

HOMILY IN THANKSGIVING FOR THE LIFE OF FRLUIGI GIUSSANI

There is a wonderful providence which brings us here tonight for this mass in honour of Fr Giussani at this moment in the life of the Church when we experience these final days of the papacy of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. For the lives of these two faithful men of the Church – Pope Benedict XVI and FrGiussani – were so intimately bound with one another. How often when you read or hear the reflections of one do you not also find resonances of the other. Just recently I read again with great poignancy some words of Pope Benedict reflecting on his own encounter with Jesus Christ. He says, “He wants me. There is a will of Jesus concerned with me. I must enter into this.....It is the space within which I must live. Our life becomes more fulfilled and free the more we become one with this will in which the profound truth of our own self is contained.” How we need to remember this in the Church at this time, and to pray for the good of the Church, and to know that Christ is with us. This is why we are so grateful, too, for the example and the witness of Fr Giussani and why we give thanks to God that the Cause for his Beatification and Canonisation has been opened.

At the heart of being a Christian for FrGiussani – and for us – is the encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter is always fresh, personal and totally transforming. The reality of this encounter with Jesus Christ and of the freedom which comes with it was the very centre of FrGiussani’s life. As he would say, “Christianity is an event. There is no other word to indicate its nature..... Christianity is not a religious doctrine or a series of laws or a complex of rights. Christianity is a fact, an event. Everything else is a consequence.”

For me the experience of reading some of his teaching and encountering all of you, the community that he founded – Communion and Liberation – these have put me in touch once more very deeply with my own early emerging consciousness of Jesus Christ when I was a teenager. It was then, like most of us, that I first had to face some of the key

questions of my own life, Why am I here? What meaning does my life have? How can I believe in God when there seems so much pain in the world? Where do I look for truth and happiness? In those years when I was in secondary school – at High school - and later at University I realised that these questions only made sense in the context of a Someone who was showing Himself to me in the reality of my questioning and my searching. Most of my peers could not see the relevance or meaning of faith in God. For most of them - if they thought about God at all - then God was seen as distant and a kind of divine policeman, entering into reality only to curb the enthusiasms of the young. Or God was seen as a morally bankrupt Demi-urge, who had put creation in train but was not interested in any on-going way in the lives of his creatures. After all, these voices would say, there is a seemingly endless series of human experiences of suffering and of evil, how could there be a loving God?

Through various experiences of retreat, of working with some of those who were most vulnerable in society and through a personal reading of the Gospels and some of the spiritual tradition, I saw that these depictions of God were ultimately idols. Something had gone wrong in our reasoning as young people. I discovered instead the person of Jesus Christ, and Him, most especially in his death and resurrection. On the cross, in the suffering of His Son, God is present but hidden. I found this image of God utterly compelling and deeply attractive. Two thoughts struck me at the same time; Firstly, “God is like this or there is no meaning in the world” and closely identified with this thought and coming hot on its heels the thought, “If God is like this, then He is worth giving your life for”.

In these past few years of association with CL I have been reminded of this fundamental intuition again and again. In Fr Giussani’s life and experience I see an important witness and guide to this discovery and this encounter. Like our Holy Father, he points us, not to himself, but to Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human. It is He who is the centre of all reality. For Fr Giussani, Jesus is the only being who was fully human, and therefore capable of understanding from within each person’s experiences, and at the same time the One capable of responding to these like no one else, because he was God.

This is the heart of the revelation of the Gospel and of the total newness which comes in Christ's person, "You must not allow yourself to be called Rabi, since you have only one master and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your Father, since you have only one Father and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourself to be called teachers for you have only one teacher, the Christ."

Jesus came to reveal the Father to us to tell us that we are his children. In each of us there is a reality higher than anything subject to space and time. The encounter with Jesus is important because it makes sense of myself. It is the way I discover that I am fully a person and that I have a place in the world. And if this is true for me, then it is true for every other person, too. Every person contains within themselves this original, irreducible principle the foundation of all rights, the source of values. It is why the followers of Jesus have always insisted upon the inalienable dignity of every human person simply by the fact of their existence. Each of us has this level of our personal being that is in immediate relationship with the infinite.

It is no surprise to me that Fr Giussani explored this understanding of the human person in the context of accompanying the young – high school students and those at University – for these are the years in which we most often face these questions with open-ness and a desire to move more deeply into the reality of what it means to be a human person, to be free and to find happiness. The search for these realities of course remains throughout our lives.

But what most especially distinguishes the Christian in this exploration is that we see that the desire of our hearts, our search for meaning and for freedom, takes place through the use of a reason that has not been left to its own devices. Our reasoning, our thinking and our questioning, is preceded by a Word which though logical and rational does not originate in our reason but rather has been given to us as a gift. In Jesus Christ this Word has become flesh; his presence always transcends our own reasoning

capacity. There is something about Jesus that surpass someone who simply lived and died for he rose from the dead. His resurrection means that he is alive now in every circumstance of my life, “The Christian proclamation is that God has become a human presence, within history” as Giussani would say, “It is not something far away that man tries to reach by his own efforts, but Someone who came to join in man’s journey and become his companion”.

Jesus is always coming close to us and his coming always has within it his invitation “Come and see”. This was the experience of those earliest apostles and it is the reality of this event, this invitation, which is the heart of the charism preached by Giussani. Yet we may well ask, how can this invitation and this following be experienced today? By beginning to experience the memory and the proclamation of Him presented by those who have been drawn to Him. This was for Fr Giussani the heart of the Church. Encountering Jesus means encountering those who believe in him, the Body that the Spirit creates by assimilating to Jesus every person who entrusts themselves to Him. This is the great consolation of our belonging to the Catholic Church and our gratitude to the Lord for giving us a ‘home’ within it. It is another reason why I am so grateful for you because with you I discover again and again the joy and consolation of being a disciple, of being ‘on the way, on the path’. Even our weakness and our sin can be moments to turn once more to Him, who is the Source of our peace and our rest.

We do not walk this path alone, we discover companions along the way and in this we find hope and courage. On this evening, then, we give thanks to God for the particular gift and witness of Fr Giussani. We give thanks, too, for bringing us into this Communion and into this freedom, a communion and a freedom which is fully centred on the encounter with Jesus Christ and His presence in our lives. We commit ourselves to seeking His presence in day to day events, to hold the memory of His presence in our experience and in the experiences of those whom we love. And we give thanks too for the gift of the Church which holds before us all, this memory of Her Lord. We know that the Lord will never abandon us. To Him, at this time most especially, we entrust ourselves and His Church.

Thank you and God bless you all.

Mgr Mark O'Toole

Rector, Allen Hall Seminary