



THE FORM OF WITNESS

Notes from the Synthesis of Julián Carrón
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1. DEFINING WITNESS

“The circumstances through which God has us pass are essential and not secondary factors of our vocation, of the mission to which He calls us. If Christianity is the announcement of the fact that the Mystery became incarnate in a man, the circumstances in which one takes a position about this, in front of the whole world, is important to the very definition of witness” (L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino [Man and His Destiny]*, Marietti, Milano, 1999, p. 63).

Each of us can judge if the way in which we have given witness in our attempts to live and to communicate Christianity, in the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves, has been more or less appropriate. The first test of the form of our witness is made by us. If we do not carry out this verification, even if we repeat the words which we say among ourselves, everything will be abstract. In fact, if what we speak about and what we receive does not take hold of us and does not first of all involve us, it will be useless for others: if it does not pass through us, if it is not incarnated in us, if it does not penetrate to our depths, what will we communicate? Words, words, words. Therefore, there is no other way to sum up all that we have been saying if not through our present experience.

So, what have we seen? What is the experience that has come out of the things we have seen and lived? And, also, are we open to following and yielding to what we have seen happen in these days? Our obedience is to the One who is at work in everything that happens in us and around us, if we have had a minimum of tenderness for ourselves, a minimum of love for ourselves, for our lives, for our fulfillment, if we have recognized it. And if nothing has happened, it is better to leave, to lock the door and throw away the key.

Father Giussani continues: “From how this position is obtained [the form of witness] in us, we can understand if and how much we live belonging, which is the deepest root of every cultural expression. In fact, a cultural expression is born from belonging, springs from that to which we belong. That does not mean that we have a theoretically formulated understanding of it—we can not have an adequate consciousness of it—but in reality it is that to which we belong that decides our cultural expression” (ibid.). It is that to which we belong, in which we participate, that defines our cultural expression. Therefore, if we have not experienced this belonging to the event that happened to us, our cultural expression will

necessarily be determined by something else, by some other belonging. The test of that to which we belong is, then, our way of being in reality.

We have repeated this phrase so many times, but it is as if we never finish penetrating its importance, understanding its meaning, because the circumstances provoke us without respite; they reveal themselves every day to be more decisive, and they require us to move, to understand more what faith is, what it means to live the faith, what experience we have of faith in this historical circumstance, in relationship to which our witness, the form of our witness is defined. We cannot, in fact, live the faith outside of history, we cannot imagine a testimony that would be ahistorical. We do not live in the sky, we live in the circumstances, in front of the challenges of a concrete moment in time: therefore, the forms of our witnesses can be different, because they are determined

by historical circumstances. This does not mean that we renounce the origin of our experience, but this origin is incarnated in historical circumstances, in such a way that we can verify if it resists the evolution of the times, the pressure of changes.

It is that to which we belong, in which we participate, that defines our cultural expression.

2. A CHANGE OF EPOCH

We have defined the current historical circumstances with the expression of Pope Francis: “Today we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change.” (*Address at the Meeting with Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church*,

Florence, November 10, 2015). A change of epoch! What openness is needed on our part and for the whole Church to accept the challenge that this change of epoch represents for our faith! All the Church, all of us find ourselves in front of this challenge, and we have a task from which we cannot excuse ourselves. But in order not to excuse ourselves, we must let ourselves be provoked, let ourselves be called by the circumstances in which we live, in order to find the right form of witness to the faith in the present historical moment. It is for this reason that for years now, we have asked ourselves: What does it mean to be a presence now? What are we to do in the world?

The Church, inasmuch as she lives in history, is constantly called to read the “signs of the times,” as Benedict XVI said in the text we cited at the Fraternity Exercises (cf. “I Have Loved You With an Everlasting Love. I Have Had Pity on Your Nothingness,” pp. 10-11), in order to identify the right form of witness. It is not only urgent now, but has constantly been urgent in the history of the Church and in our history, as is well-documented

in the book by Marta Busani on the birth of *Gioventù Studentesca* (*Gioventù Studentesca. Storia di un movimento cattolico dalla ricostruzione alla contestazione* [*Student Youth, History of a Catholic Movement from Reconstruction to Controversy*], Studium, Roma, 2016). We were born within the attempt made by the Ambrosian Church to respond to the growing disinterest of youth toward the Christian proposal, which was increasingly seen as something formal and uninvolved with life. Thus, arriving in Milan in 1955, Giovanni Battista Montini expressed his desire to find “a modern, living, new Christianity to give to the next generation” (ibid., 14). Through this pastoral endeavor, the new archbishop sought to respond to the formalism that seemed to dominate the way the faith was lived, the symptoms of which were already visible in young people’s distancing themselves from the Church, and he invited everyone to help him. We can say that Giussani responded fully to this appeal by his bishop.

The Movement, then, is a form, a way through which Father Giussani, with all the strength at his disposal, sought to give witness to Christ in that particular historical circumstance. The Movement is the form, the modality through which Christ has reached us, has fascinated us, has taken hold of us; it is the way in which Christianity has become interesting for us, in which Christ has become a real presence in our lives. And we have discovered Him through experience, through His capacity to attract us, to fascinate us, and, through our belonging, to change our life.

But this dynamic never stops, because the circumstances are constantly changing. Therefore the Church always needs to scrutinize the signs of the times, seeking the adequate form of witness. What are the signs of this epochal change? We can indicate them by making reference to people who do not belong to the Church, but who have the simplicity of a gaze that grasps what is happening—insecurity and fear—and that identifies its roots. “The roots of insecurity,” the noted sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has recently said, “are very deep. They are embedded in our way of living; they are marked by the weakness of bonds [...], by the crumbling of community, by the substitution of human solidarity with competition.” And he added that from this absence of bonds comes fear: “The fear generated by this situation of insecurity [...] is diffused throughout all the aspects of our life” (“Alle radici dell’insicurezza,” intervista a cura di D. Casati [At the Roots of Insecurity, edited by D. Casati], *Corriere della Sera*, July 26, 2016, p. 7).

The Movement is the form, the way through which Christ has reached us, has taken hold of us.

This is substantially the same diagnosis that Father Giussani formulated more than twenty years ago and in an even more radical way. That which “characterizes today’s man [is] doubt about existence, the fear of existence, the fragility of life, the inconsistency of himself, the terror of impossibility; the horror of the disproportion between himself and the ideal.” And he continued: “This is the foundation of the question and the point from which a new culture, a new criticism must begin.” This is in fact the trial facing today’s man—that is, each one of us—the point of departure and the goal with which every attempt at a response must compare itself. The relevance of every attempt is tested in relationship to this human situation, to this “today” of man. If the attempt does not respond to this need, it will not interest man, it will not interest us. “Today’s world has been brought back to the level of the problem of the Gospel; in the time of Jesus, the problem was how to live and not who was right” (“Corresponsabilità” [Shared Responsibility], *Litterae Communis-CL*, n. 11, 1991).

3. ATTEMPTS AT A RESPONSE

It is inevitable that, in front of this situation, from which it is not possible to escape, there will appear different attempts at a response in different cultures, which indicate different foundational assumptions. We are aware that in personal and social life there are so many other dimensions that render the attempts more complex. But I want to

linger on two attitudes that today seem to prevail.

a) Walls

We can indicate the first with a word: *walls*. This position at bottom proposes to create walls to defend in some way what still remains, to try and protect ourselves. Pope Francis has frequently reminded us of this. In underlining this attitude, we obviously do not want to undervalue or exclude the measures of security and the laws necessary to prevent violence and to defend ourselves against possible aggression. But are these enough? Above all, are they enough with respect to the depth of the problem that we find ourselves facing? Again Bauman, with his acuity, challenges us: “Once new walls have been erected and more armed forces put in the field at airports and other public spaces; once those who have sought asylum from war and destruction are refused and more migrants are repatriated, it will become evident that all this is immaterial for resolving the real causes of insecurity” (“Alle radici dell’insicurezza,” *Corriere* >>

» *della Serra*, op. cit.). The Pope also highlighted this a few months ago: “I have always said that building walls is not a solution. We saw one fall in the last century. It resolves nothing” (*In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Lesbos to Rome, April 16, 2016*). By analogy, ideological conflicts, which are different ways of building walls, will be unable to resolve the real causes of uncertainty, because the problem is not “who is right,” but “how do we live” in this situation. Insecurity and fear are not overcome with walls; they have such deep roots in us that, as Benedict XVI says, they cannot be resolved from the outside: “Man can never be redeemed simply from outside” (Encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, 25).

When we have built walls, has our uncertainty lessened, has it been overcome, has it been defeated? We can think of certain real walls that have been built here and there in the world—has life become more secure? We think of when we close ourselves within our garden to defend those spaces that still belong to us. Has our uncertainty been overcome? Only apparently, because the virus remains even inside our fortresses. The problem, in fact, is not first of all the risks that can come from outside, but the fear of living, the existential insecurity, the doubt about existence that we carry. Therefore, even if we build walls, Bauman continues, “the demons that pursue us [...] do not evaporate, nor do they disappear. At that point we can wake up, and develop the right antibodies” (“Alle radici dell’insicurezza,” *Corriere della Serra*, op. cit.), if we are able. It is a problem of time, not of debates. Sooner or later we will arrive at this point.

b) Dialogue

Against the attempt to raise up walls we can propose a second attitude, which we describe with another word: *dialogue*. So many men today, as we have seen on many occasions this year, are sincerely looking for an adequate response to their own needs and the needs of others, after so many ideological defeats, and we find them therefore as companions on the journey. We have seen it in the interlocutors that we have met in presenting the book *La bellezza disarmata* (J. Carron, *La bellezza disarmata [Disarming Beauty]*, Rizzoli, Milan, 2015). Recent history has left us less presumptuous and more open to dialogue, even with people apparently very far from us, but with whom we share the same questions. While coming from absolutely different stories and paths, a thousand miles apart, it is as if—paradoxically—the current situation makes all of us travel companions who are more open

to listening to each other. We are not excused from the challenge to find adequate responses, and we should verify whether we are open to consider that which, in dialogue, others offer us, and if what we can share from our experience also has value for them. Therefore, Cardinal Tauran is right—in situations in which we might think of forming various responses, ones that are more rigid, he does not tire of insisting on the inevitability of an unarmed dialogue: “The response is always and in any case a dialogue, an encounter [...] the only possible road is that of an unarmed dialogue. Substantially, in my opinion, to dialogue means to go toward another unarmed, with a conception of truth that is not aggressive, and yet however not disoriented.” “There is no other way?” the interviewer asked. “Absolutely not. We are condemned to a dialogue” (“Un altro passo verso l’abisso ma il sangue si può fermare con il coraggio del dialogo,” intervista a cura di P. Rodari [Another Step Toward the Abyss, But Blood Can Be Stopped With the Courage of Dialogue, edited by P. Rodari], *la Repubblica*, July 27, 2016, p. 8).

The problem is not “who is right”, but “how do I live” in this situation.

4. “DIALOGUE IS LIFE”

The word “dialogue” occupies a central position in the origin of the experience of GS proposed by Father Giussani. When in 1959, in *Gioventù studentesca. Riflessioni sopra un’esperienza [Student Youth, Reflections on an Experience]*, he described the “raggio,” the first gesture that marked those who participated in GS, Father Giussani affirmed that “the *raggio* is carried out as a dialogue. [...] Dialogue is communicating one’s own personal life to other personal lives; dialogue is sharing the existence of others in one’s own existence.” This was the first form that Father Giussani proposed to the young high school students with whom he was working. And in order to clarify the nature of the “dialogue” which he proposed, he contrasted it with another meaning that the word had taken on in the debates in school, that is, with “dialectic”: “Obviously this dialogue is far from a rationalist notion of dialectic that would conceive of dialogue as a more or less lucid clash of ideas and mentalities. Our dialogue is the mutual communication of ourselves through the signs of words, gesture, and attitudes: the emphasis is not on ideas, but on the person as such, on freedom. Our dialogue is life, and ideas are one expression of this life” (L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2006, p. 35).

A few years later, in 1964, in *Appunti di metodo cristia-*

no [Notes on the Christian Method], Father Giussani uses the category of “dialogue” to identify the mission, the presence of the youth in GS. “The instrument of co-existence with the whole of human reality made by God is dialogue.” We can affirm that “the history of the Church is the history of the building up of unity, based on the capacity to recognize the positive value of dialogue. We have only to think of the encounter between Christianity and the various civilizations.” How does Father Giussani describe dialogue? “Dialogue is to propose to others what I am living and to take note of what others are living, out of respect for their humanity and out of love for them; it does not at all imply a doubt in oneself. [...] The ‘other’ is essential for my existence to develop, for my vigour and life. Dialogue is this relationship with the ‘other,’ whoever and however he or she may be” (ibid., 127, 130-31).

Dialogue and dialectic. It is striking to re-read these things in the light of what we said at the beginning: “From how this position comes to be in us, we understand if and how much we live belonging, which is the deepest root of every cultural expression. In fact, a cultural expression is born from a belonging” (L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino*, op. cit., p. 63). Any cultural expression is born from a belonging. Conflict, dialectic, contraposition, have their origin in an “ideological” conception, of whatever mold. Instead, dialogue expresses the Christian experience, lived in its truth—because Christianity is a grace, a gift received gratuitously in an encounter, what else can we do but share what we have been given in an encounter and in a tireless dialogue? There is no way to make another participate in the truth we have received other than by sharing it, communicating it through our life; precisely, through our witness. But we can find this same attitude in those who, having discovered something decisive for themselves in another experience, want to share it with others.

So, each of our cultural expressions is a test of our belonging. We see it also in these times: sometimes we find ourselves closer to people who for years have been far from us, than to others with whom we live. Because life does not let us off the hook.

Remember what happened in the middle of the ‘60s, the period in which Father Giussani saw the beginning of the crisis of GS that would culminate in ‘68: “Those who later would leave GS put the emphasis on a conception according to which Christianity came to be understood as a form of moral and social engagement. In

doing this, they lost sight of the specific nature of Christianity, and therefore ended up putting their hope in the action and the organization of men, and not in the free gesture with which God chose to enter history. In my opinion, these people were not aware of such an attitude, nor had they critically theorized about it, but in practice, this is what inspired their daily life. Thus, a conflict came about that can be outlined like this: according to me and others, the reality that saves man and the world is Christ and the Church, from which the unity of believers (among themselves and with the authority) is the supreme expression and historical sign. [...] The other group, instead—putting the accent first of all on practical and organizational commitment as well as on confronting social problems in a primarily moral way—put all its hope in the resourcefulness of human initiatives and in its capacity for action, recognizing no other values than those that could lead to this. The crisis, which troubled us so severely, was already in motion toward the end of 1965” (L. Giussani, *Il movimento di Comunione e Liberazione. 1956-1986. Conversazioni con Robi Ronza* [The Movement of Communion and Liberation, 1956-1986, Conversation with Robi Ronza], Bur, Milano, 2014, pp. 62-63).

Our story is so rich with life and with experiences to furnish us with all the elements necessary to see the truth of what Father Giussani says, not only because he says it, but because the way things have gone testifies to it. If, in fact, at a certain moment, our be-

longing changes, because we have a different experience of life, our cultural expression will also change. Therefore each one of us, in his or her way of living a certain cultural expression, expresses his or her belonging.

Dialogue expresses the Christian experience, lived in its truth.

5. THE ORIGIN OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION

So what is the origin of our way of being in reality? Only if we identify the origin of our cultural expression, the origin of our attempts at a response to the historical circumstances, can we have a clear road and allow ourselves to start again when we get lost. What is the origin of walls, of dialectic, of contraposition? And what is the origin of dialogue, understood as a sharing, as a communication of ourselves and not a mere confrontation of ideas?

a) Existential insecurity

Even here, like always, history comes to our aid. For me it has been very illuminating (as I have already told you on other occasions) to see how the attempt at a re- ➤➤

» sponse to '68 developed. Those who remained in the Movement sought to face the challenge of '68, just like we are doing now in front of our current circumstances. It is inevitable: in front of a challenge we must always try to respond, we want to verify if the faith has something to do with everything. Referring to a number of our attempts at the beginning of the '60s, Father Giussani, in August 1982, speaking to the leaders of the university students and taking up the observation of someone present there, uncovered the root from which that cultural expression came: he identified it as an existential insecurity. It is “an existential insecurity, that is [...] a deep fear, that looks for support in its own expressions. This observation [...] is immensely important. One who is full of insecurity, or who has a deep fear and existential anxiety that dominate, looks for security in the things that he does: culture and organization [...]. It is an existential insecurity, it is a deep-down fear, that make us conceive the things that we do culturally or organizationally as the ultimate support, as the reason for our consistency” (L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria. 1982-1983 [Men Without a Country, 1982-1983]*, Bur, Milano, 2008, pp. 96-97).

But the most terrible thing, for me, is what he observes right after: “Thus all cultural activity and all our organization do not become the expression of a new physiognomy, of a new man.” The reason is obvious: these are signs of our existential insecurity. In fact, he goes on, “if they were the expression of a new man, they could also not exist, when circumstances did not permit them to, but that man would still be standing. While, instead, so many of our people here present, if these things did not exist, would not be able to stand, would not know why they are here, would not know what they adhere to: they would not be, they would not have consistency, because the consistency of my person is the presence of an Other” (ibid., p. 97). For this reason, right at the beginning of the student protests, in November 1967, he said of those university students from the Movement who were present at the first demonstrations at the Catholic University of Milan that the strength of their response “was so generous, but how true was it?” (A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani [The Life of Fr. Giussani]*, Bur, Milan, 2014, p. 391) We will take this judgment with us to the tomb! “Generous” does not mean “true.” Our striving for the ideal and our desire to express the faith in order to respond to the challenges of life do not automatically free us from the risk that our attitude is born from an existential insecurity; it is, in

fact, always lurking and it can generate a way of being in reality—that is a culture—which is not able to respond to the situation of man. We were not able, as Father Giussani said in 1972, to “culturalize” the discourse, to bring one’s Christian experience to the level in which it becomes systematic and critical judgment, and thus a prompt for a modality of action.” (“The Long March to Maturity,” *Traces*, n. 3, 2008). On that occasion, we were not able to give cultural value to our position; we have not always known how to express an original cultural position that corresponds to the height of the experience that we have encountered.

b) Certainty

What is the contrary of this existential insecurity? Certainty. From where is born the capacity for dialogue, the capacity to encounter the other, the capacity to share our existence with the existence of the other? From a certainty. I am always struck thinking of Father Giussani: where did this gaze on reality come from? What did he live, in order to recognize the profound error that came out of the attempt to respond to the provocation of '68? This is the grace that God gave us: a man who, at a certain point, made us discover the origin of our attempt, unmasking an error that was hidden in it. For this reason, we have always been able to rise from our ashes. Now, the fact that Father Giussani tirelessly rebuked us and got us back on track—is it a disgrace or is it the documentation of the mercy of Christ, the witness of Christ happening before our eyes, so as not to let us end in nothingness? What certainty Father Giussani must have had not to succumb to this existential insecurity! Everyone had faith—in 1982 he wasn’t talking to those who had left the Movement; no, he was referring to those who remained and who belonged there. But he never tired of warning us of the risk of acting out of an existential insecurity, so that in us, as in him, the cultural position and the action would come out of a certainty generated by faith.

With this, Giussani was telling us that there is a way of understanding and living the faith that cannot defeat this existential insecurity. And consequently, this way may have a being in reality that can be generous: but is it true? As he responded to a National Council in 1981, shortly after the referendum on abortion, speaking to those who had the correct concern that the faith would assume the dignity of culture: “I ask you if the problem of a faith that becomes culture, capacity for culture, has more to

One who has a deep fear and existential anxiety that dominate, looks for security in the things that he does.

do with the certainty of faith than with the shrewdness of its passage to the culture” (Fraternità di Comunione e Liberazione, Documentazione audio-visiva, *Consiglio nazionale di CL*, Milano, May 30-31, 1981 [Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Audiovisual documentation, *National Council of CL*, Milan]). It is striking, because between his two affirmations about the risk of a lack of an original cultural position there is a space of ten years (from 1972 to 1981), but Father Giussani does not budge, does not change his judgment. It is so rooted in him as a conviction that he repeats it ten years later, even after the protagonists of the story had changed: the problem of culture is the problem of faith. This is the witness of the permanence of Christ in history: Christ witnesses to us in history, in a man, His victory over our nothingness, over our insecurity, over our confusion.

If we look at the beginnings of Christianity, even the gospel offers us, in relation to the disciples, the original documentation of what we are saying: there is almost no page in which we do not see two different positions in front of reality, that of Jesus and that of those who followed Him; not those who didn't follow Him, but those who belonged—let's say it like this—to the same story, of those who belonged to Him. We see it in their reactions when they ask Jesus to make fire fall on the Samaritans; or in Peter, who had seen everything that happened, lived those years with Jesus, day after day, with all that endless wealth of signs—on so many occasions we see him react not out of the certainty of his relationship with Him, but falling prey to his insecurity, a prisoner of his measure. Thus he pulls out his sword in the garden and Jesus tells him: “Put your sword back into its sheath [...] Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?” (*Mt* 26: 52-53) From where does this certainty of Jesus come, which allows Him not to react dialectically? What a perception of reality He must have! “Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?” (*Jn* 18:11) That which makes Jesus what He is, is His dialogue with the Father, His bond with the Father. Without this, even He would have given way to the attitude of Peter.

Thus, the gospel constantly places us in front of (and we have mentioned this at other times) two different ways of being in reality, the way of Jesus and the way of those who were with Him. These are two attitudes which, in an analogous sense, we have also seen in the protagonists of Victor Hugo's masterpiece, *Les Misérables*: Javert

and Jean Valjean. Both have a certain sense of faith to which they make reference; both want to live up to it, but two different attitudes are generated in them. The monologue of Javert is interesting just after our reading from the Bible; I refer to the beautiful scene in the movie version with his reflection: “There, out in the darkness, a fugitive running, fallen from God, fallen from Grace. God be my witness, I never shall yield. [...] Lord, let me find him, that I may see him safe behind bars! I will never rest till then! [that is until I am able to put things in order] This I swear. This I swear by the stars!” (*Les Misérables*, directed by Tom Hooper, USA-UK, 2012)

This is one way of conceiving the task of faith: to put reality in order. Instead, the attitude of Jean Valjean, which is born from a different experience of faith, born out of an absolutely gratuitous gesture of mercy, which disturbed him, by the Bishop of Digne, is that of a man who thinks that his task is, from this experience, to witness to the mercy of which he has been the recipient. We find ourselves in front of two situations: the relentless application of laws to impose order according to our own imagination of God's design; or a familiarity with the human experience, from which Jean Valjean realized that the right way to be in relationship with everything is in accord with the way he has been treated, and therefore that consists only in sharing with others the gesture of mercy which God brought about in his encounter with the bishop.

Christ witnesses to us in history, in a man, His victory over our nothingness, over our insecurity.

6. THE PATH OF CERTAINTY

So, if cultural expression has as a support, as a well-spring, certainty, the question that we have in front of us, my friends, is which is the path to reach a certainty that can place us unarmed in front of reality, in front of the current historical circumstances.

And here, again, if we return to the origin of our history, we see how, in a text from 1955 to the leaders of Catholic Action in Milan, *Risposte cristiane ai problemi dei giovani*, Father Giussani writes that the task of Christians is not “directly to change the face of the earth, resolving its problems,” but “to bring Christ, that is, to sow in the world the seed of the solution” of these problems (L. Giussani, *Risposte cristiane ai problemi dei giovani* [*Christian Responses to the Problems of Youth*], now in *Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida* [*Reality and Youth, The Challenge*], SEI, Turin, 1995, p. 144). And what does this mean? In a text from shortly before this, in 1954, we find the answer: “The reality of the Kingdom of God can- ➤➤

» not be measured by the quantity of people that fill the churches on certain feasts and circumstances, or by the oratories bursting with young spectators for some interesting football tournament, or by the parish movie theaters built large,” but it is measured only by the capacity “to create authentic Christian personalities” (L. Giussani and C. Oggioni, *Conquiste fondamentali per la vita e la presenza cristiana nel mondo, Presidenza diocesana milanese della Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica [Fundamental Conquests for Christian Life and Presence in the World, Presidency of the Diocese of Milan for the Italian Youth of Catholic Action]*, Milano, 1954, pp. 20-21).

And how is an authentic Christian personality born? Above all, we must note that in the proposal of Father Giussani there is a powerful concentration on the person, on the “I,” on the “Christian sense of the I,” as he will insist from the beginning of GS until the end of his life. Documenting this in the book cited above from 1955, *Risposte cristiane ai problem dei giovani*, Father Giussani focuses on the phenomenon of desire as a constitutive dimension of man, of the subject, of the person: this defines the “I” in an original way. We see here the newness in his definition—desire, in fact, was regarded with a certain caution, if not with suspicion, in so many Catholic environments of that time and in many other perspectives of reflection. By highlighting desire, Father Giussani expresses a profound concentration on the “I,” on the person, understood in his concreteness and originality, which characterizes his proposal. He writes: “But above all there is a phenomenon that underlies the arc of human life—a phenomenon, above all, that is the common soul of every human interest—a phenomenon that is the source of every problem: it is the phenomenon of desire. The desire that pushes us to the solution of problems—the desire, which is the expression of our life as men, which in the end incarnates that profound attraction with which God calls us to Himself” (L. Giussani, *Risposte cristiane ai problemi dei giovani*, op. cit., p. 127).

What a difference in the way of considering desire! For Father Giussani, it incarnates the profound attraction with which God calls us to Himself.

What consolation we would have every day if we considered all the instruments that we have at our disposal to make us aware of what we are! Let’s read Psalm 62: “O God, You are my God, for You I long,/for You/my soul is thirsting.” What is this thirst, if not desire? “My body

pinches for You,/like a dry, weary land/without water.” Only a man who has this thirst can recognize the value of that which has happened to him, that is, that “Your love is better than life” (Psalm 62, Monday morning prayer, in *The Book of Hours*, Società Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2009, p. 65). Thirst and grace. Desire and the presence that responds to it.

We have never budged from this profound concentration on the person, on the “I,” over the years, which has allowed us constantly to take up the path again. This is confirmed by a text from 1998 (the previous one was from 1955, this one is from 1998!). During an Equipe of university students when someone asked: “Why does a Movement like ours insist so much on the I, and why this insistence only now?” Giussani responded: “You make me react immediately when you say ‘only now’: because the beginning of the Movement was dominated

Desire incarnates that profound attraction with which God calls us to Himself.

by the problem of the person! And the person is an individual, the person is an individual who says I [...]. So, the first years, the first decade before ’68, brought a great upheaval which put the focus not so much on the I, but on his action in society, the victory of power [this was the shift] [...], before ’68, I said, the focus with which I started all the Exercises, the Retreats, was on this phrase of Jesus [...]: ‘But what does it matter if you gain the whole world and lose yourselves?’ In fact, He said literally: ‘What does it matter to a man if he gains the whole world and loses himself? Or what will a man give in exchange

for himself?’ [...] This explains why our words, the content of our conversation, is always centered on humanity, on the human value of things; and the human value is not that of ‘humanity,’ but of the individual, of the person.” And he continues: “The phrase of Jesus that back then I said so many times, like a continuous refrain, from ’68 on was diminished a little, but now we have taken it up again, because the demands of politics and of the ‘revolution’ made us see the extreme consequences of a lack of awareness, of the self-awareness of the I.” And now what he said in 1998 appears more clearly: “In the time in which we live we are together like at the sandy shore of an aridity, of a human desert, where the subject of the sentence is the I: not society, but the I, because for the sake of the society they kill every possible or imaginable ‘I.’ While for us, society is born from the existence of the I. [...] Even so, now, the development of the Movement, the dynamic of the Movement, is joined to a point from which it is understood [...] that the only resource for stopping the invasion of power is in that summit of

the cosmos that is the I, and which is freedom [striking!] [...]. The only resource that remains for us is a powerful recovery of the Christian sense of the I. [...] The insistence on the value of the I was worked out from the beginning, because the circumstances called for it—because it has always been our concern to respond to problems starting from the circumstances in which we live [...]. The emphasis on the value of the I was not only the reason for a deepening, of a development of religiosity as a fundamental category of the I, but also the fascinating origin of the relationship with every level of consciousness” (L. Giussani, *In cammino. 1992-1998 [On the Way, 1992-1998]*, Bur, Milano, 2014, pp. 337-343).

The emphasis on the value of the “I” is therefore a growth of religiosity, of the sense of the Mystery. Starting from this, Father Giussani also assigns us a task (from the same text): “The phrase that I quoted for you from Jesus is tragic, but it is tragic also because I have not heard it, maybe only on rare occasion, quoted by others, because for us, at the beginning, it was the main point of reference. Therefore, carry it out, carry out the whole dynamic, develop the dynamic which we have advanced for years, of the main reason for our friendship, of our companionship and our friendship: that is the fulfillment of the heart, of the demands of the heart, without which nihilism would be the only possible consequence” (ibid., 344).

These are not unimportant things. Either we take this road or we end in nihilism. Therefore, he encouraged us to take it up: “Carry out [and] [...] develop [...] in yourselves the dynamic [...] of the reason [...] for our friendship: which is the fulfillment of the heart.” Only the fulfillment of the heart is the answer to our nothingness—neither walls nor dialectic, but an experience in which we see nihilism defeated, a victory over nihilism by the strength of the experience we have. The fulfillment of the heart is the verification of faith. And only from this verification of faith, only from this fulfillment, only from this certainty, can there be an adequate cultural expression in these circumstances we have been called to live, in every dimension of reality. For this reason, Father Giussani invites us to a personalization of faith, which he spoke about from the beginning; so that from the beginning of the history of the Movement the word “verification” dominated, because the question is the generation of the subject, then as now.

It is striking to see where Father Giussani places his hope! “The harder the times get, the more it is the subject who counts [...]. That which counts is the subject,

but the subject [...] is the awareness of an event, the event of Christ, which became history for you through an encounter, and you recognized it. We should work together, help each other, to raise up new subjects, that is people aware of an event that became history for them, otherwise we can create organizational networks, but we build nothing, we do not give anything new to the world. Therefore that which measures the growth of the Movement is the education in faith of the person: the recognition of an event that became history. Christ became history for you [...] He is within you” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell'uomo. 1990-1991 [A Real Event in the Life of Man. 1990-1991]*, Bur, Milano, 2013, p. 39).

7. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE VERIFICATION OF FAITH

If we want to reach that certainty which makes us new subjects, there is no other possibility than to travel again today the same road that was proposed from the beginning. It does not mean more discussion, but to experience for ourselves the verification of faith as the response to our desire, to our human needs. In front of the Samaritan woman, Jesus addresses himself to her desire, to the thirst of that woman, not to the clumsy attempts she had made to satisfy it, because if he had identified her errors without responding to her thirst, she would have committed them all again. Because it is not an affirmation, but an experience, a particular history, that changes our mentality; it is a personal experience that, because

it fulfills our desire, allows us to enter reality according to a different way of seeing and acting. For this reason, Father Giussani from the beginning focused on experience, the question of experience. Now we can better understand the importance of it. In a letter to Montini in 1962, aiming to clarify his insistence on “experience,” he underlined that “normally to Christian ‘words’” there did not correspond in the minds of youth “anything concrete.” The students felt “that Christian doctrine was abstract and without meaning for their life.” Experience was necessary because it allowed them to understand and to live the ideas that the Christian reality intellectually expressed. It was precisely personal experience that made possible a profound rediscovery of the teaching of the Church. (cf. M. Busani, *Gioventù Studentesca. Storia di un movimento cattolico*, op. cit., pp. 484, 231) If we do not do this work, even among us the words will be emptied of meaning; they will slide out of our hands.

Therefore, experience is crucial: the experience of each one of us. But this, as Father Giussani always taught >>

Only the fulfillment of the heart is the answer to our nothingness—neither walls, nor dialectic.

» us, needs a criterion for verification, which is identified with the “religious sense”; that is, with those ultimate questions of reason, with that complexity of needs and of elementary evidence with which man faces everything that exists, which Giussani put in the foreground, grasping and developing the topic put forward by Montini in his pastoral letter of 1957. The religious sense thus became the criterion for verifying the validity of Christianity, of the tradition that the young people of GS had received.

The word “verification” is one of the most often used in the life of GS from those first years. The very life of GS was considered a verification, a challenge to verify the Christian announcement, that is, if and how Christ responds to man’s desire. Father Giussani affirmed, speaking of the beginnings of GS: “Almost immediately after the beginning, the problem arose: ‘And now that we are ten, twenty, thirty, what do we do?’ I asked. At first it was discussed, as usually happened anywhere; but I felt the urgency that the joyous and certain force of the announcement needed to mature. And so that programmatic attitude took flesh, which we have called *verification*. If Christ is truly the answer to life, this must in some way be ‘seen’” (L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento di vita, cioè una storia [An Event of Life, That is, a History]*, EDIT-Il Sabato, Roma-Milano, 1993, p. 341). And in *Notes on the Christian Method*, he wrote: “An encounter that would not be a calling or a proposal to be verified would be so empty that one would not even recall it as an encounter; it would so pointless as not even to belong to history” (*The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, op. cit., p. 99). Do we have something more topical to say than this? This observation invites us to a continuous attention, to take seriously the warning of Father Giussani, reported by Savorana in his book: “One can become very faithful in using a method as a formula, and handing it on, accepting it, without this method continuing to inspire any growth: a method that does not develop a life is a sepulchral method, a silicification (petrification)” (*Vita di don Giussani*, op. cit., p. 254). We can avoid the risk of petrifying the method if we do not limit ourselves to a repetition of words—“experience,” “verification”—if we truly have an experience, and if the verification of that which is given to us is different than just repeating words.

How can we see whether we have had an experience or not, whether we have carried out a verification or not? By keeping in mind that the repetition of words

does not overcome insecurity. Only the experience and the verification of the faith conquers insecurity, uncertainty. Therefore, the problem is not who is right, but if in the end you are certain or not, and you recognize this by how you live, by how you are in reality. Do you know what the sign is? “The certainty of being loved allows me to embrace reality,” one of you said. Confirming this, let us listen to these amazing words of Father Giussani, during an Equipe with university students in 1980: “The sign of certainty is that one has sympathy with everything that he encounters. In fact, sympathy with all that you encounter is only given by the presence in us of the certainty of our destiny. Without certainty, it is not possible to have this sympathy, except in a formal way, except with those who repeat our words and with whom we already agree [we look for those with whom we agree] [...]. The more a

The sign of certainty is that one has a sympathy with everything that he encounters.

person is effective, in the sense of a certainty of awareness, the more his gaze, even in the way he walks down the street, embraces everything, gives value to everything, and nothing gets away from him. He even sees the yellow leaf in the middle of the green plant.” We can easily discover and distinguish who has this certainty, the one who builds walls or who embraces everything, who is dialectical or who dialogues, who is always discussing how things should be, or who speaks about his own experience and shares with the other what he is living, embracing everything, giving value to

everything, without running away from anything, not even the yellow leaf in the midst of the green plant. “It is only certainty about the ultimate meaning that makes one sense, like a detector, the farthest limit of truth in the pockets of each one [the detector identifies even what the other has in his pockets!]. And it is not necessary, in order to be a friend to the other, that he understands that what you said is true and he comes with you [it wasn’t necessary that those whom we encountered in the presentation of *La bellezza disarmata* come with us]. It is not necessary, because I go with him, for that bit of truth that he has” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things, 1979-1981]*, Bur, Milano, 2007, pp. 155-56). And again, as we have recalled many times in these days: “You stress the positive, despite its limitations, and you leave the rest to the Father’s mercy” (L. Giussani, S. Albert, and J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2010, p. 117).

8. HOW DO WE DEFINE THE FORM OF THE WITNESS?

The discovery of the form of the witness can emerge only from within the path that we have outlined. In our dialogues there often emerges the risk of reducing the witness to a strategy. We, in fact, always seek to spare ourselves the journey. The witness is not a strategy that we imagine, that we plan at table, nor the new password that we repeat. It is a different way of being in reality that is born from the verification of our faith: we are surprised to see ourselves different in the way we face life. Having been invested with the certainty of Christ, experiencing an otherwise impossible fullness of affection, we can look at everything in a different way, a truer way, a freer way: we are the first ones to be surprised by the fact that we see reality in a different way. It is a surprise. The fruit of Christianity is a surprise along the path of belonging to Christ. It is not only a surprise for others, it is a surprise first of all for us: I find myself with a dynamism that is not mine, ways of acting that are different than before.

The form of the witness must not be confused, then, with a strategy, but neither should it be reduced to a good example, to our adequacy, like one of you said to me: “I am tired of this expression, ‘form of the witness,’ because if I look at my witness, all I see is my inadequacy.”

An answer to this proposition—one of the things that most strikes us about the way God does things, in which it is shown that God is not at all hindered by our inadequacy—is that when He wants to show that He is at work, He chooses the most absolute inadequacy: sterility. In order to communicate to everyone what He can accomplish, He enables a sterile woman to give birth; we think of the figures of Sarah, Hannah, Elisabeth. So the witness is not a problem of adequacy, but depends on the fact that one finds in herself something she could not generate by herself, and for that reason gives witness to the One who has made this miracle possible in her. The witness is Christ in us, Christ who gives witness to Himself through our life. In this sense, it is impossible to reduce the witness to good example. The sterile woman, in fact, does not generate a son because she is good—if she, sterile, gives birth to a son, it is because an Other is at work. This fact gives witness to Christ, who makes it happen. We should overcome, then, our preoccupation with our inadequacy, which is a reduction of the witness to a good example, which of course is a part of the witness, but not the decisive thing. The witness is, first of all, Christ in me, the testimony that Christ gives in us, through the change that

he causes in our lives and to which I give my free adherence. Saint Paul says: “But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.” (2 Cor 4:7). Therefore the encounter with Christ is described by Father Giussani as running into a different human reality. You run into a human reality that has a “qualitative difference”: “a difference of life that you perceive. [...] How many times, how many among us have heard themselves saying: ‘You are different than the others, there is something different here.’ The encounter is coming across a qualitative difference or [...] a diversity: it is ‘running into a diversity that attracts you.’” It is in a difference that attracts you—the diversity that you see in an other attracts you—this is the way in which Christ makes Himself present to men. And this diversity attracts you “in the measure in which it passes through the filter of comparison and the work of judgment.” You will discover that a diversity attracts you because it

corresponds more to your heart, it attracts you because it is more beautiful. It attracts you and “it is more beautiful because it is more true, because beauty is the splendor of truth.” And for this reason it cannot be anything but unarmed. “Therefore, it is a diversity that is more beautiful because it is more true, which corresponds more to you, it attracts you, that is, it corresponds more.” He insists: “It is more beautiful because it is more true, because the criterion of truth is the heart” (L. Giussani, *Ciò che abbiamo di più caro. 1988-1989 [That Which We Hold*

Most Dear, 1988-1989], Bur, Milano, 2011, p. 72).

This path is not mechanical, it cannot happen without us, everything passes through our openness. “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45). Blessed are you, Mary, because you entrusted yourself to the word of God and verified it. Therefore the words of Elizabeth are the recognition of what she saw happening in herself when the Virgin appeared before her eyes: the leaping of the baby that she carried in her womb, his vibration in her: “For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy” (Lk 1:44). Analogously, this openness to letting ourselves be generated by an Other shows that we belong. Only a person who is truly certain can accept the challenge represented by the awareness that the Church reached at the Second Vatican Council, that there is no other way of communicating the truth except that which passes through freedom. The Church, therefore the Christian, does not need to impose anything. “The truth cannot impose itself except by >>>

**The witness
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» virtue of its own truth” (Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*, Preface, 1). At bottom, it is the fullness of God, it is the fullness that God lives which creates the space for freedom. I remember how I was struck when I learned that in the Mesopotamian religions, the reason why men were created was to free the gods from the weight of labor. Instead, the God of Abraham, which in Christ is revealed as the Trinity, lives such a fullness in the trinitarian communion that a free creature is generated with whom God can freely share His fullness. Therefore God is not afraid of human freedom—He created man free because he prefers to be recognized and loved freely, by a free “I,” as Péguy writes: “To that liberty [...] I have sacrificed everything, God says,/To that taste I have for being loved by free men,/Freely” (“The Mystery of the Holy Innocents,” in C. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents and Other Poems*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1956).

Therefore our task is not to change the face of the world directly, solving its problems, but to bring Christ, who is the seed of the solution to its problems.

9. THE TASK

So, what is the purpose of the Movement? To generate an adult who is certain, an adult so certain that he or she can introduce into the world an original position in front of every dimension of human life, personal and social. This original position has to do with self-awareness, with an awareness that is full of faith, with that awareness of faith that gives an authentic certainty: this certainty that is born of faith in order to be able to be in reality, to be able to have the correct gaze, without which we will start from another position (for the simple reason that we cannot help but start from some position). Just like what happened to Mary Magdalene in front of the empty tomb: after all the miracles she had seen, she could not help but cry, because the facts of the past did not give her the necessary certainty to stand in front of death. We do not live from a devout memory, we do not live from having eaten and drunk with Him, but we live from something that is happening now. We need a presence. The “Mary” (cf. *Jn* 20:11-18) spoken by Jesus—which was like Him telling her “Do not cry!”—has to do with faith. What kind of faith do I need? What type of certainty? What kind of presence of Christ do we need in our life so that the tears, the insecurity, and the fear do not dominate our position in reality, so that we are not defeated in spite of all we have seen? Christianity is a

present presence, and all that we have seen in the past is put to the proof, is tested, in the present, in the way we face the present. The tears of Mary Magdalene will remain for us, because if He does not remain present, all that has happened in the past is not sufficient to take away our weeping.

Instead when He is present, He regenerates our communities. “At the end of a vacation at the sea, which we took with sixteen families of friends from Varese and Fribourg (Switzerland), in a way that was anything but formal,” some of our friends wrote, “the desire was born in us to collect a free-will offering to give to the Fraternity. This was because of the amazement and gratitude for the days that we spent together, during which, also thanks to the work we did together on the Exercises and on the text from the encounter with the new members of the Fraternity, we had an experience of true friendship in Christ and of how the path of the Movement and our belonging to the Fraternity is truly ‘something more’ in our lives.”

Only by having an experience of this regeneration in our communities can we respond to the invitation that Pope Francis gave us: “To the rebirth of a Europe weary, yet still rich in energies and possibilities, the Church can and must play her part. Her task is one with her mission: the proclamation of the Gospel, which today more than ever finds expression in going forth to bind the wounds of humanity with the powerful yet

simple presence of Jesus, and His mercy that consoles and encourages. God desires to dwell in our midst, but he can only do so through men and women who, like the great evangelizers of this continent, have been touched by Him and live for the Gospel, seeking nothing else [people who seek Him day and night, as Father Giussani told us in ’68]. Only a Church rich in witnesses will be able to bring back the pure water of the Gospel to the roots of Europe [and to the world: in a globalized world, the problem is the same]. In this enterprise, the path of Christians towards full unity is a great sign of the times [as we can see in so many Orthodox and non-Christian friends] and a response to the Lord’s prayer ‘that they may all be one’ (*Jn* 17:21)” (*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis Upon Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize*, May 6, 2016).

Father Giussani has given witness of this to us: “The world has to be won over to Christianity in the end by this word that sums up everything: ‘mercy’” (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, op. cit., p. 117). **■**

Our task is to bring Christ, who is the seed of the solution to the world’s problems.