

# THE CHOICE OF ABRAHAM AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT

Notes from the dialogue between Julián Carrón,  
Joseph H.H. Weiler, and Monica Maggioni  
at the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples.  
Rimini, August 24, 2015.

Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, (1602-1603), detail. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

The images of these pages are drawn from the exhibit of the Meeting of Rimini: "Abraham: The birth of the 'I.'"

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**MONICA MAGGIONI.** Good evening everyone. I think all of us feel a bit of emotion this evening, because we are trying to look together at a complex topic: a title like “The choice of Abraham and the challenges of the present.” Above all, we are trying to do it in a particular way, a way that started with a conversation among three friends who have decided to accept a truly great challenge: to overturn a way of story-telling, while staying centered on the things that are said, thought and felt. So then, let’s try to travel this road together, and so, let’s begin to tell the story.

**ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE “I”**

**First voice.** “The Lord said to Abraham: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you’” (Gen 12:1-3).

**Second voice.** “Here, what leaps out at you is that the most realistic project for the life of Abraham is not his own, but the project of an Other. And if you accept this in its initial manifestation, you then have to verify it over time. Thus Abraham will experience familiarity with that Presence that bowled him over and dragged him far from home in the episode by the terebinth of Mamre (Gen 18) in which the mysterious Being will be his guest, to be fed and served under the shade of the tree “while the day was growing hot” (L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Bur, Milano 2007, p. 24).

**Third voice.** “The idea was that a human being should become real before it can expect to receive some message from the superhuman; that is, it must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask, veil or persona.” “How can they (i.e. the gods) meet us face to face till we have faces?” (C.S. Lewis, *Letter to Dorothea Conybeare*. Quoted in *Letters to a Sister*, by Rose Macaulay, edited by Constance Babbington Smith, Collins, London 1964, p. 261).

**MAGGIONI.** We have heard the words from Genesis, Fr. Giussani and Lewis. Joseph Weiler, let’s start from there, from this Abraham in relationship with the birth of the “I.”

**JOSEPH H.H. WEILER.** For me, the event of Abram, or Abraham, is a revolution, or rather, three revolutions. I’ll start with the first. I do not agree, Fr. Carrón, that this was the first time God intervened in history. There was the flood, and God spoke to Adam. He spoke to Cain, and told him, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil!” And He speaks to us. God had already spoken. But the first revolution in Abraham was in the nature of the conversation between God and man. For me the key word is *Covenant*. God *offers*—does not *impose*—a Covenant to Abraham. It is the first Covenant. Why do I insist that the Covenant is so important? Because in a Covenant there are two parties, and both are sovereign. “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house” is not a command. It is a proposal. “I propose that you go forth, I propose a promised land: but it is up

to you to decide.” It is this nature of the Covenant which makes the other responsible, in which the other must assume his responsibility, it is not obedience: it is the acceptance of a man created in the image and likeness of God, who also has the opportunity to say “no” to God. In fact, when God says to Abraham: “Go forth from your land” He anxiously awaits to see how Abraham will respond. This is the first revolution: not the fact of speaking to man, but the nature

of the conversation between two sovereign parties.

**MAGGIONI.** So this is already a step further.

**JULIÁN CARRÓN.** Precisely this “I” capable of answering is what emerges for the first time with Abraham, because the relationship of familiarity that God had begun with human beings, in creating them, was interrupted: they no longer accepted the relationship with their Creator. At a certain point, God wanted to enter anew into relationship with those beings who had distanced themselves from Him. Well aware, so to speak, of the need for an acknowledged and lived relationship with Him for the full actualization of the human person, God took an unexpected initiative: He wanted to intervene again, entering into history and calling a man, Abraham, to reawaken his “I,”

**“God took an unexpected initiative, calling a man to reawaken his ‘I,’ to cause him to be born.”**



Marc Chagall, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1960-1966, detail. Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.

in a certain sense to cause him to be born. In fact, the proposal of the Covenant is what raised up an “I” able to respond to God, conscious of its own irreducible uniqueness and of its own task in history; it is the question of a You who generates an “I” as one who is able to respond. This is what is stunning in the story of Abraham; as Professor Giorgio Buccellati said, for the Mesopotamians it was impossible to speak informally to Fate, to Destiny. To see that the substance of the “I” is a relationship with a you, as we learn from the story of the Covenant, we need only observe our own elementary human experience; it is not necessary to imagine what happened in the time of Abraham. This expression of an Italian singer expresses it well: “I do not exist when you are not here, and I remain alone with my thoughts” (*Vorrei*, words and music by F. Guccini). Without a you life is diminished and everything becomes predictable. Without Covenant, without dialogue with that You, deep down there is no longer anything unexpected, we find ourselves stuck in the predictable, as happened before with the Mesopotamians and then the Greeks. So then, we have to settle, as Aeschylus said, “No mortal should stir up thoughts that exceed his mortal condition.” Instead, in calling Abraham, God causes all his human desire to emerge so that he can accept the proposal of the Covenant, perceiving from the beginning how humanly worthwhile it is. This is not primarily a question of ethics: it concerns

the very nature of the “I.” Without that You, without that Alliance, the “I” is not really “I.”

**WEILER.** I agree. And I think that the Promised Land should also be interpreted this way. It is not just a territory: the “Promised Land” is another type of life, another type of responsibility, another type of relationship between human beings and human beings, and between human beings and God. Shall we go on to the two other revolutions?

**MAGGIONI.** Certainly! Also because they are the revolutions that this figure of Abraham represents: it is the image of the rupture of the relationship. Certainly, from there begins another type of itinerary. You see it in the exhibit; you understand it reading the texts.

**WEILER.** As Carrón said, the protagonist of the first revolution is not Abraham, it is God, who offers a relationship almost of parity. “I invite you!” As John Paul II said, “He proposes, He doesn’t impose.” But here are the other revolutions. God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. I’ll read: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do now that he is to become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth are to find blessing in him? Indeed, I have singled him out >>>

Marc Chagall, *The Prophet Isaiah*, 1968, detail. Private collection.



» that he may direct his sons and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord may carry into effect for Abraham the promised He made about him” (*Gen 18:17-19*). It is a revolutionary proposal because up to this point God has not instructed Abraham, has not given him the law, has not taught him morality. Morality, the ethical sensibility, is rooted in reason, which is part of human nature. This is revolutionary: four thousand years before Immanuel Kant, one finds an interiority that has the ethical sensibility to act with justice before receiving any instruction, even from God. It is something that is part of the human being. This is the second revolution. The third is Abraham’s. God says, “I’m going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.” And Abraham does not reply, “Yes, Lord.” Abraham asks, “How is this possible? And if there were just fifty innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah? It is possible that you, God, the judge of the whole earth, will fail to act with justice, destroying the innocent with the guilty....” Why is this revolutionary? Because up to this point, if God said something, it meant that in and of itself it was just. Instead, here is the Copernican revolution of justice: “If it is not just, it cannot be of God.” This never happened before in our civilization.

**CARRÓN.** Why does something that had never happened

before happen now for the first time? This is the question to be answered. This newness happens as the consequence of a historic event, of the entrance of the Mystery into history, as I mentioned before. Man, in his constitutive structure, existed before Abraham; but, as Fr. Giussani says, that which is in man as structure, in power, emerges and is actuated only in relationship to a provocation. Thus, an adequate provocation was needed for all the thirst for justice that was in the man Abraham to come to the surface, and for him to converse with God, asking His explanation for His actions. What was needed first of all was for that capacity of the “I” that belongs, as potential, to the human structure, to emerge in its entirety. But for this purpose, a you was needed, the intervention of that You. As we see in the experience of a child, who needs a you—that of a mother—to waken its self-awareness. Without you there is no “I.”

**WEILER.** I have this idea. I imagine that before saying, “Abraham, I am about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah,” God had decided to put him to the test. God waited and thought, “Let’s see what Abraham will say, whether he accepts, and says, ‘Yes, yes. You spoke well: do it!’” Instead, Abraham was audacious, and rebutted, “How is it possible that You, God, the judge of the whole earth, do not Yourself act with justice?” Well, at this point, in my flight of fancy,

God smiles and says, “Ah, this is what I wanted, this is what I wanted!”

**CARRÓN.** I am amazed in observing what kind of human being emerges through God’s intervention. In the dialogue of the Covenant between the You of God and Abraham’s “I,” we see all the power of his desire unleashed, and thus a certain kind of man who emerges, with the progression of the history that is born with Abraham. The fact that the psalmist can say, “O God, You are my God, for You I long; for You my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water” (*Psalm 63:2*) makes us understand what a provocation Abraham must have received for that thirst to be awakened. To be able to say “I” with this awareness of the relationship that grounds it, to be reawakened to this point human nature must find itself in front of an adequate provocation.

**WEILER.** I absolutely agree.

### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “I”

**MAGGIONI.** So, this is the provocation: it is the emergence of this awareness of the “I.” However, as Carrón said, this awareness is not “forever.” It is not a result that, once obtained, has a reality from which one cannot distance oneself. It is a reality in continual becoming, to be reconstructed in every instant...

**CARRÓN.** At a certain point, Isaiah said, “Your name and Your title are the desire of our souls” (*Is 26:8*). What kind of attraction must man have experienced in front of that Presence, to be able to say, “You are the desire of our souls!”

**MAGGIONI.** However... You say, “What attraction...!” But at times it seems that we do not sense that attraction, we do not see it, we are no longer able to grasp it. It is the moment in which we have the sensation of the disappearance of the “I.”

**First voice.** “It used to be that people became adults very early.... [Today there is a continual rush toward immaturity. It used to be] that at all costs, a young man became mature.... [Today, young people] do not know who they are.... They prefer to remain passive.... They live wrapped up in a mysterious torpor. They do not love time. Their only time is a series of instants that are not linked in a chain or organized in a history” (P. Citati, “Questa generazione che non vuol crescere mai,” [“This generation never wants to grow up”], *la Re-*

*pubblica*, August 2, 1999, p. 1).

**Second voice.** “The wound was boredom, invincible boredom, existential boredom that killed time and history, passions and hopes. I do not see sweetness in their eyes.... I see eyes that are stunned, entranced, stupefied, evasive, avid without desire, greedy without greed, solitary in the midst of the crowd that contains them. I see desperate eyes... eternal children... a desperate generation... that advances.... They try to escape from that void of plastic that surrounds and suffocates them. Their salvation lies only in their hearts. We can only look at them with love and trepidation” (E. Scalfari, “Quel vuoto di plastica che soffoca i giovani,” [“That void of plastic that suffocates young people”], *la Repubblica*, August 5, 1999, p. 1).

“Who could have imagined that the long parabola that, from Humanism and the Renaissance—born with the intention of affirming the human—has led us here, would have resulted in this lethargy and existential boredom?” (J. Carrón, Madrid, November 19, 2010).

**“The first revolution was in the nature of the conversation between God and man. God offers—does not impose—a Covenant.”**

**Third voice.** “All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope” (R.M. Rilke, “The Duino Elegies, II,” in *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, Vintage International, translated by Stephen Mitchell, 2009, p. 13).

**MAGGIONI.** Two contemporary intellectuals, Citati and Scalfari, and a great poet, Rilke, and the sense of comparing that construction of God, with which we started, to *this* moment, in which we sense the dissolution of that unity around which we were moving...

**WEILER.** I am a Law professor. I teach in the United States, Europe, and Asia. It seems to me that everywhere there is a common approach. The young people who come to my lessons in constitutional law are obsessed with the word *rights*: “the rights of man,” “fundamental rights,” “where are our rights?”...For goodness sake, I surely would not like to live in a society that did not respect the rights of man, the fundamental rights, equality. But there is a word that I never hear: *responsibility*. Duties. Nobody, instead of asking me, “Professor, what are our fundamental rights?” asks, “What are our fundamental duties? And where is our responsibility?” instead of shifting onto others our responsibility for what happens. “It is terrible”, they say. It is always someone else’s responsibility. This is the reduction of the “I,” the anti-Abrahamic message. He is a person who took responsibility for his actions, for his existence, for what happened around him. If we talk about reduction, if I >>

» think of Rilke, of Scalfari, it is precisely this key word: not *rights* but *responsibilities*, duties.

**CARRÓN.** The words of Citati, of Scalfari and of Rilke, if we were paying attention, describe well the disappearance of the “I.” But, if the dimensions of the “I” are originally rooted in human nature, how can they disappear over the course of history? How is it that we have gone from the desire to become more of a protagonist, with which Humanism began, to this torpor, this boredom? I find these words of Hannah Arendt very striking: “Modern man did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either.... It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958). It is a striking line, because it forces us to look at our position again: we think that the story of Abraham is only for the pious, the devout, that it alludes to an ethical question, that the relationship with a you—with that You—is not so necessary for saying “I” with all one’s capacity for response, responsibility, awareness. And instead we see that as soon as this relationship fades, we fall into torpor and boredom. In fact, at a certain moment, the Mystery, who entered into history with Abraham, was perceived by man as something contrary or hostile to himself, and the consequence of this attitude was the disappearance of the “I.” It is significant that certain artistic expressions—I’m thinking of film—seem to return practically to what the ancient and Greco-Roman world was, before the call of Abraham and the coming of Christ. I think of the line in Ingmar Bergman’s film, *Fanny and Alexander* (1982): “We Ekdahls have not come into the world to see through it. We are not equipped for such excursions.... We must live in the little world. We will be content with that and cultivate it and make the best of it.... So shall it be. [The predictable returns] Therefore let us be happy while we are happy. Let us be kind, generous, affectionate and good. It is necessary and not at all shameful to take pleasure in the little world [In what does life consist?]. Good food... gentle smiles... fruit trees in blossom, waltzes....” This is what the “I” has become, since the fading of the awareness of that constitutive relationship, which for us today is mostly reduced to a sort of spirituality, ethics, religious fable for visionaries. We pay the price for this disappearance in our torpor, our settling for less: lacking the provocation, we do not feel a surge of desire to respond, the wellspring of all the power, the creative

capacity of the “I.”

**WEILER.** I agree, but I would like to add a caveat. I am religious, but we mustn’t think that we religious have the truth and the secular, because of the lack of God in their lives, are condemned to a reduction of the “I.” This reduction can also happen in the religious person.

**CARRÓN.** Nietzsche had foreseen this. Announcing the “death of God,” he did not think that religion was finished, but that a certain type of religion would remain, one incapable of reawakening the “I.”

**WEILER.** Secular atheists can have a full life, their promised land, and can shoulder their responsibility. Here the danger is pride, *hubris*. You know the saying that I like most out of all the prophets: “You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (*Micah* 6:8). So, remember, *humbly*.

**MAGGIONI.** It was no coincidence, I believe, that the three readings we began with were not from religious men; did not arrive from a strictly religious dimension...

**“We see that as soon as this relationship fades, we fall into torpor and boredom.”**

**CARRÓN.** As we see, we religious people are not the only ones who say these things; they are the observation of what is happening. I am always amazed how well Giussani identified the drama of our times, what you, Joseph, called “lack of responsibility”: it is the disappearance of something, of the “motility” of the “I” as he says. It is not so much a problem of ethical weakness: “I would like to point out a difference between the generations of young people today and those of young people I encountered thirty years ago. It seems that the difference lies in a greater weakness of awareness one has now; a weakness not of ethics but of energy of awareness” (L. Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987 [The “I” Is Reborn in an Encounter]*, Bur, Milano 2010, p. 181). It is not that young people today are more lazy or less lazy, not that they make more or fewer mistakes: we always make the same mistakes. The question is that the capacity to adhere to something different from oneself has disappeared. In order to adhere, there must be a sufficient attraction, one able to move the “I.” The relationship—the you—is not secondary or incidental, but is a constitutive part of the definition of the “I”: “I am nothing when you are not present.” This is the crucial relationship.

**WEILER.** If we have two minutes, I would like to ask Carrón a question. I think many people share it but maybe are



Marc Chagall, *Abraham and the Three Angels*, 1960-1966. Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.

afraid to ask it. It concerns the famous story of Abraham and Isaac. God calls Isaac and says, “Take your son.” In the midrash Abraham responds, “I have two.” “Your unique son.” And he says, “They both are unique.” “The son you love.” “I love both...” “Take Isaac and go kill him!” And Abraham does not even say, “Yes Lord.” Wordless, he sets out on the journey. One can think, isn’t it a bit like these fundamentalists today, who in the name of God are ready to commit tremendous crimes? How do we respond to this challenge of Abraham?

**CARRÓN.** This is a challenge to which we must respond, because it is a crucial question: what can move a person to take an invitation like that seriously? What must Abraham have seen and experienced? How must that Presence have been so interwoven with his “I” that he could even take into consideration such a command? How can a man respond to a provocation of the kind? In the Covenant that God establishes with Abraham there is the beginning of a story that moves forward, evolves, that takes steps and progresses. God began from what was there, from the “I,” just as it was at the beginning, with all its difficulties and all its limits, proposing a Covenant to bind him to Himself. The stories in the Bible are full of the limitations of man; there is no mythologizing about man because real man is awakened by a You. Accepting this challenge, which at first sight seems

unreasonable, Abraham finally discovered the true face of his God, who did not want the death of Isaac, but desired to bind Abraham to Himself, because precisely when man breaks off this relationship, we have this torpor, invincible boredom, and void that is not innocuous, as we see.

*Video of images from the RaiNews24 reportage on the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices and the Hyper Cacher supermarket in Paris on January 7, 2015.*

## THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

**MAGGIONI.** We do not want to reduce this piece of the present, this piece of history, this contemporary challenge to the question of “the void of the ‘I,’” but this question is there within, as is the question of responsibility spoken of before. So then, in those days after the massacres of Paris, in the days that threw before our eyes the emergency we are living, Julián Carrón wrote to the Italian daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*:

*“Dear Editor, Since the events in Paris happened, there has been a great deal of discussion; nobody has been spared a sense of bewilderment or fear. The numerous analyses offered have brought forth interesting points for reflecting on and understanding such a complex phenomenon. But a month later, now that the routine of daily life has taken over >>>*

Marc Chagall, *Circumcision Prescribed by God to Abraham*, 1931, detail. Nice, Musée national Marc Chagall.



» again, what remains? What can keep these disturbing events from rapidly being erased from our memory? To help us remember, it is necessary to discover the true nature of the challenge posed by the Paris attacks.”

The nature of the challenge, certainly. But Carrón’s analysis did not stop “there.”

“For this reason, the problem is primarily within Europe, and the most important part is played here at home. The true challenge is cultural, its terrain is daily life. When those who abandon their homelands arrive here in search of a better life, when their children are born and become adults in the West, what do they see? Can they find something able to attract their humanity, to challenge their reason and their freedom? The same problem exists for our children: do we have something to offer them that speaks to their search for fulfilment and meaning? In many young people who have grown up in the so-called Western world there reigns a great nothingness, a profound void that constitutes the origin of the desperation that ends up in violence.” (J. Carrón, “La sfida del vero dialogo dopo gli attentati di Parigi” [“The Challenge of True Dialogue After the Attacks in Paris”], *Corriere della Sera*, February, 13, 2015, p.27. English translation available at <http://english.clonline.org/>).

Julián, in those days one of the most successful tactics of those who always want to distance themselves from the

problem was to say that that story has nothing to do with us, that it was the emblem of an “us” and a “them,” of a distance, of something that precisely because it is *other than us* becomes this way. In writing this letter to the Editor, you tragically, painfully, brought that piece of history inside *our* camp, inside *our* experience.

**CARRÓN.** Because that is the way it is. It is something we have in our own home. I am not referring just to those who arrive from other countries, but to our children too, our friends, teachers with their students. The question of Abraham is interesting precisely because it poses the same problem: is there something able to reawaken the “I” and to offer an adequate response to that desire of fulfilment that we all have? If this does not happen, what dominates is the void. You cannot respond to this void with ideological opposition; it is unable to attract the “I,” to awaken it. Rather, it generates even more violence and conflict. Through our history, in Europe we have learned that there is no relationship with truth except through freedom. Therefore, now that we are witnessing a continual flow of people from different cultures and religions, different lifestyles and expressions, do we want to co-exist with them? What is needed for this to happen? What do we need, in our luggage, to be able to respond to the challenge

that is in our home? This is the emergency of education that concerns all of us. Is there something that can adequately attract, that can challenge a person of a different culture who reaches our shores? Can we offer something that is more interesting than violence? That is more interesting than torpor and boredom? Do we have something to propose to the new generations? As we were saying, the problem is first of all not one of ethics, and is not resolved with an appeal to morality; it is an existential, fundamental problem resolved only if man finds something that corresponds to his constitutive needs, that makes him want to get involved, to build and live in peace. Yesterday we listened to Fr. Ibrahim tell about a Muslim who went to the well of the Franciscan convent and said, “Father, to see how the people come to draw water, with big smiles, with great peace in their hearts, without fighting, without raising their voices, I who have been all over Aleppo and see what they do, how they kill each other to draw water from the wells, I am amazed: you are different, full of peace, of joy.” The question then, is whether there is something that we can point out in the reality—whatever its origin may be—that can offer a positive contribution to the situation in which we find ourselves, that we see increasingly often. This is the challenge of education.

**WEILER.** Here I would like to challenge you a bit.

**CARRÓN.** I’m willing, otherwise I’ll get bored!

**MAGGIONI.** This is what we were waiting for...

**WEILER.** Here, notwithstanding our defects, we have a culture of tolerance. We have a Meeting with a specific orientation, but that is not afraid to invite a Jew with a different point of view.

**CARRÓN.** Absolutely, yes.

**WEILER.** We have a democracy, even if it is not perfect—democracy is never perfect, but imperfect democracy is better than any other system. We have a continual search for justice; we never reach it, but we seek justice. We also have a rich culture. We have so much to offer. Even accepting the fact that there is a void in current life, our world is nonetheless civil and rich. It is important; we have to insist on this. I would also like to avoid the temptation to say that this void in life explains a certain behaviour. It may explain it, but it doesn’t justify it, because the person is responsible for his actions.

**CARRÓN.** This is the issue: how does this treasure we have accumulated over the course of history, and which you

have described very well, endure? Because, as Goethe said, “What from your father you’ve inherited, you must earn again, to own it straight” (cf. *Faust*, vv. 682–683, A. S. Kline, 2003). As Benedict XVI said, only if every generation engages anew in a process of education can they “build on the knowledge and experience of those who went before,” “draw upon the moral treasury of the whole of humanity” (cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, 24–25). This is truly the great companionship we give each other. How can we transmit that richness we call “tradition” in an attractive way, and not end up destroying everything, disregarding the value of the effort the generations before us have made to reach this point? How can we propose it in such an attractive way that our contemporaries will discover it as a good for themselves and need not always destroy it and start again?

This is the challenge.



**MAGGIONI.** You say that the greatest emergency of all is education. We have chosen that photo of Sebastião Salgado that is part of the magnificent series of *Genesis*. Looking at it, looking at those penguins, I see something that is both very beautiful and very ugly. I read the power of education, the model to follow, the thing that brings you toward your inclination, but I also read the mainstream. None of them decides to jump in at a different point,

none of them engages its own “I” and says “I’m going to jump in over there.” We live in an era in which “penguinism,” seems very strong: it is a factor that is found in our constructs of story-telling, our constructs of thought, and of man. And so it is here that it becomes a challenge of education. Professor Weiler...

**WEILER.** Well, two minutes ago I said we have so much to offer. Democracy, fundamental rights, tolerance, etc. But we also have to be honest because I have always held that our Western civilization has two foundations: on the one hand, Athens, the Enlightenment, neo-Kantianism, rights, etc., and on the other hand, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today we all know—you can’t travel around Italy without seeing it—that this is an integral part of our civilization. “Saint Jürgen Habermas” himself admitted that in order to truly speak about fundamental rights, the roots of the Christian tradition are fundamental. However, this fact >>

» is denied. We all remember the ugly matter of the European Constitution: it was impossible to even mention the fact that together with the Enlightenment, Christianity formed part of the roots of European tradition. So then, in response to your question about how can we do this I would say, we have learned one thing, that we cannot impose this tradition!

**CARRÓN.** Because we have learned that the one relationship with truth is that which passes through freedom.

**WEILER.** Right! So then, the response is testimony, living a life that is an integral part of what we have to offer others, and ourselves. This is more than attractive, it is *compelling*. You cannot live without it. But it is possible only through example, through testimony.

**CARRÓN.** But precisely this is the challenge because, in the words of our friend Antonio Polito, with whom I presented the book on education, “our society is aged in its hopes and expectations” (A. Polito, *Contro i papà* [Against the Fathers], Rizzoli, Milan 2012, p. 144). Or, as Fr. Giussani said, “to all these generations of men, nothing has been proposed.” What was missing was precisely this testimony. Fr. Giussani goes on to say that many are only concerned about proposing “the assurance of a comfortable life, a life without risks” (*L’avvenimento cristiano* [The Christian Event], Bur, Milan 2003, p. 126), sparing their children the toil needed to make their own what their parents have achieved: we want to spare them this, but in doing so we help them dig their own grave.

**WEILER.** Excuse me, I can’t help saying that eleven years ago I came here with my family and today the Meeting is very special for me, because one of my daughters is here today, who was 10 years old back then and is now 21. She’s that blond girl with her hair dyed purple (the colour of the Florence football team): very significant after yesterday’s match for you Milan fans, don’t you think?

### **FROM WHENCE CAN WE START AGAIN?**

**MAGGIONI.** Yes, there is the story of all us here... But the problem at this point is clear. We started with Abraham, and have seen the system enter into a crisis, and thus now the question is, from whence do we start again? Among the many, many important things Benedict XVI reminded us, one is “Good structures help [and I personally believe very much that good structures help: they are fundamental, we

cannot do without them], but of themselves they are not enough. Man can never be redeemed simply from the outside.” (*Spe Salvi*, 25). So then, I would like to propose a final provocation: from whence can we begin again?

**First voice.** “A crisis forces us to return to the questions; it demands of us new or old answers, as long as they flow from a direct examination; it becomes a catastrophe only when we try to face it with preconceived judgements, that is, prejudices, thus aggravating the crisis and worse yet, giving up on living the experience of reality, using the opportunity to reflect, that the crisis itself constitutes” (translated from the Italian translation of H. Arendt, *Tra Passato e Futuro* [Between Past and Future], Garzanti, Milano 1991, p. 229).

**Second voice.** “The solution is a battle to save—not the battle to stop the shrewdness of civilization, but the battle to rediscover, to testify, man’s dependence on God.... The greatest danger today is... the attempt by the reigning power to destroy the human. [our true resource]. And the essence of the human is freedom, i.e., the relationship with the infinite. Therefore, it is mainly in the West that the great battle must be fought by the man who feels himself to be a man: the battle between authentic religiosity and power. The limit of power is true religiosity—the limit of any power: civil, political, and ecclesiastic.” (L. Giussani, “Christ: All We Have,” *Traces*, n. 2, vol. 4, 2002, p. V).

**Third voice.** “Gladness is the reverberation of the certainty of happiness, of the Eternal, and it comes from certainty and the will to journey [a certainty that sets us on the road], awareness of the journey one is making.... Being glad is the indispensable condition for generating a different world, a different humanity... gladness is like a cactus flower, that in a plant of thorns generates something beautiful” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell’uomo 1990-1991* [A Real Event in the Life of Man], Bur, Milano 2013, pp. 240-241).

**MAGGIONI.** “Beauty is what will save us,” says Pope Francis. Beauty, gladness, the overcoming of the crisis, in the words of Hannah Arendt, as we heard at the beginning.

**Violin** (J.S. Bach, Adagio from *Sonata n.1 in E minor* for solo violin BWV 1001).

**WEILER.** One needs a minute to recover, because...

**CARRÓN.** Exactly, it is precisely from here that one begins again! From this moment in which one is grasped again, because there is something in reality that attracts him more

**“The response is testimony, living a life that is an integral part of what we have to offer.”**



Marc Chagall, *The Tree of Jesse*, 1975, detail. Private collection.

than everything that is lacking, all the limits he has, all the *tumult* in which he is immersed. There is a moment, before something like this music, before beauty, in which the “I” begins again. Nothing is needed. It just has to happen.

**WEILER.** The “*spirto gentil*”?

**CARRÓN.** Exactly, the *spirto gentil*.

**WEILER.** These words of Giussani’s merit re-reading: “Therefore, it is mainly in the West that the great battle must be fought by the man who feels himself to be a man: the battle between authentic religiosity and power. The limit of power is true religiosity—the limit of any power: civil, political, and ecclesiastic.” An important message. From whence can one begin again? From the beauty of this self-critical spirit, ready to limit himself. And maybe one can re-visit God’s “Go forth” to Abraham. “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.” We have not yet spoken about the *personality* of Abraham. This initiative requires courage, determination. Throwing everything behind you, throwing away what is comforting, comfortable, and all with the ideal of a Promised Land, of beginning a new journey. This message is also part of the answer to the question about from whence to start again: with courage!

**CARRÓN.** In his message to the Meeting, Pope Francis seized on “the” question: “In the face of the [strange anaes-

thesia], our numbness in life, how can one’s conscience be awakened again?” (*Message for the 36<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Rimini*, 20-26 August 2015). How can the “I” be reawakened? This is the crucial question with which all the visions, all the proposals, all the institutions, all, all, must come to grips. Only those who have an answer to this question can give a real contribution to facing that disappearance of the “I” that we are witnessing. This is an opportunity for everyone. I was struck that in 1992, in a terrible situation, Fr. Giussani said, “And yet, paradoxically, cutting across all the positions, there are people who instead have a rare sensibility, one difficult to find. It is a fact that happens rarely and cuts across positions. We hope that these people can give what they have. Then it would be possible to buffer, to limit the damage....Who knows whether this desire to make one’s children’s lives less difficult... breaks through... the horizon.” That is, whether those who have this desire to help their children or fellow travellers understand that, to be able to do so, they need to propose an ideal, a hope. “When I spoke about this quality of cutting across, I was thinking above all of certain Jews and Muslims who seem closer to what we said before, to the sensibility that can break through the horizon” (L. Giussani, *L’avvenimento cristiano*, op. cit., pp. 125-127). Every person who possesses this rare sensibility, no matter what its origin, no matter where it comes from, has the opportunity to give a contribution. It is an opportunity for us Christians as well, to give the testimony of a changed life. This is the fascination of the present moment. I am amazed that the Pope, instead >>

» of complaining about the situation, as often happens, still affirms: “For the Church, this opens up a fascinating journey, as was the case at the beginning of Christianity [stripped of everything, as it was at the beginning of Christianity], when people kept themselves busy in a life without the courage, strength, or seriousness to ask decisive questions” (Francis, *Message for the 36<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Rimini*, 20-26 August 2015). It is a road for reawakening the human “I.” What is the road, what is the modality with which the person discovers her truth, the truth of herself? Fr. Giussani, again, is masterful: “The human person recognizes the truth of herself through the experience of beauty, through the experience of gusto, through the experience of correspondence, through the experience of attraction that it [the truth one encounters] evokes, a total attraction and correspondence, not total quantitatively, but total qualitatively! ... The beauty of the truth is what makes me say: ‘It’s the truth!’” (*Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things]*, Bur, Milano 2007, pp. 219-220); the attraction it generates, inasmuch as it attracts me, is what makes me say this. Therefore the person, the “I,” finds himself again in an encounter with beauty incarnate in a witness. Testimony is the only way to serve the truth, a way that is at the same time respectful of the freedom of the other and of the possibility of proposal; a proposal that is not a theory, a lesson, but what Fr. Giussani called a working hypothesis incarnate in someone. Therefore he identified the true challenge in saying that what is missing is not the verbal or cultural repetition of the announcement. In fact, he insisted on the fact that people today expect, even unconsciously, to find on their road people whose lives are changed (cf. *L’avvenimento cristiano*, op. cit., pp. 23-24) by the encounter with Christ or with their own religious form. We are all awaiting this adequate provocation that causes the potential of the “I” to emerge. The important thing is for this provocation to be seen in the gladness of one’s face, because “being glad is the indispensable condition for generating... a different humanity” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell’uomo. 1990-1991 [A Real Event in the Life of Man]*, Bur, Milano 2013, p. 240). Inviting Christians to nourish the desire to witness, the Pope underlined that “in this way alone can the liberating message of the love of God and the salvation that Christ offers be proposed in its strength, beauty and simplicity. One can only move forward in this way, with an attitude of respect [of humility] for people; this is offering the essence of the Gospel” (*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*, February 7, 2015). Therefore,

**“The important thing is for this provocation to be seen in the gladness of one’s face.”**

the question is simple: “Do we Christians still believe in the capacity of the faith we have received to attract those we encounter, and in the living fascination of its disarming beauty?” (J. Carrón, “*The Challenge of...*” *Corriere della Sera*, op. cit.).

**WEILER.** You are a bold man, Julián Carrón. Just think how counter-cultural it is to choose the figure of Abraham and place it at the center of the Meeting! That requires boldness. And we have to acknowledge the same boldness in Monica Maggioni, newly elected President of the RAI (Italian national television). You are also bold for coming here to moderate a panel that puts Abraham at the center of the discussion...

**MAGGIONI.** It happens...

**WEILER.** It is your spirit, Fr. Carrón. Also the spirit of Giussani. One can say, “All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.”

**MAGGIONI.** Thank you! This happens when one meets people who change life. People with rare sensibility, like that of Abraham. People who are able to break through the horizon, and so one understands how it is, the circle from which everything started, and on which everything comes to a close.

**Violin** (J.S. Bach, Andante from *Sonata n.2 in F minor* for solo violin BWV 1003).

**First voice.** “*The Lord said to Abraham: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you’*” (Gen 12:1-3).

**MAGGIONI.** Thank you! Thank you Roberto, the violinist; Matteo, Giampiero and Federica, the readers. Thanks to all of you. Thank you for the things that unite us and for those that divide us, for the equalities and the differences. Thank you!



**TO SEE THE video** of the encounter (that you find in [www.tracesonline.org](http://www.tracesonline.org), capture this code with your smartphone (the cellphone must have a QR Reader app).