

# *Disarming Beauty*

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

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Foreword by Javier Prades

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## F O R E W O R D

*Javier Prades*

### In a Connected World

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Angola for reasons related to my work at the university. My hosts took advantage of the moments of rest to tell me about some educational and charitable works in so-called *barrios*, the dry and dusty suburbs of the city of Benguela.

For a European like me, every opportunity to travel in Africa or Latin America generates a wide range of sensations. Certainly I feel nostalgia towards the freshness of a simpler way of life, free from the adulteration of what Augusto Del Noce has called our affluent society. I also envy the simplicity of a faith rooted in everyday life, able to sustain the effort and the suffering of so many privations, so different from the tormented and problematic faith that we know well. In people, especially in children, you can perceive the echo of a joy that is not easy to recognize in European societies.

On the other hand, and with the same force, the precariousness of this life provokes a feeling of injustice. It is undeniable that without the necessary human, cultural, economic, and social resources, these forms of society, exposed to profound and rapid changes, can get lost or become further impoverished. The solidity and density of Europe's

social, cultural, and economic life—even with all its wounds—seems to demonstrate its unique strength in human history. Indeed, the fresh and moving faith of these people is quite exposed to the antihumanist currents that exert so much influence in the West and from the West, the effects of which can already be seen in their societies.

These contrasts, which strike us when we travel outside Europe, recall the distinguished thinkers that have concluded that our culture has lost its way and cannot find effective remedies to recover the path. From Glucksmann to Habermas or Manent, they draw our attention to a divided West, fighting with itself, exhausted. Perhaps that is why, in the course of the twentieth century, many Europeans have come to question the value of the fruits of the civilization into which they were born. Nonetheless, we note a desire to not lose this precious European heritage of civilization and humanity, whose richness is almost unparalleled in history, a heritage that permits us, among other things, to speak today of “the person.”

We Europeans now seem to glimpse the end of an economic crisis that has been both profound and painful for millions of our fellow citizens. On the one hand, it has brought out with particular intensity that feeling of weariness and exhaustion I mentioned, as if a deep malaise were lodged in our hearts. Secondly, the same crisis offers us the opportunity to begin again, to change, to try to improve. It is up to us to discern the situation in which we find ourselves, together with the possible solutions. What is happening to Europeans? And, especially, what is happening to European Christians? I never stop posing these questions to the churchmen, academics, and people of culture, both believers and agnostics or atheists, whom I meet. It is not easy to translate the answer into a fully determined path, but the trail map that we hear Julián Carrón propose in the first part of this book will lead us along the “interrupted paths”—in the words of Martin Heidegger—of our society.

### The European Malaise

Our starting point is that in Western society a real malaise has surfaced. What is the task that lies ahead, imposed upon us by the

episodes that strike us most painfully? It is precisely to properly interpret this malaise, which is expressed in ambiguous and often ideological ways. If we do not wish to close ourselves off from reality, we must seriously take this condition into account.

In my opinion, this malaise cannot be explained simply by the economic factors of the crisis, as serious as they have become in recent years. Think, for example, of the deep demographic crisis in Europe, with the dramatic decline in birth rates and the obvious difficulties in integrating immigrants. As known observers—from Böckenförde to Pérez Díaz—have lucidly noted, there is a moral and cultural subtext to the crisis in institutional participation we are experiencing. In addition, in order to identify the nature of the crisis we must understand it as a symptom of the ultimately infinite set of needs and evidence that constitute the common elementary experience of all people, needs and evidence whose full realization reveals man's foundational religious experience. The fact that young second- and third-generation Europeans succumb to the lure of Islamic fundamentalism should cause us to think about the lack of ideals that also touches the religious sphere.

The malaise of European society, and of European Christians, is not limited to superficial aspects, as plentiful as they are. Its roots are deep. It is a difficulty that we may describe, in the words of María Zambrano, as a crisis of “relationship with reality.” But how so? It is a sort of loss of trust in our own life experience. It shows itself in the struggle to simply recognize and embrace reality as it appears, that is, full of attraction, as a manifestation of a foundation that is within everything and to which everything refers beyond itself.<sup>1</sup>

If, on the contrary, everything is reduced to mere appearances, our relationship with the real enters into crisis. We cannot ensure that knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of the world remains a sign of the foundation, of that good mystery that—in the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas—“everyone understands to be God.”<sup>2</sup> The risk is not small, because the way we use reason and freedom, and thus our intelligence about reality, about its ultimate foundation, is undermined. When reason, freedom, and reality are questioned, there is cause for alarm in any society. In the medium and long term it is impossible—or at least far more uncertain and risky—to work, to establish bonds of affection, enjoy rest, and build a peaceful society. Thus the malaise

we are experiencing gives rise to an existential weakness in humanity as humanity.

Examples of this process of weakening can be multiplied in each of the concrete orders of elementary experience to which we have alluded: love, work, leisure. Referring to young people in particular, Fr. Giussani coined the highly descriptive term “the Chernobyl effect,” referring to an effect that threatens humanity today. He described the Chernobyl effect in these words: “It is as if today’s youth were all penetrated by . . . the radiation of Chernobyl. Structurally, the organism is as it was before, but dynamically it is no longer the same. . . . People are . . . abstracted from the relationship with themselves, as if emptied of affection [without the energy of affection to adhere to reality], like batteries that last for six minutes instead of six hours.”<sup>3</sup> Carrón uses these same words as a criterion for judgment, to understand the current situation of our pluralistic societies, precisely in formulating the question about what it means to be a Christian today (see chapter 5). The nature of this weakening process is not primarily ethical or psychological, though it also includes these factors; rather, it concerns the dynamics of knowledge and freedom in relationship to reality in its totality.

If this is so, and therefore the crisis is not only an economic, cultural, or moral one, but a fundamentally anthropological and religious one, then in order to foster coexistence and peace in Western society, it is necessary to analyze this category of issues. It is evident that what is happening in the West inevitably reflects on other cultures, and thus the road that the societies of and the Church in Europe ultimately take will also affect the rest of the world.

### The Cultural Interpretation of Faith

How have we managed to reach this weakened human condition?

In a television interview at the end of his life, Giussani responded to the famous question of T. S. Eliot, “Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?”<sup>4</sup> His response—perhaps surprising to some—was that both had happened. I believe that one

of the aims of this collection of essays by Carrón is to carefully explore the ways in which the religious experience has been proposed to contemporary people, born into a pluralistic, multicultural society, a society, to a large extent, without Christ. Let us enter the field of what we might call the cultural interpretation of the faith.

Pope John Paul II made a now-classic contribution to defining the value of dialogue between the Christian faith and pluralistic society when he stressed that “the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith. . . . A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”<sup>5</sup> This indication highlights the need of faith to be converted into culture, into a concrete way of living. Pope John Paul II does not suggest, of course, a process in which faith is diluted to the point of becoming mere culture, according to the “horizontalist” or “humanist” tendencies that prevailed at certain times after the Second Vatican Council. On the contrary, he claims that faith is capable of profoundly changing human dynamics, because it results in a concrete way of living and addresses the major issues that touch people’s lives. If this process is not accomplished, we are faced with that separation between faith and life whose deleterious effects for the Christian tradition and for a fully human civilization were denounced by Vatican II and the postconciliar magisterium. A result of this separation is the inability to communicate the faith to people of different cultures and religious traditions.

On the contrary, when there is this indispensable “cultural translation,” the faith acquires a public dimension and retains its living capacity for transmission, for building society and a new way of facing reality. We should note that this formula does not directly suggest a particular social or political profile of the faith. I am referring instead to a concrete way, born of faith, to realize human life, a way that by its nature must involve all life’s personal and social dimensions. In the process different perspectives find space, not all of equal value, but all forced to measure themselves against the original nature of the Christian event, as it has been transmitted and confirmed by apostolic succession. If you do not accept this task of discernment, Eliot’s question is destined to remain unanswered.

Cardinal Angelo Scola has offered a useful reading of two widespread interpretations of the faith in Europe, bearing in mind national differences.<sup>6</sup>

A first interpretation sees Christianity as a “civil religion,” that is, as the ethical glue capable of generating social unity in the face of the widespread problems of coexistence in society. In this interpretation, the public implementation of Christianity means the defense and promotion of ethical values that underpin an increasingly faltering society. More specifically, the deterioration of the social fabric in its aspects most directly linked to moral life—of which we have countless examples—favors identification of a public implementation of the faith with efforts to recover the social validity of those values perceived to be more and more threatened. This conception can be promoted both by practicing Christians and by agnostics or nonbelievers, who expect just such an attitude from Christians. It is not hard to argue that this position reflects the tendency to identify the faith with a universal ethics, to ensure that some rational dignity is accorded to its public presence in the West.

Then there is a second interpretation, which tends to reduce Christianity to a “pure proclamation of the cross for the salvation of the world.” On this interpretation, for example, a concern with bioethics or biopolitics would mean a distancing from the authentic message of Christ’s mercy—as if the Christian message was ahistorical and had no social, anthropological, and cosmological implications. This interpretation asserts that the strength of Christian proclamation consists in a “pure” proposal of the mystery of the cross. In contrast to the first position, this one diverts attention from the ethical aspects, whether of the individual or of society, to emphasize the paradoxical strength of a Christian message, which, from the perspective of this world, is offered covertly, secretly; thus the strength of the divine power that is manifested in weakness is emphasized. It is perhaps possible to identify in this position the background influences of certain positions—originally Protestant, but later also Catholic—that reduce the universality of reason in favor of a faith life more dominated by sentiment or emotion.

What can we say about these two cultural interpretations of the faith? Both are based on elements that are, in themselves, essential for

a full understanding of the role of Christian faith in the pluralistic society: on the one hand, the importance of the cross of Christ for salvation, on the other, the obvious ethical and cultural implications of the Christian message. Nonetheless, neither of them comprehensively expresses the true nature of Christianity and the way it should be present in society. More importantly, neither is able to adequately respond to the anthropological weakness that lies at the origin of the fatigue and confusion of our European society.

The first interpretation would reduce the Catholic faith to its secular dimension, separating it from the force that is born in the Christian as a gift of the encounter with Jesus Christ in the Church. Moreover, the attempt to provide a universal ethics while bracketing off the event of Christ, for historical reasons that all can understand, has already failed to ensure perpetual peace, as Pope Benedict XVI keenly pointed out in his judgment on the European Enlightenment. Carrón has examined this phenomenon in detail in the first part of this book.

The second interpretation deprives the faith of its incarnated and historical depth, reducing it to an inner inspiration and the expectation of a fullness in the hereafter. This “eschatological” interpretation also fails to understand the anthropological weakening process with its historical consequences, nor does it offer an answer that is adequate to the situation.

To overcome the limitations of both of these positions we need an understanding of Christianity in which the advent of Christ—irreducible to any human interpretation—is shown in its originality and its supercreaturely origin. On the other hand, we need an understanding of the reasonableness of this singular event in history, an event that transcends any measure reason is capable of imposing. Christianity claims to offer nothing less than a kind of experience that corresponds to what is human in any culture, because it springs from an event unique in history, one that opens all cultures to come face-to-face with a transcendent truth. This is one of the keys to inter-cultural and interreligious dialogue.

There is, then, a third position, which we call “the personalization of faith.” Briefly, it comes down to choosing an understanding of the Catholic faith that implies its necessary existential verification, both

on a personal and communitarian level, as a way to become a Church that is fully human within the conditions of a postsecular and post-Christian society. If I'm not mistaken, this is precisely the thread that runs through Julián Carrón's educational and cultural approach, as reflected in his presentations in very different fields, from which this book was born.

### Personalizing Faith: Existential Verification

The Christian message claims to generate an “unprecedented newness” that “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” This famous statement of Benedict XVI, taken up by Pope Francis, gives us an adequate understanding of the originality of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> If we look at the life of Christian communities, especially in the southern regions of Europe, the initial impact of the newness is apparent in many places; indeed we often come across episodes of moving conversions, sometimes with almost miraculous consequences. We must thank God for all of that. So it is not the initial impact of the Christian message that is most lacking in Europe, although it is urgent that that impact multiply exponentially according to the Lord's mandate to reach all people. What is necessary, instead, is a type of education in the faith that can preserve, renew, and transmit this unexpected newness in all the circumstances of daily life. Christian experience, even when it is received with sincerity and generosity, often does not generate a human maturity sufficiently founded on its corresponding certainties so as to be able to work and love in the present and also keep the prospect of eternal life alive. Among those aware of this were some of the most acute observers of European Christianity, such as Newman in the nineteenth century and Guardini, Schlier, or Giussani in the last century, to cite the figures I am most aware of.

The anthropological weakness of Christians thus points to a weakness in the way we live and transmit the faith, one we could define as a “lack of verification” of the faith within Christian education. Faith is “verification” when it shows its ability to illuminate and bring to fullness the typically human dynamics of reason, affection, and

freedom, and so increases the existential certainty essential to an adult in all of life's circumstances. In the other, opposite sense of "verification," faith "cannot cheat because it is tied to your experience in some way; essentially, it is summoned to appear in a court where you, through your experience, are the judge,"<sup>8</sup> to echo Giussani's bold expression taken up by Carrón in this book (on experience verifying faith, see chapter 6). If we skip this verification, we simply assume that faith is a rational and free adherence to the event of God in history, and the Church's action slips into the generous practice of its social, political, cultural, or charitable consequences, but does not effectively and profoundly form the Christian adult.<sup>9</sup>

If we wish to follow the indications of the magisterium and to consider the profound interconnection between faith, religion, and culture, the most serious methodological issue is that of the "personalization of faith," which is necessary in order to bring forth persons and communities capable of regenerating the Christian community. So we must more deeply understand the "circularity" between elementary human experience and faith.<sup>10</sup> On one hand, the encounter with Christ awakens our relationship with reality in its original breadth; on the other hand, the vitality of human experience—including its fundamental questions about love, pain, death, and beauty, and its search for the meaning of life—protects it from a formalistic and ultimately rigid expression of faith itself. These are the decisive factors needed to accompany and address, over time and with the necessary patience, the human fragility of so many Church members. From a standpoint of method, this implies the art of knowing how to recognize the expressions of the quest for meaning reflected in many questions, frustrations, searches, and efforts of our contemporaries in the postsecular culture, thanks to the light that comes from the truth freely manifested in Jesus.

Only a faith subject to verification can address the root of the West's crisis, which strikes at our relationship with reality not in generic terms but in the concreteness of human life's basic dimensions, as the "Chernobyl effect" demonstrates. Let us return to this question of method, because its importance is crucial for achieving the sought-after goal of a faith that is neither formalistic nor spiritualistic, but

which perfects what is human. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for Christian education to have an effective impact on the understanding and maturing of each person's elementary experience, so that that experience, in turn, gives life to the believer's human position. Thus faith will, according to the famous gospel parable, show its value for every person "one hundredfold."

In this process, how we refer back to the elementary experience that is at the heart of the understanding of the religious sense is crucial. In fact, we can directly identify it in its formal characteristics, so to speak, abstracted from any concrete content, or we can describe a given situation or a particular action and recognize the elementary experience by its formal features and by the criteria for acting that result from it. In my opinion, the genius of education lies in not allowing these levels of understanding of the human experience to be separated. The irresistible force of an educational position emerges when one takes into account all the factors. It is not enough to accumulate examples, placing each of them in the category of "experience," as if this makes education more concrete. If you do not get to the "why," that is, a judgment in formal—universal—terms, the path is culturally less fruitful.

On the other hand, the criterion of judgment is not reached by deduction, but by starting from the description of concrete lived experience. So a good teacher is not one who simply repeats formulas, even excellent ones.

### A "Culture of Encounter"

The primary task of the Church, from the dusty *barrios* of Angola to the corridors and classrooms of our European universities, from attending to those most affected by the crisis to participating in the daily lives of friends and families, is what I described briefly as personalization of faith. Only a lively adult, one whose experience is enhanced and transformed by the encounter with Christ, will be able to dialogue with others, whatever their cultural or religious position, within a pluralistic society.

Our world “asks Christians to be willing to seek forms or ways to communicate in a comprehensible language the perennial newness of Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> These words of Pope Francis in his beautiful message to the Rimini Meeting of 2014 continue to show us the way. In a society so marked by change as to be defined by Bauman as a “liquid society,” we need adults who can communicate the radical novelty of Christianity, without being paralyzed by changes in forms that might have been useful in the past. Francis’s message can be a contemporary echo of the words of Saint Paul commented on by Josef Zvěřina. “Do not conform! *Me syschematizesthe!* How well this expression reveals the perennial root of the verb: schema. In a nutshell, all schemas, all exterior models are empty. We have to want more, the apostle makes it our duty, ‘change your way of thinking, reshape your minds’—*metamorfoÿsthe tē anakainōsei tou̅ no̅s*. Paul’s Greek is so expressive and concrete! He opposes *schēma* or *morphē*—permanent form, to *metamorphē*—change in the creature. One is not to change according to any model that in any case is always out of fashion, but it is a total newness with all its wealth (*anakainōsei*).”<sup>12</sup> Only then can the “culture of encounter” to which the pope tenaciously invites us spread. Dialogue then becomes an exciting opportunity for critical reception of the truth present in every human experience and of passionately communicating one’s own experience, transformed by the newness of the Christian fact. It is a fundamental issue that is before—or beyond—the wearisome debates between liberalism and conservatism.

### “Disarming Beauty”

In the light of the analysis that Carrón offers in the first part of the book, you will better understand the range of proposals for a cultural and educational work appropriate to the crisis in which we are living in Europe. Carrón shows us the path he has taken in recent years, starting from his numerous talks in university, cultural, media, social, and business venues, almost as a type of program for the moment we are living in. Often his reflections are the result of an open dialogue with stakeholders from different backgrounds and cultural

sensitivities, without any other weapon than the “disarming” beauty of the mystery of Christ. He offers us some examples of his passionate quest to glimpse the basic outlines of elementary experience within all the spheres of human life, illuminated by the Christian event.

His concern to propose to us criteria for judgment, and thus for action, within the different dimensions of life—education, family, social and charitable works, and even politics—puts in our hands a very valuable tool for understanding and loving our European society on the basis of a positive hypothesis that makes us protagonists of the era in which we live, and therefore open to the realities of all continents. We will be protagonists only if along the path of our actions we mature because we understand what we are living.

I hope this book will provoke in readers the same gratitude and the same desire to encounter the author that it inspired in me.

*Madrid, July 15, 2015*