

What the New York Encounter taught me about faith, art and friendship

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During my first trip to the [New York Encounter](#) seven years ago, Pakistani Christian Paul Bhatti talked about forgiving the men who had killed his brother Shabaz for being an outspoken Christian in politics. Frank Simmonds, a former homeless drug addict, spoke about his journey to sobriety, fatherhood and faith. And I stood in the ice-cold lobby of the Manhattan Center in the middle of New York City, handing out programs, greeting guests and talking to another volunteer named Joe.

I had decided to fly to New York from Portland, Ore., to attend the Encounter, a three-day free cultural festival that takes place every winter in Manhattan. When I arrived, I was handed a purple T-shirt and a stack of programs and assigned to the welcoming and coat check area along with a group of college students from Kansas.

In one of the lulls between events, I started to talk with Joe, a burly chemistry student wearing a red and white University of Nebraska beanie and matching sweatshirt, his volunteer T-shirt pulled on over the top. We talked about music, books and movies, about what we were studying in college. But every time I made any sort of a claim, whether I liked Sufjan Stevens or that I was bored of engineering school, Joe would ask me why. At a certain point, feeling like I was being asked to mount a courtroom defense of everything I thought and believed, I shot a glance at Fionna, another of the students from Kansas. "He does this to everyone," she whispered, leaning over. "You'll get used to it." *Great.*

Toward the end of the evening, Joe told me that he loved the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. I turned the tables. "Why?" I asked, a little pleased with myself. Joe proceeded to tell me, in great detail, about how Wittgenstein's way of looking at reality fascinated him and affected how he looked at his own life. His mini-lecture on

the brilliant philosopher was not at all the response I was looking for as I tried to counter all his “whys.” The next time he asked me why I thought something, I was surprised to find that it didn’t annoy me. In my world, music and books were sources of entertainment; in Joe’s, they were things that could get him closer to the meaning of it all.

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I ended up spending almost the entire weekend in that lobby in a coat and scarf, greeting visitors and talking to Joe and the other volunteers. I missed most of the events, but I did not really miss out on the New York Encounter. I had glimpsed something in Joe that I wanted for my own life: an intensity, a curiosity, a passion. At the time, I was a senior engineering student at the University of Portland. When I got back home, I saw that things I previously had a passing interest in, like music and film, and even things I had actively avoided, like literature, philosophy and my engineering studies, took on a new dimension for me as I started to recognize that they had something to do with my deepest desires.

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When I encountered the films of Terrence Malick later that year, I watched them in a way I had never watched a film before; I dug into them. I let them show me things about my life that I hadn’t seen before. Although I was already familiar with them, the same thing happened with the music of Sufjan Stevens and the short stories of Flannery O’Connor. Life began to take on a richness that it had not had before.

As Joe and I became friends, I realized that his intense engagement with reality was rooted in his experience in the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation, the group that gave birth to the New York Encounter. At the time when we met, Joe had been involved with C.L. for a couple of years. I had encountered it in high school and had been peripherally involved ever since. But Joe’s experience in the movement, unlike mine, was central to how he looked at every aspect of his life.

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Communion and Liberation started in Italy in the 1950s as an informal group of high school students with their teacher, a priest named Luigi Giussani. Father Giussani had

perceived that, although they knew all of the right “religious answers,” faith had nothing to do with the actual lives of these students. For this reason, he believed that they would walk away from it.

But he saw the rising wave of secularization as an opportunity to re-propose the Christian faith in a new way. Father Giussani devoted himself to showing the “human benefit” of faith for life; that faith made life more full, more true, more beautiful. He proposed that Christ is the only sufficient answer to the infinite needs present in every person for goodness, truth, beauty, love, happiness and meaning. He encouraged his students to look at their life experience and gauge whether this was true: whether the encounter with Christ was as life-giving as promised.

The students met weekly in what became known as a “School of Community” where they would hear a lesson from Father Giussani. Later, as the Schools of Community multiplied, they would read a text by him and discuss it in terms of what they had lived that week. This experience has grown first under Father Giussani and then his successor, the Rev. Julián Carrón, to more than 80 countries and around 100,000 people.

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Local communities meet weekly for School of Community, where they looked back at their week as perceived through the lens of a text written by Fathers Giussani or Carrón. They do charitable work together and gather for annual summer vacations and occasional retreats. Many local C.L. communities put together cultural initiatives like the New York Encounter and similar events in Barcelona, Madrid, London and elsewhere. The community is meant to be a place that helps people to measure their daily lives against the standards of the Gospel, to “test everything, and retain what is good,” as Paul puts it.

Communion and Liberation is difficult to define because it cannot really be understood without being experienced. When asked what it is, many people who belong to the movement will say “come and see.” It is an invitation but also an echo of the Gospel. Jesus did not always tell people who he was; he told them to come and see for themselves. It is the same way the church spread in the early centuries: by attraction.

When asked about Communion and Liberation, I usually end up talking about my

friendship with Joe. He and I have never lived near each other and only get to spend time together once or twice a year if we're lucky. But something beautiful and lifegiving has grown out of that first experience volunteering together.

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When I met Joe, I saw someone who lived in an attractive way. It was not something "religious" in a narrow sense; he was more interesting, more curious, more alive, and I stuck with him because I was jealous. Because of his experience with the charism of Father Giussani, he looked at everything from chemistry to music wondering what it had to do with his desire for beauty, truth and meaning. As we became friends, I started to face my life in a similar way and the same transformation began to happen in me. I discovered a passion for nature and science that led me from engineering to teaching; my desire to take my work as a teacher seriously bore fruit in an exhibit I helped create for the New York Encounter on the educational proposal of Luigi Giussani; my love for film gave birth to a film club at Trinity Academy, the small ecumenical Christian school where I teach in Portland, and later to a presentation on Terrence Malick's films that Joe and I gave with another friend at the Encounter. This way of faith spreading by attraction and changing how you interact with all of life is the basic charism of Communion and Liberation. As Julián Carrón put it, "I always tell my students that Christianity is communicated through envy."

The New York Encounter has grown out of this charism. In 2008, a handful of friends who belonged to the C.L. community in New York decided to put together a small gathering where they could give witness to their new lives of faith. They wanted to show that the encounter with Christ allows people to look at the world in a new and better way, that faith has to do with everything from art to work to science to family life. They invited a couple of speakers and rented a venue for an afternoon. In the years since then, the Encounter has presented events and exhibits on topics ranging from education to exoplanets, as well as film screenings, concerts, dance performances and comedy shows.

The 2020 Encounter focuses on the way that ideology creates a barrier between people and ultimately between us and the real world; we tend to view events through our own

ideological lenses. We dismiss facts that do not fit our predefined narrative. The speakers, performances and exhibitions at the New York Encounter—touching on politics, race, family life and artificial intelligence—look for ways that this divide can be crossed.

The Encounter has grown so much since those early years that it has moved to a larger venue: the Metropolitan Pavilion. But in many ways it has not changed. It has remained free, funded entirely by donations. It still happens with the help of hundreds of volunteers, many of whom travel from across the country and beyond. And it still springs from the desire to look at all of reality seriously, captivated by Christ—that same desire that attracted me years ago in the freezing lobby of the Manhattan Center.

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