

**I AM NOTHING
WHEN YOU ARE
NOT PRESENT**

Notes from the talks by Davide Prospero and Julián Carrón
at the Beginning Day for adults and university students of CL.
Mediolanum Forum, Milan (Italy), September 27, 2014

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L'illogica allegria [The Illogical Joy]
Amare ancora [Continue to Love]
La strada [The Road]

DAVIDE PROSPERI

We would like to welcome all of you here in Assago and in the all of the cities throughout Italy and abroad that are joining us via satellite. In these days I have been reflecting on the value of an event such as this, which can seem repetitive. After all, we do it every year! But as we said two years ago, for those who walk, the first goal of starting again is to avoid losing gusto for the journey. There is only one reason that beginning again helps us to not lose gusto for the journey—because the beginning always contains the criterion of everything. The beginning is a gift, a preference, just as the beginning of life is an unmerited gift, it is the greatest sign of the relationship with Him who wanted us. For this reason, every beginning is always a special opportunity for memory, to recall the fact that we are loved, that we are not in the world by chance, that there is Someone, One, who loves us now, still loves us right now, and this is the first factor of certainty in a person's life.

Today, perhaps more than at any other time in history, the certainty that the human person needs is not just an intellectual, dogmatic understanding of things, but rather, as Fr. Giussani called it, an affective knowledge of reality: relying entirely on the living relationship with Him in whom reality has its ultimate substance.

What most helped me to understand this was something Rose from Kampala said this summer at the International Assembly of Responsibles of CL, held in the beginning of September in La Thuile. She recalled a conversation with Fr. Giussani in which he said, "If you were the only person in the universe, God still would have sought you out so that your nothingness would not be lost." She commented, "For me, when you talk about Beauty with a capital B, it is in this that my nothingness, my life, has gained this Beauty, this value that does not depend on my nothingness, but depends instead on this preference that God has had for me. Saying that I am fulfilled, that I am affectively fulfilled, is not something made-up, it is a fact: that I am breathing this morning is possible precisely because Someone loved me

this morning and is not afraid of what I am, but had pity on me and wants me to exist." Anyone who meets Rose, sees what she is, and sees what she does, has no doubt that what she says is true, as Monica Maggioni and Dario Curatolo—who with Roberto Fontolan produced the video on the sixty years of the Movement—told me when they returned from Kampala.

The "I" is reborn in an encounter where this choice—this preference—happens, this is the factor of certainty in life because this choice is an initiative of the Being who loves me. Our uncertainty—which can concern relationships (normally, it concerns relationships), can also concern our capacity for initiatives and therefore it can also be insecurity about a presence or a judgment—arises from fact that, since we do not experience this relationship with the Being who loves me now, we try to fill the void with something else, with other relationships that substitute it, or with our initiatives.

In fact, during last year's Beginning Day we were provoked precisely by this in the story of Mary Magdalene—we remember it well—who went to the tomb where she expected to find the lifeless body of Jesus to venerate and instead heard herself "called by name" by the risen Lord. Precisely in being called by name, Carrón told us, the "I" is reborn and we desire to tell others about Him and to take initiative in the world.

Our first step in recognizing the importance of this announcement that we received, this year came with the letter that Carrón sent to the Fraternity of CL after his private audience with Pope Francis. In the letter he summarized the Pope's fundamental concern: it is necessary to concentrate on the essential, which is the encounter with Christ. (cf. Letter to the Fraternity, October 16, 2013, in *Traces*, n. 10/2013)

The challenge of what is essential arose immediately as the decisive factor in continuing to build the Christian presence in the world. From this point of view, the publication of Savorana's book, *Vita di don Giussani* [*The Life of Fr. Giussani*], and the presentations that followed throughout Italy, proved to be a formidable instrument for new encounters, well beyond our own efforts, because this capacity for encounter is at the origin of the charism. In fact, we are asked precisely to remain faithful to this origin, if we do not want to lose it.

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The Pope's invitation to focus on the essential then accompanied us along our journey in rendering a judgment on the European elections, culminating in Carrón's talk at the Milan expo—a talk which then became the content of *Page One* of the May issue of *Traces*: “Europe 2014. Is a New Beginning Possible?” He said, drawing upon Fr. Giussani, “The solution to the problems life poses every day does not come from directly facing the problems, but from exploring more deeply the nature of the subject who faces them.” And Carrón commented, “This is the great challenge Europe is facing. The great educative emergency demonstrates the reduction of man, his dismissal, the lack of awareness of what man truly is, of what the nature of his desire is, of the structural disproportion between what he expects and what he can achieve with his efforts.” (*Traces*, n. 5/2014, p. 18)

This judgment was the point of departure for the work in many of our communities this summer. Certainly, we have had the greatest testimony of this for the last several weeks in our fellow Christians who are being persecuted, who are suffering and risking their lives every day to affirm their faith. In their testimony we see what the essential is, what is essential for those living in this situation. In *Traces* we read the interview with the Archbishop of Mosul: “It is

possible to live every moment full of hope and joy.” When asked “How did you learn that this is possible?” he answered, “I myself began to live this way, and then I started to communicate this in my homilies and in meetings. Over time, I noticed that the people changed too.” “How have you noticed this change in the Christians?” “From the way we live. They were the ones to tell me that they needed to be more attached to our faith. It was they who told me that they began *to live* again amidst the many difficulties. They told me in words, and I, from their eyes, could see that it was true.” (A.S. Nona, “I Remain in Mosul,” interview by L. Fiore, *Traces*, n. 7/2014, pp. 10-11)

Here you finally understand what testimony is (and it is no coincidence that this was the original meaning of the word “martyrdom”): a judgment of love and attachment for which you give your life, first of all because life changes through a new gaze upon yourself, upon your own destiny, and the destiny of the world; you give your life because of the gaze that faith introduces into your own existence. This testimony judges us, because it shows clearly that because of the judgment on the experience you live, you can risk your life without being a hero, wherever you are, simply by the fact that, without defending this experience, life would be less than living! This is a wake-up call for the entire >>>



» Christian people, which is also one of the tasks of our friendship: that the “I” be re-awakened, not that it be consoled; or better, consoled as well, but not in the way we usually understand the term, as if to say, “Well, yes, cheer up, you’ll see that tomorrow will be better.” It is not this. The one consolation we seek is to be before the meaning of life. Nothing less than this can truly console us, because anything less than this—that is, without this meaning—life is solitude. In fact, I was thinking this summer, that when the love of our life enters into our existence, when you have an encounter that can reawaken your “I”—if you are true to what you encounter—you are ready to give your life for it. You would not hesitate to give your life and you even begin to do it, making your whole self, all of your energy, available for this. And you begin to experience life as sacrifice, that is, as given for a greater purpose that is not an imaginary purpose but something real: to love Him who loved you to the point of saving you from your nothingness, as we said before. I began to understand that all of this is only an introduction which allows you to understand what we are made for; an introduction to discover that there is more, that there can be more. Life can even be more profound than this. You can love the love of your life even more than this heroic impulse. For us, sacrifice still contains a final misunderstanding. We are ready to give our life according to the modality, the form—maybe even a great one—that is needed, as a service that we can do,

but there is an even greater sacrifice, which is giving your life according to the *how* and the *when* that He decides. Maybe you are not ready—or do not feel ready—for what is asked of you in a form that is so different from the one in which you are already giving your life, but everything is asked of you there. And so then you understand that the moment—as we have said many times to each other, but you only begin to discover it within your own experience—acquires an infinite value when you give your life according to the *how* and the *when* that the love of your life asks of you. This openness is learned and deepened through all of your *yeses*, even the small ones, that you have begun to say out of love.

Well, this summer among many of us (in different ways and in many stages) it has emerged that the journey we are making is becoming the factor that enables us to “explore,” as we said earlier, “the nature of the subject more deeply.” But often we sense the distance between this heroic impulse—felt as something lively—and normal life, which we instead perceive as a sort of “lesser” reality, or between the judgment on reality that comes to us from faith and the need to look at the person before us and encounter him truly, and not in a dialectical way, as the Pope asks us. So then, I ask you: what makes the “I” unified, so that we can live everything that is given to us, all the challenges we face, as fullness and gusto of living?

JULIÁN CARRÓN

WHAT MAKES THE “I” UNITED?

“I am nothing when you are not present,” says the song by Francesco Guccini that is the title for our gathering. (*Vorrei* [I would like], words and music by F. Guccini) Of whom can we say such a thing? Of whom can we say this *now*? This expression struck me for two reasons. The first is that I recognize what is essential for me because I am nothing when it is not present, and I can see this from the fact that “I remain alone with my thoughts,” as the song by Guccini continues. The second reason is that the essential thing must be present *now*. If it is not present now, then I am nothing. It seems to me that there is no other criterion for recognizing the essential to which the Pope recalled us to again in his Message to the Meeting of Rimini if not this: a presence that makes me exist. I recognize it because when it is missing I am nothing, I do not exist at all. You see right away that it is not primarily a problem of coherence, but of belonging to a presence without which I am nothing.

But what makes us exist? What makes us exist *now*, in this historic situation that we find ourselves living? Nothing, nothing can keep us from having the same experience that Giorgio Gaber recounts in the song we listened to earlier (*L'illogica allegria* [Illogical Joy], words by A. Loporini, music by G. Gaber). I can be “alone” in any place, “along the highway,” at any hour, “in the first light of dawn,” even knowing that “everything is going to ruin,” but “just a little nothing suffices / maybe a small glimmer / an air already lived / a landscape [...] / and I am fine.” The mere entrance of reality, any fragment of reality, even almost nothing, into the horizon of our “I” through any circumstance can reawaken and make possible the experience of this good—one so surprising that it almost seems like a dream and we are tempted “to be ashamed of it.” But an evidence imposes itself: “I cannot deny that “I am fine / precisely now, precisely here / it’s certainly not my fault / if it happens to me this way.” It is as if reality, an instant before we can defend ourselves from it, before we can raise a wall against it, succeeds in penetrating into the “I” to make it itself, “precisely now, precisely here.” I find inside myself an “illogical joy.” In fact, it seems totally disproportionate that “a little nothing / maybe a small glimmer / an air already lived” can bring to life this joy. “An illogical joy / for which I don’t know the reason / I don’t know what it is,” so real and at the same time so mysterious. If it were not real, what Gaber says next could not happen: “It’s as if suddenly / I was given the right / to live in the present.” Something enters

into life and makes me present to the present, “precisely now, precisely here.” A little nothing that seizes me so much that it makes me present to myself. I am entirely whole, present, when you are present.

It is hard to find a song that better expresses the meaning of the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense*. The “I,” recognizing the inexorable presence of reality, “reawakened within his being,” says Fr. Giussani, “by the presence, the attraction, the awe [at reality], is grateful, joyful” (*The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal: 1997, p. 105) and is fine.

Who would not desire this every morning, in every moment of life? A moment of fullness that you discover, as we too have experienced many times. In that very simple elementary experience, within reach of everyone, in any moment, in any place, in any circumstance—there lies the whole **method**: a presence that makes me exist. No attempt of mine can give me what that instant gives me. There is no other criterion for recognizing the essential. And I see that it *is* the essential because it makes me exist so much that, when it is missing, I do not exist—I really do not exist! As soon as it appears, I exist, and I am happy. I experience an “illogical joy,” “precisely now, precisely here,” that enables me to live the present.

Instead, when this method does not predominate, “what bitterness, my love, / to see things as I see them [it is not that reality changes, but the way of seeing things changes] [...]. //What disappointment [...] / to live life with this heart [so often twisted and numb] / and not want to lose anything” (*Amare ancora* [To Love Again], words and music by C. Chiuffo), seeing anyhow that everything slips through your fingers.

But changing is easy: “You just have to return to being a child and remember [...] / and remember that everything is given, that everything is new / and liberated.” You just have to remember that our first activity is passivity, this accepting, this receiving, this acknowledging that everything is given. A glimmer suffices to be able to say that something is given to us. Nothing particularly exceptional is needed. Just a little glimmer, because anything, even the smallest little thing is evidence that there is something else. “Here is our method,” Fr. Giussani says in the last book of the Equipe, *In cammino* [On the Journey]: “To clarify the problem of the human person as religiosity—which is the deepest and most totalizing problem of the human person—it is necessary, first of all, to personalize the relationship between the human person and reality, from which it originated” (*In cammino*. 1992-1998, Bur, Milan: 2014, p. 316). »

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» In certain exceptional moments, we have all had an experience of that kind, but we wonder how it can become stable. How can the relationship between the human person and reality (inasmuch as originated) be made a stable personal experience? This is where the issue of the journey comes in. In fact, we can have exceptional moments, but if we do not make the journey we can return to the same-old-same-old and everything can return to being flat, squalid, and reduced. We belong to the Movement to make this journey together, to support each other on this road. Every time we gather, as Davide said before, it is to continue the road, for the gusto of the journey, because without making a journey—that is, without an education—this method does not become personal experience, that is, it does not become mine. Reality is there, in front of all of us, but it is not mine.

At this point, we need to take up the question we asked each other this summer: “What are you looking for?” Seeking is the sign of someone on a journey. But we said: let’s not take the question “What are you looking for?” for granted. We can belong to the Movement, be here physically, and no longer seek. We can be here, yet be stopped, blocked. You see it because what prevails in living is not the “illogical joy,” but complaint.

It is impressive how all of these experiences we live are similar to those of any person who belongs to something. In another song, *Qualcuno era comunista* (“Someone was communist,” G. Gaber and A. Luporini), Gaber made a very long list of all the reasons for being a communist: because you “need a push,” because you “need a different moral system,” out of a “desire to change things,” because you need “impetus,” etc. What was he seeking through membership in the party? What did he desire? To overcome the dualism we so often find within ourselves. “It was like two people in one,” he says. “On the one hand, the personal daily toil, and on the other, the sense of belonging to a race that wanted to take flight to truly change the world.” Belonging has a goal: to change life, the “living that cuts the legs out from under you” (C. Pavese, *Dialoghi con Leucò* [Dialogues with Leucò], Einaudi, Torino: 1947, p. 166).

Then, over time, after years of belonging, the dramatic question becomes: “And now?” And now? Whether you like it or not, belonging needs to pass through the verification of daily toil. Has this belonging shown that it responds to the challenges of living, to that desire for change? Gaber’s honesty in acknowledging the result of the verification is surprising: “And now? Even now one feels like two people: on the one hand, the man who is inserted and obsequiously moves through the squalor of his own daily survival, and on

the other hand, the sea gull that no longer even has the intention of flying, because by now the dream has shrivelled. Two miserable conditions in one body” (*Qualcuno era comunista*, G. Gaber and A. Luporini).

You see that not just any belonging resolves the question of life. And it is not even just any old way of living a true belonging resolves the dualism. The problem of the unity of life constantly presents itself. Mere words to affirm belonging do not help us get by. Voluntaristic insistence on this belonging does not help us get by. In fact, we can still live a deep division within ourselves between “the squalor of [our] own daily survival” and “the sea gull that no longer even has the intention of flying.”

We who belong to the reality of the Movement have the same problem. Just as being communist had to pass

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through the verification of history, so we verify faith in front of the challenges of daily life and history. And now? One of you writes me: “In our Fraternity group”—but I have heard the same thing from other groups, too—“it is often difficult to achieve that fraternal friendship which enables us to share in common the experiences of each person, and to do so in a way that makes it possible to express common judgments, so the group can be useful for everyone to rediscover the “eyes of heaven” in their own lives. Rather than seeking a fraternal help with this objective, we limit ourselves to comments, often of an intellectual nature. In the end, however, our dissatisfaction remains, and we ask ourselves what should be done, as if the solution were outside ourselves.” As you see, not just any modality of living the belonging is satisfying. Substituting experience

with comments is not useful for rediscovering the “eyes of heaven.” Fr. Giussani foretold this: “Only a faith arising from life experience and confirmed by it (and, therefore, relevant to life’s needs) [...] could be sufficiently strong enough to survive in a world where everything, everything pointed in the opposite direction” (*The Risk of Education*, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York: 2001, p. 11). This is the risk of living a belonging that does not respond to the needs of life.

The honesty with which Gaber acknowledges, in another song, *Il desiderio* [Desire], that “it is senseless to continue listing problems / and invent new names [‘comments, often of an intellectual nature,’ as our friend said] / for our regression / that is not stopped by our continual talking. // Love, / it is no longer necessary / if what we lack / is called desire” (*Il desiderio* [Desire], G. Gaber and A. Luporini). Stunning! We do not stop our regression with our chatter or our discussions, with the avalanche of our comments, be-



cause precisely this is already the sign of our regression. If we lack desire, if we lack that which is the motor for living—because “desire,” Gaber says, “is the true interior stimulus / [...] it is the one motor / that moves the world”—who will re-awaken it in us? If our staying together is not useful for rediscovering the “eyes of heaven” that enable us to fly again, who can make us so present to the present so as to awaken all our longing?

I have always been struck to think that the first gift I received from Fr. Giussani was to be able to see that he was unafraid of saying things that we all live, but that were kept hidden in shame, even to ourselves. We can look at them in the face, say them and challenge them only through what we have received. This is why each of us, after years of belonging to the Movement, must see whether we are already in the condition of the “the sea gull that no longer even has the

intention of flying,” or whether we still find in ourselves the desire to fly (because desire is the motor that moves everything), with the awareness that not only we have not “lost life in living,” to use Eliot’s words, but we are actually earning it in living. For this reason, the question is not banal: are we still seeking, or have we stopped?

THE LORD HAS NOT ABANDONED US

Whatever point we have reached on the journey, whatever point of the itinerary, whatever moment of difficulty or of joy—the Pope tells us in his Message to the Meeting: “The Lord has not left us to ourselves [that is, to the squalor of our daily survival or our being sea gulls without the intention of flying], He has not forgotten us. In ancient times He chose one man, Abraham, and set him on a journey toward the Promised Land. And in the fullness of time He chose ►►



» a young woman, the Virgin Mary, in order to take on flesh and come live among us. Nazareth was truly an insignificant village, a 'periphery' with respect to both politics and religion; but that was exactly where God looked to fulfill His plan of mercy and faithfulness" (Francis, *Message to the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 24-30, 2014). For us, the place through which the Mystery continues to prefer us—we know well—is our charism, the place where the Lord still has mercy on us. This is the place where He continues to call us, through each gesture, each word, each attempt.

Yesterday, one of you, having just learned of the title of this Beginning Day, wrote: "Dear Fr. Julián, 'I am nothing when you are not present.' Today I discovered that this is exactly how I am. When Christ is in the horizon of my gaze, of my day, I 'live.' I live even when I am travelling for weeks far from my family and my children. I live in the change of time zones and beds, in the struggles of my work. I live thanks to the 'memory' of Christ who comes before me in many

ways—the same ones you described recently: the Sacraments, Morning Prayer, a phone call, the School of Community, an encounter, even a testimony at the Meeting that I see later on YouTube... Even the gestures that before seemed ostentatiously pious to me I now realize are a gift of real companionship that I love. It is the memory of Christ that illuminates everything, even the most simple or most toilsome moment. But if Christ is not my memory, I truly am nothing. His absence is a mortal weight, as in this week: even though I was home, sheltered from the struggles of life, nothing was enough. I am writing these few lines to tell you how much I am looking forward to tomorrow. I truly am nothing if You are not present."

The question is how each of us responds to this historical modality through which the Mystery still has mercy on our nothingness. A formal belonging is certainly not what keeps alive in us the desire to fly; real following does this. The one possibility for still searching, for re-awakening desire, is to follow. "I'd like to take advantage of this opportunity

to thank you for the 2014 Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity in Rimini, because in those days you gave new birth to my desire (you gave me back my life, I would even venture to say). Before you, before encountering you, I reduced everyone and everything. I reduced Christianity to a good example to give, but then I couldn't do it myself and so I was always dissatisfied and without God's grace; I wandered alone and in solitude like a vagabond, without a true goal. I was even afraid to be by myself... During those days in Rimini, however, you reawakened, in the depths of my being, the gift of His presence and now I feel that nothing and nobody can stop me. 'I feel life bursting inside my heart,' as Chieffo sang. Thank you! After the Spiritual Exercises, when I was back to my true life, in daily life, I dove (literally dove) into reviewing the Exercises, and something began to germinate. I am happier. I continue pondering and reading the text. I delve deeply into it and something, a little flicker of hope, begins to illuminate my shadows. I am another person, and I thank God for it because—unlike the miracle I awaited for so many years—now I enjoy every step of the journey I have to make, in joy and in pain."

The encounter with the Presence that makes me exist, to use Fr. Giussani's words, "makes the personality perceive, or perceive anew, makes it discover the sense of its own dignity. Since the human personality is composed of intelligence and of affectivity or freedom, in that encounter the intelligence is awakened to a new curiosity, a new will for truth, a new desire for sincerity, a desire to know how reality truly is, and the 'I' begins to tremble with an affection for existence, life, oneself and others that it did not have before. And thus one can say: the personality is born" (*In cammino, 1992-1998*, op. cit., pp. 184-185).

But what is this following? A formal belonging? A verbal repetition of the right and true definitions? Or is it, as Fr. Giussani says, the experience of true things? Here, too, the Mystery had such pity on us that He gave us everything needed to respond, and with the life of Fr. Giussani He testified to us what this following means, so that nobody would be confused, so that everybody would have in hand the instrument for knowing what it means to follow (and thus to decide whether or not to follow); He left us a signpost in the road, enabling us to reach the point of making ours all the true things ours, and reaching that unity of life that everyone desires. The alternative is clear: it is between a formal belonging to an association, an organization, that does not stop the regression of our life, or it is a belonging that is a following, as Fr. Giussani described it. How many

more times will we need to repeat it: to pass from intention to experience! "Following is the desire to relive [relive!] the *experience* of the person who provoked you [relive the experience!] and who provokes you with her presence in the life of the community. It is the striving to become not like that person in her concreteness, full of limits, but like that person in the value to which she gives herself and that redeems—deep down—her face as a poor human being. It is the desire to participate in the life of that person in whom you are brought something Other, and this Other is that to which you are devoted, that to which you aspire, that to which you adhere, within this journey" (*Il rischio educativo: Come creazione di personalità e di storia* [The Risk of Education: As Creation of Personality and of History], Società Editrice Internazionale, Torino: 1995, p. 64).

Reliving the experience of another is not formal repetition or participation in an association. There is an enormous gulf between this and true following! In the first case, the regression is not stopped, desire is not rekindled, no wings to fly are given; while in the second case, you are more and more fascinated, you become more and more yourself.

One of you writes, "Rereading the assembly of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity, I am experiencing again the liberating and provoking impact of your first response. I am one of the so-called 'oldies' of the Movement (I am 60 years old), and I feel that it is a crucial point for starting anew, as it has been ever since the beginning of your leadership. This challenging correspondence takes me straight back to the days when, as a fourteen-year-old, I discovered the Movement as the road of salvation for my life. In front of those who complain I feel a bit like the man born blind in front of the objections of the Pharisees: 'You say this isn't good; but in following I find again the sense of the encounter with the Movement, its freshness, its ironic youthfulness now with a bit of maturity added in. It seems to me to be the road of freedom and a renewal of an awareness of the faith that is entirely new. Should I therefore ignore all of this in order to give space to your objections?' For me, in following I see and I breathe, and you cannot take this away from me. It is a fact." You can answer the question "And now?" finding yourself at the age of 60, after more than forty years of belonging to the Movement, with a freshness, a lungs-full breathing, a freedom and awareness of the faith that is entirely new, that no objection can take away. What enabled him to make this newness a constant in his life? Following.

This therefore is the level at which our life is constantly wagered: in following the charisma or not. A line of Fr. ►►

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» Giussani's that I often repeat to myself describes this method succinctly: "A definition must reflect the experience of an acquisition, otherwise it would prove to be a ideological imposition (*At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal: 1997, p. 61). Either the definition is an acquisition that has already happened in my own experience, or it is a schematic imposition. For this reason, the choice is between those who want to follow someone who imposes a framework, and those who want to follow someone who helps them to personally acquire the content of the definition. Helping the person to achieve this acquisition is the method followed by Jesus. There is no alternative. And if we do not understand how critical it is for us, then we do not realize that this is exactly what we do with others: we impose our mental frameworks on them. Since we often think we can settle for repeating

definitions and discourses to ourselves, we end up thinking that it is sufficient to impose our correct definitions on others, or worse, beat them over the head with them. But, as we know well from our experience, this does not make my life whole; it does not make the definition that I know so well my own. To acquire it, an experience is needed. For this reason, I do not know how many times since I have been here that I have repeated this line: "Reality makes itself evident in experience," and again, "Experience is the phenomenon in which reality becomes transparent and makes itself known" (*In cammino. 1992-1998*, op. cit., pp. 311, 250). What a "nuclear" line of Giussani's!

So then, what does it mean to relive the experience of another? What does it mean to relive Fr. Giussani's experience? What has he testified and proposed to us as a hypothesis for entering into reality, for being human persons, for not los-

ing the intention of flying, for being people who do not stop seeking, people whose desire never diminishes? Let's listen to the words of the Pope again, in his Message to the Meeting, inviting us "never to lose touch with reality; rather, to love reality. This too is part of the Christian witness: in the presence of a dominant culture which gives top priority to appearances, to all that is superficial and temporary, the challenge is to choose and love reality. Fr. Giussani left this legacy as a plan for life when he said: "The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious, the formula for the journey to the meaning of reality is always to live reality intensely without preclusion, without negating or forgetting anything. Indeed, it would not be human, that is to say, reasonable, to take our experience at face value, to limit it merely to the crest of the wave, without discerning the core of its motion" (Francis, *Message to the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 24-30, 2014). With this exhortation the Pope gives us again—"now"—the program of life that Fr. Giussani always proposed to us! And the program is not repetition of the right definitions; it is the indication of a journey that all of us can make. To be authentically human persons we must "always live reality intensely" (*The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 150). Each of us must decide.

THE VALUE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

But what is reality made up of? Of circumstances, of circumstances through which the Mystery calls us, reawakens us, comes to us—as Davide said before—so that we never diminish, never succumb to nothingness. Precisely for this reason Giussani invited us to look at circumstances in a way that keeps us from remaining merely at the level of appearances, because circumstances are the modality through which the Mystery calls us, draws us forth from nothingness, and prefers us. This is why he tells us in *The Religious Sense*, "Man, the human being's rational life would have to be suspended on the instant, suspended in every moment upon this sign, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, yet the circumstances through which the unknown 'lord' drags me, provokes me toward his design." A definition is not requested, but the answer to a provocation. And these circumstances [Fr. Giussani adds to it!] can be at times a "sign so obtuse [the toil of living, the squalor of daily life, the dramatic situations, the most apparently inhuman things], so dark, so opaque, so apparently random that to pursue it is like placing yourself at the mercy of a river's currents that toss you here and there." This is nonetheless the modality through which the Mystery calls me to keep me from falling into nothingness.

But who can demand this kind of following from us? Only God. Who else can demand something of the kind? Only He who calls us. This is why the crucial question is to understand how God calls us, because otherwise we talk about God in the abstract.

"I would have to say 'yes' to every instant without seeing anything, simply adhering to the pressures of the occasions. It is a dizzying position" (*The Religious Sense*, op. cit. p. 135). For this reason, many times we become afraid and we back down from the challenge. But what a testimony Fr. Giussani gives us! "I hope that my life," Fr. Giussani said, "was lived out according to what God expected from it. One can say that it was lived with urgent need, because every circumstance—, in fact, every instant of my Christian consciousness—was the search for the glory of Christ" ("Don Giussani: 'Io sono zero, Dio è tutto'" [Fr. Giussani: I am Nothing, God is everything], interview by D. Boffo, *Avvenire*, October 13, 2002, p. 3).

Because for him, "Life coincides with reality inasmuch as it touches you, calls and provokes you; therefore there is no life without a task." How does life touch you? "It touches you as reality [a reality that calls forth your freedom] and reality always provokes you to a collaboration, a commitment—that is, to a task." Friends, this is what we must follow. It is through this that the Mystery calls us. But who can demand this kind of following from us? Only God. Who else can demand something of the kind? Only He who calls us. This is why the crucial question is to understand how God calls us, because otherwise we talk about God in the abstract; we throw Him out of reality, relegate Him to where we think He is, and we look at reality this way, as the Pope says, remaining on the level of appearances. We do not recognize that we are called to respond to Him through the circumstances. But Fr. Giussani educated us to acknowledge them and look at them for what

they are: the modality with which God calls us, which can be something absolutely commonplace (a small glimmer) or a dark circumstance, at times opaque; but, it is as if through these things the Mystery tells us, "Look, this modality that you do not understand, that seems so dark to you, is the sign through which I who make all things build your life, help you to mature, make you yourself, make you united, rekindle your desire, make you present to the present." What a sensation when you embrace this design!

"Dearest Fr. Carrón, I am writing to thank you for what you proposed at the Spiritual Exercises, and the work on 'living the circumstances' with which you challenged us this summer. I am 27 years old, have been married for two years, and have become the mother of a 9-month-old girl with Down syndrome. I am also a physician looking for work. This situation is not exactly normal. I am writing to thank you, because in these months I have come to realize how much I need to follow. An exceptional fact is not >>>

» enough (in my case, daily life is exceptional in some ways thanks to the mysterious presence of my daughter), nor is all of my good Catholic openness to life. I am a Christian, in the Movement for practically forever, and yet all this is not enough for truly living. Today I need a reason for living what exists. In these months, following the Movement not just formally but letting myself be educated, often even harshly, has introduced into my days the consciousness that what is given to me today is the most useful companionship for me now, my road for knowing what truly fills the heart: Jesus. He has made Himself my faithful companion, as a necessary and loving presence; it's not that I need someone to tell me that my daughter is of infinite value, that her life is great (this is evident in the daily relationship with her—you should see her!); but the difference is in the gusto that comes from the consciousness that the Lord is calling me here, and not where I thought it would be. It is as if each day the little things—our home, my husband, my daughter—were 'restored' to me! This truly fills my heart with gratitude. I had never thought that living reality would enkindle my desire for happiness instead of placating or settling it in some way. Once again, my heartfelt thanks for the guide you are in this human, very human, journey." What she is given today is the most useful companionship for her now. She had no need for someone to tell her that her daughter is of infinite value (a definition); for this young mother, "the difference is in the gusto that comes from the consciousness that the Lord is calling me here, and not where I thought it would be." And thus everything is restored to her: things, home, husband, and daughter.

But at times we do not want this method: you do not acknowledge it and so you withdraw. In the face of the challenges of the current circumstances, which often shock us, what is our temptation? It is to give into fear, thinking we can reach unity, as Professor Eugenio Mazzarella said to us this summer, being "exonerated from risks." We do not believe the circumstances were given to us by the Mystery, by the Lord of time and history, so we could re-acquire the truth. There is no way to re-acquire a truth that we already know other than through freedom, through the involvement of my person in the Truth that calls me through circumstances.

As Cardinal Scola reminded us in the interview in *Tracce*, at times there prevails in us "a static vision of the human person: one still thinks, with a certain ethical intellectualism, that the one problem is to learn the right doctrine and then apply it to life: 'Authentic doctrine, once proclaimed, will be victorious.' However, this position does not take into account one thing: by the very fact of being 'thrown' into life,

people find themselves living experiences in which questions, interrogatives arise. Doctrine, which for the Christian is based on the original experience of following Christ, proposed with authoritativeness by the Magisterium, must be rediscovered as an organic response to the 'why's' that arise from experience. Otherwise it is not enough" ("Le conseguenze dell'bell'amore" [The consequences of beautiful love], interview by D. Perillo, *Tracce*, n. 8/2014, p. 31).

For this reason Fr. Giussani presses us, emphasizing that after the encounter, "reality is not to be archived because we already know [and] have everything [out of the simple fact of having encountered Him]. We have everything, but we [only] understand what all of this is [...] in the encounter with circumstances, with people, with events"—as that mother bore witness to us. Either we understand this

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or all the historic challenges we have to face have nothing to do with our journey, and even become an obstacle. Instead, Fr. Giussani believes they are precious for our path. We have everything, but we cannot understand what this everything is by merely repeating definitions, by merely adhering formally: we understand in the encounter with circumstances. If we do not understand that the entire complex of circumstances is given to us for our maturity, to re-acquire our unity, we withdraw from this verification. Fr. Giussani insisted that, "nothing is to be archived, [...] or censured, forgotten, or rejected. [Because] the meaning of everything we have, the truth that we have, [...] the meaning of this 'everything,' we understand [...] is in facing things, therefore, through the fact of encounters and events, through the encounter [...] and in events" (*L'io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987* [The "I" Is Reborn in an Encounter], Bur, Milano: 2010, p. 55).

IN HIS COMPANY, SURE IN ANY PLACE

Only in this way can we reach that certainty which enables us to enter into everything, into any periphery; and, instead of letting ourselves be defined by fear, we are determined by the certainty that He generates in us. As the Pope told us in the Message to the Meeting (we need to look at this whole message again!): "A Christian [who lives as we have sought to describe] is not afraid to decentralize, to go toward the ends of the earth, because his centre is in Jesus Christ. He frees us from fear [not because we formally say 'Christ;' everyone knows that this alone does not suffice, that a type of formal belonging does not suffice to overcome squalor, to overcome fear, but an experience of Christ], thus in His company we are able to move forward safely in anyplace, even through the dark times of life, knowing that wherever



we go, the Lord always goes before us with His grace, and it is our joy to share with others the good news that He is with us. Jesus' disciples, after completing a mission, returned with joy because of their success. But Jesus told them: 'Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (*Lk* 10:20-21). It is not we who save the world, it is only God who saves it" (Francis, *Message to the Meeting...*, August 24-30, 2014).

Only those who are certain of the essential will be willing to seek forms and ways to communicate the truth that they encountered, otherwise the inability to communicate

with others will be absolute. The Pope continues: "A world in such rapid transformation calls Christians to be available to look for forms or ways to communicate with a language which comprehends the perennial newness of Christianity [Fr. Giussani is an example of this revolution in ways and forms]. In this too it is important to be realistic. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 46)."

"How many people," says the Pope, "in the existential >>>



» peripheries of our time, are 'tired and exhausted' and await the Church, they are waiting for us! How can they be reached? How can the experience of faith, the love of God, the encounter with Jesus be shared with them? This is the responsibility of our communities and of our pastoral care. [...] In the face of so many pastoral exigencies, before the people's many requests, we run the risk of becoming frightened and withdrawing into ourselves in a fearful and defensive attitude. And this gives rise to the temptation of self-sufficiency and of clericalism, that codification of the faith in rules and regulations, as the scribes, the Pharisees, the doctors of the law did in the time of Jesus. To us, everything will be clear and set in order, but the faithful and those in search will still hunger and thirst for God" (Francis, *Address to the Participants in the Meeting Sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization*, September 19, 2014).

In order to respond to these challenges, the Pope indicates to us the ways that Jesus Himself faced them: without becoming frightened or withdrawing into Himself, Jesus goes out to those who are "tired and exhausted." A good example of these kinds of people is the publicans, hated by everyone for their obvious inconsistency. Jesus' relationship with them leads the Pharisees and scribes to murmur against Him: "He welcomes sinners and eats with them." But their objections do not stop Jesus. Rather, He defends His way of relating with the publicans even more vigorously with parables like that of the prodigal son (*Lk 15:11-32*), which shows how aware He was of the risk He ran with His way of proceeding. The prodigal son will always be the image of those who, having received everything (father, home, wealth, etc.), cannot resist the fascination of autonomy; everything seems an obstacle to his anxiety for limitless freedom, as we see in ourselves and many times in our fellow citizens. We can all imagine the father's feeling about his son's freedom. Notwithstanding everything, the father runs the risk of his son's freedom. What love for the freedom of his son, that he might re-acquire through his own experience what he already knew!

And the unexpected happens. Precisely in the moment in which his son is most lost, when to survive he abases himself by eating corn cobs with the pigs, he is not entirely lost. Why? Because precisely in that moment, when one would least expect it, the son "returns to himself." The son finds within himself something that was not lost. Precisely in what was apparently the darkest and most confused moment, his heart emerges with its constitutive evidences and needs. All of his mistakes cannot eliminate the

memory of his home, of his father, and the quality of life of his workers. And this enables him to judge, to make a very quick comparison between his previous and his current situation: "How many workers of my father have bread in abundance and here I am dying of hunger!" And so he can recover from within his experience what he thought he knew. He realizes the dimensions of his need and of the good of having a father. Finally he understands where freedom is found, discovers that freedom is a bond, a home, a father; recognizes the good it means to have a father who embraces him again and welcomes him back as a son. The father, in turn, is happy to see how his patience with the freedom of his son has enabled him to find him again as a son, and is grateful and glad to have a son who is happy to be his son. At the same time, we will always have

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before us the fact that a formal remaining at home, like that of the other son, does not necessarily mean understanding what it means to be a son and to have a father; in fact, one can stay home but complain.

Precisely to defend His way of proceeding with those who live on the periphery of human life, because their anxious, impatient, and restless thirst for freedom has taken them so far away, Jesus sets before His critics this relationship between the father and the prodigal son. The publicans seem to have preferred to abandon their Father's house because it was too tight for them, and Jesus, in treating them in this way, seemed to be saying to the Pharisees, "I act this way. I run the risk and I wait for them because My Father acts this way." This certainty of Jesus' relationship with the Father—"I am not alone"—is essential for Him to live and risk everything with those who have strayed, even to the point of allowing them to discover from within their own experience who they are and to Whom they belong.

In this particularly challenging moment, characterized—as we said about Europe—by the collapse of historic evidences, through tremendous labor, through many sufferings (think again of the episode of the prodigal son), and in front of so many of our contemporaries who insist on travelling the strangest of roads—just as we can seek satisfaction following our imagination—we can understand how the Mystery can run the risk of freedom to make them and each of us discover who we truly are and to what we are called. To what does the Mystery entrust Himself? To our heart and to His presence, which has become flesh in order to be close to us and to reawaken in us the desire to return home, so that precisely through our difficulties and sufferings we can discover what freedom is. »

» We have not been chosen to withdraw from reality, but to be inside of situations even more. We have been chosen to accompany anyone “who has faltered along the way,” as the Pope tells us. Fr. Antonio Spadaro, speaking at the Meeting, used the image of the torch: “The torch [...] journeys in the midst of women and men, illuminates that portion of humanity where it finds itself. If humanity moves toward the abyss, the torch moves toward the abyss, [not because it wants to push toward it], that is, it accompanies people in their processes. Obviously, in this way, it may be able to save them from the abyss, enabling them to see it. If you are not on the journey with people, if you stand there and say: ‘The light is here, we are the salvation, come, and those who don’t want to come, go ahead and kill yourselves,’ well, this image of the Church is not the ‘field hospital’ of which Francis speaks. It is necessary to accompany the cultural and social processes, no matter how ambiguous, difficult and complex they may be” (A. Spadaro in *Le periferie dell’umano* [The Peripheries of Humanity], edited by E. Belloni and A. Savorana, upcoming publication by Bur).

Therefore, acknowledging that we have been chosen and insisting on the essential is not so that everything ends there, but so that everything can begin from there. In his Message to the Meeting, Pope Francis calls for “this return to the essential, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” because “Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* n. 15), that is, ‘by the way of a personal witness or gesture, or in a way which the Holy Spirit may suggest in that particular situation’ (*Ibid.* n. 128) (Francis, *Message to the Meeting...*, August 24-30, 2014).

This is our task. This is why we were chosen, as Fr. Giussani reminds us: “There was nothingness, the nothingness of everything, but more precisely your nothingness, my nothingness. The word ‘election’ sets the limit, the boundary between nothingness and being. Being blossoms out of nothingness, as a choice, as election [we were drawn out of nothingness because we were chosen]. There is no other condition that can be proposed, no other premise imaginable [as Davide said at the beginning]. This choice, this election, is the pure freedom of the Mystery of God in action, the absolute freedom of the Mystery that expresses itself” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-

Queen’s University Press, Montreal: 2010, p. 45).

Fr. Giussani continues: “The Mystery of God, which expresses itself in freedom of choice or in election, vibrates, it can and must vibrate, with fear and trembling, with absolute humility, in human preference, because human preference is the shadow of the choice of God’s freedom” (*Ibid.* p. 45). God calls us so that we may communicate Him to others. God had this preference for us, so that through us His love could reach all. As Saint Paul says: God chose me to be able to show in my person what He wanted to give to everyone. Therefore, all of His passion for every person vibrates in this human preference of God. For this reason, our first preference is for the One who chose me. This is why we often repeat the word “gratitude.” Acknowledging the great preference of Christ for us means acknowledging with gratitude this place that is constantly given to me. But to understand deep down the whole task that is contained in this preference, first of all we must acknowledge that our first response is to He who prefers us this way, we must realize that we have been chosen by Him. Only then do I understand that “the choice of God’s freedom, which chooses One, hidden like a tiny flower in Our Lady’s womb, is for the whole world [this is why the Pope says there is not a Church that is not missionary. The Presence that we bear is for the whole world: for the whole world, not for the sphere that we decide, choosing those who are more or less adequate]. So the humble echo of preference, full of fear and trembling, does not exist unless out of love for the world, for the benefit to be brought to the world, out of passion for

God calls us so that we may communicate Him to others. God had this preference for us, so that through us His love could reach all. All of His passion for every person vibrates in this human preference of God.

the world. And how wonderful is this supreme paradox of a preference that chooses and elects so as to embrace the world, so as to draw the world along with itself. In making this preference, choice and election coincide with a love that fixes itself on every living person, on all flesh” (*Ibid.* p. 46). The preference of the Mystery enables us to look at everything, even the most dramatic situation, with a “redeemed gaze” as Fr. Pizzaballa said at the Meeting (cf. *The Peripheries of Humanity*, op. cit.)

Who can say this? Who can prefer this way? Who can love this way? Who can love all flesh this way? I can prefer only if I realize that I have been and am preferred, if I live on the basis of this preference, if this preference makes me overflow so much that it becomes contagious, makes me capable of preferring everyone, of drawing others. This is why we can risk, because those who do not risk will be unable to re-acquire all of this today and reach that wholeness of life that everyone desires. **I**