let’s look for it together.” In other words, “You are not what I was looking for, you are a beautiful companion and I am happy you are here with me, and I don’t want you not to be next to me, because you are

fantastic, but you ignited this desire, but you don't quench it, it is beyond you." I think that the best way to think about it, more than a relationship between a man or a woman, is really to think about yourself on a top of a mountain, on top of a mountain. You don't think, I wish this mountain were bigger, I wish there were more trees, if only I could embrace all this mountain, because it is a mountain you don't have that temptation, the mountain is opening you up to something more. Originally that is what man does for woman, and that is what woman does for man and that is why man and woman, because the temptation is so great, because at a certain point you have to live for something that you can understand, you began to live for that man or for that woman. But, by the way, this is not what marriage is, according to the Church. MG says to young couples: here is you, here is your girlfriend, here is God. How is the unity between you two? And everybody is like this: "I go through my girlfriend to God. I see God's face in my girlfriend." MG says, "No, you two move like this. The more you move toward the Mystery, the more you are close to each other."

Question: What is it that facilitates the recognition of reality as a sign and what is opposite to it?

Chris: MG would probably say a critical awareness of our experience. In other words last week I started out with saying that these are not ideas. MG is not a philosopher; this is not philosophy, obviously it's dealing with philosophy; I don't mean to be naïve, or reductive, but I think what MG proposes to us is that we become aware of our own experience. MG says to you tonight, as I say to you: if you affirm that a person can find everything he needs in the horizon of our physical experience, I cannot talk with you anymore. If you are going to say all that we have to do is skip from thing to thing, I go from one woman to another, I go from a night of fun to another night, if you are going to tell that the real problem of life is very simply "*carpe diem*", take every circumstance for what it is and try to get anything that you can, move on to the next one, then that is happiness. If you are going to say to me something like that, then I have nothing to say to you. You and I disagree on something so fundamental at this point, that I will be next to you, I will humbly accept your freedom of your position, but I fundamentally cannot understand you as a human being. If you listen to my lectures, I hope you notice that I am giving you examples with my own life, because I discover in my own life this dynamic, what my encounter with MG was. I was 19 years old. I remember the night I read first the book. The thing that most illuminated me, that shocked me the most, that I found most true, was this distinction between sadness and despair, I knew exactly what he was talking about, because I have lived in despair. My last 2 years of High School were spent, every opportunity I had, drinking. At a certain point I told myself, I cannot deal with how difficult it is to live, every time I can, I am going to drink and forget it and feel good and that is it. What MG desires for us is a critical awareness, and I don't mean critical in a negative connotation, when I mean with critical awareness of our experience as human beings, I mean, a humble, passionate, continuous, critiquing of my life as human being. That day on the beach with Kristy would have disappeared from my life, had I not met MG, I don't even know if I would ever remembered today. He was the one that made me critically aware of that moment, and the encounter with him and his way of suggesting that I read my own experience. Therefore the answer to your question, what impedes us is blindly living, refusing the impetus, refusing the evidence that existence gives me, refusing the invitation that life and the world is to me and unfortunately the kind of culture in which we exist today, everything in our culture encourages us to that, to blindly live and to live in a state of almost complete unconsciousness, and this is not surprising. You give up this part of yourself, you are like an animal: you can see that a dog does not understand what the hell he's looking at when it goes on the top of a mountain. You don't meet dogs that are standing in front of a view on top of a mountain with awe. The more we give up these things, the more we live an unconscious life,

the more we live a programmed life, it is this refusal of the invitation that reality is, this is the real tragedy and this is what takes a major education, even for us as “religious people”, because MG says that we tend not to be authentic religious people, the authentic religious people are the ones that accept the provocation of reality, who take it all the way to its depth. Most of us, he would say, are ideologues, living according to a bunch of ideas that people around us and our culture has inculcated in us, that is, living as slaves to that inner circle, within the great circle that I put on the board before.