

INTELLECTUALS AND SPAIN
JULIÁN CARRÓN

President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation since 2005, this theologian originally from Estremadura who has settled in Milan does not resign himself to reducing the unease that has gripped the life of Europeans to a question of economics. “What is at risk today—he wrote in *Disarming Beauty* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017)—is precisely man, his reason, his freedom, and the freedom of critical reasoning.”

“At the origin of the current crisis is the destruction of the human.”

by Fernando Palmero

Photographs by Javi Martínez

Julián Carrón agrees with Benedict XVI’s statements about the Christian origin of the values upon which European civilization, from the Enlightenment onwards, has taken form, and also with his diagnosis of their failure in a moment in which the key of the human condition in the West is “the collapse of the evidences that for centuries formed the foundation of our co-existence.” Then-Cardinal Ratzinger observed in 2005 in Subiaco, “The quest for a reassuring certitude that could stand uncontested beyond all differences has failed.” “Not even Kant, for all of his undeniable greatness, was able to create the necessary shared certainty. (...) The extreme attempt to fashion the things of man without any reference to God leads us ever closer to the edge of the abyss, to the total abolition of man,” he concluded. “Thus we witness a singular and significant reversal,” Carrón commented in *Disarming Beauty*, a work rich in erudition and ethical reflection that explores the roots of the current crisis, “the radical detachment of the Enlightenment philosophy from its Christian roots, which should have ensured a full and autonomous affirmation of the human person, ‘ultimately leads it to dispense with man’.”

Question: *In your book, you insist that the causes of this crisis are not only economic.*

Answer: In these recent decades, we have gone through other economic crises that did not bring us to this attempt to close in on ourselves. Reducing everything to economic reasons is too simplistic. We are in front of a deeper crisis. The Pope speaks of a change of epoch, because in the last centuries there were not such deep changes. The values upon which Western culture is founded—freedom, progress, freedom of conscience, the possibility for people to choose their own destiny, solidarity, fraternity—are beginning to not be evident, and the problem is knowing what we have in common today, upon what foundations we can base our co-existence in Europe and the world.

Q: *In the first stage of the French elections, 50% of the voters chose positions against the system, and in the second, 35% supported the racist position of Marine Le Pen. Is this a symptom?*

A Just five years ago, nobody would have imagined this result. What happened in France is a reaction dictated by fear. Those who voted for Le Pen believe that in this way they can better defend “what’s ours,” as if the solution was to create new defensive walls instead of reflecting on what brought us to this situation. As Bauman said, the thing we thought was a pilaster that never could fall, democracy, has begun to be in doubt.

Q: *What is the source of this nationalist tendency we are suffering here, too, and that questions our membership in the European Union?*

A: The origin is the same. The problems we are facing are of such a nature that only by facing them together can we solve them. We all know that certain things about the European Union have not worked as we had hoped: it would be a mistake to pretend otherwise. But it seems to me that isolating ourselves is not the solution, and in such a globalized historical context, I believe that it

would be naïve. As Hannah Arendt said, crises are useful because they make us return to the questions that challenge us, and we can no longer give ready-made answers. A crisis is an opportunity to create spaces of dialogue and to establish places where we can listen to each other, so that our presumption will not dominate.

Q: *Has Islamic terrorism contributed to weakening the European project?*

A: Oliver Roy, in France, has given an interpretation that takes into consideration the ultimate root of this type of terrorism. We think of the terrorist as an Islamic radical, but most of the times he is a second-generation immigrant, not necessarily an observer of the precepts of Islam, who was in prison and experienced sudden radicalization. These are people with problems, delinquents who became Muslims and found a justification for problems they already had. But it is the lack of an ultimate reason for living that leads many people to opt for violent positions, because the destruction of the human person is the origin of the current crisis. They can be people who have just arrived, or second generation, who do not adapt, like many children of our families. Therefore, even if we expel all of them, we will resolve nothing, because they do not create the problem: they manifest the problem that we are the first to have.

Q: *There are those who believe that in order to battle against jihadism, the West needs moral re-armament. On the contrary, you propose “disarming beauty.” Isn’t this naïvely utopian?*

A: Moral re-armament is a new form of imposition. When a boy goes to school with an iron club in his backpack, the one chance for him to abandon his aggressive instincts is to challenge him with a form of life that seduces him and is more attractive than violence. This is the only moral re-armament that disarms. I do not believe in alternatives. The others are relationships of power. There are two possible choices: either we create police states whose defense requires us to live perpetually in a regime of fear of others, or we create open states where there are spaces for discovering what is worth living for.

Q: *However, there are also international reasons, such as the war between Sunnites and Shia.*

A: Yes, but we must consider that the great changes that have happened in the Middle East were provoked by wars imported from abroad. We do not want to say that Saddam Hussein was a saint, but after everything that has happened, the Iraqis are no better off. Certainly, this can offer some people an alibi for the use of religion to ratify violence, to justify the unjustifiable.

Q: *Doesn’t the fact that Islam did not experience the Enlightenment, as happened for Christianity, make it difficult for Arab nations to access democracy?*

A: Perhaps so, and this makes us realize the naïvety of those who think they can export democracy, which is a Western value that was the outcome of a very long process of social, cultural and human construction. Benedict XVI acknowledged that when Christianity became the religion of state, it was the Enlightenment that reminded us Christians that the role of religion was distorted. This is an itinerary that all religions and cultures must follow, so that every person, independently of their beliefs, can gain access to the truth without any type of coercion. As Charles Péguy said, of what interest would be a truth that was not accepted freely?

Q: *Why does Christianity, or concretely, the Church, evoke such strong rejection in certain sectors of society?*

A: This is a question we Christians must ask ourselves, as T.S. Eliot reminded us: did the Church abandon humanity or did humanity abandon the Church? It is the great challenge the Second Vatican Council sought to answer. With its decree on religious freedom, among others, it explored the nature of the truth, the nature of Christian faith, which does not need any other force than the evidence of beauty. If this is not so, if Christianity becomes a set of customs and behaviors in which

you do not feel the drive to challenge others with the beauty of something that attracts you, Christianity will have no prospects.

Q: *[Here in Spain] after the Transition to democracy, the Church has also been accused of enjoying privileges. Do you think this is so?*

A: I am not a historian, and in those years I was young, but it is obvious that without the change that happened in the Church with the Second Vatican Council, it would have been difficult to have a peaceful transition, which was the attempt by everyone to recognize that we could not live without each other. When this is lost sight of, and we presumptuously think we can live without others, everything gets radicalized. The Church does not want any privileges; she just asks for a space to be able to give the contribution that any other reality in the sphere of society, culture and work can offer. She has no other interest than defending this.

Q: *How do you think the Rajoy government has managed the inheritance on the level of legislation about issues such as abortion, euthanasia or homosexual marriage?*

A: In this type of problem, legislation is the last point. The issue is not to impose one position or another, but what makes it possible for certain values to be acknowledged again as valid, which they are not for others. The Church holds that life is lived better in relationship with others, that children grow up better within a family, that people live better in marriage than if they divorce, but none of this can be imposed by decree. We thought that to enjoy freedom it was enough not to have any kinds of ties, but there comes a time in which you ask: why do I have freedom? It is not a legislative problem. The law is a consequence of something that needs to be built before, so that it can be acknowledged by all. When laws take a step backwards—in work, in defense of women, of life, or of the environment—what we see are the consequences. For example, nobody forces us to pass a law to defend nature, which means that this value has not yet collapsed, and this is also reflected on the legal level. The challenge, as the Pope said, is to avoid the predominance of the ideology of throwing out everything that does not serve us, of treating people like something to be used and thrown away.

Q: *Has the value of human life been lost?*

A: We have taken for granted that life is of value in and of itself, but life is not enough. Life is of value if it has a meaning, if there is something that makes it worth living. Life must make you fall in love with it, because this is what facilitates my opening to a broader horizon and beginning to sense the other not as an adversary or someone who limits my freedom, but who expands it for me.

Q: *In this regard, what is the responsibility of education?*

A: The more data we have, the more evident it is that we are in front of an emergency in education. It used to be that teachers had students in front of them who were willing to learn. Today this is not the case. You have to spark interest in what you are explaining, so that it can have an impact on the person, so that by offering the person a human itinerary, a journey of knowledge, a journey in the use of reason, an education to freedom, you can generate a subject who in turn will give form to the society in which we live. Often the problem of education is the problem of the adult, not just the children. For many parents, the one principle is that their children not have to suffer the difficulties they suffered. But if we take away from them the factors that make the person grow, instead of accompanying them and helping them grow by overcoming these difficulties, we will create eternal children. Today, education consists in giving students a series of technical instruments so that they can survive. It is no longer current to give them formation in philosophy or anthropology. This is the reason we are defenseless in front of fake news. It is as if the heart of the human person were no longer capable of discerning the truth. For this reason, it is necessary to put the person at the center, to teach students to look at the world with their own eyes, to think with their own heads, developing

a critical spirit that makes the “I” more a protagonist and less a spectator, more a leader and less a follower, more a citizen and less a subject.

Q: *Is authority necessary in education?*

A: Etymologically, authority means one who causes me to grow. Who does not have people in their life like this, teachers or friends? This is authority, the witness who tells you “Look how you can live life,” not someone who imposes on you in an authoritarian way a vision of things, but someone who simply challenges you, living.

Q: *In the current situation of the Basque Country, is it necessary to place forgetting above justice in order to move ahead?*

A: Justice cannot fail to carry out its function against those who committed crimes. However, they can serve their entire sentence and not acknowledge the harm they did. We can feel frustrated because the victims will never have their loved ones back. We are in front of a deeper problem. If there is no afterworld, justice is an empty word. Christianity affirmed that the afterworld is a fact present in history. In giving His life for women and men, Jesus challenged the spiral of violence from which we are unable to escape. Without this mercy, neither one nor the other finds peace. When people open up to this process, a fact begins to happen that changes the people themselves, first of all. If something does not happen in life in the present that prevails over all the horrors of the past, there is nothing to be done.