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“Have faith in this Pope, family is a man and a woman, the Synod won’t be divided”

Interview with Julián Carrón

By Antonio Manzo

“Have faith in the Pope, let’s trust the Pope. The Synod of Bishops is not a tribunal established to judge the peripheries of contemporary humanity. Rather, it’s an opportunity to repropose the truth of the Christian faith to the world, through personal freedom. Out of the Synod, I’m not expecting a guerrilla war between doctrine and pastoral practices, but a search for new ways to repropose the Church’s age-old message in the face of new challenges in society, beginning with welcome for those who are suffering. The Church needs to accompany, without discrimination. We don’t need walls, we need bridges; faith has to provide aid for man, wherever he gets stuck in difficulty or suffering, communicating the Christian event that sets him free.”

Fr. Julián Carrón, successor to Fr. Luigi Giussani, has been leading Communion and Liberation for 10 years. He’s a 65-year-old Spanish priest who, until 2020, will be the head of a “people of God” born in Italy but now spread into 90 countries. He’s the son of farmers, and that you reap what you sow is in his blood. He’s the man behind a shift in CL: no to a Movement as a political arm; yes to a recovery of the Christian experience. Long after sunset in a hotel in Naples, he still has the energy and stamina to meet with the young people of the city’s CL community.

Fr. Carrón, we know how the Church came out of last year’s Synod, still divided on fundamental issues about life and family. Do you think the divisions, evoked even by prominent cardinals in the Church, will be overcome?

“Nothing will be the same after Pope Francis’ preaching in America, with the weighty affirmation of the idea of the family as a gift. The American Pope, and it’s significant he’s from America, told the world that the family isn’t a reason for concern, but rather a gift for society. How can families, with their witness and their lives, awaken the desire in young people to get married?”

The Holy Father is bringing the concept of family back into the worldwide debate...

“He’s bringing it back in a positive sense, not a dialectic one. He doesn’t treat it like something to lament or a problem to overcome; rather he insists that the beauty of the family is a possibility for everyone.”

Will the Church continue to speak of family according to the order of Creation, as the union between a man and a woman?

“Without a doubt, she couldn’t do otherwise. In fact, discussion of the family and its mission in the Church and the world begins with the recognition of this original fact. But we Christians have to witness more often that is an experience of love between two people who freely join together to walk toward their destiny, and not a bond that limits, suffocates and in the end disappoints. Often I hear young people who are scared say, ‘Maybe it’s better not to get married;’ they’re afraid. This is why we are called to proclaim Christ as the response that conquers fear. Christianity is the invitation to participate in an experience where you can verify that things impossible in the eyes of men are possible for God.”

Concretely what does this mean?

“What the Church needs most is to create spaces for families, not define new rules. Fueling doctrinal controversies over immovable points from tradition doesn’t help; the Church needs to welcome families and listen to those who are struggling to find work or to guarantee a future for

their children. Who is listening to this existential solitude today? This is the event of a Christianity that listens and goes out to meet.”

As I’m sure you remember, in the speech by Cardinal Kasper that introduced last year’s Synod, there were open references to a crisis of the concept of family which called for, among other things, updates to pastoral practice.

“Family life brings to light the solidity of the faith of the people who get married. The question we have to answer is if the Church is capable of offering couples, especially those who are struggling, a path to mature in faith. In other words, do those who are going through a difficult time find open doors in the Church, or only judgment that often excludes them from the life of the Christian community?”

What do you think?

“The Church has to open herself ever more to embrace human limitations, including when it comes to the crisis of the family. When you embrace limitations with the measure of faith, you become aware of the other person and the nature of your love for him or her.”

Even high-ranking cardinals are cautioning: beware that, with the Synod, we are at risk of a schism in the Church.

“I’d hope that it wouldn’t be just a way of diverting attention from the problem, because the Church is called to question herself about how to sustain the lives of every person and of families as they face any kind of difficulty.”

Is there a separation between doctrine and pastoral practice in the pre-Synod debate?

“In Christianity, there can be no separation between doctrine and pastoral practice, because Christianity is the eruption of God into history, an event through which concepts, or doctrine, become flesh and blood, as Benedict XVI said; they are incarnated in human experience. Like when Jesus goes to Zacchaeus’s house. His divine presence brings about an embrace that reawakens and gives birth to his desire to change. Jesus doesn’t force that man to change, but he awakens the beginning of a new life. Doctrine is not enough, because the Word was made flesh, was made life that bears in it the content of faith.”

So, they’re just debates among theologians?

“It’s a false opposition. In Christianity the Word of God becomes flesh, becomes reality; Jesus ate and drank and was moved for his friend Lazarus.”

Cardinal Kasper also said: remaining firm in the doctrine, let’s adjust the pastoral practice.

“The attempt to make the communication of the faith better suited to the times was the major theme of Vatican II. And it isn’t a question of pastoral strategy; it’s a question of understanding the very nature of Christianity, to then be able to communicate it in a way that our contemporaries can understand. It’s an event, not just a doctrine. Some young Italian college students recently met some fellow students who are Chinese, who at the end of the experience recognized that Christianity, when taken seriously, is a proposal that is a spring of life, not a series of rituals.”

With relation to the world of homosexuality, what path should dialogue take?

“Christ didn’t come just for some people; He came for everyone. He gave his life for all people, so all can follow a human path. Dialogue is with all people, because everyone needs to be accompanied. The questions about the meaning of life, what is good, and what is right concern people who are homosexual or heterosexual. The question is: how can the Church accompany each person in the journey of life, which sometimes ends up on roads that lead to nowhere?”

Will the Synod recognize gay couples?

“The tradition and doctrine are crystal clear on this. But that doesn’t mean discriminating against a person. The Church has to embrace homosexuals inasmuch as they are persons, as she would with anyone.”

Is celibacy still a value for the priesthood in the Catholic Church, even in light of today’s situation?

“Of course it is. Now more than ever.”

Will a road to the sacraments be opened to the divorced?

“The Pope decided to streamline canonical processes for the nullity of marriages. The question of Communion for the divorced and remarried is a delicate matter, and the fathers know how to apply the entire intelligence of the faith to respond.

Isn’t there a risk that the Pope’s theology of the people could become a theological populism?

“The Pope isn’t a populist, as some people have judged at times. He has a great sense of a people, but he doesn’t bend it to an ideological goal, instrumentalizing, because he takes to heart the good of every single person.”

What do you think Pope Francis would like from Communion and Liberation today?

“What he said to us on March 7. To be faithful to the charism of Fr. Giussani, who communicated to us the relevance of the faith to life’s needs. And he asked us to live the fullness of the charism to truly be a Church ‘which goes forth.’ We can do this only if we remain rooted in Christ, without remaining on the fence, victims of self-referentiality.”

Would you say there have been moments of infidelity to the charism in CL’s history?

“Through human error, yes. Throughout our history, Fr. Giussani always corrected and called us back to the truth, as Jesus corrected His disciples.”

What was the Pope’s reprimand for Communion and Liberation?

“He spoke to us with great paternity, using the same words that he used, for example, with the American bishops: inviting us to missionary conversion and to ‘decentralize’ to communicate Christ, because otherwise the Church becomes deformed.”

Is there a return to spirituality in CL? Or will there still be more initiatives?

“Spirituality and initiatives are not alternatives to each other. We want a CL that has to do with everything, down to ‘eating and sleeping,’ as St. Paul says. Initiatives are able to respond to human need, they’re not something disdainful. Of course, we have to avoid the mistakes that are possible in any human activity.”

When has Communion and Liberation gone astray?

“When we pay more attention to holding positions of influence and to human success. On the other hand, every action is a risk, but it would be worse not to act for the sake of not risking. Then again, the first risk was taken by God, creating us as free men and women.”

On the topic of politics?

“CL takes on the challenge of generating adults capable of putting themselves into play in public life. Responsibility is personal, therefore each person, in any kind of activity, responds for what he or she does.”

Has there been some confusion?

“When I have perceived a moments of getting off track, I’ve pointed it out. We have no problem recognizing our mistakes; if we love the truth more than the affirmation of ourselves at every cost, we can always begin again.”

Is the Italian Church still disoriented in the wake of Bergoglio’s election?

“There’s been disorientation, if you want to call it that, everywhere, not just in Italy. But a providential disorientation. The Pope has introduced a beautiful newness that has shaken everyone. His is a healthy call to put ourselves into play to go out and meet the humanity that awaits us outside of our churches, where we Christians live and work, rejoice and suffer, like everyone.”

How many cardinals are already regretting having voted for Bergoglio?

“Perhaps a few have been surprised because they didn’t foresee the newness in a Pope that the cardinals went to ‘the ends of the earth’ to find, as he said the evening of his election. But this happens every time that a personality asserts itself and asks of us a radical change, the way that Pope Francis is asking to center ourselves again on Christ, because we are not afraid of Christ, of telling today’s men and women who Christ is.”