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The response to the extremists

The Challenge of True Dialogue after the Attacks in Paris

by **Julián Carrón**

Testimony. *In order to remain a space of freedom, Europe must host the encounter between different proposals for responding to each person’s quest for meaning. It is an opportunity for everyone, Christians included.*

Dear Editor,

Since the events in Paris happened, there has been a great deal of discussion; nobody has been spared a sense of bewilderment or fear. The numerous analyses offered have brought forth interesting points for reflecting on and understanding such a complex phenomenon. But a month later, now that the routine of daily life has taken over again, what remains? What can keep these disturbing events from rapidly being erased from our memory? To help us remember, it is necessary to discover the true nature of the challenge posed by the Paris attacks.

We Europeans have what our forebears desired: Europe as a space of freedom where each person can be what she or he wants. The Old Continent has become a crucible of the most varied cultures, religions and visions of the world.

The events of Paris document how this space of freedom should not be taken for granted as self-perpetuating: it can be threatened by those who fear freedom and are willing to impose their own vision of things with violence. What response is required for such a threat? It will be necessary to defend this space with all the legal and political means possible, starting from dialogue with the Arab nations disposed to impede a disaster that would hurt them as well, and to build a juridical framework that guarantees authentic religious freedom for all. But this is not enough, and the reason is obvious. Those who carried out the massacre in Paris did not come from abroad; they were second generation immigrants, born in Europe, educated and formed as European citizens, as a great many others who have long dwelt in our countries. It is a phenomenon *in fieri*, in virtue of the constant flows of migration and the demographic growth of the populations who reach here from all parts of the world, driven by hardship and poverty.

For this reason, the problem is primarily within Europe and the most important part is played here at home. The true challenge is cultural, its terrain daily life. When those who abandon their homelands arrive here in search of a better life, when their children are born and become adults in the West, what do they see? Can they find something able to attract their humanity, to challenge their reason and their freedom? The same problem exists for our children: do we have something to offer them that speaks to their search for fulfilment and meaning? In many young people who have grown up in the so-called Western world there reigns a great nothingness, a profound void that constitutes the origin of the desperation that ends up in violence. Just think of the Europeans who go to fight in the ranks of terroristic formations, or of the lost and disoriented life of many young people of our cities. This corrosive void, this far-spreading nothingness, requires a response.

In front of the events of Paris it is sterile to mount opposition in the name of an idea, no matter how right it may be. We have learned after a long journey that the only way to truth is through freedom. Therefore, we have decided to reject the violence that has marked moments of our past. Today none of us nurtures the dream of responding to the challenge of the other with the imposition of a truth, whatever it may be. For us, Europe is a space of freedom; this does not mean an empty space, void of proposals for life, because nothing can live off of nothingness. Nobody can stand, have a constructive relationship with reality, without something that makes life worth living, without a hypothesis of meaning.

So then, this is the true element that will decide the future of Europe: whether she will finally be the place of a real encounter between proposals of meaning, different and numerous as they may be, as happened for centuries in some countries of the Middle East where different cultures and religions were able to live in peace, but now where Christians are forced to abandon their homeland because the situation has made their life impossible. In this way, however, the problem is not resolved, only shifted aside.

Now the verification for Europe begins. Space for freedom means space for saying in front of everyone, individually or together, who we are. Each makes available for everyone their vision and their way of living. This sharing will enable us to encounter each other on the basis of the real experience of each person, and not on ideological stereotypes that make dialogue impossible. As Pope Francis said, "Dialogue begins with encounter. The first knowledge of the other is born from it. Indeed, if one begins from the premise of the common affiliation in human nature, one can go beyond prejudices and fallacies and begin to understand the other according to a new perspective."

This historical situation offers an exceptional opportunity to everyone, Christians included. Europe can constitute a great space for us, space for the testimony of a changed life, full of meaning, capable of embracing that which is different and of awakening its humanity with gestures rich in generosity.

Inviting all Christians to nurture the desire for testimony, Pope Francis underlined that "in this way alone can the liberating message of the love of God and the salvation that Christ offers be proposed in its strength, beauty and simplicity. One can only move forward in this way, with an attitude of respect for people." Do we Christians still believe in the capacity of the faith we have received to attract those we encounter, and in the living fascination of its disarming beauty?

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