

In the piazza: Conversational witness in Rome

by [René Breuel](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue



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I took two folding chairs and walked with my wife to the park near Sapienza University of Rome, Europe's largest university. Students dotted the large field on this warm spring morning, eating their lunches, smoking, lying in the sun.

My heart beat faster as we unfolded the chairs and surveyed the scene. I had debated an atheist two days before, but that was in a café next to Roma Tre, another university in central Rome. To debate in the open air seemed more daunting.

These debates had been arranged by a university ministry named the Gruppi Biblici Universitari, which had invited the Italian Union of Atheists and Agnostics to provide a speaker. The union's director had debated with me two days before. Now I was going to debate Roberto Sabatini, who teaches sociology at Sapienza.

I used my 15 minutes to present some classic arguments for why belief in God is credible: as the cause of the universe, as the designer behind its beauty and detail, as the author of the morality we carry in our hearts, as the historical explanation for Jesus' resurrection, as the one I and so many others have met personally.

Professor Sabatini responded by laying out some classic objections or counterarguments: the God hypothesis is not necessary to explain the universe or to

make us behave morally; God is a human projection, and religion is a cultural production; religions have claimed that women are inferior to men.

One claim of Sabatini's revealed how faith is usually seen in Italy: "Belief is something antithetical to thought. When I believe, I have to stop thinking, suspend judgment. When I believe, I don't function rationally, with arguments." He cited Tertullian's (widely misunderstood) remark, "I believe because it is absurd," and pointed to the church's condemnation of Galileo and other cases that, at least to the average Italian, make faith and reason seem like they are at war.

The crowd grew as the debate went on. We responded to each other and then fielded questions from students. The questions were poignant, informed, sincere. What about other religions? Suffering? Christianity's often dark history?

A circle of students lingered after we finished, continuing the conversation. One of them looked especially troubled and said, "You know, it was great to hear all this, but I don't think I really believe. I have all these questions I can't answer. How can I be a Christian if I have doubts? I don't think I can do it."

I told him, "I don't think it is a problem that you have these doubts. The doubts show that you're thinking, that the faith you want is not a blind faith. And that's how it should be. I don't want a blind faith that sticks your head in the ground. I want an intelligent faith, one that wrestles with doubts and seeks good answers for them. Being a Christian is not about not having doubts. I have lots of questions too. It's about believing because you're thinking, doing both."

From his surprised look, I figured that he had not heard this message before. It seemed to me that a new path toward faith, a thoughtful kind of faith, might be opening for him. Or maybe not. Who knows?

In any case, I left the debate feeling thrilled, wondering why such encounters happen so rarely. Students were so interested, their questions so thoughtful. It was an hour pregnant with meaning for me, and I hope for others too.

Why do Christians rarely engage nonbelievers in dialogue? Do we assume that the younger generation is apathetic? That the Christian faith is unappealing to them and therefore dialogue is not worth it? The culture's relegation of religion to private discourse makes even the most ardent of believers inclined to keep quiet, or at most whisper, about the faith. It's as if we hear the glass exploding at the very mention of

“Jesus” in a bar or shopping mall.

Instead of having meetings where people come to different conclusions, letting both sides be heard, we often resort to throwing rhetorical bombs at the other side—those we consider ignorant and obstinate people who just don’t get it.

Sociologist James Hunter explains this process as the “conflation of the public with the political,” the absorption of public interaction into political struggle, where “the realm of politics has become, in our imagination, the dominant—and for some the only adequate—expression of our collective life.”

Not only are our politics and media becoming more partisan, but the processes of pluralization and differentiation in contemporary societies make local communities more homogeneous in ideology and less capable of accommodating “the other,” let alone allowing that person to talk and be heard.

In Rome, attitudes of religion are marked by a negative view of the Catholic establishment along with the fear that any non-Catholic establishment would be even worse. It’s assumed, especially among young people, that religion imprisons and stifles people—and that personal freedom requires liberation from the religious trappings of childhood and of previous centuries.

Yet if the average Roman seems uninterested in talking about religion, nonbelievers are often equally reticent. “I don’t want to impose my views on others,” they think, justifying their timidity and fear of starting a conversation.

Nevertheless, I’ve found that many people long for such conversations—and they long to have intelligent and sensitive conversation partners. They are like the 12-year-old boy who, for all his anxiety, deep down appreciates it when an adult sits down with him to talk about sex, about which he has heard so much disparate information.

It is an intimate, delicate moment when two people dare enter socially forbidden ground and talk about faith, church, Jesus and the Bible. The conversation is a dance filled with beauty and tension, a dance that continues only as the partners pay attention to each other’s signals: go ahead, don’t press me here, tell me more about this, let me have my space now. If there is any hint of dishonesty, or of a power play or a desire to manipulate, the music stops and the dance ends awkwardly. But when the conversation happens, we find ourselves in the presence of the very Spirit of God.

In my experience of planting a church in Rome, the old methods of reaching people are ineffective. Holding mass events, passing out tracts, staging street performances—these events do not engender the personal contact necessary for real conversation. In our urban post-Christian context, outreach is profoundly relational. It takes a solid friendship to make a countercultural message both visible and trustworthy. It takes a warm community of people to patiently answer people's doubts, tend to the seeds of the gospel and provide a love concrete enough to make the beauties of faith tangible. We need an approach that fosters deep dialogue and warm community.

To that end our church has organized what we call Gruppi Scoprire—discovery groups or seeker Bible study groups. These are a series of meetings over pizza with nonbelievers. We limit to one or two the number of Christians who attend, so seekers feel that they have their own space; they can say the wildest things and not feel that they are unwelcome. They become intrigued to discover more about this faith that grants them space to express their objections and journey at their own pace.

These groups start as a short series of meetings, usually four evenings, so participants need make only a limited commitment of time and don't feel trapped into a long-term commitment. (In practice, people often come to love the meetings, and the groups often continue and take part in regular Bible studies.) Some people find out about these groups at our church website, but most are invited by someone from our church.

The meeting focuses on a text from the Gospels that we have printed out. Key to the evening is the role of the leader. My wife, Sarah, leads the discussion well because she makes everyone feel welcome. She finds ways to reassure the ones who look afraid and encourage those who look interested. She gets the discussion moving toward the heart of the biblical text and gently guides people to apply the text to their own lives. A successful meeting evokes a sense of joint discovery, of finding a treasure of great price and finding it together.

This approach, of course, is nothing new. Paul's ministry in Ephesus, for instance, included not only proclamation and teaching but also *dialeghomenos*, reasoning together or persuading, at the Tyrannus lecture hall (Acts 19:9). He regularly received groups of people and interacted with them, presumably for hours. Paul did not halt his public preaching and market evangelizing, but he recognized that for

some people—as for most people today, I’d argue—a longer, more relational approach is needed.

Many people who come to our groups do not end up embracing the faith, but some do. One who did is Ella, a woman from an Eastern European country who was raised on communist skepticism of religion. She had numerous doubts, vigorously articulated. We spent evenings fielding her questions, empathizing with her complaints and trying to argue as strongly as she did, yet in a way that respected her independence and ability to disagree with us.

For some months we did not see her, but then she came for the first time to church on a Sunday and was visibly touched by the service. Again we did not see her for some months, but spiritual questions surfaced again for her, and after several other evenings of conversations, she became a follower of Christ.

Every new group takes its own adventure. We cherish the honesty of the seekers and the beauty of people using their intelligence, able at last to talk not just about the weather or other superficialities but about things that matter.

Our latest discovery group consisted of five seekers. One was Valentina, who said she wanted to find out what exactly the Christian faith is. One was Riccardo, who said he really had no interest in Christianity. One was Ilaria, who said, “I don’t get why are there so many rules! I’m someone who experiments with stuff. I can’t get people telling me what to do and what not to do. I feel they just want to control us.”

At this, Riccardo jumped in. “You still don’t get it? Religion is just a way of controlling people. It’s just stuff made up—all these myths and stories that say there is just one truth, *their* truth.”

Melissa said, “What bugs me is that I feel that the whole thing has lost its meaning. I went to some church events, and after the meditation everyone stood in silence for 30 minutes. I tried to meditate too, but it felt so empty. Not for me.”

At this point the disparate complaints converged into a stream: the group enumerated a long list of corruptions, abuses, hypocrisies. It referred to church leaders who were apparently motivated by money, or who had abused their authority or abused children.

After many such concerns were raised at some length, Sarah handed everyone a sheet of paper. Printed on it was the passage from the Bible about Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers at the temple in Jerusalem. The passage seemed to reflect the outrage that people had just been expressing—shouts among the crowd; coins reverberating on the floor; animals and merchants driven away; Jesus standing alone, indignant.

The group was startled to encounter this Jesus—a Jesus who was disgusted by the corruption of religion, who condemned a religion turned into “a house of trade.” Here was a Jesus who understood the longing for something better and who took a public stand against distortions of faith.

I could feel the interest of the seekers increasing. They were getting a fresh glimpse of Jesus in a setting where the dialogue was raw and personal, where skeptics and believers alike could have their say. I could see their eyes sparkle and their imaginations become engaged as they caught a glimpse of something that is life-changing: a Jesus for them, a Jesus for you and me.