

“Who helps you the most to understand the meaning of your experience?”

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

14. Sole authority

by Luigi Giussani*

The supreme authority is the one in which we find the meaning of all our experience. Jesus Christ is this supreme authority, and it is His Spirit who makes us understand this, opens us up to faith in Him and His person.

“Just as the Father has sent me so do I send you.”¹ The apostles and their successors (the Pope and the bishops) constitute, in history, the living continuation of the authority who is Christ. In their dynamic succession in history and their multiplication throughout the world, Christ’s mystery is proposed ceaselessly, clarified without errors, defended without compromise. Therefore, they constitute the place, like a reliable and effervescent spring, where humanity can draw on the true meaning of its own existence, probing ever deeper.

What genius is to the cry of human need, what prophecy is to our cry of expectancy, so the apostles and their successors are to announcing the response. But just as the true answer is always perfectly specific and concrete with respect to the expectancy—which is inevitably vague and subject to illusions—so are they, like an absolute and reliable rock, infallible: “You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my Church.”² Their authority not only constitutes the sure criterion for that vision of the universe and history that alone explains their (i.e., the universe’s and history’s) meaning; it is also vital—it steadfastly stimulates a true culture and persistently points to a total vision. It inexorably condemns any exaltation of the particular and idealization of the contingent; that is, it condemns all error and idolatry. The authority of the Pope and bishops, therefore, is the ultimate guide on the pilgrimage towards a genuine sharing of our lives [convivenza], towards a *true civilization*.

Where that authority is not vital and vigilant, or where it is under attack, the human pathway becomes complicated, ambiguous, and unstable; it veers towards disaster, even when on the exterior it seems powerful, flourishing, and astute, as is the case today. Where that authority is active and respected, the historic pilgrimage is confidently renewed with serenity; it is deep, genuinely human, even when the expressive methods and dynamics of sharing lives are roughshod and difficult. We must emphasize one important point: the gift of the Spirit manifested to the apostles conveys Christ’s value as “The Way, the Truth, the Life.” It gave the apostles a conscious and enlightened abandonment as the origin of their irresistible courage and vehement confidence in affirming their Master before the culture and civilization of their times. »

¹ See John 20:21.

² Matthew 16:17ff.

* Source: *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 73-75.

» Still today it is the gift of the Spirit that allows us to discover the profound meaning of Ecclesiastical Authority as a supreme directive on the human path. Here is the origin of that ultimate abandonment and of that conscious obedience to it—this is why it is not the locus of the Law but of Love. One cannot understand the experience of that definitive devotion that binds the “faithful” to Authority without taking into consideration the influence of the Spirit, and that devotion often affirms itself on the Cross of a mortification of the drive of our own genius or our plans for life.

From our brief meditation we can also say that without the gift of the Spirit we do not know how to recognize the teachers of the true civilization, and humanity does not find the strength and wisdom to build a common, balanced, and enlightened unitary path.