



CHRIST  
IS PRESENT  
IN THE PASSING  
INSTANT

CONVERSATIONS WITH FR. PIGI BERNAREGGI

■ *Cover: Fr. Pigi, pictured from behind,  
points to Bairro Providencia, in Belo Horizonte.*

*Photo by Neófta Oliveira.*

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*Pier Luigi Bernareggi (1939-2021), nicknamed Pigi, was a student of Monsignor Luigi Giussani, founder of the movement Communion and Liberation, in the 1950s at Liceo Berchet high school in Milan. There, he encountered GS (Gioventù Studentesca or "Student Youth," the group at the origin of CL). Following the history that unfolded, he left for Brazil as a missionary in 1964, joining a group of Italian students already there. He was ordained a priest in Belo Horizonte. For a number of years, he taught philosophy and theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais.*

*The historical impact of his presence was felt especially in the Primeiro De Maio neighborhood, where he served as pastor of Todos os Santos parish. He helped build several churches and dedicated his time to creating truly fraternal communities of solidarity.*

*For many years, he dedicated himself to the fight for a right to a home for those most in need.*

*After completing his fiftieth year as a priest in 2018, and after his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, he moved to Convivium Emaús, a residence where a number of elderly priests from the Diocese of Belo Horizonte live. He passed away on January 22 of this year, after falling as he was walking in the hallway.*

*This book pays tribute to Fr. Pigi through the memory of a number of striking and beautiful exchanges he had in recent years with friends in the movement, especially with Marco Montrasi ("Bracco"), leader of CL in Brazil. Most of these conversations took place in the company of Rosetta Brambilla ("Rosa"), another missionary who spent over forty years in Brazil and was Fr. Pigi's dear friend. The letter that concludes the collection of his words was written to her. The book closes with the last three messages Fr. Julián Carrón dedicated to Pigi.*

# INTRODUCTION

As soon as I heard about Pigi's death, I immediately had the desire to go and look for the transcripts and recordings of the last times we met. I wanted to revisit these memories of Pigi, because the conversations were really milestones for me, something that touched me forever. It was impossible to leave a meeting with him the same as you were before. Every moment we spent together was really an unexpected gift that I received. Because of this, I could never go to Belo Horizonte without going to see him.

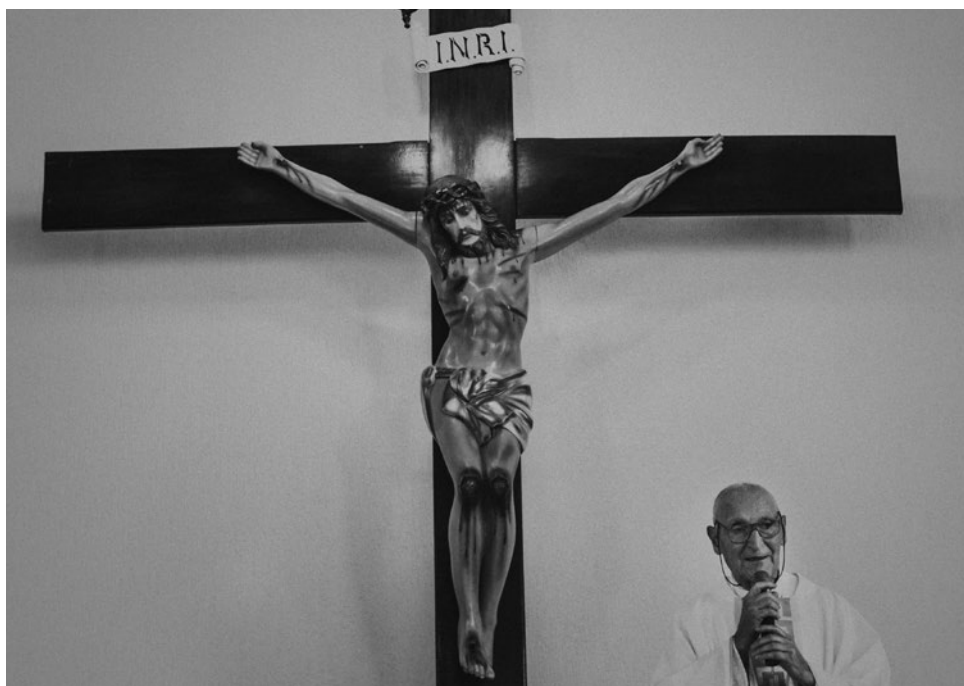
Pigi was like a safe harbor for me. Not in the sense of an escape, but of a port from which you depart for unknown places, to the boundless sea. He always helped me to discover something new about the charisma that I had encountered as a living reality. It was not just his past experience at the beginning of GS that he communicated, there was something he carried inside himself that made his eyes radiant. For me, it was truly like seeing in him the heart of what I myself had seen, the heart of the human experience I saw resonating in Fr. Giussani.

Another fundamental aspect when I think of Pigi was the mercy in his gaze. Starting from the first times I met with him, I always felt a desire to go to confession after meeting with him. It was like the natural consequence of wanting to immerse myself in that mercy.

These pages, then, contain a number of texts that are like little memories I have collected, hoping and asking God that I may have Pigi fixed more and more in the corner of my eye.

*Marco Montrasi (Bracco)*

■ Marco Montrasi with Fr. Pigi  
on the anniversary of his ordination.



## MERCY AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE PEOPLE

*A conversation with Fr. Pigi on the topic of “the theology of the people,” and the provocations from Pope Francis that leave us restless (published in Italian magazine Tracce, July/August 2015).*

**by Marco Montrasi**

Bairro Primeiro de Maio, on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte. We are at lunch at the home of Rosetta Brambilla, who has lived in the neighborhood, close to Fr. Pigi Bernareggi, for over thirty years. Pigi and Rosetta were some of the first students to depart as missionaries after encountering the charism of Fr. Giussani. They have been in Brazil for fifty years. Rosetta works with children and teenagers, and Pigi, a brilliant philosopher from a well-off family in Milan, dedicates his time to impoverished families. He moved into the favelas (*Translator’s note: poor shantytowns or slums*) of Belo Horizonte, to live in the midst of his people. He became a “pastor with the smell of his sheep,” to use Pope Francis’s vivid imagery. Meeting with him always does me good. His shining eyes exude both kindness and mercy, and they remind me of the look in Fr. Giussani’s eyes. In part because he is constantly quoting him, or the songs and stories that, as you will see, still mold his heart and his gaze on everything. That’s why conversations with him are so pleasant.

I had recently read an article, written by then-Cardinal Bergoglio, on the concept of “the theology of the people” (*Editor’s note: in Italy, it appeared in the newspaper Avvenire on April 26, 2015*), in which the future Pope highlighted the rich asset that is the popular piety in Latin America. Many questions and a few discoveries were bouncing around in my head, so during lunch I asked Fr. Pigi about many things. What came out was a dialogue that, in this time of anticipa-

tion of Francis's visit to Latin America, can help us to better understand the relationship between the Pope and "his" people.

**One of the things that has helped me the most recently is what the Pope said about the grace of thinking of ourselves as sinners. The thing that's most repulsive to us can become a grace: it sounds absurd, at first!**

**Pigi:** *"Oh! Si tu savais combien je t'aime..."* Oh! If you only knew how much I loved you, you would come back to me, Jerusalem, and the weight of your sins would make you walk all the more quickly. Truly, your sins would propel you, they would drag you back to me. Christ's love, His prevenient grace, comes first, and then our return. If Christ's love had not been there first, we could not return.

**Why do we resist coming back to Him? Why is the weight of our sins stronger than our abandonment?**

**Pigi:** Because of original sin. Christ's love created a magnetic field against the gravitational pull of sin; better, it is a stronger force which is the desire and inclination to come back. Consequently, it's no use speaking about mistakes; we need to speak about Christ's love, because that is what pushes a person to get moving, almost automatically. But if no one speaks to me about Christ's love... I see it in the young people here, who get involved in drug trafficking at 13, 12, even 11 years of age. And now they even want to reduce the age of criminal responsibility...

**When the Pope speaks about popular piety, he does not talk about it like a kind of folklore, but rather as an important treasure for Latin America. Here in Brazil, for example, the phenomenon has had, and continues to have, great significance.**

**Rosetta:** But it's not the same any more, Pigi...

**Pigi:** It's not that it's not the same any more; it's more hidden, if you look at the latest generations, but the root is still there. The root is not our capacity; it is Christ's grace. All it takes is a person who says so at every street corner. Like the story of that trafficking friend Rosetta had. Tell the story!

**Rosetta:** I saw one of the drug lords at a neighborhood celebration. After the party, he came up to me and asked, "Why were you looking at me?" "Because I wanted to look at you," I replied. He retorted, "Do you know all the things I've done?" So I said, "I wasn't looking at you because of the things you've done, but because your heart is seeking the same things mine is seeking." He asked me if he could come visit me and I said, "Of course!" He came often and we became friends. Then, one day, he was murdered.

**Pigi:** That is what you call *prevenient* grace. Christ's gaze goes ahead of our conversion. That's exactly what Caravaggio's painting *The Calling of St. Matthew*, which the Pope spoke about, shows us. There was a young man here named Marcelino. He had already killed 22 people. One day, a journalist came to interview me, because people said the drug traffickers were terrorizing the favela, and her newspaper had received a tip that an elderly woman had been thrown out of her house to make it a "*boca de fumo*," a drug den. I told her I didn't know anything about it, but if it was true, it was definitely bad. The next day, my name appeared on the front page, "Fr. Pigi denounces drug lord Marcelino." And I got an anonymous phone call: they said I should leave right away, because Marcelino had already sworn to kill me. I didn't sleep all night, but in the morning, I had an idea. As a gift, I had received a beautiful face of Christ carved in wood. I took it and went to the favela to find Marcelino. When I got there, a person stopped me and asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wanted to talk to Marcelino about the interview. He told me to wait, and after ten minutes Marcelino came in. I explained the reason for my visit and he, first, shows me where he parks his truck (in fact, it's right where the old lady's shack used to be), and then he says, "Come with me." I thought, now he's going to kill me. We went into an alley and at a certain point, where the alley ends, you can see a small house, which looks like Snow White's house: made of brick, curtains on the windows, red tile floor, bedroom and bathroom, all new. "Look, this is where the old lady lives now." I exclaimed: "Oh, Marcelino!" And I gave him the image of Christ I was carrying. I have never seen such a genuine smile on a person's face as the one I saw on his at that moment. Then he resumed his rough



demeanor and told me that I could go. Thank God I'm still alive. But Marcelino's smile when he came across the face of Christ was an incredible thing. That was the definition of *prevenient* grace. Since that day, I've never seen Marcelino again.

**That story resembles what Fr. Giussani writes in *Why the Church when he speaks of the unity of life generated by faith, of those bandits who, in the Middle Ages, prayed before going off to steal...***

**Pigi:** It shows a root. People receive this root in their mother's womb. We should never start from defects, from limitations, but simply communicate the experience of Christ.

**Rosetta:** Today, however, it seems as if that root had disappeared...

**Pigi:** *Semel assumpta, semper assumpta.* Once the origin has been assumed, it lasts forever. Christ assumed our human flesh and, having taken it on once, took it on forever. Christ never goes backward. There is no need for another incarnation. He is all in all. You can no longer look at a person thinking that he or she is outside the relationship with Christ. And it is not true that that root has disappeared. If you help a person to become aware of it, the root appears immediately. It takes very little. Now that Christ has returned to Heaven, Heaven is the root. At the root of all of us.

**In that article, the Pope writes at a certain point, "I am sorry when someone says, 'We need to educate those people...' The Church's first heresy was Gnosticism. Even today, Gnostic attitudes towards this phenomenon of spirituality or popular piety can persist."**

**Pigi:** Gnosticism reduced religion to intellectual comprehension. Christianity is the acknowledgment of an unpredictable reality, one that was entirely unimaginable, but that happened. Or better, is still happening. It's not in the past that no longer exists, or in the future that no longer exists, but in this instant, in the instant that just passed. That's where it is. If not, we'd all be a bunch of failures left alone with our pastoral plans. You need to immerse yourself among the people with this humility, which means not carrying Christ to others, but helping others to discover Christ who is already there. Just as the Pope said, speaking about Fr. Giussani, who never intended to found

anything, but only wanted to propose Christianity in all its original elements.

**I'll read another passage from the article: "When, as a Church, we approach the poor to accompany them, we see that they live life with a transcendent aspect. Life depends on Someone. We find all this deep in the hearts of our people. This is a key point that we must guard carefully, because it offers a richness for today's Church."**

**Pigi:** The Church will spread wherever people live with the greatest expectation. And what a person waits for or expects is not directly linked to his or her thoughts, as Gnosticism supposes. When people are awaiting something, they wait with their entire being. The important thing is that there is someone looking and waiting. In fact, with young children, it is useless to spend too much time talking about God and Our Lady; we need to help them and encourage them to wait and to expect.

**Modern men and women still wait and expect, but it is as if the answer were missing.**

**Pigi:** It's "as if," because the answer already exists.

**Our problem is that we think we know everything.**

**Pigi:** "When shall I see your face?" A person's humanity is in motion toward this "when." Adriana Mascagni used to sing this Psalm: "As the deer longs for living water, so my heart thirsts for you, my God." This is true for even the least educated person on the earth... We need to know how to appeal to this element that exists in every person. Giussani strikes a chord that exists in each one of us. I always try to ground things in this sense of expectation, during my homilies. And it is this expectation that gets your attention. "I have a pebble in my shoe, ouch! It hurts so, so much, ouch!" Giussani sang us an Italian song with those words during his classes. ■

*\*Note: The Gnostic heresies, which were most significant in the first centuries of Christianity, but persist in more subtle forms even today, affirm that access to God requires a special kind of knowledge that not all people, but only those experts dedicated to its study, can reach.*

## THE FULLNESS OF TIME

*Notes from a conversation with Fr. Pigi at the national vacation of Communion and Liberation in Brazil (Serra Negra/São Paulo, July 29, 2016).*

**Bracco:** We invited Pigi to speak with us about the journey we are walking, in particular focused on the Fraternity Exercises on the topic of mercy [“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have had mercy on your nothingness”] to try to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of that word and also understand what it means in our experience.

**Pigi:** They told me that this would be an assembly, so do not expect me to give a lecture or meditation. What I can do is to help you to confront your questions, which are always a sign of an intelligence. He who asks expresses that which his spirit is seeking. The point of articulating a question does not mean a point of arrival; the question is transformed by our ongoing search. In that light, I am all ears to anything you would like to communicate, clarify or ask.

**Contribution:** Pigi, I am a teacher, and because you said that a question is the expression of a person, there is something I want to ask you to help me understand. What was the challenge that Giussani proposed to you in the beginning like? Because what I see in myself is fear. In the booklet of the Exercises, Carrón says, “Without wanting to impose anything external, from the first day of school Fr. Giussani submitted himself to the tribunal of his students, entrusting his proposal to their judgement.” Giussani said, “I’m not here so that you can take my ideas as your own. I’m here to teach you a true method that you can use to judge the things I will tell you.” In my experience, I carry this treasure with me, but often, when I am with

my students, it's as if I doubted it, as if I were afraid. I am certain, but with my students, I feel powerless. So I would like to hear from you what that challenge Giussani posed to you was like.

**Pigi:** In that passage, Carrón himself sat down behind a desk beside us, looking at how don Gius (*Translator's note: a nickname for Fr. Giussani*) began his attack, you could say, on his pupils. It was a real attack, because you cannot imagine this epochal change just started today. When I was in Italy, we were completely immersed in what is the point of arrival for this epochal change. It is not a change over a matter of days or of months; it is rather a change over 500 years, now it must be 600, a change of direction for Western culture. Therefore, he carried the weight of a completely foreign culture, one hostile to Christianity, on his shoulders every day. In reality, it was not that great a burden, because none of us, at least in my class, was still Christian or defined himself that way. When Fr. Giussani walked into the classroom, he met a prejudiced and hostile wall. It was not one person or another who disagreed with him, but the whole class who sided against him. And, with his personality, he accepted the battle. From the first moment, he presented us with a challenge. He would say, "I challenge all of you." Those words were like a refrain that echoed throughout the three years of high school. Hardly a class went by without him posing that challenge. What was the content of the challenge? He challenged us to be loyal to our experience. What came out of Fr. Giussani's mouth was the word loyalty. "Be loyal to yourselves." The appeal to loyalty was the appeal to the fundamental needs and evidences within our person, in comparison with what he was proposing to us. This framing of combat forced us to throw ourselves into the fray. The objections arose in droves, especially from the more dialectical students, whose efforts were most evident. And when the objections arose, he never appeared to be offended in any way; he expressed his gratitude to whoever had the fighting courage to face him in battle. The biggest adversary, however, was not in our class, it was our philosophy teacher. At that time, you took three years of history of philosophy in high school. That beloved professor, the

dear enemy, was Mario Miccinesi, who had studied in the most prestigious academy of philosophy in Italy, the University of Pisa. His was a very refined dialectic, so to speak. The students spoke about their objections with this philosophy professor, and together they developed their objections, which were delivered from the mouths of our classmates, with all the pressure of the most refined philosophical culture of the time. Fr. Giussani seemed to joyfully immerse himself in these discussions, which often went beyond the boundaries of the class. When don Gius's religion class came after philosophy, or vice versa, the two teachers would meet in the hallway and the debate continued there. The two classes came out and gathered round in the halls, and we watched them, Miccinesi and Fr. Giussani. It was like watching a game between Atlético and Cruzeiro in Belo Horizonte. We followed these debates passionately, feeling we ourselves were involved and perceiving it was not a cheap, rude or petty confrontation, but a clean debate. This helped us to get out of that prison of neutrality, of indifference to which the culture of absolute relativism and individualism of the time had conducted us. On the contrary, we were invited to enter into a battle of ideals, of humanistic ideas and the ideal of Christianity. Leaving class, at the end of an intense debate, Giussani went arm-in-arm with his colleague Miccinesi to the coffee bar. We remember those years fondly. I think that all of us, who are still alive, still remember those moments. That is what we did in our meetings for three years. Of course, then came the invitation to meet outside the classroom, which led to the student movement in schools around Milan, with its own headquarters in the city center, where all the groups from schools around the city gathered to have *Raggio* ("Ray or Radius") meetings. We considered our groups like rays of light in the midst of the cultural chaos of the time. The meetings were called "Rays" and we were the "rays." So, returning now to what Carrón said, the challenge was always this: "Compare what I say, or what Miccinesi says, or what your classmate says, with your humanity, with the authentic nature inside you, with your authentic needs." We were all very fortunate to have those three years of high school. One of my classmates became a Dominican, and is still a Dominican in Par-

is today; one of our greatest adversaries at the time now edits many of the documents of the movement in Italy, and there are many other examples. When we see one another, we remember that time fondly, because it is a great joy to learn to work, to put our experience into play in the face of what happens, of what the world or society proposes. None of us were Christians, but over the course of those years together, those who wanted to be Christians became authentic Christians and still are today. I escaped my prison of neutrality to begin a wonderful adventure that I'm still a part of today. I consider my life a beautiful adventure. I don't know if I answered you well, but I at least tried to communicate an experience.

**Contribution:** I am a university professor, I do School of Community, and I meet people and students in our department who come from a tradition that is very distant from the Church. I wanted to ask you a question about point 2 in the introduction where it says, citing several Popes, that the need for mercy is a sign of the times. Working on this in School of Community, our first reaction is a lack of understanding, because people say they do not see this need for mercy anywhere. I kept thinking that the need to be forgiven is not obvious, unless, as you said, you're loyal to your own experience. I realize that we need to be helped to be able to help these friends of ours to be so loyal with their own experience that they recognize that every man, regardless of his own history or creed, has this need for mercy. So, I wanted to ask you why we have this difficulty perceiving this need in ourselves. It is not so much an intellectual curiosity, although I am also curious to understand why, but as a help for me and for these friends to walk in this journey and to realize that everyone, regardless of whether they have faith or not, has this need for mercy.

**Pigi:** The city needs mercy. It had already appeared, from the time of Greek civilization in the *polis*, as a way of creating a little humanity within an inhuman world. The great empires—the Egyptian, the Babylonian and many other pre-Christian empires—tried. Those were the imperialist attempts of pre-Christian society. Even within

that imperialist world, where the value of the person did not exist, there was only the dominion of the emperor, they created places where each person could be treated as a person and feel free from the yoke of the empire. This is how the *polis*, or cities, appeared. And this is still the vocation of cities, despite the fact that when a city grows and becomes a frightening metropolis, that origin which inspired everyone to flee from the countryside—where they were slaves, where they were mistreated, where the owner of the land exploited them, where they had no health, no hope, nothing—the origin can be lost. But they came to the city to look for hope. If a city has the vocation of being, say, the place of liberation for the people and, on the contrary, it merely replicates the experience of slavery, then it becomes much more essential to save the beauty and value of the person in the city. In the current context of large Brazilian cities, this vehicle for saving the value of the person, as incredible as it may seem, is the favela. I have worked for many years, and I still do, in the pastoral care of the favela of Belo Horizonte, and we always say that the favela is not the problem; it is the solution. Every morning, when its inhabitants go out into the city to do the humblest and often worst paid jobs, they carry with them a dose of humanity that they pour out all over the city. The most humanizing factor of the Brazilian metropolis are the favelas. The inhabitants are simple people, but they have Christian roots from their heritage. And this residual Christianity is already enough to have a humanizing force stronger than the urban context, of these conglomerations of humans. Therefore, I would analyze this need for mercy from within my, we could say “limited,” experience of Belo Horizonte, of the margins and favelas. I consider the work of the Catholic Church as an essential and strategic force in encouraging, uniting, and reinforcing the presence of the humblest individuals throughout the city. It’s true that, from a certain level of middle class and higher, people are not concerned with mercy. But a greater truth is the fact that, where there are fountains of humility, or mercy, we have a better city. It is in those places where people have compassion for others that a culture of hope sprouts up. I say this because I am the pastor of a humble suburb. One part of the parish is a favela, and the other

part is middle class, but I sense it is the favela that encourages and sustains us in the work of regaining a fraternal humanity. We are creating street communities. In humble areas, the street is a kind of communal living room for all the houses. So, we're fighting to form small street communities, where families can meet, love and help one another. It may be the case that intellectually, in a high-level sociological analysis, charity is superfluous, but it seems to me that in our very ordinary community, in the simplicity of our people, the enjoyment of true fraternity is very great. The joy of being brothers and sisters is immediately apparent. That is why we, in the Church of Belo Horizonte, chose the motto *Network of Community*. The Church aims to create an extended network of small communities throughout its territory. This seems to us to be the most appropriate pastoral care for the future. A university professor deals with people who are, perhaps, a kind of elite and therefore have not developed this particular sensitivity. But I am dealing with a much humbler reality. I perceive the beauty and joy of people who rediscover this sense of fraternity and reciprocal mercy.

**Contribution:** In your response to the first question, you spoke in a very passionate way about the debates between Fr. Giussani and the philosophy teacher, and with all his students, many of whom held what we could call hostile positions. In the face of all these discussions and contrasting tides, from what you observed and experienced, how did Fr. Giussani's thought change in the face of contrasting positions, and how did he welcome them?

**Pigi:** He often quoted this line: "I am human: I regard nothing human as alien to me" ("*Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto.*" Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos*, v. 77). He repeated it to us constantly. But that was not a later evolution in Fr. Giussani, it was his point of departure. "Nothing of what is human is alien to me." To the extent that he went to meet Buddhist monks in the Himalayas and did his thesis on a great Protestant theologian. If there is a person who was open to everything that exists in the world, from the beginning, that person is Fr. Giussani. So, everything that could be



defined as the evolution of his thought or of the concrete entities that were born within Fr. Giussani's sphere of influence (CL, the Fraternity, *Memores Domini...*), is in reality not a true evolution. We shouldn't think of them as extra steps, but rather as expressions of what was already implicitly within this 360° openness in his humanity. Don Gius always said he had learned it in seminary from a professor who said, "We are open to everything; everything is ours. Have you ever thought about it? There will come a beautiful day when we will lecture on the third or fourth floor, we will jump from that window and not crash, because Christianity is a way of having command of the whole world." It's a kind of fantastic perception of Christianity. Just as man invented the airplane and sails through the skies, and the submarine sails under the sea, we, one day, will possess everything, just like those children who pick up a toy and feel like they have the whole world in their hands. It is a tiny and vague image of the total embrace of the whole world and of the dominion over all things. This is the beginning of the root of Christianity. I would not, therefore, think of an evolution, but rather of the articulation of what was already at the origin, in the original position of Fr. Giussani's person. This is why CL has spread all over the world, why it puts down roots everywhere, like the small *tiririca* plant (nut grass), which spreads everywhere.

**Bracco:** I am struck by what you said about the positive side of this time. The truth is, in this epochal change, as we called it, we risk living in fear as if all the negativity were almost winning out. The other day, however, I read something from the Pope that talks about the fullness of time. When Christ was born, there were no clear evidences. It was just like now. In some way, that gaze you spoke about is the same gaze a person could've had when Jesus was born. But sometimes what dominates in us is resistance, as if evil were prevailing. So, I wanted to ask you to speak about this concept of time. What can give us hope? What is it like for you, in your life?

**Pigi:** The fullness of time: an infant in the grotto of Bethlehem, with two oxen breathing down on him; a poor fisherman, a carpenter;

then, on the cross, at the instant of the death of Christ on the cross: all this is not a joke. The moment of Christ's death on the cross is the salvation of the whole world. And St. John understood this perfectly when he wrote the words he uses to describes Christ's death: "And bowing His head, He handed over the spirit." Pentecost! For St. John, the death of Christ is Pentecost. Jesus said His last words, "It is finished!" Does that mean everything turns to dust, that there is nothing left? No. Everything is contained within this action of Christ. In the first baptisms, of the first Christians, people were immersed in water, in a large pool, and when they came up, they could breathe. This was to show how Christianity allows you to breathe. So, the question of the fullness of time is very serious. Perhaps the problem of our time is not so much that the world is bad, but that we urgently need to recover that joy, that infinite embrace. And if you'd like a suggestion: the Easter season does not end on the day of the Resurrection; it ends with the Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The descent of the Spirit flows from Christ's Ascension into heaven. That reminds me of a day spent in Gudo, on the outskirts of Milan. Certain things remain, like a flash in your mind, and never go away. In Gudo, there was a meeting room where Fr. Giussani once gave a reflection for *Memores Domini*, and he said, "Today is a special day because we will meditate on Christ's Ascension." And we all said, "Ascension? Ascent to heaven? How strange..." And this is how he explained it: "Christ ascended to heaven. What does 'heaven' mean? Our Father, who art in heaven... So where is He? Heaven is our life; it is the source of the life we have deep within ourselves. Christ, with His risen body, is present at the depths of all our being, of all of you and of all the people in the whole world who have never thought of Christ." I advise all of you to meditate on the day of Ascension again. You must be able to find something written about it. It is essential, because we are often uncomfortable, seeing so much suffering, so much misery, so much injustice. But, folks, what is all this in comparison to Christ's presence and His Ascension? The people killing Catholics just because they are Catholic, who are blowing them sky high, are throwing their victims into the arms of the risen Christ. In our city,

Belo Horizonte, the heart is the drug market. The neighborhood I live in is like the hand of a person. We are at the center, and all the arteries flow out from there, communicating with the whole city. It is the hand of the drug lords. When they barbarically kill one of these kids who are 18, 17 or 15 years old they think they are hurting them, but they are flinging them up into Eternity. If they knew, they would stop killing them, because they want to hurt them, but they are really handing them their passport for heaven. I talk about this with mothers during funeral Masses and they understand. I see it in their eyes. What a surprise! I do not mean metaphorically “surprising;” reality truly surprises us, the reality we are immersed in day and night. Not the explosion of a bomb, but the explosion of the risen Christ who ascended into heaven and is in all of us. If anyone says talking this way is like seeing visions, they’re wrong. This is not an abstract definition, but rather the pure essence of Christianity. This is the central core of Christianity. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. [...] Whatever you did [for one of the least of my brothers], you did for me.” Does Christ use figurative language in his parables? No, that’s not how He is! This is the pure and simple truth. Woman, inside your son is the glorious body of the risen Christ! This constant awareness in our life cannot allow us to become frightened, with heavy spirits. I am seventy-eight years old; I feel the weight of my old body and I can start to be negative. But it’s just a matter of remembering! It is not remembering, it is “cultivating memory;” that is, becoming aware of something which I may have forgotten, but that is the true substance of the instant I am living. Simone Weil used to say, “Time is this anticipation. Time is the anticipation of God, who begs for our love.” What is time? I do not live in a past that is already gone; I do not live in a future that has not yet come; I live in this passing instant, that is now already gone: it is moving. This flow of time is not empty, it is God who is awaiting me, begging for my love, offering me another opportunity to perceive that the instant is the flow of God’s infinite love, right within the moment I am living with Him. It is not God’s love that passes through me, it is I who pass through God’s love. Like scuba divers, we immerse ourselves in God’s love

like fish in the water. The passing moment may seem like the most boring, most monotonous time, but these are the instants in which He gives me everything, because in this passing instant, I am not doing anything to make myself exist. It is God's infinite generosity that makes me what I am. A mercy without limits. So, let's let ourselves be carried away by the infinite flow of this God who gives me His life infinitely, right in this instant, and in the next instant, until the instant with a capital "I," which is eternity, where time becomes the fullness of the instant. A fullness we can't even imagine, but it's a fantastic thing! We learned all this from Fr. Giussani that day in the meeting room in Gudo. ■

■ *Fr. Giussani and Fr. Francesco Ricci (in back) together with Pigi Bernareggi. San Paolo, 1974.*  
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## THE INSTANT CONTAINS EVERYTHING

*This conversation took place on June 23, 2019, with a group of friends, including Rosetta Brambilla (who was, like Pigi, a missionary in the capital of the state of Minas Gerais), and Marco Montrasi (nicknamed Bracco, the leader of CL in Brazil).*

**Pigi:** Thank you, because if I had read Carrón's message (*see p. 43*), I would have begun to cry. I could not have managed it. One day a long time ago, Carrón knocked on my door. I did not know who he was. He asked, "Can I talk to you?" He asked me thousands of questions and I answered all of them. I thought: "God has sent me this person..." No one had ever asked me so many questions. Then he embraced me and left. I'm not sure how long after this I realized it was Carrón. I thought, "My God!" How is it possible to have such a great capacity to love other people without ever having met them before? I had never seen him, or he me. So, imagine me now, with this [message]; I would cry for over a year...

**Rosetta:** It is for love of our history, isn't it, Pigi?

**Pigi:** I know that I know nothing. Everything happens without me expecting it. I would never have expected all of this to happen! There are many people who will turn 80 this year—Eugenia Scabini, Peppino Zola, Dino Quartana, Maria Rita... (*Editor's note: some of the first participants in Gioventù Studentesca*).

**Bracco:** You know, Pigi, I was struck by the fact that recently Carrón has been using the word "superabundance" repeatedly. In the last few days, we held a meeting with a group of educators. At a certain point, I began thinking about what should be the most im-

portant force in the life of a teacher, and of each of us, and whether something has happened that made it resonate, producing a superabundance. I thought: this awareness, this recognition of what had happened to him or her would be like a nuclear bomb deep in one's heart, without anyone else seeing it. I could be far away, distant from everything (imagine, for example, one's fear of accepting the freedom of one's children). Yet paradoxically, the moment the "nuclear bomb" exploded for each of us was not when we were attending the world's most beautiful event. Perhaps it happened later, when we were alone, or further away as we were leaving: this "nuclear bomb" found me when I understood, when I realized something. I also thought about the incredible grace of having a path indicated for us, of having someone who helps us keep that moment alive; the moment in which my freedom is totally free to understand. It is just as Carrón says in his message: it is your superabundance. In fact, what always fascinates me about you when I come to visit, in the quiet moments—not in the big events—is the fact that the superabundance of Christ is always present: it is a peace generated by Christ, a freedom generated by Christ. This immediately made you something of a father for me.

**Pigi:** And vice versa.

**Rosetta:** That "bomb" which explodes, as you say, is an awareness of what we have found, is it not?

**Pigi:** At the age of 80, it is also an awareness of what awaits us, like a river that, as it flows towards a waterfall, gets faster. The older we get, the faster time passes. One does not realize it is passing so quickly until it is time to go over the waterfall.

**Bracco:** How would you answer this question that we worked on in our Exercises: "What can withstand the test of time?"

**Pigi:** The present instant. The passing instant. Time passes. Everything is contained in the time that passes, in the passing instant. So,

the “nuclear bomb” we are talking about is the kind of event that happens in the passing instant. We are not talking of things of the past or things of the future, but rather things that are happening in this moment: everything is, everything exists, thanks to God. Have you ever asked yourself: what if, in this instant, God did not wish to create anymore? Nothing would exist, no! We know that everything exists because in this instant which passes, which has already passed, I could perceive its existence. So, you ask about the permanence of the knowledge of the great novelty that is Christ. Christ’s permanence is not a continuous holding onto the past. It is a constant presence in the present which extends into both the past and the future. This is why, as we get older, time passes more quickly; because time must eventually give way to eternity. The closer we are to eternity; the faster time passes. I do not know how better to describe it. When you are young, you never obtain what you desire. Never! When we get older—like me—time passes at an alarming pace. Yet this is not worrisome, because within this is contained everything else. In the passing moment, you find everything.

**Bracco:** The great fear that many live with nowadays is linked to the future, as if it were a burden, source of uncertainty. There is a sensation that everything is fluid and unsettled beneath our feet. Yet this is caused by the weakness of our awareness of the instant.

**Pigi:** Of the passing instant, that it not be an instant that just comes and goes... that has already gone! It is in the passing of that instant that you find something—the force behind everything, the power behind everything. You spoke about that power as a radical, completely new event. It is found in the passing instant; in this instant, which seems so fragile, so useless, so fleeting, we can find everything.

**Elenice:** Pigi, yesterday in our Fraternity group, someone spoke about something similar to what you are describing now. She said that this question—what can withstand the test of time?—can lead us to perceive something about the past or about the future, but she realized that we must ask ourselves that question every day because it is



contained in every instant. She said, "I go to work [she is a nurse in a health clinic, a difficult environment] and every day, faced by many people, by patients that arrive with a thousand different problems, I ask myself that question," because only then can we realize what resists the passing of time; only by working on this in order to verify the victory of Christ.

**Rosetta:** Tell us, in your 80 years, what have you not lost sight of? What should we not lose sight of?

**Pigi:** I have thought of only one thing: carrying forward what we have received. We should not worry too much about other things, because if what we have received is what makes the world go round, we can imagine that it is also what will attract people's attention. What I received in GS was the certainty of Christ's presence in everything, always, come what may, even if the world should implode. This is the presence of Christ in the passing moment, because if it is not in the passing moment, it simply does not exist; it would be merely a theoretical framework you refer to every once in a while, a kind of refuge or spiritual retreat. The great discovery I made with my friends in GS was that the substance of the passing instant is Christ's presence. If He is not in the passing instant, He does not exist.

**Rosetta:** Many of us may not have this awareness.

**Pigi:** It is a gift from God that we call faith. Faith is not a capacity of the person; it is a gift of God. When I was a boy, my mother taught me her faith through the way she spoke, as she was speaking, and in the positions she took. Yet the world we are immersed in today is so devastating and disruptive that it destroys everything. When we were students at Berchet High School, we were at rock bottom. There was a particular teacher, Miccinesi, who tore people apart. Everyone laughed at Dino Quartana, my friend, because he was kind and friendly. He was the one who brought me to GS. At school, we were the village idiots.

**Bracco:** Carrón recently said to us that the current cultural moment is one of total disruption, perhaps one of the most difficult ever, yet he maintains that this is also fascinating because none of us can rely on a treadmill to move us forward. Previously, many people thought in the same way, so there were never any big problems. Nowadays, something must occur within me first, otherwise...

**Pigi:** It is not that nothing occurs within me, but that I need to be aware of it. Sometimes, we say “it happens, it does not happen.” It happens! It is you who are not aware of it. What happens, happens. It happens no matter what, whether you like it or not, whether you take it into consideration or not, and it totally surpasses everything you could ever imagine.

**Bracco:** This is the “nuclear bomb!” When you see students or teachers in this moment of confusion, it is a miracle if anyone stops to realize what is still happening.

**Pigi:** Christianity is a gift from God, so it is a miracle—“mirabilis”—that which evokes admiration. So, it does not have miraculous proportions, but it is admirable. Miracles are not strange and incredible things; they are what fascinate you in the passing instant. ■



## WIDENING YOUR GAZE

*On November 29, 2019, a group of friends that runs Entrepassos (a book club that was born from a desire for literature to help judge one's experiences) met with Fr. Pigi in Belo Horizonte/Minas Gerais. Here are some excerpts from that conversation.*

**Bracco:** At a meeting in Thailand with the religious orders, the Pope said, “Mary’s gaze impels us to look where she looks, to turn our eyes to that other gaze and to do whatever he tells us. His is a gaze that captivates because it is able to penetrate appearances to find and celebrate the authentic beauty present in every person. It is a gaze that, as the Gospel teaches us, shatters all determinisms, fatalisms and standards. Where many saw only a sinner, a blasphemer, a tax collector, an evildoer or even a traitor, Jesus was able to see apostles. Such is the beauty that his gaze invites us to proclaim, a gaze that enters in, transforms and brings out the best in others.”

**Pigi:** God’s gaze on us means that we look at Him too, because if we do not turn our gaze, we cannot see. Not by looking towards God, but by *looking*. I look because I am seeking. Sometimes one may walk looking down looking for a 50-cent coin to pay for a *cachaça* (drink). In that case, there’s nothing else to it. That person is just looking. It’s all a matter of where you turn your gaze. If we do not turn our gaze to God, He cannot look at us.

**Bracco:** How does this happen? When people wake up in the morning, they start to look at things, and there can be times that they get to the end of the day without having seen anything. It is as if there were an external force that deprives us of the possibility to see something. Don’t you think so?

**Pigi:** I believe that if there really was something that could destroy our gaze, then we would be like Protestants. According to them, human nature has been ruined and Christ has replaced human nature with His Presence. To a Protestant, human nature is not that important. Instead, what matters most is that it is taken over and transformed by that new fact, which is Christ. At the same time, we cannot forget that we are beggars. Therefore, the reason why I am searching is because I am poor and needy. To be Christian we must be beggars; we must realize that we are needy. Nowadays, the problem is that you think you need to dress up, you need to look good, and you need to look attractive. However, we draw God's attention because we seek Him, not because we have some special quality that draws God's attention to us. God has been looking for us since before we were created. But God creates us in His Own image and likeness, and we are drawn to this image and likeness. This is why we are always restless and seeking Him. Therefore, I think that what matters is to look, to pay attention, and to keep our gaze open.

**Bracco:** What can help us to pay attention?

**Pigi:** It is like chickenpox (*Editor's note: which is spread by contagion*). This is why a community is incredible, because, when you find someone who is always looking, you feel you too can look. When you see that someone is searching, you can imagine that you also can search.

**Bracco:** Carrón used to say that by being part of a community, you can see something happen in someone else and then believe that it is also possible for the same thing to happen to you.

**Pigi:** This search, this desire, I think that it would be impossible to eradicate them from a human being, unless you shoot him in the head and that's the end. There is not one person that is not drawn by someone seeking. Those who go shopping on Black Friday are also searching, but it is not "the search," it is a search. I am not saying that this may not be a manifestation of "searching." What makes a true Christian community is "that searching." The search for, the

nostalgia for that encounter that any Black Friday could not satisfy. Adriana Mascagni, who used to write songs when we were teens in the Gioventù Studentesca (GS), said precisely this in her first song:

“My God, I look at myself and I discover that I am faceless;  
 I look into my depths and see endless darkness.  
 Only when I realize that You exist do I hear my voice again—like an echo—and I am born again, as time is born from memory.  
 Oh heart, why do you tremble? You’re not alone, you’re not alone;  
 you don’t know how to love, yet you are loved;  
 you don’t know how to make yourself, yet you are made.  
 As the stars up in the sky, You make me walk in Being;  
 make me grow, make me change, as you raise up and change the light from day to night.  
 You make my soul take on color, as the snow on Your precious mountain tops  
 takes on the sun of Your Love.” (*Il mio volto* [“My Face”])

Adriana Mascagni shows existentially what it truly means to search, what it truly means to gaze. This is why we have been able to form a community, a shared life. It is not thanks to the beautiful qualities of each individual, but because everyone, in the profound mystery of their being, longs to encounter Christ. Clearly God reaches out to us, always, but the key is to have an attitude of longing for God, to recover within ourselves that seeking nature that reveals that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Our being longs for God’s gaze, a gaze that, in itself, a fruit of our being made in the image and likeness of God. This is the origin of gaze, the fact that we are this window; that we are this longing for God.

**Bracco:** I am always struck by our conversation. I am provoked every time. The fact that for Christ to look at me, I also need to look at Him. And that there is nothing that can destroy this, not even when one looks for a coin to purchase a *cachaça*. Such a humanity that nothing can take away. It is incredible. You are an example of this gaze.

**Pigi:** The gaze is the expression of the human person. There is nothing that expresses a person's humanity more than their longing. Darwin, a scientist, said that the function generates the organ. If we have eyes, it is because we are beings that seek, beings that are always looking for something. If we were not constantly seeking, we would not have eyes. The reason for this is that we are beings longing for meaning. We are in dialogue with God. When God created us, he conversed with us, because if he had not spoken with us, we would not have eyes to seek Him. The purpose, the need to long for and to look for meaning is what generates our eyes. As a result, I understand the importance of reading, to look for something so that my eyes can function. If I already had the book of life, I would not have eyes. Therefore, I see this way of reading together as a way of living my deep searching. I see this as a way of looking at our humanity longing for meaning, longing for the answer to all of our questions.

**Bracco:** I didn't understand well when you said that our seeking is a sign of our likeness with God. You said that to discover this gaze we have to seek.

**Pigi:** To discover God's gaze we need to actively look. We need to start looking. It is not a question of morality; rather, it is an ontological matter that has to do with being. We are made to look for God with our eyes wide open. This is why, if we exercise this seeking, we can find out that God loves us always. I cannot help seeking, because it is a fundamental and essential part of me. This does not depend on my own abilities. That is the reason why I think we need to form community wherever we may be.

**Bracco:** Because community is the greatest provocation to become aware of our seeking nature.

**Pigi:** And also because that gaze is the same that exists among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They all look at each other with the same gaze. Therefore, the more we share this gaze, the more authentic it will be. The gaze will grow and will help us grow. Hu-

man growth is not a question of millions of cells. Instead, it consists in the discovery of this profound union that exists, of this mutual gaze among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So, we form a community wherever we live, in our family, at work or in our neighborhood. We form communities not out of a moralistic duty, but because we need it to live.

**Bracco:** Because nihilism is at work. It is something so subtle that is invisible; it is the attempt to isolate yourself. It is the opposite of forming a community.

**Pigi:** Yes, because this thing [a cell phone] is not real; it is virtual. The more you have the impression of having the world in your hands, the more it becomes obvious to you that that is not reality. Reality is something deeper than that. Virtual reality is clearly commercial and it strongly undermines realism, especially because we do not exercise our humanity in the virtual world; we do not seek Christ with an open gaze. That gaze is at the very core of our being.

**Marcela:** *Entrepassos* was born from a shared passion for literature. How can we help each other? How can we grow?

**Pigi:** I believe that opening a book is the same as looking or searching. Every time you open your eyes, you turn them towards something. Reading means turning your eyes towards reality. The book is not a tool for learning; rather it is a question of looking at reality, and listening to that original longing within our hearts. It is as if the book were a third or fourth eye, or for the blind, their eyes. If you read a book to a child who doesn't know how to read, you are helping the child learn how to gaze. By reading the same book together, you are focusing your gaze on the same thing. It is as if you all had one eye. Within a community that is actively and truly seeking Christ, a book can make this search much easier for the members of the community. In a group there may be those who are smarter or more distracted, and by reading a few pages together, they are all helped to look at reality. All are unified in what counts most, which is to seek, or



rather to find out that all are seeking the same thing. Because when you read a book, I don't think you need to critique each other's comments. It is not a question of having a debate, or to have a discussion with those who disagree with you. You are not treating the book club meeting like a debate and you are not engaging with those who have a different opinion. In the book, you can discover the other person's longing, so one should not question whether someone's view on the book is authentic. ■

## THE PARADOX OF CORONAVIRUS

*This is one of the last things Fr. Pigi wrote. In April 2020, he sent this letter to his friend Rosetta Brambilla, in response to a question: what has your experience been like in this time of pandemic?*

They are asking me about my experience of this period of Coronavirus. With existential anguish, knowing that there is no access to medical resources—particularly ventilators—and that people are dying suffocating in the water generated in their lungs by their own body. Existential anguish, too, in perceiving the surreal opposition that the world propounds between the value of the person (saving lives) and that of the economy (saving businesses), even after two thousand years of Christianity.

I also experience the existential anguish, having dedicated much of my life to the problem of homelessness, of perceiving that, for a large part of the population, the “home” is no longer (or has never been) people’s main point of balance and well-being. People react negatively to the wise recommendations of the United Nations and of governments to “stay at home.”

Another reason for anguish: the spirit of disobedience towards the new norms of life, in the name of one’s own individualistic and relativistic criterion. That is what Pope Benedict XVI denounced when he visited the University of Regensburg, where he had taught for many years. According to John Paul II, the greatest danger of the third millennium is born from this individualistic relativism: “The civilization of death.”

St. Francis of Assisi says in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*: “Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death, from whom no one living can escape.” For him, there is no reality created by God that does not bring a blessing. The same is also true for Coronavirus. In fact, wherever the virus appears, a set of measures and human powers necessarily come into action: science, technology, solidarity in infinite forms, support structures, research for vaccines, financial aid. Governments are forced to put aside many operations of dubious significance, to hasten into effective action on behalf of the people. Political factions lose their importance in favor of the “common good.” The horizon is more dignified, decent, idealistic, fraternal. In short, life is paradoxically happier, useful, necessary, interesting, “loved.” Even everyday conversations become less boring, empty, futile. Human relationships become humanized. The final perspective becomes divine.

For this reason, the Easter proclamation of these days (the *Exultet*) says: “O happy fault, that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!” That is why, these days, my colleagues and I from the *Convivium Emaús* (*Editor’s note: a home for elderly priests of the Diocese of Belo Horizonte*) gather every day to pray the rosary for the world, shaken by Coronavirus, wanting to participate in so much good work, so much spirit of service, the purification of so many hearts. We want to live this period mysteriously invented by the Creator of all creatures: “Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Coronavirus!” ■

## “BROTHER CORONAVIRUS”

*Fr. Pigi's contribution at the CL Advent Retreat for Priests in Latin America, which took place by video conference on November 30, 2020.*

Historically, up until last century, the Church successfully cultivated the ancient tradition of the importance of “preparation for a good death” as part of life in the Christian community. I’ve asked myself why many times, without being able to understand it. I thought, “Who knows, maybe because a kind of dark, pessimistic Christianity...” But now, in the current circumstances with the pandemic, a perception of the extreme pertinence of life, or, better, of the cause and the reason for death, has spontaneously come to me. It is a theme that puts our Christian awareness to the test. It was in responding to a group of *Memores Domini* that many questions came to mind about the meaning of this experience of the pandemic for the life of that community, and my mind naturally jumped to remembering these lines from St. Francis’s *Canticle of Brother Sun*:

“Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,  
from whom no one living can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,  
for the second death shall do them no harm.”

I confess that, in the beginning, what I said was a bit unclear, but then I focused on a few things that I will share with you today, hoping it is in harmony with your perception of the value of the experience our world is living right now.

The pandemic has been a recurring factor in the history of humanity. The word commonly used is “plague,” which appears often in

the prayers and supplications of the Church, who asks to be freed “from hunger, pestilence and war.” In my native city, Milan, as a child, every time I went downtown, I passed the Lazaretto (the name alludes to the parable of the poor man Lazarus in the Gospel). It was a large building in the shape of a circular courtyard, where the “plague victims” of the pandemics of the time were confined until they died. Those who were infected and managed to escape or avoid being confined to this place of death were considered by the rest of the city as “anointers,” that is, evil people who spread the disease, presumably by anointing the doors of houses at night. They were persecuted by the general population, captured and subjected to mob justice, then buried in strange places so they wouldn’t infect the populace. It has only been since scientists discovered vaccines, medicines and treatments and made them available all over the world that the terror of pandemics, as well as places of quarantine, have disappeared from the world’s collective subconscious. The last pandemic, a source of general anguish, at a time when science still had limited resources, was the Spanish flu at the beginning of the twentieth century.

**The current dismay over the Coronavirus pandemic** is rightly attributed to the fact that our collective subconscious, supported by science and the World Health Organization, has been taken by surprise. *Mors tua, vita mea* [“Your death is my life”]: this Latin saying is a very synthetic definition of the typical dynamic of life, from its origins to present day. The whole dynamic of the cosmos, from the moment of it appeared, is contained in this idea. In modern times, the great scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin expressed this dynamic with an image of the trajectory of everything that exists: from the **Alpha point (the Big Bang?)** to that final reality, the **Omega point (the cosmic Christ)**.

Now, the necessary energy behind the whole dynamic is **Christ’s death**. The Cross of Cross embraces the entire universe, including at the physical and scientific level; it embraces the totality of human existence with a surprising intensity and creativity—in our case, all you

need to do is imagine the vital force with which a single specimen of Coronavirus enters a living cell of immensely greater size and, poaching on of all its vital elements, rapidly produces more than 500 new Coronavirus particles...truly, *mors tua, vita mea*, and with what fantastical proliferation!

**But what is death?** The ancients thought—think of the passage from St. Francis's *Canticle*—that there were two deaths, or two phases of the same death: the first, bodily death, and the second, eternal or spiritual death. The first death touched only the visible body: this is the idea behind a "dormitory," in Greek called *koimetérion* (cemetery), in which people whose bodies are already dead remain awaiting either a definitive death or the equally definitive life of beatitude that comes with the "final judgment." During this time, people would have the chance to free themselves of everything that does not fit with eternal beatitude—purgatory.

According to St. Francis's *Canticle of Brother Sun*, the second death will come at the end of time and space, when everything will flow into eternity and, depending on each person's spiritual choices, either eternal beatitude will follow, or eternal damnation for those who seek only evil—which is the same as **nothingness**.

Unlike the ancients, we no longer think of death in two phases, with purgatory in between. Today, we conceive of death as an integral event, which touches our entire human structure: body and spirit. In this integral structure, Christ's death is everything, in every instant, because we do not live in the past, which has already passed; nor do we live in the future, which has not yet arrived. Rather, we live our lives in this instant, in which Christ is "present," which is to say He makes a gift of Himself—death—and-resurrection. We always carry the death of Christ within us, hoping to share in his resurrection. This is how every factor related to death, including Coronavirus, is a living part of our life in Christ, and; therefore, we can even, despite what the world thinks, call death "brother," as Francis called his bodily death. St. John understood this when, in His Gospel, he described Christ's

death as the Omega point of all creation, saying, "Bowling His head, **He handed over the spirit**,"—an expression which intentionally has two meanings: "He died" and "He transmitted the eternal Life of His Holy Spirit." Here, the ultimate definition of our relationship with the Lord, which is also the law of the entire universe, is revealed in its sublime truth: *Mors TUA, vita MEA*.

**What does all this have to do with our Advent Retreat?** The word Advent means "coming, arrival." Death, our sister, is really our happy arrival at our final destination: Christ's eternally instantaneous embrace, the **Omega point of the life of the entire universe**. When, in contemplative monasteries, a member of the community dies, the bells toll as loud as they do on the day of Easter, and rightly so, because it is the true *dies natalis* [day of birth] ... yet think of how many have died during the pandemic with neither singing nor music? Will our brother Coronavirus have appreciated it? ■



■ Pigi and Rosetta during two celebrations  
at the Obras Educativas Padre Giussani.





# MY LIFE WITH PIGI

by Rosetta Brambilla

Thinking back on my life with Pigi is like returning down a long road, one that began in Milan and reached its destination in Brazil, one that belongs to God, that carried us through suffering, pain, sacrifice and joy.

I met Pigi in Milan going to the Giovetù Studentesca (GS) Mass at Santo Stefano church and the city-wide GS meetings, and then I had him in mind as one of the people who had said they were available to go on mission in Belo Horizonte.

When I, too, arrived in Sao Paolo, at the convent of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, I clearly remember that I went with Lucia Virtuani to Belo Horizonte in 1967 to see some of our friends: Nicoletta, Maria Rita, a few other girls and some of “our” seminarians, including Pigi. I still remember, as if it were today, when Pigi arrived one day with pain stamped all over his face, because our friends had run off impetuously to try to save the people they saw oppressed by so many circumstances by their own efforts.

Being there, with them, we recognized the cultural wind that was blowing and we remembered what don Gius had written to them 1962: “What you will be able to do does not matter; what matters is what you will be able to Be,” and, “Remember two fundamental rules to build up His work, which is the beginning of our work: 1) Abandonment to God—prayer; 2) The simple familiarity among yourselves.” And these indications from don Gius, which I have treasured,

just as Pigi has treasured them, have been precisely what saved me throughout my journey.

In a letter from 1968, Fr. Giussani told me, “These are terrible times in which people are abandoning the level of the Mystery of Christ to interpret everything as it appears to the majority... God placed you in the world and sent you to Brazil to help men and women, that they may know Jesus Christ, and to help them live the Christian life, which is the truly human life.” Don Gius was always close to us.

On March 9, 1999, Fr. Giussani sent me a letter telling me, “You are now serving one of the greatest names among all our missionaries, Pigi. And Pigi also generated some of the earliest beginnings of the Movement, in that he embodies the Ideal of our Movement: to bring CHRIST to life today just as Peter and John saw him yesterday. Greet Pigi for me and do not leave him. If something keeps you from doing so, make sure to tell us.”

Once I went to live in Belo Horizonte, I collaborated with Pigi in his pastoral work in the favelas, creating Christian communities in the slums of the northern region of Belo Horizonte and responding to their needs: incentives for housing, the approval of the “Pro Favela” law that gives families who live in favelas a title to their property... Working closely with him, I breathed in the Mystery within reality just as he did.

I lived with Pigi from 1977-78 in the same house: I prepared food for him, I put his room in order...

Then, for many years, I lived in the same neighborhood and met him for the Holy Mass every morning; I listened to his words, I consulted him about decisions I was making... I saw him in action with the people. And there was not a day when I did not have before my eyes that encounter with Fr. Giussani, our history, and I was full of Gratitude.

In recent years, Pigi has been an invaluable help for all of us who work in the Obras Educativas Padre Giussani [“Fr. Giussani Educational Initiatives”—a network of 6 institutions] through his profound reflections that indicated a clear path for us during our bi-annual meetings.

Every so often, I used to invite friends to dinner at my house so that they could get to know Pigi personally and ask him questions, and he liked meeting with people and sharing with them what was dearest to his heart. Pigi loved it when Bracco came, and always made sure to come to dinner to have a chat with him.

Obedying Fr. Giussani in staying close to Pigi, saying my yes each day, was simply the opportunity to reciprocate some of God's love for me and for our precious History.

In all these years spent with Pigi, almost sixty, we have realized that we lose nothing of all that has been given to us, because everything is present in His Presence. ■



■ *Pigi with Julián Carrón.*  
© Neófito Oliveira

## MESSAGE FROM JULIÁN CARRÓN FOR FR. PIGI'S 80<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

Dearest Pigi,

I take this opportunity to wish you a very happy birthday through Bracco. I imagine you must be full of gratitude for the loyalty the Lord has shown in your life from your first encounter with Fr. Giussani, after which you could never be the same again. That yes of yours has born such fruit; it expanded the horizons of your faith and took you to Brazil, where you remain even now with a faithfulness I envy.

I ask you to pray constantly for the great “tree” of this Movement, and for me; that nothing may ever separate us from the love of Christ, just as nothing—not even difficulties, misunderstandings, and sufferings—could ever separate you from Him.

Through the intercession of Fr. Giussani, I ask the Virgin that your presence among the people may continue to testify to that superabundance of life Christ grants to those who give in to His unique grace. Only His victorious presence can withstand the test of time; your long life is a testimony to that.

I greet you with the words Fr. Giussani wrote in 1999, which you read at the New York Encounter last year: “I pray to God, who loves you just as Christ loves you now, and loved His disciples, that He

may never fade from your memory—not from mere remembrance, but memory. Thank you, above all else, for what you have given to humanity out of the love of Christ, and in His name.”

Happy 80<sup>th</sup> birthday from all your friends from the Movement!

*Julián Carrón*  
*Milan, June 6, 2019*

## FOR FR. PIGI ON THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF HIS PRIESTLY ORDINATION

Dearest Pigi,

The saying you chose to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your ordination is a snapshot of your life: “Put nothing before Christ” (St. Cyprian). St. Benedict made this the rule of his life: “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ.” And you did as he did.

In this epochal change—which Fr. Giussani already perceived in the 1950s and responded by going to teach at Liceo Berchet, where you met him—in a time in which it seems like everything is collapsing, the security of our life lies only in Him.

You have witnessed to us that no human capacity or project is able to respond to the boundless need found in our contemporaries. Man can only begin to hope again, and to look at his discomfort and his wounds without fear if Christ makes Himself present through a humanity that has been changed by Him, through the life of the Church.

What else have these 50 years been for you, if not the spectacle of God’s fidelity that never abandons those who let themselves be seized by Him? Your humility and simplicity of heart are what have allowed the Lord to work wonders through you, within the particular history that was born in the unexpected encounter with a Brazilian young man at the beginning of the 1960s, “followed with fidelity;

in other words, stubbornly,” as Fr. Giussani said. You were the fruit of that stubbornness: it was why you left Italy and the only reason you remained.

The love of Christ present carried you through many events, including dramatic ones, and made you more and more a sign of hope for your *favelados*, who feel looked at the way Jesus looked at the poor in the Gospel: with that one-of-a-kind tenderness—that so corresponded to their longing for a gaze that would fix on them—that led them to exclaim, each time they met Him, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mk 2:12). It is the same surprise Pope Francis inspires with his disarming gestures.

I, therefore, join you and all your friends in celebrating you with a toast, because you show us that the charism given to Fr. Giussani when you were a young high school student is still appropriate for today’s men and women; it is useful for our human journey. This confirmation is a gift for the whole Church and for all of us in the movement, showing how we, too, need to verify the faith as you did, remaining faithful to the form of teaching to which we have been entrusted.

*Affectionately yours,  
Fr. Julián Carrón  
December 17, 2017*



## MESSAGE TO OUR BRAZILIAN FRIENDS AND THE ENTIRE CL MOVEMENT ON THE DEATH OF FR. PIGI

“The new self is born in Christ’s gesture of choosing, which places him within the human companionship generated by His Spirit, i.e., into the Church. This election, this choice, always takes on a concrete historical form” (L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, p. 70).

Dear friends, these words from the School of Community we have just studied describe the life of Fr. Pigi Bernareggi, which never strayed from the banks of that concrete historical form that is our charism and was always marked by a dual fidelity. Above all, the fidelity of God, who chose him to advance His plan of salvation and never abandoned him. And then, the faithfulness of “don Pigi,” who recognized and followed the call of the Mystery, which first reached him in 1954 in a high school classroom at Liceo Berchet in Milan through the unmistakable voice of Fr. Giussani. He remembered his own “beautiful day” for his whole life, “He came into our lives like a hurricane, and we found ourselves waiting for the next lesson.” Why? “He asked us to use our reason and intelligence in a new way. He did not want us to use them to create outlines and catalogues of various ideas, but to open them up to discovering the mystery of being, the final meaning of human experience.”

Through Fr. Giussani, Christianity erupted into his life as a present event: “What I received in GS was the certainty of Christ’s presence in everything, always, because if He is not in the passing instant, He

simply isn't; He would be merely a theoretical framework you refer to every once in a while, a kind of refuge or spiritual retreat. The great discovery I made with my friends in GS was that the substance of the passing instant is Christ's presence. If He is not in the passing instant, He does not exist." Pigi reminds us that Christ is something happening now. That is the biggest patrimony he passes on.

This is why his priestly motto was "Put nothing before Christ" (St. Cyprian). This was the awareness that made him a protagonist in his daily witness amongst the favelados of Belo Horizonte. He never walked any other road, not even when he had to walk through the dark valleys of loneliness and illness. He always followed the subtle method of God. Look how much fruit his willingness to follow that method produced!

In a 1999 letter to Rosetta—who shared the adventure in Brazil with Pigi until the very end—Fr. Giussani spoke of him as "one of the greatest names among all our missionaries. And Pigi also generated some of the earliest beginnings of the Movement. For me, Pigi embodies the ideal of our Movement: to bring CHRIST to life today just as Peter and John saw him yesterday."

We ask that the ideal incarnated in Pigi might fill our lives, so that what Peter and John lived becomes more and more the daily experience of each one of us: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rm* 8:38-39).

*Affectionately yours,*  
*Fr. Julián Carrón*  
*Milan, January 23, 2021*

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Communion and Liberation