

New York Encounter 2017: Final Statement

Twenty-five conferences, five exhibits, two original shows and 320 volunteers: The ninth edition of the *New York Encounter* was under way. Faithful to its theme — “Reality has never betrayed me,” a challenging observation that Servant of God Msgr. Luigi Giussani repeated often toward the end of his life — the 2017 *Encounter* did not disappoint the more than **10,500 people** who crowded Manhattan’s Metropolitan Pavilion over the course of three intense days. The theme captured the fact that despite the intuition that reality bears a promise and life is fundamentally good, we seem to have a hard time relating to many of life’s aspects. This often leads to frustration, or even anger and violence. The theme ended with a question: “What can help us reconcile with reality and engage life as it is?”, and an invitation: “Join us to encounter people who, by facing the concrete circumstances of their lives, experience the positivity of reality.” **Pope Francis** expressed the goal of the *New York Encounter* in his message to the participants: It was an *Encounter* made of encounters! Encounters with people who witnessed to what reconciled them with the reality of their jobs, their communities, their relationships or themselves.

The *Encounter* was enriched by **41 guest speakers** who passionately engaged with topics that ranged from economy to food, from theology to history, from sociology to science, from medicine to politics, from literature to international development. Among them were: **Richard Cabral**, a former gang member and now a rising TV star, who opened the *Encounter* with the story of his meeting with L.A.’s Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, a man who looked at him as no one else before ever had, and Cabral’s surrender to this encounter; or **Timothy Cardinal Dolan** of New York, who witnessed to his admiration and love for St. Damien of Molokai, who lived two centuries ago, and for another “modern” saint, the quadriplegic NYPD Officer **Stephen McDonald**, who (though not yet canonized) passed away just three days before speaking at the *Encounter*; or **Polly Matzinger**, the internationally known immunologist, who showed how faithfulness to reality as it emerges in experience is the method of true scientific research, and ended up dancing barefoot with the volunteers at the final concert; or **Fr. Julián Carrón** who, conversing with **Joseph Weiler** on Carrón’s soon-to-be-released book *Disarming Beauty* (University of Notre Dame Press) explained why beauty does not betray, and stated that in our divided society “it can be a bridge because it is contagious, respects freedom, and is enough to move the human heart”; or *The New York Times* editorialist **David Brooks**, who spoke about the “need to have public places where things that really matter can be finally discussed” and wished that there could be more New York Encounters!

During all of this, young children played in the **Kids’ Corner** and people dined at the all-volunteer staffed **food court**. They could also visit one of the **four original exhibits** that helped illustrate the weekend’s theme: **photography**, with photos presented by their photographers, including Tony Vaccaro; **education**, with an interesting comparison between pedagogical theories in the United States and the educational method proposed by Msgr. Giussani; the lives of some **American Saints**; a multimedia presentation of **stories of people who were not betrayed by reality**, because “there is a crack in everything and that’s how light gets in.”

After dinner the *Encounter* offered two original shows: on Friday, “**Shadow and Sound: The Journey of Helen Keller**,” a stage performance about “an encounter that neither deafness nor blindness could impede”; on Saturday, “**Invasion 14: the Prisoner, the Priest**” a work by Christopher Vath for narrator, violin, cello and piano set in the squalid WWI prison of the Maxence Van Der Meersch novel.

As the *Encounter* drew to its close, **Fr. Vincent Nagle** reminded us that it is through a human encounter that we can reconcile with reality and learn how to engage with life. He added that the most surprising effect of this re-engagement is that we feel more acutely life’s promise and the nostalgia for its fulfillment. We find ourselves with more questions, and we desire more intensely and with less fear to reach out and risk in our relationships.

If the people who spent time at the Metropolitan Pavilion felt the same, we can say that the *Encounter* itself was an experience of reconciliation with life. Understanding why and how it happened, and exploring the source of the joy that was so palpable during those days, remains an intriguing task for the future for all those who organized or attended the *Encounter*.