

THE 2018 GIUSSANI SERIES ON
FAITH AND MODERNITY:
*Can a Modern Person Still Reasonably Believe in
the Divinity of Christ?*

THE 2018 ALBACETE LECTURE
ON FAITH AND CULTURE:
Freedom From Reality?



Dr. Michael Hanby, Fr. Paolo Prospero
and
Dr. David C. Schindler



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Crossroads Cultural Center

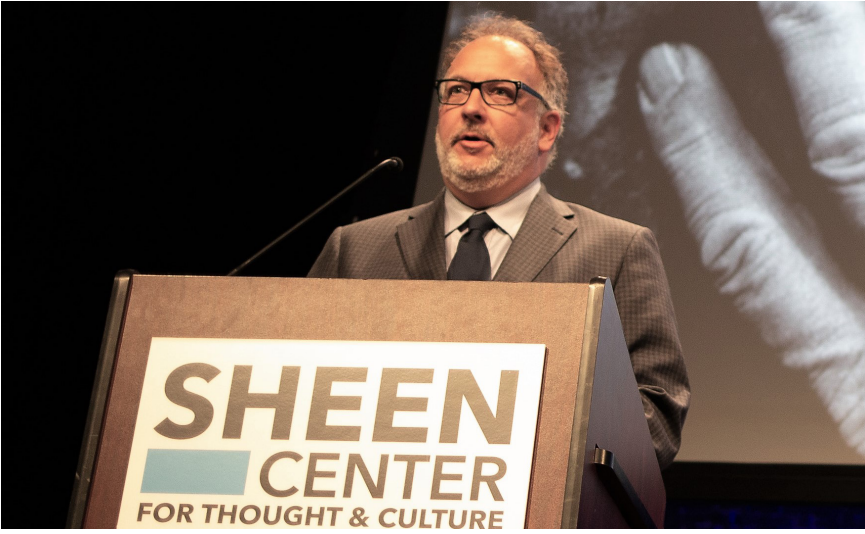
Copyediting and layout:
Deep River Media, LLC
PO Box 4115
Asheboro, NC 27204
www.deep-river-media.com

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Can a Modern Person Still Reasonably Believe in the Divinity of Christ?

Dr. Michael Handby¹

Fr. Paolo Prospero²

The 2018 Luigi Giussani Series on Faith and Modernity
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture
New York City
May 1, 2018



Margarita A. Mooney: Tonight, we gather as a way of recalling the life and writings of Luigi Giussani. Fr. Luigi Giussani is well-known as the founder of Communion and Liberation and the author of numerous books, including *The Religious Sense*. But what is less understood about him is how he broke through the conventional opposition between liberalism and traditionalism, and proposed Christianity in a way that answers the challenges of modernity to the Christian faith.

One crucial question for modernity can be seen, perhaps, as a twist on the perennial question of evil: In the face of so much misery, division, and war, how can the existence of God be justified to man?

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Giussani responded to this challenge by asking all of us: Where do we see God in the midst of our everyday realities? Not just some of them, mind you, but all of them.

As a person of faith, I have, in fact, greatly struggled to understand the continuing existence of war, misery, and human suffering, which have often been the subjects of my own work as a sociologist. When I tell people I teach sociology and theology at Princeton, I get a puzzled look. From those who know that sociology emerged to develop a modern, empirical science of the human good without need for the transcendent or the eternal, I get questions like: How do those two fields even go together? How did you end up working in those two disciplines?

I answer these questions by saying that discovered myself limited by the vocabulary about human experiences that I found in sociology and psychology, so increasingly I read philosophy and theology. When I read Giussani's books for the first time only a few years ago, I quickly saw he had an ability to break through the fragmentation of human experience so common in modernity and could guide us in the universal desire to ponder our ultimate origins and ends as human beings.

The way in which Giussani does this is by calling us to pay close attention to the seemingly disparate events of our lives, and immerse ourselves in reality. In that way, we develop a contemplative outlook, where we don't need to dominate nature and control our destiny. Rather, we ponder the unexpected happenings in our lives and savor our special chosenness, the gift of being able to experience every single moment of reality. In this way, we come to see how all our experiences point us from the reality of each moment to the presence that is always there, animating those moments, and reaching out to us.

As Giussani once said: "Every day we are called to experience this subtle, discreet jolt of resurrection: we have a point of light, a desire to know, an impetus of gratuitous good, a passion for the destiny of men and of things—it is like a projection of love for our own destiny—and within this, slowly, as time passes all things are embraced and involved until the

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culmination...How right it would be if the boldness or keenness of this awareness of self and of things that the eternal implies were as vibrant and intense as they could be.”³

As Guissani expressed in this quote and other writings, it is in encountering an other that we become more fully a person; whereas in pursuing autonomy we never feel complete. So often in trying to be autonomous we end up depending on other finite human beings, or on substances, or on entertainment to fulfill us. It’s our dependence on God that frees us and makes our daily reality full of joyful encounters again!

For Guissani, theology was not just a set of abstract ideas. His theology animated his pedagogy as an educator of so many young people, his vocation as a priest and founder of Communion and Liberation, and his relationship with everyone he met, of every imaginable background.

Michael Hanby: Can a modern person still reasonably believe in the divinity of Christ? I feel like the answer is supposed to be yes, so I’m going to say, no. I’m naughty that way. What’s more, while it might be too strong to say that Fr. Guissani would have answered this question in the same way, I’m also going to say that my meaning accords, or mostly accords, with his thought, to which I give a “Yes, but...” So let me explain.

My answer to this turns on what it means to be modern. Modernity is not just a chronological designation for the era that happens to follow the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or the time in which we happen to live. Those who first recognized themselves as modern self-consciously defined themselves over against the ages that preceded them. It was an act of defiance, a declaration of independence, so to speak. So, what was it, in declaring themselves modern, that they set themselves against? Against

³ Luigi Guissani, “On the Way: Notes from a Talk of Luigi Guissani with Some University Students.” *La Thuile*, August 1992.

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the symbolic cosmology of antiquity and the first Christian millennium, a world at once saturated with intrinsic meaning, that nevertheless pointed mysteriously beyond itself to its maker, shrouded in luminous darkness; against the order of universal reason, understood as an attempt to penetrate and contemplate the meaning of nature and being; and ultimately against the God, whose word, whose *logos*, is the Creator and measure of all things. The Enlightenment, of course, declared itself to be the age of reason, but its exaltation of reason was always purchased at the price of restricting what reason is and drawing stricter and stricter around boundaries around what it could know. Time and again in the history of modern western thought, reason magnifies its power by restricting its own scope, dumbing the world down precisely in order to authorize our command over it. This project has now reached its *telos*, which is to say that it has collapsed in on itself—and on us, who are not simply the protagonists of this project of domination but its objects as well. Autonomous reason, cut off from its transcendent source on one side, and from the symbolic order, an inherently meaningful world, on the other—concludes in its opposite: a technological unreason incapable of thinking or even asking what anything is, but only how it works. The result is the crisis of truth now manifest in every facet of modern life and even deep within the Church itself.

Modern man is capable of believing many things. He may believe that history has an arc. If he is still vaguely religious, he may even believe the arc of history is identical with the work of the Holy Spirit. He may believe that the future is destined to be better than the past, or alternatively, that an apocalypse of our own making awaits us—he may even believe both at once. He may believe he can direct his own evolution through greater technical command of his own nature. He may believe that all things are possible or he may despair that nothing ever really seems to happen—and here again, he may even believe both at the same time, unbound as he is by the law of non-contradiction. He may believe that a man can really be a woman, or what amounts to the same thing, that there really is no such thing as man and woman as we have heretofore understood them. Modern man can believe any number of things without really thinking about any of them; he may even believe in any number of Christs. But he cannot reasonably believe anything insofar as he is modern, nor in the Christ who

is the divine *logos* of the Father, in whom all things were made. Because to be modern is to have reduced reason to its technical application, to have reduced the world to a meaningless receptacle of the technical will and truth to technological possibility, to have identified our knowledge of this world with the control we can exert over it. To be modern is to be one for whom the elves have always already sailed west, to inhabit a world reduced, in Fr. Giussani's words, to the level of things, flattened two-dimensional surfaces transparent to this or that kind of empiricism. Except that, according to this logic, there ultimately are no real things, no given natures, no abiding identities with inherent meaning, interior depth, and the weight of being, only collections and series of manipulable historical processes—facts to be analyzed and problems to be solved.

I therefore concur with the clear implication of John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*: that faith is ultimately required to sustain a commitment to reason, though this brings with it a certain, less frequently observed corollary. We can judge the quality of the faith, its adequacy to the divinity of Christ and the *logos* in whom we were created, by the quality of the reason it inspires, its scope and depth, its capacity to sound the depths of being and to take all thought captive to Christ. By this measure, the pious atheism that prevails in the Church today, in the sociology, psychology, politics, and journalism elevated to the place once occupied by theology and philosophy, manifests a profound crisis of both faith and reason.

The question, then, is not so much whether modern man can reasonably believe in Christ, as whether Christ can restore modern man—which includes the modern Christian—to the fullness of his reason. The answer to this question is surely yes; for modern man is man before he is modern, more truly man than modern. Modernity may stupefy, but it does not satisfy. There is, as Fr. Giussani says, something even in the heart of modern man that corresponds to the mystery of Christ, that longs for it, even though as a modern he no longer recognizes what he desires and thus no longer recognizes himself, and even though this desire for the infinite is easily perverted in ways that are terribly destructive.

The awakening of man from his modern stupor and the restoration of his

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reason therefore surely depend upon his encountering truth as an event, as Fr. Giussani says, “something unpredictable, unforeseen, not a consequence of previous factors” that brings him back to his senses, as it were. This event in which we encounter Christ and the mysterious depths of reality, this event that opens our eyes can, of course, take many concrete forms in the concrete course of our lives—a great personal or civilizational tragedy, an act of real humanity and love, an encounter with great beauty, which always pierces and wounds the soul, opening it to receive. And yet, I want to suggest—I hope more as a clarification of Fr. Giussani’s idea than a correction of it—that the Christian encounter can only be a totalizing event in the way Fr. Giussani proposes, one that integrates the whole of his subjectivity with the whole of objective being and history as he is able to apprehend them, if the very nature of event is paradoxical, such that it is not simply “unpredictable, unforeseen, and not a consequence of previous factors” but at the same time and for the same reason the fulfillment of those factors which somehow anticipated it, as the New covenant fulfills and completes the Old which made straight its way. In other words, truth—the truth of God, the truth of being, the truth of ourselves, the truth of Christianity—is not simply a surprise which interrupts and imposes itself amidst “the banal reality of every day.” Truth, reality, to the modern man is also like the blade of grass which struggles to grow between the cracks in the sidewalk, and which we pass by in the banal reality of the everyday without even noticing it. The event unites the surprise of becoming or the drama of a happening with the quiet stillness of being that precedes my entry into it or my awareness of it.

And like all truths, this one is risky. Dangerous consequences follow, both for individuals and for religious movements, if this rich paradox of givenness, anticipation, and surprise is dissolved in either direction. Dissolve the dramatic structure of the event into the simple givenness of the truth, and the event of truth will have no new word to speak, no word of life, in circumstances that are unprecedented in their very nature as circumstances. The result is the dominance of a traditionalism, a rule-bound “Pharisaism,” as Fr. Giussani suggests, devoid of Spirit and life, incapable of reordering the whole of my being, or of apprehending the meaning of the moment. But dissolve the paradox in the other direction,

resolve it exclusively in favor of the “unprecedented, the unpredictable, and the unforeseen,” and the result is a “presentism” cut off from the historical gift of the faith which mediates the event and makes it intelligible to us, isolated from the *communio sanctorum* transcending time and space and, ultimately, inadequate to the fullness of the truth beyond my subjectivity to which the event is an awakening. The two stances are ultimately not so different. Each is a perennial temptation for religious orders and movements, the temptation of the branch to mistake itself for the tree, to see its founders or patrons not simply as exemplary figures in the vast sea of the tradition, but as the *summa* of the tradition—Thomists are often accused of this, though it is certainly not how St. Thomas would have thought of himself—or to see the movement not as possessing one charism or one mission in a Church spanning the ages but as identical to the Church itself. This temptation is particularly acute in modernity, where we perpetually define ourselves in opposition to previous generations, and in our particular moment in ecclesial history, when we are perpetually invited, or bludgeoned, into equating the Holy Spirit with the spirit of the age.

Let us take a remark of Fr. Giussani’s, one which admittedly makes me a little nervous, as an occasion for thinking further about this temptation. The event, he says, “is the only category capable of defining what Christianity is...We have never spoken of Christianity except as an event: it cannot be spoken of except as an event.” I appreciate the effort to break open the profound inner core of Christian experience, but then one wants to ask: What was Christianity then before we learned to speak this way? And did the generations upon generations of Christians who did not think this category so fundamental not understand themselves? I trust you see the difficulty. Read properly, and no doubt in the way the Fr. Giussani intended it, the language of event is understood as a way, particularly apt in this time of suffocating and enforced superficiality, of penetrating more deeply the dramatic experience of living faith at the heart of all true Christianity. Misinterpreted, however—and such misinterpretations usually take the form of an unreflective assumption rather than a self-conscious position—such a comment could be taken to mean that Christianity has only fully arrived with us and with our ability to see and think this way. This pervasive

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assumption takes many forms in modern Christianity; we see it every day. It is the very essence of the modern, ungratefully negating that upon which its own life depends, depriving itself of the capacity to see beyond its own conditioning. It takes precisely the openness to reality for which Fr. Giussani pleaded, a profound gratitude and what Joseph Ratzinger called ontological humility, as opposed to moralistic humility, to avoid succumbing to this temptation.

St. Augustine profoundly and famously praised God as the one who is ever ancient, and ever new—the one who is both because his eternity is the self-same while our existence is fleeting. The event that brings us face to face with this mystery must likewise be ever ancient, ever new: new because it addresses us, each of whom enact a life and occupy a perspective in the cosmos that is never to be repeated, ancient because we unfold this life in the presence of the eternal one whose knowledge into the depths of his creatures is the cause, truth, and measure of all things. Only when we begin to perceive this, and to see everything in light of this, only when we can once again begin to view our present in light of the eternal, can modern man be said to have a reasonable belief in the divinity of Christ. Only when he has a reasonable belief in the divinity of Christ, can he be said once again to have the full use of his reason. That this too was the position of Fr. Giussani, I infer from these remarks of his, with which I will close. “Over every instant looms the weight of the eternal,” said the poetess Ada Negri, who converted because of this discovery. The affirmation of the boundless, eternal, infinite value of even the tiniest instant a man might imagine is, in fact, proof of the divine, the gift of the Spirit. There can be no such affirmation except in a divine conception.”

Fr. Paolo Prosperi: Fr. Giussani loved to use a quote of Cornelio Fabro, when he wanted to embrace in a nutshell the core of the modern way of seeing reality: “If God exists, he does not matter.” For Giussani, what is most dramatic about the situation of the modern man is not in the first place that he has lost faith in the God of Jesus Christ—but that he sees the world, himself, and everything in such a way that he thinks he can make perfect sense of this reality, as if God does not exist. “If God exists, he doesn’t matter”: this is secularism.

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Again, to quote a famous friend of his, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI:

“The man of today is stuck with positivism, and thus in despair, close to God and to the question about God.” And again: “It is as if the organs, the senses through which by nature man is given to perceive the presence of God, of the Mystery of God within this reality, that my eyes see, that my hands touch, that my nose smells, were severely atrophied.”

We can speak in this sense of a crisis of “the senses”—or, to quote the title of Giussani’s most famous book, it’s a crisis of the religious sense, which is not a sixth sense alongside the other five, but rather is the power we are given to use all of our perceptive faculties to the full extent of their potential. The religious sense, in two words, is the power to see the flower as sign of the Infinite Mystery, as the effervescence, as it were, of the ultimate mystery out of which it springs forth; it’s the power to hear in reality the voice of the Mystery, who speaks it.

In a nutshell, the core of the modern problem for Fr. Giussani is, to use his habitual expression, the reduction of reason. I think this expression is key, because it shows the provocative element of Giussani’s take on modernity: not an overemphasis on reason, for example, too much reason versus faith, but rather its reduction, which means dis-empowerment—i.e., “too little reason.” Not so much too much power to man,” but, in a certain and ironic sense, “too little power to man”—where obviously the core of the problem lies in what we mean by power. I will come back later to this. Here I want to stress that Fr. Giussani never starts by emphasizing the misery of man—for example, sinfulness, brokenness, etc.—although he is very aware of all that. But rather man’s call to greatness—let’s even say power—rightly understood (see his predilection for Psalm 8). From this perspective, we can say Fr. Giussani fully empathizes with a key dimension of the modern spirit (which is, by the way, a dimension consciously or unconsciously inherited from Christianity): the idea of the infinite dignity of the human person. In other words, Giussani empathizes with the modern emphasis on human aspiration to greatness—while he sees in most of the modern mentality a tragic reduction of what this greatness is really about.

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1. Leopardi as friend

There is perhaps no better exemplification of Giussani's relation to the "modern man"—a relation we may describe as empathically critical or critically empathic—than Fr. Giussani's friendship with one of the most extraordinary figures of Italian modern literature: Giacomo Leopardi. Just a few words about who Leopardi is, since most likely many here do not know him. First, Leopardi is a philosopher (granted, not a great one) and a poet (an outstanding one), who lived in the first half of nineteenth century in Italy (by the way, in a beautiful place, Recanati in Le Marche). As philosopher, Leopardi is entrenched in the Sensualism of French Enlightenment (although he has read a bit of Locke, too). As a poet, however, he is not. His human experience of reality breaks the boundaries of the philosophical ideology he embraced. His heart, in front of the beauty of a landscape, or even more of a woman, vibrates no less than the medieval heart of a Dante vibrated in front of his Beatrice. The comparison is illuminating. For Dante, a man of the middle ages, the beauty of the woman was like a window into the divine. In piercing the eyes, created beauty awakens the memory of the Creator, and thus becomes a way to Him (that is why Fr. Giussani calls experience of reality as *sign*). Leopardi, in front of the beautiful face of a woman, experiences the very same sublime elation of Dante, but he calls this feeling delusion, dream, naïve illusion of the "youth." The modern enlightenment, which is for Leopardi the adult age of humanity, has taken away the "shade of mystery" that endowed all things in the pre-modern age. But this is the irony: deprived of their shade, of their mysteriousness, of their nocturnal dimension, things, faces, all of reality—lose at the same time their very splendor. What remains is a flat, shallow, empty mass of "stuff" deprived of any interiority and meaning: "So youth fades out / so it leaves mortal life behind. The shadows and the shapes of glad illusions flee / and distant hopes that prop our nature up, give way." Life is forlorn, lightless. Looking ahead, the wayward traveler searches for goal or reason on the long road he senses lies ahead and senses that man's home truly has become alien to him.

This tragic contradiction between Leopardi's heart, between his experience of beauty and his reduced understanding of reason, becomes for Giussani a

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paradoxical sign of hope: no matter how entrenched men and women are in modern scientism and in this technological world, the heart of every man and woman still longs for the truth, longs for Beauty with capital B. There is in particular one poem of Leopardi's that Fr. Giussani loved more than any other, precisely because he read it as a sort of unaware expression of the longing of the human heart for the encounter with Christ—i.e., Beauty Itself made flesh: it's called *Alla sua donna* (to His Lady): "It was a tribute not to one of his 'lovers,' but to a discovery he unexpectedly made. [...] What he was looking for in the woman he loved was 'something' beyond her, which revealed and communicated itself in her, but was beyond her." It's worth reading and savoring the first two stanzas of this poem, as well as the last, keeping in mind that Fr. Giussani, when he was still a seminarian, was so touched by it that he learned it by heart and use to silently repeat it as a mental prayer of thanksgiving after receiving communion:

*Beloved beauty who inspires
love from afar, your face concealed
except when your celestial image
stirs my heart in sleep, or in the fields
where light and nature's laughter
shine more lovely;
was it maybe you who blessed the innocent
age they call golden,
and do you now, blithe spirit,
soar among men? Or does the miser, fate,
who hides you from us keep you for the future?*

*No hope of seeing you alive
remains for me now,
except when, naked and alone,
my soul will go down a new street
to an unfamiliar home. Already, at the dawn
of my dark, uncertain day,
I imagined you a fellow traveler
on this parched ground. But no thing on earth
is equal to you; and if there were someone*

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*who had a face like yours, though she resembled
you in word and deed, she'd be less lovely.*

(...)

*Whether you are the one and only
eternal idea that eternal wisdom
disdains to see arrayed in sensible form,
to know the pains of mortal life
in transitory dress;
or if in the supernal spheres another earth
from among unnumbered worlds receives you,
and a near star lovelier than the Sun
warms you and you breathe benigner ether,
from here, where years are both ill-starred and brief,
accept this hymn from your unnoticed lover.*

a) If what we said is true, an important consequence follows: for Fr. Giussani, as in a certain sense for the atheist Leopardi, a world without God, a world deprived of its relation with the Divine, is a world reduced to nothing. Deprived of its infinite depth, it's precisely the face of man that evaporates and at last disappears. It's reduced to "a thing to use." We come in this way to see the core of Giussani's "modernity," as I see it. If the turn of modernity is about humanism, i.e., liberating the full potential of man in mastering and enjoying this world, then Giussani's answer to modernity, in a nutshell, is this: without Christ, that is precisely what you can't gain—the taste, the full taste of this world. Hence the centrality of the evangelical concept of *hundredfold* in Fr. Giussani's way of proposing Christianity. What Christ promises is not only life eternal, but the hundredfold already in this world: a fuller life here and now, a fuller enjoyment of the realities of this world.

The encounter with Christ is for Giussani that event through which the interior senses of man are reawakened, and he becomes able anew to see reality in its true splendor, and so to enjoy the looking at the stars as well as the face of the beloved: a hundredfold.

2. *Back to wonder*

With this we have already introduced the answer to the most urgent question: How can we reawaken and re-educate, so to speak, the religious sense that in contemporary man is so atrophied? The answer of Fr. Giussani is: through the event of an exceptional encounter—the encounter with Christ, i.e., God made flesh. The human “I” is reborn through the experience of the encounter with the beauty of Christ, i.e., with a man, in flesh and blood, in the eyes of whom the Mystery of God becomes visible, transparent, perceivable in a such a luminous way that one is conquered even before starting to fully understand why. Giussani calls this experience “correspondence.”

Here I want to make a final qualification, in response to my friend Mike Hanby’s important challenge.

Whenever Giussani speaks of or tries to describe what he means by “correspondence,” he always ends up using a *paradoxical* language. In *Recognizing Christ*, for example, he writes:

But those two, the first two, John and Andrew—Andrew was most probably married with children—how was it that they were won over at once and they recognized him (“recognized”: there is no other word that can be used)? I would say that, if this fact happened, to recognize that man, who that man was (not who he was in detail, right to the core, but to recognize that he was something exceptional, out of the ordinary, to recognize he was absolutely out of the ordinary, irreducible to any analysis), to recognize him should have been easy. If God became a man, if he came amongst us, if he came right now, if he slipped into this crowd and was here among us, to recognize him — a priori I say — should be easy; it should be easy to recognize him as divine. Why easy to recognize him? Because of an exceptionality, an incomparable exceptionality. I have before me something exceptional, an exceptional man, there’s no comparison. What does “exceptional” mean? What

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could it mean? Why does what is exceptional strike you? Why do you feel that something that's exceptional is "exceptional?" Because it corresponds to the expectations of your heart—no matter how confused and nebulous they might be. What is exceptional corresponds unexpectedly — unexpectedly! — to the needs of your mind, of your heart, to the irresistible, undeniable demands of your heart in a way you could never have imagined or predicted because there is "no one like that man." What is exceptional is, paradoxically, the appearance of what is most natural to us. What is natural to me? That what I desire should happen. What could be more natural than that? That what I most desire happen: that is natural. To come across something totally, profoundly natural ("natural" because it corresponds to the demands of the heart given to us by nature) is something absolutely exceptional. It is like a strange contradiction: what happens is never exceptional, truly exceptional, because it cannot adequately answer the heart's demands. An exceptionality is hinted at when something makes the heart beat because of a correspondence that we believe has a certain value and that, the day after, will retract, the day after will annul.

The event of Christ is for Giussani something unforeseeable, unimaginable by me—and yet something that resonates with me (correspondence), with my heart/reason as nothing else, when I am put in front of it. Something I can recognize, even if, and precisely because, at the same time, I have never seen anything like it. The *even if* points to the incomparableness, to the incomparable excess of Christ's beauty and goodness in comparison with any other "encounter." The *precisely because* points to the fact that this incomparableness is not in relation to the beauty and goodness I already know. On the contrary, for Giussani, any experience of beauty already contains, as it were, a foreshadowing of this encounter, and this is why the encounter with beauty always elicits a profound nostalgia for something one can't imagine and yet must exist: Beauty with a capital B, as Leopardi glimpsed. This is why I can recognize Christ: because, somewhat unconsciously, my heart is always already waiting for his beauty. So both

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things are true: he is the unexpected One. And yet I can perceive the encounter with him as a surprising grace only because my heart structurally longs for him and thus is able to easily recognize him, in the same way in which I can immediately recognize in a crowd the features of the face of a friend I haven't seen for so long—so long that I thought I'd completely forgotten his lineaments. As soon as he shows up, the submerged memories naturally surface and I recognize him: "It's him."

Just a memory on this key point, to conclude. I remember I asked this very question to Fr. Giussani: How can we say that the event of Christ is unexpected and at the same time that he is the one our hearts wait for? Is it not contradictory? And Giussani, knowing my passion for music, answered using the following analogy: "Could you ever have imagined something like the fifth symphony of Beethoven before actually listening to it?"

"No, I couldn't."

"And yet, when you heard it, you loved it?"

"Yes, I did."

"Can we say you felt a correspondence, as if that music resonated with you, and was somehow a real revelation of what your hearing is 'made for'?"

"Yes, we can."

"The same is true with Christ. I couldn't imagine him before encountering him, and yet I recognize him infallibly when I meet him. At the same time, in and through the encounter with his gaze, I start to better understand myself, who I truly am. It's like when you listen to the fifth of Beethoven for the first time and you feel pierced. In a sense, it is as if you realized for the first time what your sense of hearing is capable of; it is as if you knew yourself, the mysterious potential of your hearing, for the first time. Without that particular encounter, without the historical event, in time and space, with the beauty of that symphony, you can't know what sense of hearing is made for—what kind of sublime realities your hearing is able to put you in touch with, just by capturing sounds. The same with Christ. Only in front of him, you realize who you truly are, what your eyes, and ears and heart are made for."

This, then, is why the encounter with Christ is surprising—elicits wonder—for Fr. Giussani. Not only because it's totally unforeseen; that could leave

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me perfectly indifferent or actually bother me. Rather, it is surprising precisely because it corresponds to my longing as nothing else before.



Freedom From Reality?

Dr. David C. Schindler¹

The 2018 Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture
New York City
October 27, 2018



Angelo Matera: Hello everyone. On behalf of Crossroads, I'd like to extend to you a warm welcome to the Third Annual Albacete Lecture on Faith and Culture. The lecture was established by Crossroads to honor the memory of Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete, who chaired our advisory board until his passing. It's the highlight of our yearly program, and special thanks go to the Sheen Center for hosting it, and to the Albacete Forum for helping organize it. My name is Angelo Matera, and I'm a member of the Crossroads Advisory Board. I also had the honor to know Monsignor Albacete for many years.

Monsignor Albacete's intelligence and passion animated Crossroads from the start. He often reminded us that our mission, and most important challenge, was to reawaken in people an interest in the full spectrum of reality, and especially in all that is happening in our society. In our fifteen years, we have been trying to follow his advice, because *not* to be interested in all of reality would mark not only our end as an authentic cultural center, but above all, the progressive decline of our humanity into nihilism.

My own relationship with Msgr. Albacete was sparked by these same concerns. I had experienced a faith conversion in my mid-thirties, thanks to the witness and thought of Pope John Paul II. I was about to launch

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a media project whose aim was to engage the most secular sectors of our culture, when one of Msgr. Albacete's former students, the speaker and author Christopher West, said, "You have to meet Lorenzo Albacete. He writes for the *New York Times*, he's befriended many secular figures, and no one understands the meaning of Pope John Paul II's theology like he does." Then Chris said something that got to the heart of what I was looking for: "Both the pope and monsignor would rather you be free and wrong than unfree and right."

I immediately arranged a meeting with Msgr. Albacete, which took place in an office at Grand Central Station—the center of the city that is the center of the world. All I can say is that I was never the same after those two hours. As evidence, I still have the five pages of notes I scribbled furiously afterwards, with all his profound insights and quips. It was as if, for me, faith and reality had been in conflict, viewed through distorted lenses, and were now in focus and in sync.

I can't begin to fully explain what Lorenzo—as he insisted everyone call him—began to teach me that day. All I can say is that his wisdom and humor—his entire person—had, for me, the shock of the truly new, as it has had for so many others.

That effect was perfectly captured by a remark Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr., publisher of the *New York Times*, once made to Lorenzo, when he said: "We know a lot of priests. They tell us what we know. You tell us what we don't know."

As extraordinary as his theological and spiritual insights were, so was his quickfire comic timing. I'll end with a favorite personal story. Once at a Communion & Liberation event in Bryant Park, I was taking a cigarette break with Lorenzo, standing on the corner of 42nd and 6th, when a woman came up to us and asked: "What is this? A protest?" "Yes," he answered, with his mischievous smile. "What are you protesting?" She continued. "Dualism," he answered, without missing a beat. I'm sure there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of his friends with stories like this.

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In his humility, Msgr. Albacete always cited the life-changing influence of his own mentor, Msgr. Luigi Giussani, founder of Communion & Liberation. For both, and in the work of Crossroads, the word “freedom” has always had a central focus. Nowadays it is often invoked, from both the left and from the right, but fewer people seem to understand experientially what makes it possible, what fosters it and what, instead, suffocates it. So it seems appropriate to return to basic questions: What is freedom? Where does it come from?

Tonight, we’re truly fortunate to have with us Professor David C. Schindler, who is doing groundbreaking work on this topic. As you can see in the program, Dr. Schindler is Associate Professor of Metaphysics and Anthropology at the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of America, and the author of a new book that I highly recommend: *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*. Please help me welcome Professor Schindler to the stage!

David C. Schindler: The greatest revolutions are those that take place below the surface. The overthrow of a government is of course a dramatic and headline-making event, but unless it is accompanied by a new conception of man, the change it causes remains a superficial one. It is little more than a new arrangement of the same old pieces. A change in our conception of man—that is, in the way we understand ourselves, what it means to be human, the nature of human existence—is not just a particular revolutionary deed, but a revolution in the doer of every deed; not just a new idea, but a new thinker of every idea; not just a different value, but a different heart that receives and loves and pursues every value; not just a transformed institution, but a transformation in the maker of every institution and in the one for whom every institution is made. A revolution in our conception of man, in short, changes everything; it causes a shift in the very horizon of our world.

If this is true, it follows that there are few things more important, both personally and culturally, than attending to the meanings of the central realities of human existence, those things that make us human, that distinguish us from other creatures, that present as it were the place

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wherein we encounter other people, ourselves, the world, and God: What is reason? What is love? What is freedom? The answer that we give to these most basic questions affects the way we understand and so relate to absolutely everything else. And the converse is true as well: the way that we interact with the world and each other, the way we organize our existence, both at the macro level, in politics and economics, and at the micro level, in the way we set up our household, inevitably implies some answer to these questions, whether we are conscious of it or not. In a healthy culture, there may be little need to ask these questions in a deliberate or conscious way, though of course such reflection on the meaning of human existence has always been a privileged activity, even when not imposed by need. But in a culture in which “things fall apart, the center cannot hold,” as the poet said, in which we witness the unraveling of the fabric of our humanity, such reflection becomes an urgent necessity.

I would like, tonight, to open up a reflection of this sort on the basic human reality of freedom, which I suggest has indeed undergone a revolution in the manner just described, a revolution that has had a profound effect on the way we live. It will become apparent, as we reflect on this matter, what it might mean to recover the more original sense of freedom, and why it would be good to do so.

The fact that a revolution has taken place is not at all hard to see if we simply compare what might be called the “normal” conception of freedom in the contemporary world with the conception one finds in the classical philosophical tradition. Let us take, for example, an observation from Aristotle. It is interesting to note that the observation I am going to cite is one he makes in passing, as a kind of illustration to help clarify a difficult idea that he is attempting to explain. This is interesting because it suggests that he takes the observation regarding freedom to be perfectly obvious, and not in need of any clarification itself. In one of the later books of the *Metaphysics*, he writes the following: “The free men [in a household] have least license to act at random, but all things or most things are already ordained for them, while the slaves and the animals do little for the common good, and for the most part live at random.” The contrast with our contemporary understanding could not be clearer. What we

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typically associate with freedom, namely, the capacity to do whatever we want without externally imposed restriction, Aristotle identifies with the condition of slavery. A free person is one who cannot do anything he wants, one who has certain restrictions imposed on him. Along similar lines, Plato referred to the free man as one whose activities are prescribed for him, one after the other, from sun up to sun down. This ancient view of freedom is not just different from the conventional modern one; it seems perfectly opposed. How are we to understand such a foreign way of thinking, and what could it mean for us?

Scholars have long understood that one of the most basic reasons for the radical contrast between our notion of freedom and the concept that appears in classical philosophy is a semantic one. When they spoke of freedom, Plato and Aristotle were not thinking of a particular power of the human soul, more specifically, a particular quality of the act of will, but of a social status; for them, freedom is not an anthropological term, with personal significance, but in the first place a political one. Freedom meant membership, specifically membership in the political community of the city in which one lived. A free man (and in ancient Greece it was in fact only the male who could have this status) is a citizen, one who belonged in an essential way to the city. By extension, with respect to the household, the free members are those related by blood to the father. The servants, by contrast, may contribute in indispensable ways to the running of the household, they may enjoy a certain level of respect and deference because of their personal qualities, but they are not, and can never become, free. Freedom has here a perfectly objective meaning: the foundation is membership, and specifically membership based on blood kinship.

If we think of freedom thus in terms of social status, the observations we cited from Plato and Aristotle make more immediate sense. Why is it the free man that has constraints placed on him that are lacking to the slave? Because the free man, as the member of a community, has a role to play, an office, which carries certain powers and privileges, of course, but these powers and privileges entail a complex set of duties and responsibilities. A non-citizen, a non-family member, by contrast, has no such office, and so the constraints placed on him are much more discrete and episodic. A

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slave may have a set of tasks he is compelled to carry out, but as long as he reliably fulfills these tasks, he is otherwise quite literally “on his own.” He is a mere individual. There is no particular behavior that is expected of him, no special virtue generally awaited from him, nothing that is “proper.” Instead, as long as he does not cause trouble for others and gets done what he needs to get done, he can do “whatever he wants.”

A striking contemporary illustration of the point being made here is the popular TV series, *The Crown*. As the series shows, quite relentlessly, the special social status that Queen Elizabeth enjoys (if that is the correct word)—we might say that she is supremely free in the ancient sense, freer than any other person in England—entails an extraordinary set of constraints. There are rules governing every basic choice she is required to make, not just in political matters that affect others, but in what would have seemed to us purely private matters: what color and style of dress to wear on particular occasions, how to respond to family events, and so forth. To use Plato’s phrase, every activity is in some sense prescribed for her, from sun up to sun down. As the TV drama impresses on us over and over again, her office requires a kind of submersion of her individuality and personality. The whole of her existence, we might say, is an effort to rise up to the form of this freedom, in service of the common good, of the whole of which she is not only an essential part but the decisive representative.

Now, it seems to me that we, in the contemporary U.S., generally find this idea strange and oppressive, or at least that is our most immediate reaction. But the fact that not only this series, *The Crown*, but perhaps even more so shows like *Downton Abbey*, have been wildly popular with American audiences, suggests that it is also fascinating for us, that something in us craves, and laments the loss of, the constraint and discipline of social form and the deep and very human drama it generates. However that may be, I want to defer to the end a reflection on this suggestion and a consideration of what the ancient sense of freedom might still mean for us today. At this point, I want to shift gears and explore for a bit what we have replaced this older sense of freedom with and what the implications of this shift are.

There are two ways to describe the modern revolution in the conception

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of freedom, the first being the more immediately evident, but the second getting more at the essential core of the change, and what is at stake: with respect to the ancient conception of freedom I just briefly described, we can say that, on the one hand, we have privatized freedom, and on the other hand we have possibilized it. Let me begin with a brief comment on the more obvious change, the privatization of freedom. In a classic essay called “The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns,” which was a lecture delivered in 1819, the French political philosopher Benjamin Constant felt compelled to point out that a lot of confusion had emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries because we moderns were using a word that the ancients had used, namely, the word *liberté*, but perhaps without realizing it had infused the word with a radically different meaning. Whereas the ancients had understood “freedom” to designate a public role with political bearing, which is what I was describing earlier, Constant explained that in the modern world we have come to associate freedom with what we might call the private sphere: for us, freedom means the license to pursue and enjoy more immediate pleasures, whatever strikes our fancy in a more personal sense. Freedom in this respect is precisely the disposal I have over the sphere of things that concern me and me alone (or perhaps my family and immediate circle of friends). In other words, freedom is no longer public office, but has been reduced to private sovereignty. My freedom is the sphere of exclusively personal matters over which I have complete dominion, a sphere that lies precisely outside of the matters of public concern.

Accepting this description of our modern liberty, in contrast to the ancient sense, as more or less accurate, it seems to me that there is a more fundamental revolution in the meaning of freedom, which lies behind the change Constant describes, a revolution at the metaphysical level. This revolution is far more radical, and has world-changing implications that have taken centuries to unfold. Some of the most potent fruits of this revolution have only directly come to light in the past decade, or even the past few years. I referred to this revolution a moment ago as a “possibilizing” of freedom; in more technical, metaphysical terms, we could describe it as a reversal of the classical priority of act over potency. Because I do not take for granted that everyone here is a trained metaphysician formed

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in the classical tradition, I'll try to spell out in concrete terms what this means, and then reflect for a while on how this revolution "shows up" in the ways we typically think about freedom today, and then think through the implications, which also show themselves in our experience. This will prompt us, then, to open up to an alternative conception, by going back to the roots of our culture.

In classical metaphysics, "actuality" means both "reality" and also "completeness" or "perfection." When the classical thinkers affirmed that actuality is prior to potency—the formulation appears explicitly in Aristotle, but all classical thinkers, from ancient Greece up through the high middle ages, hold the principle to be true—what they mean is that, whenever we try to understand things, no matter what they are, we inevitably take our bearings from the notion of completeness or perfection. We can recognize what is incomplete by comparing it to what is complete. When we seek to give an account of what something is, we define it according to its ideal form: we don't define a table as a wobbly structure with three good legs and one broken one, because that is what we happen to have at home, but we instead recognize our table at home as being in need of repair, because we know what a table is meant to look like and how it is meant to function. Completeness is the reference point for incompleteness. This principle holds not only for artifacts, the things we make, but even more so for natural realities. For classical thinkers, events in nature are not purely random but are always the expression of things seeking their proper fulfillment, trying to reach the completeness that corresponds to what they are by nature. The wood thrush sings its song to attract a mate; the stickleback fish swims in schools to protect itself from predators. Human beings also seek completeness, though of course the scope of possible failure and betrayal increases in tandem with the height of noble achievement possible.

From the perspective of the classical priority of act over potency, possibility acquires a particular character: it is always ordered to some perfection or completeness, or is the fruit of some perfection or completeness, which is to say it exists for the sake of or as an expression of some perfection. Let us take one of the more obvious examples to illustrate. As a fairly average

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human being, I have a potency for certain higher-level activities like playing the piano; this possibility is given in my rational nature (whereas it is not given in non-rational natures: cats will never play piano). Now, the classical mind would recognize that, if I have never sat at a piano, much less taken lessons, my capacity for this activity is very low; it is a possibility, in the sense that nothing is preventing me from giving it a shot, but at the early stage of training it represents still a fairly unreal possibility. In technical language, we might say my capacity for piano-playing is an as-yet indeterminate potency. To the classical mind, such a potency is uninteresting as long as it remains in this condition; it could be aimed in any number of directions precisely because it has no shape of its own. We have here a purely open possibility, but this means, from the classical perspective, a rather impotent potency. If I were to discipline my nature by submitting to the constraints of the perfection, the form, I am seeking to acquire, my potency would gradually strengthen; it would become more and more real. More and more concrete possibilities would open up for me the better I became at actually playing piano. Notice that this development of my capacity in one respect entails a restriction or limitation of possibility in other respects: the more I devote myself to acquiring the perfection of piano playing, the less likely it is I will become a super-star basketball player, for example. (It is worth observing that the highest level pianists tend to focus their expertise on one or two composers.) But in another respect, my possibilities are liberated by this particular kind of restriction. Generic, abstract possibility may be lessened, but real, rich, and meaningful possibility is increased.

In this classical world, in the world in which act has priority over potency, freedom becomes something that needs to be cultivated. Just as my freedom to play piano develops and deepens with my entering into the discipline of this art, my freedom more generally to be human and to do the things that belong to my humanity—to be a proper friend or proper spouse, to perform my role in the family, to participate in my community, to love the world, and to love God—requires growth and development. In this world, education comes to have a central significance. From the perspective of freedom classically understood, we think of education as the formation of the person with a view to determinate ideals of what a human

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being is meant to be. We foster a desire to live such ideals, an aspiration to become a full, flourishing man or woman. We encourage serious and deep attachments to people and to the real things that develop mature personality, and liberate our humanity. We prize disciplined devotion to meaningful human work, and commitment to realities of intrinsic beauty and goodness. All of this represents a culture of freedom—at least if we take our bearing from actuality, from completeness or perfection.

It is not difficult to recognize that what I have just described stands in contrast on many significant points to the notion of freedom that we tend more often to take for granted in the contemporary West. It seems to me fair to say that we—and by “we” I mean not just the average man in the street but also our loftiest theoreticians and academics, not to mention our journalists, our politicians, our lawyers and judges, our artists and culture-makers—we tend to identify freedom with power, potency, and possibility, rather than with perfection and actuality. Thus, freedom is typically for us above all the power to choose for ourselves, to decide whether we want to accept what is given, the capacity to change what is already there; it is the possibility of doing otherwise than we are actually doing; freedom is not what is actually given, but lies with the capacity for novelty, open possibility rather than completeness. We think we best protect freedom, in this case, by keeping options open, by multiplying possible alternatives to some given path.

I think all of this is sufficiently obvious not to require much elaboration in the present context, or if there is any difficulty understanding this point, it is only because it is all-too-obvious, it is the difficulty of the fish coming to see it is in water. The connection between freedom and possibility seems so evident, so basic, we struggle to imagine what it could even mean to raise a question about it. But I am suggesting that this association is the result of a radical revolution, which I described above as the “possibilizing” of our conception of freedom. What I mean by this is that we have reversed the priority of act over potency, and have come to rate possibility over reality, to take open and indeterminate potentiality as the basic reference point for our understanding of things. As rational beings, we humans can’t help but be guided in our thinking and doing at some level by some sense of

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perfection, but we have come to identify perfection, it seems to me, not with the reality of the actual, but most fundamentally with power and possibility.

Lest this remain what some might call a mere “academic” concern, an abstraction far away from our concrete, everyday experience, let us reflect a bit on some of the concrete implications of this reversal, this revolution in our basic way of thinking. I find it most helpful to juxtapose the classical and the modern view of freedom in relation to a series of basic human realities, to set into relief just what is at stake in this question. First, what could be more basic than family, our given relation to our mother and father, to our siblings, to aunts, uncles, cousins, and then to grandparents and great grandparents, down into the mists of ancient history. As is often remarked, family are precisely relationships we do not choose, but into which we are born in spite of anything we might want to say about the matter. If freedom is understood in terms of the primacy of actuality, we understand the very unshakable givenness of this relationship as a support that allows us to develop into who we are meant to be, a solid ground from which we grow in freedom. By contrast, if freedom is about open possibility above all else, then family cannot but appear as a threat to freedom. Friends in this case are more important than family, because we choose our friends. But notice, if we follow out this line of reasoning, then to the extent that we commit ourselves to the friends we have chosen, the less free we are in relation to them. The relationship remains a free one only if I can leave it at any time. As a general principle, then, any pronouncement of a vow, by which I hand myself once-and-for-all over to an other—whether that be another person, in marriage, or immediately to Christ in religious consecration—would be, from the modern perspective, the renunciation of freedom, whereas for the classical mind definitive commitment provides a fitting ground for freedom to flourish. A great freedom is precisely one that is capable of committing itself forever.

Along similar lines, we might consider the contrasting import of authority and law. As the Italian philosopher Augusto del Noce has so profoundly shown, authority, and the law through which it comes to expression, is an essential precondition for genuine freedom, since it bears witness to order,

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it communicates form, which allows individual freedom to find an anchor and develop an inward viability and strength. *Auctoritas* comes ultimately from the verb *augere*, to increase or make grow. The authority of parents is what allows children to grow into independent adults, and so enter into freedom themselves. By contrast, authority and law present an obstacle to freedom for the modern mind. One might accept that a certain degree of authority and law is necessary—pure freedom, one admits, would be total chaos (note that this takes for granted that freedom is pure indeterminate power without any form or order)—but one tends to speak of balancing freedom and order against each other, as if they were simply opposed, even if both are necessary.

Let's enter more deeply into human experience. There are two things that inevitably bear on the exercise of our will that we associate with freedom, in such a way as to guide that exercise and to that extent place a certain constraint on it: namely, our reason and our desire. But if we identify freedom with open possibility, with the unconstrained power to make our own choices, then both of these dimensions get marginalized in our sense of what it means to be free, and so ultimately what it means to be human. This is especially evident, perhaps, with respect to reason. Reason bears a particular connection to actuality or reality; it is a receptive power, the essence of which is to recognize what is. Truth, the aim of reason, has a certain objectivity about it, a necessity, and even a universality. To the extent that reason enters into our choices, we are thus being guided by, being moved by, something outside of ourselves, namely, reality. For the ancient mind, this is liberating: it is precisely truth that sets us free. The more compelling our reason for acting, the more free we feel and indeed are. For the modern mind, by contrast, truth cannot but appear as a kind of extrinsic imposition. We might need truth, but it comes at the cost of freedom. A compelling truth is a threat to freedom. Freedom inevitably turns into something irrational.

Now, this might mean that modern man lets himself be ruled by his desire rather than by his reason. While this isn't absolutely false, it seems to me that the matter is more complex. The deepest current of the modern sense of freedom is not just to silence our reason, but to silence our

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desire, or perhaps to obey desire only to the extent that we can render it completely trivial and meaningless. In his wonderful book, *God at the Ritz*, Msgr. Albacete spoke of our tragic reduction of desire. What does the impoverishment of our desire entail? In the ancient view of the world, desire is essentially reality tugging at our soul. It is ultimately rooted in goodness and beauty, and, as such, ought to be conceived as an invitation to our freedom—a kind of “unexpected” invitation, because desire acts on us, soliciting our attention, before we are aware and can consciously respond. But it is just for this reason that desire poses a certain threat to modern freedom. As power, modern freedom in this context is essentially a matter of control, and thus resists being moved by anything other than itself. And so, because we cannot simply eliminate desire without becoming stagnant beings that perish under their own invincible inertia, we re-conceive desire as something purely subjective, and as far as possible something under our own control. What we desire is from this perspective entirely “up to us,” because it is not up to anyone else. The most radical form of this imputed sovereignty over desire is the theme that currently dominates the attention of our collective imagination: namely, the natural desire for real bodily union with a man or woman, transformed into the bizarre concept of “sexual orientation,” a concept previously unknown to the world, invented only recently in the contemporary West. This notion, which ultimately changes the most original, given meaning of our bodies into a choice, prompting the question what our choosing ought to be based on, entails a radical schizophrenia, which is worth pondering (though we do not have the time to do so here). What happens when we make our very selves, in our most intimate reality, nothing more than the object of possible choice? At the deepest level of the difference between the two conceptions of freedom we are considering lies the question of God and what the ancients called “the good,” the ultimate principle of reality that is the source of all goodness. What is goodness? The classical philosophers answered simply: “that which we all desire” (and by “we,” here, they meant not just we human beings, but all creatures whatsoever, every single thing in the cosmos). Reaching into us through desire, goodness moves us before we move ourselves, and so that we can move ourselves; it sets the field of action for us. To call particular things good is to say that they make a claim on us. To be sure, there are many, infinitely many, goods in the world, and

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so we have to make a choice in everything that we do, we have to select a particular good from all the rest at every given moment and leave the rest aside. But, for the classical mind, choice does not constitute our most basic relationship to what is good. Instead, choice always comes second; it is always responsive to a relationship already initiated, so to speak, by what is good. Things look fundamentally different from the perspective of modern liberty. Here, things appear to us, not most basically as goods, speaking to us as it were through our desire and reason and enabling us thus to respond through choice, but instead originally as options. What is an option? It is something that moves me only because I let it; a mere “option” is wholly a function of my choice, it is the term of a relationship that I alone initiate through my act of will. There is a profound revolution in this transformation of goods into options, analogous to the “Copernican revolution” that Kant claimed for his own philosophy: Kant insisted that the human mind does not revolve around reality, but instead reality revolves around the human mind. In modern liberty, the revolution is even more radical, because the human mind, for Kant, is at least compelled by reason; the human will, detached from anything that would give it order and form, is compelled by nothing but itself and whatever winds happen to be blowing through it at any given moment.

In this open sea of possibility, even God becomes, finally, an option. This view of God arrives historically in stages: first, instead of a simple recognition of God’s entry into history in the incarnation, as the Son of Man, an incarnation extended through space and time in the Church, as the Body of Christ, we have a variety of apparently irreconcilable interpretations of that history, which imply a variety of interpretations of Christ and therefore ultimately a variety of interpretations of the nature of God himself. We have grown so accustomed to taking what we call “religious pluralism” for granted as an indisputable fact, a rock-bottom given, that we are no longer astonished by this, as we might be if we were told each individual person has his own solar system. We are no longer capable of seeing what is implied here and what is at stake. This is a “possibilizing” of God, and therefore of everything else, as we will see in a moment. The assertion of a fundamental religious pluralism gets radicalized historically beyond the political arrangement of *cuius regio, eius religio*, and then beyond the toleration for all Christian

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denominations within a nation (except, interestingly, Catholics), and becomes in the most Western of Western Civilization finally a matter of personal preference. Relation to God is no longer something into which one is born, as a member of a community, but becomes instead the result of a deliberate act of will, which we now identify as our most cherished freedom. So conceived, God—God!—stands before us as nothing more than a possibility, which we actualize, which is to say which we make real, make effective, make genuinely meaningful, through our choice. God is thus subject in the end to human power, which is another way of saying that human power—as open, indeterminate potency—is supreme, the one and only absolute.

Now, to say this would seem to aggrandize human freedom beyond all measure, but I want to suggest that this appearance turns out to be a deception. In reality, this absolutizing of human freedom turns out to be a radical trivializing of it. To make freedom in the first place a matter of potency, power, or possibility, in the manner we have been describing, is to separate it fundamentally from the real. This, in a nutshell, is what I mean by “freedom from reality.” The things that make up reality, the concrete realities of our day-to-day lives, which define us, give us our unique identity, and locate us at a particular time and a particular place in history, are all limited by their very nature. If we think of freedom as a stepping outside of these natural boundaries, and therefore outside of these concrete realities, so as to have power over them, to turn them into options, freedom appears to cast aside all restrictions. It presents itself as essentially unlimited. On one, admittedly superficial, level, this is, no doubt, exhilarating: one gets a thrill standing before apparently open horizons. But, note, as we are coming to see in our reflections, the very thing that makes freedom unlimited makes it unreal. The promise of power invariably turns out to be an empty one.

An anecdote: after college, my brother and I shared an apartment, and my brother was working at the time for a small start-up company, which was quite interesting and seemed to have some potential, but the founder of the company was not an altogether honest guy. Like many small start-ups at their beginnings, the company had some cash-flow problems, which meant that, at one point, my brother went a couple of months without a

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paycheck in spite of the extra hours he was putting in. Since he and I were sharing the rent, this of course made me as nervous as he was, and I finally persuaded my brother to confront the boss and insist that he get paid, or else he would be forced to find a different job. When my brother returned from work that evening, he was beaming with satisfaction. I was relieved. “So, I guess he paid you after all?” “No,” my brother answered. “Then why do you look so happy?” “Because he gave me a raise.” This was the boss’s cheapest solution to the problem, and the irony is that the bigger the raise, the less likely it would be that my brother would ever see any money. The “potential” increased precisely at the cost of the reality. It seems to me that this rather diabolical irony lies at the heart of what we typically imagine in the modern world to be freedom.

If we had more time, we could reflect on all sorts of examples—like the many studies in psychology that reveal that the multiplication of options often paralyzes choice—but we will have to content ourselves with a basic instance, which I think carries a special symbolic value. In an opinion written for the 1992 Supreme Court case *Casey vs. Planned Parenthood*, Justice Kennedy rather infamously claimed that “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” On the surface, this definition of freedom seems to grant us an extraordinary, an unprecedented, power, but the briefest reflection deflates this impression immediately. Unlimited potency turns out to be perfect unreality. If we all have freedom in the sense Kennedy proposes, which is to say if we all have the power to determine the meaning of existence, then this can only mean that we cannot determine the meaning of existence in any objective or real sense that would bear on the lives of others people. We can only determine the meaning for ourselves, or in other words we can determine only our own subjective interpretations—or, even more accurately, our feelings about reality. But even this is not really true. If we determine the meaning of reality even just for ourselves, in any definitive way, in a way that gives it abiding significance, a meaning that is no longer simply up to my choice but represents a kind of claim on me, I no longer have freedom. To be free, I have to be able to change the meaning of existence whenever I want. But this means I can never really change it at all. Real change cannot have any significance for me. Freedom

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as the power to determine the meaning of existence is in fact the total incapacity to determine the meaning of existence. This absolute power is no power at all. It is unreal, empty, an illusion, in fact an illusion that grows more unreal the more it is absolutized. This completely unreal freedom puts up no resistance to the increasingly tyrannical imposition of rules and regulations that we have grown accustomed to in the contemporary world. In fact, it requires this imposition, because as pure, empty power, freedom is nothing in itself, and so can have only as much effective force in the public sphere as the government can devise for it. It is no surprise that, in our culture, we witness at the very same time the most extreme claims made on behalf of freedom and the most astonishing disregard, or even contempt, for its reality. It is no surprise, because all of this is logically implied in the revolution the notion of freedom underwent in the rise of the modern world.

So, what are we to do about this? What response is required of us? While a radical critique, a diagnosis that says the problem lies not just in this or that fact, this or that behavior, but in the very foundation of our thinking and doing, in the heart of our conception of man and so in our very being human, would seem to make things hopeless, it is actually a cause for hope in a deep sense. We mount a retreat from reality, and attempt to protect ourselves in shells of delusion, but we can't help but fail. Reality never retreats from us. As Charles Péguy has so beautifully shown us, hope is relentless. And this is because reality, and the human heart that responds to it, is relentless. The very self-undermining character of modern liberty, the self-aggrandizement that invariably proves to be a trivializing, is a source of hope. Recognizing this triviality breaks the spell it otherwise might have on us. But it also entails a task—one that is not first a political program (although in fact it has profound political and economic implications), but essentially concrete. It begins, as they say, in the home, which is where we all first encounter reality. The classical sense of freedom, as I have described it, roots freedom in the givenness of reality, which it recognizes as a gift, a reflection of the generosity of the Creator, and so which invites us in, so to speak, through its beauty and goodness, the splendor of its truth. Whereas the modern conception of freedom would encourage us to protect ourselves from the claims of beauty, goodness, and truth, to enhance our self-

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determining power by detaching most basically from the real, the classical sense would bring us to intensify our relationship to what is actually given to us in the world in which we find ourselves. The key to freedom, from this perspective, is not the abstract multiplication of options, but education, that is, the deepening of our receptive understanding and the formation of our love and affections. Our free acts are best understood as the offspring, so to speak, of our love of the good. Plato, long ago, memorably described the purpose of love as “begetting and giving birth in the beautiful.” I want to suggest that what is begotten in beauty is precisely our freedom. Our acts are all the freer the more they spring from a passionate and comprehensive love of the good, and such a love remains available to us at any moment in history and in any culture. How fresh, and genuinely spontaneous are the acts of people in whom we recognize such a love compared to the stale tedium of the rational pursuit of self-interest that we take for granted as the standard engine of modern society. A society that is in fact governed by self-interest will be one that lacks the capacity to recognize genuine freedom and so *ipso facto* lacks the resources to foster and protect it, to enable it to flourish.

“We are not our own,” said the Canadian philosopher George Grant, which is to say, we are not first abstract choosers that determine the meaning that things will have for us, and even the meaning of our own existence. We are rather part of something larger than ourselves. The hope of freedom lies in communities that cultivate a love for beauty and goodness. Msgr. Albacete, in whose honor we gather tonight, often spoke movingly of the “human passion for freedom.” This passion, this profound desire, will not be satisfied by the mere multiplication of options. What fills it, instead, is belonging, having our proper place in a genuine, and generous, order, being a member of a community that helps us to see what is real and discern the profound goodness that lies in it, a goodness that is truly for us, that will enable us to flourish in freedom, even in those places where, left to our own devices as isolated individuals, as mere abstract “choosers,” we would see only hardship and suffering. This passion finds fulfillment, for example, in love of the natural world in its given beauty, of which Wendell Berry wrote in a poem, “For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” It is finally most at home in the Church, which is a city that, as

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again Péguy observed, includes sinners as well as saints. It remains real, and abides present, no matter what illusions we may harbor and cast upon ourselves and others. This ultimate freedom is a blood kinship that exists at a more fundamental level than any possible failure, because this blood that ties us together was shed on our behalf by the God-Man, who, as St. Paul said, came to “set us free for freedom” (Galatians 5:1).

Matera: Thank you very much, Dr. Schindler! I now have the privilege of inviting to the stage Father José Medina, the National Coordinator of Communion and Liberation in the U.S., who will ask a few questions to Dr. Schindler and moderate the Q&A session.

Medina: I have a few very simple questions. I want to read to you a few of the things that you’ve written about. I think it can help all of us understand even more deeply what you’ve been talking about. In your book *Freedom from Reality*, you identify liberty with morality. You say, “Virtue is most basically self-control, which means the power to determine oneself.” I was struck by this and how you relate it to a Lockean sense of freedom, freedom as potency, as possibility. This is the definition of virtue that is most used even in religious settings. Can you speak a bit about this?

Schindler: This is another instance of a word, the meaning of which has changed fundamentally, dramatically. And yet, because it’s the same word, we tend to miss the change. The classical sense of virtue is excellence. Virtue is the capacity to pursue and attain what is noble, what is good and beautiful. It involves a being moved by some genuine good or beautiful thing that draws the whole of me, and includes the whole of me. So this classical sense of virtue always involves the whole person. In the modern sense, precisely in tandem with this transformation of the meaning of freedom, virtue no longer means a being moved by the good, but has been reduced to self-control. So when Locke talks about virtue, he means the power that I have over myself. It has the same logic that Max Weber sees in the accumulation of capital, money as an abstraction. In the modern morality, we have a tendency to think of virtue as an accumulation of power that we have over ourselves, and we simply assume that this is a Christian virtue, but it’s so radically contrary to the Christian spirit. Essentially it’s

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heretical, to put it in classical terms, to the extent that my virtue is my self-control; I'm in my own hands. And if I'm in my own hands, I'm not in the hands of God.

It's important to pay attention to this shift in meaning because the same word has radically different meanings, but we'll have people who will point to the language of virtue in some of these early modern thinkers, and present that as somehow defending this whole tradition, but they are not defending the same thing. It's dangerous. It serves to cut at the core, at the root of the tradition that was essential to freedom in the Christian tradition.

Medina: You thought about the same thing from the point of view of the word desire. Can you speak to that?

Schindler: This is a topic that I am especially interested in. In the modern world, we take for granted that desire is something selfish. One of the best books that expresses that was a profoundly influential book by Anders Nygren called *Agape and Eros*. He presented *Eros* desire as essentially selfish, and proposed in contrast to that an altruistic sense of *Agape*. But the problem is that it's a complete misunderstanding of what desire is. As I explained in the talk, we can think of a desire as reality tugging at us. It's setting us in motion. To be fully in motion, we have to involve our free choice. But the setting in motion is something that the good thing, the beautiful, is initiating. And in that respect, desire is not self-centered. It's essentially other-centered because it's precisely the other moving me.

One of the reasons the ancient philosophers were nervous about desire was not because it was selfish, but because they thought that reality was taking too much control over us. Like the stoic, we have a certain tradition of detaching from all desires, but that's not the Christian response. The Christian response is to recognize that desire, in the deepest sense, is God's call. Why is it God's call? Because the movement is initiated into us by the goodness and beauty of the world that he created. There can be a bad interpretation of desire, there can be a bad living of desire, but in its very essence we have to recognize it as a positive thing and as part of our

freedom.

Medina: Is there a connection between an understanding of virtue as self-control, and, in religious circles, the loss of the word desire?

Schindler: Absolutely, perfectly, because if to be virtuous means to be in control of yourself, and if desire means being moved by something outside of yourself, then they become opposites. It becomes the very essence of virtue to silence desires. There's a certain conception of religion, a certain conception of God, that reinforces this movement. So we think of God in an eschatological way; we think of God as in the afterlife, and recognizing that God in the afterlife will reward us for our virtue, that helps us to detach from the desires that are involved in our everyday life, and so we come to use this notion of God as a way of reinforcing power and a false conception of freedom, but we've sort of baptized it with this religious sanction, and I think that's a very dangerous thing. That's something that is very foreign to the classical Christian view of man.

Medina: Then what is the connection between desire and freedom? It seems you have a perception of desire as always positive even if you can lose yourself. What is that connection of desire and freedom then?

Schindler: There are a number of things we can say. Desire is always positive at its foundation. You won't have a desire unless there is something in you asking for what is good. So it's always good in that sense. We can have desires that confuse us in all sorts of ways, but at its heart, it's a request for goodness and beauty. In that sense, if we understand freedom, as I was arguing, in terms of completeness and perfection, this movement that is seeking completeness of oneself is actually a desire for freedom. That becomes especially clear if we connect freedom with belonging, because through our desires we're actually taken up into an order of things that is larger than ourselves. And so there's also that element of being part of a greater whole.

Medina: You spoke about this Lockean sense of freedom related to potency, worried about how to get power, how to act, ability, change—and

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then you mentioned the sense of freedom that comes from the Greeks, that is more in actuality. You spoke a lot about belonging. What else is freedom as understood by the Greeks worried about? What are the words you would use? If it is not power, then what?

Schindler: Instead of power, it's perfection; it's goodness. Goodness is something that's simultaneously satisfaction of desire, but it's also a task. The more we receive the good, the more fruitful we become, so that energizes our generosity towards others, our movement towards others. The book that you're referring to is volume one. It ends with the Greeks. The one I'm working on now is thinking how the Christian context transforms the Greek notion. One of the things we see in the late medieval period is transformation in our conception of God, and so the inherited and Christian-transformed notion of God as unstinting generosity, self-communicating goodness, gets transformed into a God as understood principally as power, as omnipotence. That transformation happens in nominalism, and provides a perfect instance of this opposition. So instead of self-communicative goodness, you get power that imposes itself from without.

How does goodness move us? In a way, it is imposing on us because it's presenting something to us that we don't have yet, but it moves us precisely by enabling us to move ourselves. It reaches into us and moves us. That's a free relation, whereas power imposes from the outside and that provokes an attempt to become free in this false sense of detachment.

Medina: In this polarity between potency and actuality, you also use two terms: the diabolical and the symbolical. I would love to hear something about that.

Schindler: I wish we had a whole other evening for this one. Those are etymological opposites, the words *symbol* and *diabol*. Symbol means, in Greek, a joining together, a uniting, a bringing together. Diabol means a setting apart, a setting at odds. It struck me that it captures in essence this evolution that I was attempting to describe. The classical cosmos had a deeply symbolical sense. The things that move us by their goodness and

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beauty, connect us to each other, connect us to ourselves; they connect us to God; they insert us in the political order, and so forth. So there's an essentially unifying movement in the symbol. And, of course, what's the paradigmatic symbol that unifies us when we all partake? The Eucharist. The diabolical, then, are the very things that we associate with freedom. Rather than deeply uniting us to each other, these things precisely separate us. The very meaning of freedom is being separate from others so that I can have a certain control, and that is a diabolical movement. What do we associate with the diabolical? We associate deception; we associate a kind of self-subversion. And I think all these elements enter into that conception of freedom when you begin to think through its implications. So that's a beginning of a response.

Medina: What I love very much about your talk and the book is that I perceive that you have a sincere desire to reconnect modern freedom with its origin, its root. In your book, you write, "A response to a cultural crisis must always first take the form of a grateful affirmation of what is given." What is the positive in Lockean freedom, and how are we reconnected?

Schindler: When you start thinking through these problems, your first reaction, ironically, might be to reject and separate yourself from this culture. That's precisely the wrong move because it's this movement of separation and trying to protect yourself by withdrawing. If, in fact, it is the case that our freedom is a response to what is given, we are given the modern world, the world in which we live, and a simple reaction to it is not going to be adequate. So we need to first be grateful about what we receive. In the Lockean sense of freedom, what do you have there? I don't especially like the forms it takes in Locke; he's a bit of a slippery character, but there are other modern authors that show forth the genuine creativity. There is a sense of possibility that we have in the modern world that the ancients didn't have. It's a precious thing. If it does bring a certain satisfaction and thrill to us to experience possibility, that's responding to something that we desire so there has got to be something positive there. The key is to root these modern developments back into the tradition. Rather than interpreting them as a separation from the tradition, root them back into the tradition. Recognize the beauty of possibility, but recognize it as the

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fruit of our real relationships, the fruit of our possession of the good. That can liberate a kind of creativity that goes far beyond what would have been recognized in the classical tradition.

The great German Catholic philosopher, Robert Spaemann said that the point is not to reject modernity, but to interpret modernity against itself. The early modern thinkers precisely presented themselves as breaking with everything that they received. That's very explicit in Descartes, for instance. And that we can't accept. There's nothing good about rejecting what we've received. But it seems to me that we can see some of the fruits that came through these efforts that were always better than what the authors themselves understood, and rediscover the roots because the tradition is inescapable, and that promises to bear much more fruit, so effectively the first movement is a positive, affirmative one.

Medina: My favorite piece from the book is in chapter six, in between this study that you do of Locke and the Greeks, the potency and the actuality that you spoke about, where you say, "Liberation is most basically a reawakening to a rootedness in reality so that truth, goodness, and beauty can become effective in us." And you say that "coming to understand freedom is not just a necessary condition for the effort to become free, but properly understood, it is already itself an essential act of freedom. Understanding freedom and being free are all but inseparable from one another." I think that the last part of your talk tonight was very much related to this, but even if it was not, I would love for you to comment on this, that "understanding freedom and being free are all but inseparable from one another."

Schindler: There's a lot that's packed in those sentences. One of the implications of the separation of reason and freedom that I talked about is that reason becomes something purely conceptual, intellectual, abstract, and then freedom becomes some empty and indeterminate power. When we start talking about these problems in the culture, we tend to take for granted some form of that dualism that Msgr. Albacete protested against. There's a dualism there. One of the expressions of that dualism is that we say, "Okay, understanding things is fine. That has its place, but what we

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really need to do is act. We need to make a difference. We need to make a change.” That’s precisely what I’m criticizing—this sense of freedom as acting, making a change. Understanding is a fundamentally receptive act. If we simply come to understand what the problem is, that’s not just the first step. A profound, a deep understanding of a problem is already a connection to the goodness precisely in the form of recognizing how it’s being betrayed in some way, but that connecting to that goodness is itself liberating. It’s starting to sound a little mystical, but I think we all have that experience. Say we have personal problems, some difficulties in our lives that we’re trying to figure out, and we speak to a friend, and the friend explains exactly why we’re feeling a certain way, and what’s going on, and if what that friend says to us is true, we experience it as liberating, just hearing that proper interpretation that we didn’t have, that clarification of what was confusing to us, we experience that as liberating. Why? Because it’s an affirmation. We now understand, and in our understanding we’re receiving the good in some way. So it’s not just a first step on the way to being free, but in a certain sense, it’s the point. And that’s why philosophy is so important. Philosophy is about becoming free. It’s not just an abstract exercise of the mind. It’s about becoming free.

Medina: Listening to you tonight, it’s as if you had a perception of reality, or a perception of real things—people, circumstances—with the capacity to actually communicate, attract, fascinate, and we with our incapacity to actually “hear” reality is what is being missed in the modern world. Is that true?

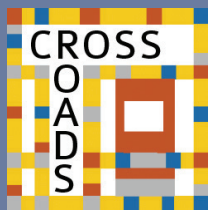
Schindler: Yes. I think it’s because we are impoverishing what we mean by reason, we’re impoverishing what we mean by desire, we’ve impoverished what we mean by freedom and what we mean by love. And that’s why the response is not a moralistic one—we need to try harder, we need to do certain things. The very first thing we need to do is come to a more profound understanding, re-enrich our understanding of what these fundamental human realities are.

Medina: So then, what conception of morality do you have? If morality is not self-control, is not to act according to a rule, and it has to do with

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desire, what conception of reality is born out of this?

Schindler: This might sound naïve, but this is what Plato implied, and the Greek philosopher Plotinus said more or less explicitly. Virtue is nothing more than falling in love with a good. In Christian terms we could say falling in love with God. That seems sentimental, but that's because we tend to have a sentimental understanding of what love is. If we understand what that really means, it includes everything that we would want to say about what virtue is. But the key is that virtue now is allowing God, allowing the good, to be effective in me, to bear fruit in me, so that my actions now carry a weight that is much greater than I individually could give them.



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