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Interview: Luigi Gioia, author, researcher

by TERENCE HANDLEY MACMATH

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‘Nothing is too trivial for God, nothing is unworthy of God’

I first joined a small monastery in the south of Italy, and spent some years in the mother-house in Tuscany. I spent 19 years in France, during which time I did my doctorate in Oxford, became an abbot in Rome, and then became Professor of Systematic Theology at the Pontifical University of Sant’Anselmo, Rome — a Benedictine college and a university — and a visiting scholar in Cambridge.



Now in Cambridge full-time, I focus on research, especially in Augustine and French phenomenology, and on writing, especially on prayer and spiritual life. The Von Hügel Institute is a wonderful hub for critical catholic thinking — catholic in the broader sense of looking for truth and beauty wherever

they can be found, beyond the institutional boundaries of the Church, according to the spirit of Vatican II.

For me, the stability has been in responding to God's call, and the exterior patterns of Benedictine life are now interiorised. Everything boils down to the depth of one's relationship with God. Whatever I do, wherever I am, prayer is the first thing.

I'm pretty much at ease everywhere, but going back to Italy recently was surprisingly claustrophobic. I miss the weather, the food, and the beauty of Rome, of course, but I'm happy in the international atmosphere of Cambridge — and I love Anglican liturgy.

In Rome, there's new interest in Luther for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which is a source of great hope. I don't know many Roman Catholics of today who wouldn't have taken Luther's side if they'd witnessed the same endemic corruption of Catholicism as he did.

[Pope] Francis has reconnected the Church with people inside and outside institutional boundaries, despite one of the worst crises of its history because of the abuse scandals and the cover-ups which allowed them to continue. He's demonstrated how much people still want to trust our Churches. [But] only when people see Christian leaders like Francis can they believe the gospel that Jesus came not to judge the world, but to heal it.

The one thing I'd change immediately is the role and presence of women in the [Universal] Church. I'm not undermining the complexity of the issues related to ordination, but, even before this point is settled, I don't see why women shouldn't be equally represented in all positions of authority in the Church, and all committees and commissions where doctrinal, ethical, and disciplinary decisions are made. Whenever women are involved, the dynamics change profoundly for the better.

For years, I taught the basics of prayer to groups of teenagers who visited the monastery where I lived in France. I started writing *Say it to God* when I was on holiday in the Alps, in 2009, but it wasn't flowing from a place deep enough in me. Since then, I've given many talks on prayer all over the world, and slowly found an approach that helps people. I wanted the book to be as simple and direct as possible, and to make sure that everything corresponded to something I truly experienced in my own prayer.

I'm suspicious of theology that confines itself to academic jargon. If I can't make a theological point accessible to everyone, I haven't really understood it. Both in academic research and in writing for a non-specialist audience, clarity and focus depend on speaking from that part of ourselves which truly is "in touch" with God through faith and desire, and with our humanity with its contradictions, frailties, and failures.

I had to learn to make ideas accessible to priests from many different cultures and academic abilities. But the really wonderful school for my writing has been preaching retreats. This work demands that you're inspirational — you really learn what makes people tick, what touches them.

The most important point is that we don't have to be in a special place, in an ideal mood, or able to focus, or have plenty of time to pray. God is truly and deeply interested in absolutely every detail of our lives — nothing is too trivial for God, nothing is unworthy of God. There's nothing, not even the things we might be tempted to be ashamed of, or feel guilty about, that can't be transformed into prayer. The only secret for starting and growing in the life of prayer is talking to God freely and truthfully. God will find ways of showing us that he's listening, and that everything we entrust to him is taken care of.

I always start by praying for what worries, annoys, distracts, distresses me most. Often, I become aware of what is bothering me only when I say it to God in prayer. Most of the time, just this is enough to soothe my heart. Then, I pray for people and

situations as they come to my mind. Sometimes, the thought seems a distraction, but, since it's there, I think: "Well, I'll pray for this, too." In this way, there are no distractions, since everything becomes a pretext to entrust everything to God.

Prayer is an even more effective tool of evangelisation than preaching, because, as Jesus says, without him we can't do anything. Prayer is the fundamental way of letting God work, think, act, and love through us — or, more realistically, and most of the time, despite us.

I grew up in small villages in the south of Italy, where the culture and the lifestyle still were very similar to Carlo Levi's descriptions in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. I joined the monastery at 18, and it was particularly hard to leave my three-year-old brother.

My mother has a deep faith, whereas my father, to this day, remains the most anti-clerical person I've ever met in my life. I have in my blood both the faith of my mother and the anti-clericalism of my father — and my studies of ecclesiology persuade me that clericalism's always been one of the Church's greatest diseases, and still is today.

My family name: "joy"? I think it comes quite spontaneously to me to be optimistic — often a bit naïve.

Fr Cleto was the greatest influence on me. I met him when I was 16, and he's the reason that I became a monk. He radiated joy, spent all his time either praying or doing spiritual counselling, and had a gift for explaining scripture in a way which was insightful and easily understandable. He was a model of authenticity.

Some years ago, I realised I really look at things only when I see them through a camera. When I do this, I forget everything else, and explore tiny details all around

me. I also like going to the gym.

People who tie heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, when they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them, make me angry. This is the doctrinal or ethical intransigence, lack of empathy and inhumanity that Jesus warned against.

Hearing that somebody in despair has found consolation makes me happy — especially if I've been the instrument of this.

Millennials give me hope. They tend to be much more socially conscious than previous generations. They're sensitive to ecological issues, abhor discriminations, sexism, and homophobia, reject the present surge of identitarian paranoia.

I'd choose to be locked in a church with the French-American 20th-century novelist Julian Green, at the age described in his autobiography, relating his childhood and youth between 1900 and 1922.

Professor Gioia was talking to Terence Handley MacMath. Say it to God, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2018, is published by Bloomsbury at £9.99 (Church Times Bookshop, £9).