

LUIGI GIUSSANI
GIOVANNI TESTORI



THE MEANING
OF BIRTH

foreword by
ROWAN WILLIAMS

The genius of Fr. Giussani—who had an uncanny ability to speak directly to the human heart and open it to the mystery of God—stands out clearly in his encounters with other searchers. This particular encounter sets before us a number of human realities and gives each of them an extraordinarily dramatic depth and urgency: birth, death, freedom, memory, pain, redemption, sacrifice, and hope.

—D.C. Schindler
Author of *The Politics of the Real*

For Giussani and Testori, the stakes could not be higher: either we as a culture will begin to recall where we came from and thus rediscover the meaning of our lives, or we will turn our faces and walk away from the source of all love. Toward the end of this brief but powerful little book, I found myself moved to tears.

—Paula Huston
Author of *The Hermits of Big Sur*

Two men sit down to carry on a discussion of the meaning of hope in the context of birth and what it means...and the result is a white-fiery explosion of theological and psychological insight. The truth is: I was blown away by this exchange.

—Paul Mariani
Author of *Ordinary Time*

Perhaps now more than ever before we need this profound, prophetic book which shows us how to deal with the “forgetfulness of being loved” in the light of the “catalytic encounter with a human presence” made possible in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

—Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P.
Founding editor-in-chief of *Magnificat*

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introduction by
Giuseppe Frangi

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S L I. N T
B O O K S

THE MEANING OF BIRTH

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FOREWORD

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to recognize yourself—or any other being—as a person? It's a question that comes up in all sorts of different contexts, from debates about the unborn child to animal rights to issues in the development of artificial intelligence, and the answers are chaotically diverse. But in this book we have an answer that is genuinely startling and distinctive, with the broadest implications. We are not invited to think about what morally or intellectually interesting qualities something needs in order to count as a person; instead, we are reminded of a bare physical fact: we were born.

There was a moment when our parents underwent a transitory visitation of self-abandonment and a new material process began, a clustering of cells into a new organic unit. And this cell cluster, as soon as it begins to exist as a definite organic reality, is launched on a process that will inevitably involve a unique relationship to the rest of the physical world—a story, a destiny, a set of memories and hopes, a way of speaking and seeing.

Life was begun *for* us, not *by* us. It was given us, in the shape of this cell cluster; a literal physical place was made for us, and this is why and how we are persons. We grasp the reality of our personal nature by acknowledging

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that we have been given life, that we are always *someone's child*. If we are blessed, that recognition remains a point of reference for us: we know we are loved, that at the beginning of life there was a moment where human self-abandonment allowed God's own act to weave itself into the world's fabric in a wholly fresh way. If we are in any way deprived of that recognition—if our parenting has been indifferent, abusive, repressive, rejecting, if we know that conception itself was marked by cruelty or violence—we are injured at the very root of our being.

But the woundedness of so much of our contemporary culture is less about these extreme and tragic individual injuries and more about the way we are encouraged to forget what it is to acknowledge our dependence, the basic level at which we are receivers of life from elsewhere. We feed ourselves endless fictions about the self-sufficiency we think we long for, we are ashamed of having to receive and depend; we give value and respect to lives that deny this receiving and depending, and dismiss lives that are especially, visibly, dependent—the unborn, the very young and very old, those living with disabilities and limiting conditions. We can't embrace the truth of our own birth, it seems, and we resent those who can—those who have never forgotten that they are children—while at the same time feeling a deep and painful nostalgia for that central conviction that we are *given* life at the hands, ultimately, of a love which simply desires that we exist.

It is this conviction that makes it possible for us not to hate ourselves. If we embrace the truth of our birth, we embrace the fact of our material, organic being—and we embrace the organic physicality of the other, wherever that other's face is shown to us. My recognition of my own birth is inseparable from the recognition of yours;

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what we most deeply have in common is not an abstraction called human nature but the common fact of this material moment of beginning-to-be—being projected into a story and a calling, a set of unimaginably extravagant possibilities. Lose sight of this, and the face of the other begins to blur and recede, just as my own sense of my value and solidity blurs and recedes. I and the other alike become abstract, defined not by the gift of birth but by all those lesser and more localized identities which set us apart from each other.

Abstraction is the enemy repeatedly hauled out into the light of day in the conversation that we are privileged to overhear in this book. We are forcefully reminded that one of the undeniable trends of capitalist and militarist modernity is the disappearance of human faces. You can fight a war without ever seeing the face of your opponent (and this was before the development of drone warfare); you can spend years in the employment of a business without ever seeing the face of an employer or a client (and this was before the development of online retail, electronic banking, zero hours contracts). We can imagine a global catastrophe that is “nobody’s fault” because power has drained away from identifiable human agents into the hands of vastly complex mechanisms and algorithms (these days, the catastrophe of an environmental devastation driven by financial modeling which tells us that it is beyond challenge or change, no less than the risk of global warfare unleashed by impersonal calculations).

As many biblical scholars have said, the “principalities and powers” of the New Testament are for us today the faceless influences that steadily strip away our decisions from us. Resistance is all the harder because they are so intangible; at least in the dreadful totalitarianisms of

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the twentieth century, there was a certain visibility to evil and coercion. How do we learn to resist when we do not even know where the levers are being pulled?

All that our two eloquent dialogists say is if anything more pertinent now than when their conversation took place. The forces of abstraction are stronger, the pressures to deny or forget our dependence are shrill and insistent; and the result is a pervasive feverishness of self-definition and self-protection, struggling to cope with the terrible burden of creating and sustaining who we are by our own resources.

The Psalmist says to God (in the old Anglican translation): “Thou hast set my feet in a large room.” Proclaiming the Gospel of Christ today requires of us as never before not only a clarity about the largeness of the room (that alone can lead to a sense of paralyzing disorientation) but a clarity about the one who “sets our feet” there, who gives us a place to be which we don’t have to earn or justify. If that liberating recognition can pervade our hearts and minds, the ethic of justice, solidarity, compassion, mutual delight and reverence becomes the obvious way of living humanly—living as if we had been born, as if we had been desired, invited, loved.

As it is beautifully put in these pages, this is an ethic of Christmas: the mystery of God’s own self coming to birth among us so that we may at last see and love the dependence we fear or deny and acknowledge in one another the mystery we must look upon with wonder and thanksgiving.

—Rowan Williams

INTRODUCTION

FEBRUARY, 1980. In a beautiful country house on the river Ticino, a few kilometers from Milan, Giovanni Testori and Father Luigi Giussani met each other for a conversation that gave birth to a book. They needed a peaceful place where they could put themselves in front of a tape recorder, and this house was truly a welcoming, ideal spot.

Father Luigi Giussani was the founder of Communion and Liberation (CL), a movement that in those years had seen tremendous growth in Italy, particularly among university students. Giovanni Testori, on the other hand, was a writer, an art critic, and editorialist for the Italian daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*. They had met two years earlier when an article by Testori on the assassination of the Italian politician Aldo Moro had drawn the attention of some university students from CL, who came to meet him personally and then took him to meet Father Giussani.

The understanding between these two men was immediate, helped along by their shared roots in Lombard Catholicism. Testori, in fact, was a writer who, rather than defining himself as a Catholic, described himself as one who had always reckoned with Catholicism deep

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down. His personal path, intense and sometimes brutally dramatic, was turned upside down in 1977 after the death of his mother. The newspapers spoke about his “conversion.” In reality, Testori’s conversion was simply the experience of an encounter: an encounter with those young people about whom he knew nothing and who came knocking on his door. And then, above all, the encounter with Father Giussani: “Giussani was a person who censored absolutely nothing of what I was, not even those parts of me that could have created scandal,” Testori would say, referring also to the fact of his homosexuality.

The son of a family of small Lombard manufacturers, Giovanni Testori was born in 1923 in Novate Milanese, a town just outside Milan. He graduated from the Catholic University of Milan with a degree in art history, with a thesis that was in part also censored by the academic authorities because of its openness to the aesthetic of contemporary art. He was “adopted” by Roberto Longhi, the most important art historian of twentieth century Italian art and a leading scholar of Caravaggio. With Longhi, Testori became one of the principal scholars of Lombard art: we owe to him the rediscovery of the Sacri Monti, those extraordinary artistic monuments which were built starting in 1400 at the foot of the Alps. In the meantime, he debuted as a fiction writer, publishing a successful collection of stories set against the background of a post-war and economically booming Milan. From some of these stories, Luchino Visconti made his most famous film: *Rocco and His Brothers*.

The arc of Testori’s life was very similar to that of the film director Pier Paolo Pasolini: the same generation, the same attachment to their cities of birth or adoption (Milan and Rome), the same freedom in critiquing every

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hypocrisy of religion and church. Above all, Pasolini and Testori were considered intellectually heretical by the official Italian intelligentsia, both progressive and conservative. When Pasolini died in 1975, Testori took over as editor of the front page of *Corriere della Sera*: like Pasolini, Testori was an observer who was not ideological, who went against the tide, not only with particular positions, but above all by choosing to put the human factor at the center of every one of his columns. This anti-intellectual approach unleashed furious polemics against Testori, exactly as it did with Pasolini.

It was these pieces published on the first page of *Corriere della Sera* that drew the attention of a group of young people from CL who studied at Catholic University. From that encounter, a new and important experience was born for Testori, one that would also have consequences in the arts. His impassioned engagement with young people was to be centered in the theater. Together with Emanuele Banterle, then a student at Catholic University, and the Company of the Ark, created by a few students from Forli, he staged a production of his text, *Interrogatorio a Maria (Interview with Mary)*, which had more than 500 productions throughout Italy. In the summer of 1980, it was performed at Castel Gandolfo for Pope John Paul II. Together with Banterle, and with one of the most famous Italian actors, Franco Branciaroli, he founded a theater company, Gli Incamminati (Those En Route), destined over the years to become an important presence in the national theater scene.

At the beginning of 1980, Giovanni Testori asked Father Luigi Giussani to meet for a discussion that could be turned into a book. It was not a simple or obvious idea. Testori, the famous writer, humbly and attentively

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followed this priest who was not only popular among young people, but always in conversation with the great thinkers of the past. For Father Giussani, "*The Meaning of Birth* signaled in some ways a turning point in the history of CL," as the journalist Lucio Brunelli wrote in his introduction to the reprinting of the book, published as a supplement to the weekly *Il Sabato* in 1982.

In what way was it a turning point? Brunelli explained: "Its newness does not come so much from the judgments that Giussani expresses. Those of us who had the fortune to participate, starting in 1976, in the meetings for the leaders of Communion and Liberation had already heard these things. The newness comes from the fact that for the first time, and without mediation, these ideas became a public fact. It was a break with the schemes that pigeon-holed a certain image of CL." The book, in fact, "made possible by the intellectual courage of Testori," was put out by the principal publisher in Italy, Rizzoli, and so was destined for a much broader public.

This innovative fact detailed by Brunelli shows up in the dialogue itself: *The Meaning of Birth* dismantles an image of CL that was maliciously elaborated by the mainstream media. In other words, the image of a movement of "crusaders," of "fundamentalist troops" who move only in reaction to the attacks of the secular enemy (Brunelli). CL was boxed in by the strategies of the ideological opposition, who depicted it as the advance guard of a Catholicism in search of a new cultural and social hegemony. Instead, Giussani profited from this public occasion to clarify his thought with words that still move us by their precision: "This is the time of the rebirth of personal awareness. It is as if we can no longer make

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organized crusades or movements. A movement is born with the reawakening of the person.”

This quote brings us to a fuller understanding of the book’s title. The “birth” to which he refers is the birth of the person. Father Giussani says: “Paradoxically, the little David of a liberated person stands up against the Goliath of the state, which is the powerful instrument of the mechanism that destroys man. For me, this is the sign of the times for Christians.... It is on this fragility, this ultimate weakness of the truth, that the power of God inserts itself with its promise.... This is how the concept of a ‘movement’ is born...the ideal of a movement, which exists as if it did not have head or tail—we don’t know how it happens. In fact, the birth of this movement happens in the most inexperienced and unarmed particle that exists: that is, the person.”

Testori himself, in dialogue with Giussani, gives witness to his own personal “birth.” At a certain point in the dialogue he reveals that he has lived Christianity like an undesired stain “stamped on my forehead,” almost like a mark that he cursed. “You were like a child locked in the basement,” explains Giussani—that is, with an interior life that was chained and frightened. “But, in such conditions, no one in the house could sit by calmly,” Giussani goes on to underscore. That is, his condition could not be extraneous to us, it could not but trouble our hearts as well. In the dynamic between this question and its answer, Testori relives the moment from two years earlier, when he felt himself welcomed by Giussani and, as those who witnessed it say, he could not keep back his tears. The meaning of birth is not something that we acquire once and for all; it is a question that remains

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always open, as we entrust ourselves at every moment to the One who loves us.

Giovanni Testori died on 16 March 1993. For years he had followed the life of CL with great passion and freedom. Thanks to their relationship with him, dozens of young people were able to gain clarity and find their own personal path in life. This was a dynamic that Father Giussani remembered, with sorrow, when he celebrated the funeral of Testori in the parish of his hometown, Novate Milanese. “And so you became the father of these young people, who in their confusion and impotence (in Italian, *sperdutezza*, a key word in this book), they found in you a point of reference, just like you found a point of reference in them, a point of hope in them. ‘They came!’ you said, and you surprised those who heard you. ‘They came!’ But who? Those glimpses, those moments of hope, for your eyes and your heart; and you threw yourself into relationship with them, and created everything in relationship with them, and so you ‘recreated’ them. What deep thanks they give you now!” *The Meaning of Birth* is a book that in the true sense of the word has borne fruit in new life.

—Giuseppe Frangi