Opinion



Fr. Julián Carrón, a Spanish priest who is leader of the worldwide Catholic lay ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation, addresses the congregation at the end of Mass Jan. 15 during the New York Encounter in New York City. Encounter is an annual three-day cultural festival featuring lectures, panel discussions, art exhibits, photo galleries and music. The event is organized by Communion and Liberation. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Michael Sean Winters

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JULIÁN CARRÓN

Disarming Beauty

ESSAYS ON FAITH, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

The only way to truth is through freedom. History is the space of dialogue in 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.

Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth and Freedom
Julián Carrón
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Fr. Julián Carrón has led the Communion and Liberation movement since 2005 when the movement's founder, Msgr. Luigi Giussani, died. Carron's new book, *Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth and Freedom*, is at once splendid and frustrating. And, in this regard, it is faithful to the style of Giussani's many books which could stop me dead in my tracks with insights and inspiration and also leaving me scratching my head.

A confession: I have a soft spot for Communion and Liberation. I was introduced to them by Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete who served as chaplain to the movement in the United States for many years. When I found a head-scratching claim in one of Giussani's books, Lorenzo could explain it to me, but Lorenzo has gone to God and I had to work my way through *Disarming Beauty* on my own.

An observation: Part of Giussani's great insights was that in our modern technocratic age, we had to relish the fact that there is Mystery at the heart of our experience, that there is Mystery at the heart of our faith in Jesus Christ, and that this experience of Mystery was, in fact, a confirmation of the Incarnation, not a difficulty. So, it should not surprise that sometimes the writings of both Giussani and Carrón seem opaque.

But let's start with the gems. Chapter 5 opens with the arresting question once posed by Dostoevsky: "Can one believe while being civilized, i.e. a European?, believe without reservation in the divine nature of Jesus Christ, the Son of God?" It is a question that is too easy to ignore. At a time when religious fanaticism perpetrates the grossest offenses against humankind, it takes courage to posit that our Christian faith is reasonable *only* if it is "without reservation."

Yet, Carrón is no culture warrior or religious fanatic. After a few pages of unpacking the claim, and noting the changed, secularized culture of today, he writes, "we need to find a way of living the faith, within this social reality and pluralistic culture, such that others can perceive our presence not as something to defend themselves from, but as a contribution to the common good and their own personal good. We need a way of being present without a will to dominate or oppress, and at the same time

with a commitment to living the faith in reality, in order to show the human benefit of belonging to Christ." The phrase "human benefit" would sound suspiciously utilitarian coming from some writers, but not Carrón: Here he is expounding another essential Communion and Liberation charism, the proposition that faith must be reasonable or it is insulting to expect people to believe it.

Like the great theologians and founders of the *Communio* project – Balthasar, de Lubac and Ratzinger – Carrón and Communion and Liberation stand on the claim that Christianity is an event. "Christianity is a fact, an event, not a doctrine," writes Carrón. "It is enough just to read a page of the gospel in order to realize this, to recognize its vast distance from any purely notional conception of Christianity." This insight became a part of the magisterial teaching of the church most clearly in *Deus Caritas Est*, where Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." The reduction of Christianity to a checklist of ideas is a reduction that deforms the faith.

So, too, is the reduction of Christianity to a set of ethical norms. "Another, equally common error is the reduction of Christianity to ethics, to values," writes Carron. "It is an old temptation: St. Augustine already rebuked the Pelagians for it. 'This is the hidden and horrid poison of your heresy: you want the grace of Christ to consist in his example, not in his gift.'" Carron offers a brief historical reflection on how this reduction manifested itself in recent years, but I would encourage him and other ~~CL~~ Communion and Liberation leaders to be more clear about citing contemporary examples so that the indictment is less notional. If it is a "horrid heresy" let's not beat around the bush in confronting it.

Another splendid quality that this book shares with Giussani's is the wide range of cultural references. I cannot think of a book about our Catholic faith that I have read in the last few years that contains more citations to works of literature and poetry. The artist can sometimes achieve what a theologian, bound to a more systematic approach, cannot attain, a sense of lived faith, inculturated faith, a faith that vibrantly creates beauty and shines the artist's light on truth.

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I have two major criticisms of the Communion and Liberation approach, much in evidence in these pages. The first is the repeated employment of the word "total" to describe our desires and their fulfillment. Reflecting on the questions that arise from a candid reflection on our experience, Carrón writes, "The second characteristic of these questions, then, is that they are inexhaustible, they have within them a need for totality. … They require a total answer, an answer which covers the entire horizon of reason, exhausting completely the whole 'category of possibility.'" If there is one word that should give us pause, having survived the 20th century, it is the word "total." Carrón must be alert to the danger given the wide cultural perspective he brings to his writing. Why not take a moment and explain why, in this context, the word is not dangerous, or what other factors in Christian life, such as its complicatedness, or the equally inexhaustible capacity of us Christians to get things wrong, might minimize the dangerousness of the human instinct for totality.

The second is like the first: The cultural sophistication Carrón brings to discussions of human experience fail him when he turns his attention to the issue of human freedom. Commenting on the parable of the Prodigal, and his choice to leave his father's home, Carrón observes, "The absence of constraints begins to show its true face: loneliness." And, two pages later, he writes, "We feel free when we see a desire fulfilled. Freedom becomes experience in the satisfaction of a desire."

It is true that a negative conception of freedom, a freedom from, ultimately proves inadequate for Christian anthropology. But, it is also true that we do experience freedom as a boot lifted from our necks. Carron and other Communion and Liberation thinkers need to wrestle more seriously with the insights of the great liberal thinkers, such as Isaiah Berlin, and less with those who unreflective embrace of a culture of choice does indeed lead to loneliness and alienation.

This inability to recognize the truth within a liberal conception of freedom would be more worrisome to me if I had not so long experienced the charism of Communion and Liberation. They really are committed to the experience of those they encounter, awash in the consequences of the doctrine — and event — of the Incarnation that they reject nothing authentically human a priori. They are not people who are out to manipulate or impose. Still, as an intellectual proposition, the liberal conception of freedom must be engaged with greater attention and seriousness.

Lorenzo Albacete once described Communion and Liberation to me as "Opus Dei for lazy people." It was a joke. There is nothing lazy in Carrón's book. My few reservations notwithstanding, the book confirms my impression of the movement as a fruitful expression of the Christian faith in our time, loyal to the church and equally loyal to the human experiences of those like me who struggle, and often fail, to be true to our Christian vocation. This is no cheap apologetics. *Disarming Beauty* is a work of evangelization for our time, a Christian witness that resists despair and recognizes the humanity of Christ in the humanity of His followers. It is not an easy read, and it is sometimes unclear. But in most of its pages, a fervent but unfanatic faith shines through.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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