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**THE BLESSED VIRGIN
IN THE ECCLESIAL MOVEMENT
"COMMUNION AND LIBERATION"**

*John Janaro, Ph.D.**

Communion and Liberation (CL) was founded in Milan, Italy, by Msgr. Luigi Giussani in 1954, as an initiative to provide an integral catechesis and an experience of common life for young people. It took initial form as a youth branch of the Italian "Catholic Action" organization in the years immediately prior to Vatican II. The original impetus of CL—the *Gioventù Studentesca*—continues to be one of the more vital and impressive characteristics of the life of the movement today, especially in Italy, where one may witness thousands of energetic high school and university students organizing cultural events, participating in the Good Friday *Way of the Cross* and in pilgrimages and retreats. Giussani's charism continues to attract young people. At the same time, over the course of fifty years, it has also blossomed into stable forms of adult commitment to the life and mission of the Church: the *Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*—a lay association of pontifical right; the *Memores Domini*—individuals in CL who dedicate themselves to God by the virtue which the Church calls "virginity"; the *Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo*, recognized as a Society of Apostolic Life; and the *Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Assumption*, an autonomous religious institute of the consecrated life. In all, CL today has over 100,000 adherents throughout the world. Lay members are formed in the movement's spirituality and participate in its various events and charitable works; they are not,

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however, separated from the parochial or diocesan context of the local church. While CL members are dedicated to an active participation in the life of their parishes and dioceses, they also seek to show the face of the Church in secular environments: at school, the workplace, and in various cultural centers.

A CL "community" is a place of catechesis, friendship, and mission. The focus of CL's spirituality is the *real historical event* of God becoming man in the Incarnation, and—as a consequence of faith in His saving death and resurrection—the vital recognition of Jesus Christ as the *meaning* of every aspect of life. The risen and glorified Christ is not a relic of the past or a merely theoretical idea. Rather, He is present in every circumstance of life, and in Him God gives His love to us as the fulfillment of the desire for happiness that pervades all of our actions, even the most ordinary.

As friends, CL members live an organic interpersonal relationship in which the natural human interest in the other members' lives and activities that is proper to the nature of friendship becomes by grace the possibility for helping each other to remember the presence of Christ, who is living and loving each person here and now, at every moment, in and through every circumstance that the human person faces. The emphasis of CL's catechesis and the bond of friendship that constitutes the central feature of CL community life are oriented toward the cultivation of an awareness that Christ's loving embrace gives meaning to everything in life, whether it be joy or sorrow. Thus, "loving one another" and sharing life together (in all its beauty and its many burdens) is a concrete witness for each person in the community of Christ's loving presence in his or her daily life. A member of CL will often say, "I know that Jesus loves me because of the way my friends love me and take care of me." Thus CL's charism entails a strengthening of the virtue of faith and the development of a more profound and concrete confidence in God through the experience and practice of fraternal charity. Further, we believe that Christ uses the friendship as a *means* to communicate His loving presence to the person, consecrating the characteristics of human friendship—affection, sensitivity, interest, assistance—and making them *signs* and instruments of His loving action in the person's life, while at the same time pu-

rifying them through the CL catechesis, through the leadership of the movement, and through participation in the Church and her sacramental life (which is always the fundamental, indispensable characteristic of any CL community). Indeed, the CL charism is a witness to the whole Church of the *dynamic character* of Christ's Mystical Body, concretely alive inside of the most ordinary moments of relationships between or among Christians.

Mission means that the CL friendship is open, not exclusive. CL communities seek out and invite others to be with them and to adhere to their life according to the "organic law" of friendship. The bond that unites a CL community is one of friendship and free personal adherence. People live the charism of CL in the measure that they experience therein a real help in belonging concretely to the Church's life.

The Marian aspect of CL's spirituality is reflected in the movement's distinctive Marian prayer: *Veni Sancte Spiritus. Veni per Mariam* (Come Holy Spirit. Come through Mary). This short prayer—offered frequently throughout the day—evokes the living memory of the mystery of the Incarnation and Mary's central role in the reality of salvation history. This little prayer has been called "a synthesis of the Christian mystery" and, as we shall explore further below, it is rich with theological implications. Mary is the *graced one*, filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of her conception by virtue of the saving power of God. Her singular privilege allows her to be the icon of God's design for the whole universe—expressed by St. Paul as "that God might be all in all" (1 Cor.15:28). Also, Mary's *fiat* is the focal point for the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation, and this is the foundation for an ongoing correspondence—centered always in the mystery of the Incarnate *Redeemer*—between Mary's intercessory "yes" and the Holy Spirit's work of conforming all things to Christ.

Another feature of CL's Marian piety is a special devotion to the *Angelus* and to meditating on its significance (which is the commemoration of the saving event of God's entrance into history through the response of Mary's freedom), as well as the regular recitation of the *Memorare* and the rosary. Important, too, is the frequent practice in CL of pilgrimage to Marian

shrines. The annual CL pilgrimage to Loreto in Italy is a major event, and CL communities throughout the world have followed the practice of traveling together to honor the Blessed Virgin in the shrines of their own countries. Czestochowa, Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe, Aparecida, the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, and many other Marian shrines are familiar places for both local and international CL pilgrims. The Marian pilgrimage enables people to experience how their own concrete history is inserted within the particularity of the history of salvation: Mary is the "place" where God came into the world and where He continues to come into our lives.

CL's charism has been shaped by its founder, Msgr. Luigi Giussani. First as a high school religion teacher and then as professor of fundamental theology at the Catholic University of Milan, Giussani inspired his students to come to know Jesus Christ not as a relatively extraneous object of occasional pious devotion nor as a mere historical figure who preached an ethical world view—but rather as the *center* of the *whole* of their lives. It is He who gives meaning to the drama of human life: to joy and wonder, love and play, work and the promotion for justice, eating and drinking, suffering and dying.

Giussani stressed that all human action is motivated by the search for *happiness*. The desire to "be happy" may seem to be simple and obvious. But because God has made us *for Himself*—because God has imprinted upon the human heart that longing which St. Augustine describes so well in his famous phrase, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you"—the human search for happiness is in fact a journey into a realm of mystery that cannot be satisfied with anything less than the Infinite. The human person, created by God and called—in the very depths of his or her being—to eternal union with God, can only find true happiness in a living relationship with God.

All of the goods and purposes that people seek in life are attractive precisely because they reflect the mystery of God's glory and constitute *signs* pointing the human heart toward that mystery—indeed giving to the heart a kind of obscure "foretaste" of the glory that constitutes human destiny, a hint of the perfection and joy for which the heart was made. In every-

thing he or she does, the human being manifests this fundamental hunger and thirst for the Infinite. Yet human experience throughout history has made it clear that humans cannot attain this destiny, this happiness, by their own power. Because of the inherent limitations of finite strivings and the weakening caused by the wound of sin, humans must depend on God' initiative to come to heal them and bring their lives to fulfillment. The Gospel—the Good News—is that in Jesus the Infinite Mystery, the Mystery who is the source and goal of all things, has drawn close to human persons and has become their companion. Through the concrete reality of Jesus—His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection—God has established the *way* within human history for men and women to attain the perfection that gives meaning to their whole lives. Jesus is the answer to the question "Why was I created?" This is a question that I "ask"—in a certain sense—every time I act, every time I seek the enrichment of my being by entering into a relationship with "the good." The human search for God—incarnated in every human action—follows the road toward its accomplishment by saying "yes" to Jesus, by recognizing that His loving presence fulfills every aspect of life. The significance of Jesus is not limited to His being the object of explicit religious devotions (as though my faith could be limited to going to Church, saying prayers, and keeping certain moral rules [the fewer the better!]). No. In Jesus, the God who is my ultimate happiness enters into my life with healing and forgiveness, but also with the inescapable, concrete call "Follow me!" Therefore, my whole life ought to be lived in the sphere of His love; indeed, everything in my life reaches its full vitality and manifests its beauty when it is seen as "within" my relationship with Jesus. Jesus *reveals and communicates* the ultimate meaning of everything in my life.

Giussani told his young students that in Jesus they would discover a new richness for the whole of life; they would gain not only "heaven" as a state *after* this life, but also heaven *beginning here and now*—heaven as the truth, the fulfillment of everything in this present life. Giussani often emphasized (in an original manner) the promise of the "hundredfold" (see Mark 10:30-31). "Follow Christ," he said to his students, "and you will love your girlfriend or boyfriend one hundred times

more, you will love your parents one hundred times more, you will find one hundred times more purpose in your work, your studies, your family relationships, your friendships, one hundred times more beauty in art, music, and poetry."

Because Jesus Christ—the *real*, living Jesus Christ, the God-man, born of the Virgin Mary—is the center of life, it is natural that Mary should play a pivotal role in the charism of CL. Giussani constantly emphasizes that it is not a theory about Christ, an imaginative or emotional symbol of Christ, or an ideology constructed from the teachings of Christ that brings about our salvation and happiness. It is Jesus Christ Himself, the real Incarnate Word, the real entrance of God into human history and into *my* history. Mary's motherhood is the great sign and guarantee of the *historical reality* of Jesus. She is also the uniquely consecrated *means by which* God comes into the world and into our lives. And she is the exemplar of perfect conformity to Christ, and the masterpiece of God's loving plan for His creation—the icon of God's self-diffusive goodness.

As its *charism*, CL lives and witnesses the perennial life of the whole Church with a certain *accent* (as Giussani often stresses)—a certain style and certain emphases. It is not easy to articulate in a few words the distinctive "accent" or "style" of CL. To attempt such an articulation risks reducing the charism to a humanly understandable scheme rather than a life that draws its vitality from the grace of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless—recalling the observations we made above about the life of CL—we might venture to *indicate* the heart of the CL charism as "a vital awareness of the presence of Christ as the meaning of life" and "friendship within the community as a way of manifesting this Presence, helping one another to recognize it, and bearing witness to it in the world."

A second facet of CL's charism is the central place which Mary occupies in the CL experience. CL's Marian piety is not founded upon any extraordinary or supererogatory Marian devotions. Fundamentally, the place of Mary in CL, profound and pervasive as it is, is the same as it is in any genuine Christian life. In a spirituality that emphasizes the centrality of the Incarnation, and of the presence of Christ in the daily circumstances of ordinary life, Mary naturally has a prominent role. There are four qualities of Mary which we strive to make

present in our communities: 1) *mediatory* (rooted in Mary's divine maternity and its continuing significance); 2) *exemplary* (Mary's assent as the supreme model of embracing the circumstances of life as the gift of God's love); 3) *pneumatological* (the correspondence between Mary's intercession and the work of the Holy Spirit); and 4) *cosmic* aspect (the perfection of Mary as God's masterpiece and the great "sign" of His love for all of creation). These four Marian qualities of CL's charism are a resume of what the whole Christian tradition says about Mary.

First we spoke of Mary's mediation. As the means through which God has chosen to enter into the world, and—in her glorified state—the indispensable maternal companion of the exalted Christ and His work in the lives of each of us, Mary is the instrument of the saving presence of God Incarnate. The continuing significance of Mary's motherhood in our lives indicates the concrete humanity and real intimacy of Jesus as He takes hold of our lives and conforms them to God's purpose. An ideology, an abstract principle, a theory does not need a mother, but Jesus was and *remains more* than any construction of our imagination or our intellectual cleverness. Mary's maternal presence in our lives indicates a real, ontological link to the humanity of Jesus.

Moreover, dependence on Mary's maternal love forms in us the disposition of *childhood*, which—Giussani points out—is the proper disposition of the created person toward the mysterious, loving God. The creator of all things—notwithstanding his transcendence—shapes the depths of our being such that He, in the most primal and intimate sense, is rightly called our "Father."¹ "Being a child," says Giussani, "means feeling this totality of grasp, this possession which an Other has of us. An Other, the Mystery" is God who makes us, holds us in being, and brings us to fulfillment. Giussani then says, "The expression

¹God, Father in every instant, is conceiving me *now*. No one is so much a father: he who generates. To be conscious of oneself right to core is to perceive, at the depths of the self, an Other. This is prayer: to be conscious of oneself to the very center, to the point of meeting an Other." To put it another way, "I do not consciously say 'I am,' in a sense that captures my entire stature as a human being if I do not mean 'I am made.'"

of the child is ultimately the one that says: 'Mother!' *Mother*—inside this word is everything that came forth out of nothingness, there is everything that comes forth day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, out of our nothingness." And then he prays, "Our Lady, help us, you who were made the Mother of your Son! We, your children, want to follow you and be born, be born again to the flavor of your perfume and your face. Help us, Our Mother, to be sure in whatever becomes evident in the day that we have to live: pain or joy, or pain and joy."²

Through her maternal love, Mary herself is "present" as giving us her Son in all the moments of life. In a prayer, Giussani articulates it thus in his unique, expansive style: "We return to you, O Virgin Mary; dispel from our hearts all this fog that normally shrouds them and that keeps our eyes from seeing you in all your power and the inevitability of your presence, which determines the meaning, the sense, the substance of whatever we touch."³ As *mediatrix*—as Mother of the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, as Mother of the Lord of my life whose maternal love accompanies His saving action in my life—Mary possesses this "power" and, by God's design, brings her specifically feminine tenderness into the "substance" of my daily life. Here there is much room for fruitful meditation.

The second quality of Marian presence is *exemplarity*. Mary is both the model and the teacher of a life totally aware of the presence of Christ, totally focused on Him. In the Annunciation, Mary embraced the astounding words of the angel, saying, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to Your word" (Luke 1:38). Giussani stresses that Mary's consent involved a living faith, a boundless openness to the divine plan, and an attentive awareness ready to follow God's will even if it exceeded the boundaries of her own un-

The human person 'exists because he is continually possessed.' See Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997 [original Italian edition, 1986]), 106.

²Luigi Giussani, "Prayer: The Outpost of Our Embattled Humanity—Notes from Address to Opening Day for the Adults of Communion and Liberation in the Diocese of Milan." Milan, Italy, September 21, 2002. Published in *Traces* [Communion and Liberation International Magazine], English ed., no. 10 (October, 2002).

³Giussani, "Prayers to the Virgin Mary" (from a CL document).

derstanding. In response to the "Mystery that announced itself by vibrating in her flesh, the Virgin opened her arms wide, the arms of her freedom, and said, 'Yes.' And she stayed alert every day, every hour, every minute of her life."⁴ Thus Mary is the model of faith, which—Giussani stresses—is "the certainty that everything is God's, that God is the Father of everyone, that the world is destined to everlasting positivity. If she had not had this in her mind every day, if she had not gotten up every morning thinking about this, if she had not moved through her day thinking about this, if she had not gone to bed at night thinking about this, it would have been an abstract theory."⁵ Mary's "yes," Giussani insists, did not proceed from a theoretical piety, but from the vital truth that shaped her attitude in every moment—that the goodness of God permeated all things and that the ultimate hope of life was God's *glory*. This certainty in enacted in a radically new way in her fiat, and then lived through all the days of her pilgrimage with her Son. Mary's mediation and exemplarity are synthetically expressed in this prayer by Giussani:

May the hand of Our Lady introduce us into the Mystery, because this is the meaning of our days, the meaning of time that passes. May her gaze guide us on our journey, may her example teach us, and may her figure be the plan of our purpose. Generous Mother, who generates for us the great presence of Christ, we want to be consoled, comforted, nourished, enriched and gladdened by that Presence which was born again from your flesh, and for this reason we ask you to make us participate in your freedom, your readiness to help, your life.⁶

Thirdly, the CL charism stresses the pneumatological aspect of Mary's presence—the relationship between Mary and the work of the Holy Spirit, expressed in the movement's distinctive prayer: *Veni Sancte Spiritus. Veni per Mariam* (Come Holy Spirit, Come through Mary). The union of the invisible mission

⁴Giussani, "The Holy Rosary [Meditations]," published in *Traces*, English ed., no. 5 (May, 2001)—*First Joyful Mystery: The Annunciation*.

⁵Giussani, "The Holy Rosary"—*Introduction to the Joyful Mysteries*.

⁶Giussani, "Prayers to the Virgin Mary."

of the Holy Spirit (grace, "divinization") and the visible mission of the Son (in the Incarnation and Redemption) is most concretely expressed in Mary, the *Kecharitomene*, the "graced one," made like God in a singular fashion so that she might be the Mother of God. Moreover, as the New Eve, Mary—Mother of Salvation—cooperates from the very beginning with the divinizing work of the Holy Spirit poured forth upon the world, an outpouring that accomplishes the Spirit's work of forming us in the image of Christ with the accompanying maternal love of Mary. From the moment of the Incarnation, the work of the Spirit and the fiat of Mary have become inseparable, because both are integral to the mysterious work of transforming human persons in Christ. Thus Giussani explains:

Veni Sancte Spiritus. Veni per Mariam. Come Holy Spirit. Come through Mary. . . . it is through her that He comes. All the renewal of the world passes through Our Lady; just as the choice of the Chosen People passed through Abraham, thus the new and definitive Chosen People—of which we have been called to be a part—comes through the womb of a girl, through the flesh of a woman. This is why the closeness to and affection for you, Mother of God and our Mother, is great. . . . The Spirit is the energy with which the Origin, Destiny, and Making of all things—mobilizing everything according to His plan—has impacted our life and brought it into the heart of that plan.⁷

Moreover, Mary's unity with the Spirit, who forms Christ in her, is exemplary for our own conformity to Christ in the Spirit. Thus Giussani prays:

May it come about in us, O Spirit of God, as it did in Mary—the mystery of the Word was made flesh in her. It became part of her flesh and one with her expressions. Thus, may the memory of Christ become flesh of

⁷Giussani, "The Holy Rosary"—*Third Glorious Mystery: The Descent of the Holy Spirit*.

our flesh, part of all our actions, counsel for every thought and flame for every affection, and move in us with all our actions, from morning to evening, as we eat and drink, and in all our living and in our dying.⁸

Finally, there is what we have called the *cosmic* aspect of Mary's presence. We have already seen that—because she is the Mother of Him who is the Lord of the cosmos and history—Mary's maternal love touches upon every aspect of our lives. But Mary is also, we might say, an *icon* of the whole redemption of creation. In her we see already the radical fulfillment of all things, the perfect penetration of divine love into created being. The glorification of Mary in the Assumption is the beginning of the New Creation in which God will "be all, in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), and it reveals the eternal value of every moment in every life, the transcendent significance of each circumstance in life, because everything comes forth from God and is ordained to his glory.

According to Giussani:

With the mystery of the Assumption, the Lord says, "You see, I will not let you lose anything of what I have given you, of what you have used, of what you have tasted . . . if you acknowledge that everything is grace, that everything is mercy, because your criteria are nothing, my criterion will be everything." Our Lady is already at this ultimate, profound level of Being from which all beings draw substance, life, and destiny. This is why she was bodily lifted into heaven, where the Mystery of God dwells: so that she would be for us, daily, the Mother of the event [of Christ present and active in our lives]. The glorification of Our Lady's body indicates the ideal of Christian morality, the valuing of every moment, every instant . . . because through even the smallest things is borne our relationship with the Infinite, with the mystery of God.⁹

Here perhaps we can see that Mary is a fundamental reference point for the contemplation of the whole of the Christian Mystery. It would be appropriate to conclude by citing what

⁸Giussani, "Prayers to the Virgin Mary."

⁹Giussani, "The Holy Rosary"—*Fourth Glorious Mystery: The Assumption*.

Giussani calls the most beautiful poetry in the world, the "Hymn to Our Lady" from Dante's *Paradiso* (Canto 33), in which the figure of St. Bernard leads Dante into the presence of the Blessed Virgin. St. Bernard calls Mary the "living fountain of hope" and Giussani reflects that "The figure of Our Lady is truly the figure of hope, . . . in the pavilions of the universe (as medieval people would say) [she is] the spring of water that can be heard running day and night, night and day. May this living fountain of hope be every morning the most gripping and tenacious meaning of life possible."¹⁰

¹⁰ Giussani, *Editortal*, "Living Fountain," in *Traces*, English ed., no. 9 (September, 2000).