

[First published in 1987.]

MORALITY: MEMORY AND DESIRE

By LUIGI GIUSSANI

Translated by K.D. WHITEHEAD

Ignatius Press, 1986 [now out of print].

Reviewed by GREGORY WOLFE

The publication of *Morality: Memory and Desire*, by Msgr. Luigi Giussani, is an event of some importance for American Catholics. For in addition to the book's value as a penetrating discussion of the spirituality of the moral life, it is also an opportunity to learn more about a leader in the Church who until now has been little known outside of Europe.

Over thirty years ago, Fr. Giussani came to the realization that the youth of Italy were losing their faith because they felt that Christianity had very little to do with the business of life. It was then that he realized that his vocation was to show that the faith should permeate every facet of our daily lives, that the Church should be a presence in the world, witnessing to the kingdom of Christ.

What began as a small movement known as Student Youth has now become *Comunione e Liberazione* (Communion and Liberation or CL), a lay movement in the Church consisting of tens of thousands of Catholics who pray and study together and who are involved with the cultural and political life of Europe.

The words "Communion and Liberation" may sound suspiciously like the motto of a liberation theology group, but they reflect the spiritual wisdom of Msgr. Giussani. He has rescued these concepts from co-optation by the secularists and restored them to their primary, Christian meaning. Instead of collectivism and salvation through political revolution, CL proclaims that in Christ and His Church man finds true unity and freedom.

This background is directly relevant to the message of *Morality: Memory and Desire*. Like his mentor, Romano Guardini, Msgr. Giussani has the ability to write about profound theological matters in an eminently practical and lucid manner. Though morality as such may not be popular in a relativistic age, nonetheless, as writers like Joseph Sobran and Paul Johnson have shown, most people are driven by notions of "social justice" that are to some extent an expression of a moral urge. Msgr. Giussani recognizes this, and in this book he shows that morality is neither relativism nor ideology, but a personal encounter with Christ and an attempt to be faithful to His words and deeds.

In writing that is reminiscent of St. Augustine, Msgr. Giussani argues that our encounter with Christ must be rooted in fidelity to the Fact of his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. But just where one might again suspect his argument of being highly individualistic, he brilliantly demonstrates that memory and desire find their perfect enactment in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. In short, it is in the Church—grounded in an awareness of sin and the need for prayer and penance—that we find memory and desire focused on the Savior.

Like all great spiritual writers Msgr. Giussani knows how to bring to life what has been taken for granted. But he is also acutely aware of the conflict between the Church and the world at the present time. “The saints,” he writes, “are those who discern the plan of God in the world, that is, the presence of Christ; and, within this divine framework, seek to work for the good of humanity in accordance with humanity’s profound and authentic destiny. All ideologies, on the contrary, are erected on the basis of violence and scandal. The true novelty in the world is the peaceful and quiet miracle that is wrought in every person who risks everything within the framework of ecclesial life.”

The tenor of Msgr. Giussani’s thought is extremely close to the Christian personalism of Pope John Paul II, and it should be no surprise that the Holy Father has strongly endorsed the work of CL, calling it to evangelize the decadent and post-Christian West. There are now several CL communities in the United States. As a lay movement that seeks to restore all things in Christ, it embodies the true spirit of Vatican II. *Morality: Memory and Desire* is an invaluable elaboration and restatement of this mission.