

**W**ho are the young people of today? To understand, we need to look at their urgent needs for happiness and for fulfillment; at their—and our—bewilderment in the face of a reality that (especially for digital natives) seems increasingly liquid, that constantly changes. We need to look at the treasure housed in their humanity and the great things that can be discovered by anyone who seeks to unearth this treasure by throwing themselves into the adventure of education. In the following pages, we would like to offer a living experience of all this: an example of what can happen when the hearts of young people—their expectations, questions, and desires—meet a proposal. When they meet a method—a road on which they can learn how to grow—and an adult who will accompany them, who will throw him or herself entirely into this adventure with them. We present a dialogue between Julian Carrón (the successor of Fr. Giussani in leading the Movement) and a group of college students. The topic was charitable work, a gesture of sharing in the needs of others (the poor, the sick, prisoners, other students...) done on a regular basis so that a person can learn to discover his own deeply-rooted needs, his humanity. From the beginning, charitable work has been one of the pillars of Fr. Giussani's educational proposal and is powerful enough to leave its mark on all of life (as you can read below): from academics to relationships to making use of time... It is also a formidable proof in action of the humanity of this generation of young people, giving voice to it in a much deeper way than many of the analyses that have been offered about them. And a way to listen to it. (dp) ■

# What makes life flourish

Notes from a conversation with a group of university students who take part in “charitable work,” a gesture that educates them to discover themselves and reality (Milan, March 12, 2018).

**Julián Carrón.** As we have said, today we will focus on “charitable work.” The witnesses we have received are evidence that this gesture is helping many of you to flourish. Sometimes a person expresses the experience he or she is living so powerfully that it’s useful for all of us.

**Anna.** My charitable work consists of going to serve breakfast for the homeless one morning a week. The first thing I’ve noticed is that it’s a gesture that always changes me; I’ve never left there the same as when I went in. A fundamental tool for me in this has been *The Meaning of Charitable Work* (L. Giussani, Soc. Coop Edit. Nuovo Mondo, 2010), which we read each time before this gesture, because it is able to “give a name” to the things that happen in that hour. The second thing I’ve observed is that during that hour of charitable work, I’m present to the present as I am in very few other moments during the week. When I’m there serving breakfast, I’m completely focused on responding to any needs, from getting more sugar to washing dishes. Being so present to what is happening helps me to enjoy everything more and be more attentive. I have a greater love for what’s there, am more open to embracing everything, and I find that being that way infinitely corresponds to who I am. In that place, I find that I am living the “verifiable” difference described in the *School of Community*. Going to charitable work helps me to be more aware of the needs of all the people I meet. One morn-



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ing, one of the homeless men gave me a newspaper clipping with a picture of a girl, saying he thought it looked like me. I was really moved by his gesture because I do the same thing with Jesus: in all that I do, in all the faces I meet, I look for the features of Him who loves me and gives me everything, because I need the goodness He brings.

**Carrón.** For a person to participate in a gesture and be able to say, “There has never been a time I’ve left there the same as when I went in,” is surprising. Who wouldn’t be interested in participating in a gesture through which such a thing can happen, that can change the way we live and conceive of ourselves? When Fr. Giussani invited us to take part in this gesture—to educate ourselves—he was laying out a road one can follow in order to see what our friend just described: to become ever-more present to the present,

which is what we all desire, rather than being in the present waiting for it to end so we can begin to live, as we often do. Participating in that gesture, our friend was saying, “helps me enjoy everything more; makes me more attentive” to all that happens.

I’ll read another excerpt, from a girl who wasn’t able to come because she lives far away.

**Chiara** writes:

*“I’m studying Education in Catania. I have been doing the same charitable work for seven years now, since I met the Movement in high school. Charitable work was really the place I realized the true nature and beauty of what I had met. Charitable work has, in a way, ‘monopolized’ all of my life and my choices, beginning with what to study at the university, because I wanted that newness in my relationships with others to be at the center of my work. The most recent*

circumstance in which I discovered the real value of charitable work was, paradoxically, that of the elections, specifically a conversation with one of my brothers. He accused me of being useless to society because I couldn't decide on a party to vote for. Taking the punch, and sort of defending myself, I started to accuse him of sitting there comfortably on the couch delegating others to solve problems. After the argument, I regretted reprimanding him, because what is predominate in him is something profoundly human: no one gets moving unless something is personally interesting. Deep down, I know that I don't move if I don't see some good for me, whether material or spiritual. You can only think of taking action for another who's not you if you recognize the other as a good. From this perspective, charitable work has been the best "school of politics," if you can call it that, for me: not only because it's an attempt to respond to a need, but because I have received more than I have given from the people I've met over the years, in that way discovering that the other is a good for my life."

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In her argument with her brother, you can see the two ways of thinking about politics: it's either just a question of finding a party or it's taking an interest in the polis, in the common good, taking an interest in the needs of others. Her brother accuses her of not picking a side, and she volleys with another image of politics. He did pick a party, but from his balcony! These are two different attitudes toward politics. So then the question is: What can make a person get up off the couch and get involved as a protagonist in responding to the needs of others? It takes, as our friend testified, participating in something that is a true "school of politics," an education in caring for the polis, the common good, and the other and his or her need. This is the education we seek by getting involved in charitable work.



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**Tommaso.** Over the years, I've discovered that charitable work is not a gesture that's separate from the rest of my life; it seeps into every aspect of it. When I started I was still in high school, and there was a teacher who reminded us every time that we were going there to learn to love as Jesus loves. For about a year, I heard the words but didn't understand what they meant; I thought it was just another cliché, until a time when, because of various life circumstances, I found myself full of affection for a person who was treating me badly, and not knowing how to talk to her, since she was distancing herself from me in every way possible. That's when it became clear to me what those words meant. When I go to charitable work, I'm there with people who perhaps can't stand me, or who I myself can't stand; I don't, in fact, choose who I'll help study that afternoon. I can only decide to stick with it or not. This leads me to an exam-

ple that helps to show why I say charitable work permeates every aspect of my life. It's about this last round of exams. I studied with a friend, even though I don't always love studying with other people, especially when I'm up to my neck in work, because too much time is wasted. A year ago, after a few hours I would have looked for an excuse to slip out, "defending" my time to study alone. Instead, this time I stayed until the end, not without some preoccupations because I really was up to my neck, and I asked myself why I stayed. The reason was clear: it's been two years since charitable work stopped being a nice gesture "on its own." Every week at the after-school program at Martinengo, I find myself studying with kids who have no desire to do so, nor to be with me, kids with whom you don't always see a relationship grow: with some it happens, but only after many months and many attempts. There, however, I can't escape;

*I'm "forced" to look at them, to keep reinventing ways to reach out to them and respond to their needs. This is why charitable work is a school where I'm learning to live everything in a new way, including how I study—which has become more productive—and allows me to live relationships more truly, from my family to that less-than-pleasant classmate. I recognize that I need to live this way. That recognition flows from two factors: from my life experience and from consultation with people who are further along than me—in the beginning, that teacher I mentioned, and now others. In addition, two other aspects have been fundamental for me: the booklet *The Meaning of Charitable Work*, an essential guide, and faithfulness to charitable work, which comes both from trusting the people who propose it to me and my own interest in the proposal.*

**Carrón.** Why do you cite these two aspects? How did you discover the value of the booklet in living the gesture?

**Tommaso.** *For a long time, I hardly understood anything; in fact the first few times I read it, it seemed like "CL-ese," a formality, but little by little I realized that what was written was true: the experience I was having couldn't be put into better words.*

**Carrón.** And faithfulness? What has that faithfulness meant for you?

**Tommaso.** *It was only going there every time, without making excuses for myself, that made it possible for me to change how I interact with my family, for example.*

**Carrón.** Let's look at the witness Tommaso has given us. Who wouldn't like to take part in a gesture that, as he said, touches, permeates, and truly renews us, making every aspect of life flourish? It's not a gesture detached from everything else, it's what shines light on every aspect of life. When something like this happens to someone, it's a good for all of us. With two conditions: first, you have to not live the gesture, as happens often today, as merely a response to a need, as if you were in an NGO, outside the frame that has been proposed. Everyone, little by little, has to discover this, as Tommaso did, through the booklet *The Meaning of Charitable Work*. Today, a lot of people volunteer, but how many can say

that the gesture permeates their entire lives? It's not just something extra, you see? This is why Fr. Giussani wanted the gesture to be guided, as our friend said, speaking about his teacher. For a time, just as it was for him, a person doesn't understand why—for example—the teacher leads it, or why we insist on being faithful to Fr. Giussani's suggestions; but, after a while, if you are faithful—this is the second condition—you will understand and discover the full weight of what you're doing. So, like Tommaso, we have to allow for the time that's needed—this is faithfulness—so that all of the promise of a gesture like charitable work can be revealed. If, instead, we try to rush

*"If I look at how I was and how I am today, I can't help but be amazed. It's changed everything in my life."*

everything, if we prefer things that are automatic—like putting our coins in the Coke machine—we’ll miss out on the best part; we won’t have a real experience. You have to give yourself time, so that the gesture we embrace can demonstrate its full capacity to change us and our lives. Participating in the gesture, it’s important not to forget these two factors just highlighted: living it as Fr. Giussani laid out for us, because otherwise it won’t produce what we’re describing, and with fidelity.

I’ll read another contribution from Reggio Calabria.

**Santina** writes:

*“A few years ago, I was asked by a friend if I’d like to do charitable work as a catechism teacher. I immediately said yes because I trust him. As time passed, I had to find reasons for my ‘yes,’ primarily in order to stick with it. Through all these years, it’s been clear to me how charitable work has been helpful most of all for me, and I’ve realized that there has been a change in my person....”*

It is interesting how everyone underlines this: charitable work is a good most of all for the one who does it. So it’s not just someone who is authoritative saying, “do this”; instead, you have the opportunity to verify in your experience if what they tell you is true. I’m always amazed by the way Jesus connects the call to follow Him with the hundredfold: “Follow me, if you want to live; follow me and you will have the hundredfold on earth.” He doesn’t say to you, “Follow me because I said so.” No, He says, “Follow me because I promise you something that you can verify in your own life.” What? The hundredfold, a change you can see happening in yourself. The hundredfold is not the success you might see in the charitable work; sometimes a person works with someone who is sick or has a disability and doesn’t see any “success” in the usual sense. True success

is the growth of the “I” that you discover in yourself; it’s a hundred times more intensity in your life, in your relationships, your studies, the way you face reality.

**Santina’s** letter goes on to say:

*“There has been a change in my person I never imagined was possible.”*

She found evidence in herself of a change she didn’t imagine was possible before. Pay attention: you can’t see this change, you can’t see the hundredfold without going all in: you only see it when you are following. If she had said, “No, I want to see first,” then she never would have seen it, because it’s something you have to verify in your experience. Our friend goes on to say:

*“I was there with those three watching while they silently did their work. In that moment, I felt useless: ‘What am I here for?’ A second later, however, my question shifted to: ‘Can even just the fact that I am here have a value?’ The only thing that I’m giving them in this instant is the fact that I’m here with them.”*

*“If I look at how I was and how I am today, I can’t help but be amazed. Before, I sat watching, delegating to others and not wanting to take responsibility; but now I find myself being proactive, and it’s changed everything in my life, because in getting my hands dirty and adhering to the proposal, I have been able to observe that things are not the fruit of my skills or my performance. Through my ‘yes’ there’s Someone who first changes me, and the things around me, too, so I don’t lose anything. Who are You who constantly seek me to make me grow, You who never tire of me? I’m grateful for all of this because I have understood that I can’t stop short at what I have in mind, especially in*



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*moments of difficulty when I don't think I can go on, because deep down there is One who, through my 'yes,' comes to embrace me and make everything different."*

How could listening to a witness like this not open up in us a curiosity, a desire to make the same verification, to see how life can change

when we follow a person? In our culture, as Fr. Giussani said, it's become inconceivable that I can start to understand and change by following someone. Yet this young woman demonstrates precisely that it was only by following someone that she changed, became the protagonist

of her days, and better understood what life is. Each can decide for him or herself whether or not to miss out on this opportunity.

**Federica.** *I've been doing charitable work in Precotto, a neighborhood in Milan, for three years, at a tutoring center*

for middle school students. For the first year—I admit—it was a bit of a superficial gesture for me; my motivation for going was the chance to get to know some of my classmates, since I had just started at the Catholic University. My position toward charitable work changed when a friend of mine asked me to take her place as the leader for that session and invite new students. This forced me to take the gesture seriously, because otherwise I couldn't propose it to anyone else. Fr. Pino once told us that charitable work might be the most educative of all the gestures we do, and that it's like wanting a Ferrari: if I want a Ferrari, I want it to be nice and fully intact, not missing a mirror or with a broken window. Charitable work is proposed to us as a whole package: you don't choose this or that aspect of it; you get there on time and don't skip, because skipping or going when you feel like it is constructing a charitable work to fit your tastes, so it's almost better not to bother so you don't waste your time. I trusted this and tried to take the proposal seriously. Little by little, after three years I'm beginning to recognize the importance of the gesture for me, more than any other. I realized it during the university term that just ended. All of my exams were on Wednesdays, and Tuesday afternoons I always have charitable work. It was not automatic that I would "give up" an afternoon of studying the day before an exam, especially at a time when charitable work was a bit challenging: I had little desire to go and the kids I had weren't understanding a lot. I spoke about it with my friend Sofia. Both of us were thinking about skipping it that day to prepare for the next day's exam. In speaking with her, however, the conversation slowly shifted to the real question: what interests us in life? Is it deciding how to spend the time we have, and so deciding that the only thing at stake in the day is studying to do well on an exam, or are we interested in something else? Why did we decide to do charitable work this year? What are we discovering within the struggle to be faithful to the proposal? Our questions shifted from "What should we do? What's bet-

ter for our studying?" to "What am I really interested in today? What am I discovering in charitable work?" We were left without any doubt about what to do, not because it was moralistically correct to go—"you don't skip charitable work"—but because for me going there is first of all asking once again what really interests me in life, which I forget every day. That Tuesday, *The Meaning of Charitable Work* brought this message to heart in a short paragraph titled 'Consequences,' point two, which states, "It is the discovery of the fact that precisely because we love them, it is not we who make them happy... and that not even the most perfect society, the most legally solid organism, the greatest riches, the surest health, the purest beauty, the most educated civilization will ever be able to make them happy. It is an Other who can make them happy. Who is the reason for everything? Who made everything? God. So Jesus is not only He who announces to me the truest word, who explains the law of my reality, He who is no longer only the light of my mind; I discover that Christ is the meaning of my life. The witness of those who have experienced this value is very beautiful: 'I continue to do charitable work because all of my sufferings and all of theirs have a meaning.' Hoping in Christ, everything has a meaning: Christ. I discover this, finally, in the place where I do charitable work, precisely by means of the final powerlessness of my love; it is the experience in which intelligence discovers wisdom, true culture." After we returned, Sofia and I stayed up late studying without wasting a minute. Aside from the fact that the exam went well, I was really happy with the way I studied. Thinking back on it, my affection for charitable work keeps growing because I see that it's closely connected to my life and to all the other days of the week; it helps me organize my time and my studies, it helps me to see that, deep down, time is not mine, and that my studies don't go better because I cut things out of my life; but rather, it's precisely in committing myself to certain things that I can go back to my studies with a new perspective, in which I don't just

*focus on passing exams. What interests me? Discovering that Christ is the meaning of my life; seeing if this is true not only at charitable work, but also in the way I relate to my parents, my exams, my boyfriend, and people in my apartment. By going to charitable work, I am slowly learning to love the other because they are in front of me, not because they cheer me up or are nice or do their homework well, but because they're there. This is what I really desire in my relationship with everyone. It's too important for my growth for me to skip charitable work, even if it's the day before an exam. I still don't understand everything, but I have a lot of little intuitions, answers, and new questions that push me to continue to bet on that place for my life.*

**Carrón.** Each of these witnesses offers something crucial. Federica underlines a vital fact—the integrity of the gesture: “You don’t pick elements, you get there on time and don’t skip,” which is another way of

reiterating the two factors we talked about before: the need to consider the proposal as it is outlined to us and faithfulness. Charitable work is only effective in changing our lives if we live it the way it is proposed to us. She is already beginning to see, as she said, that “this gesture more than any other,” is decisive in changing everything else. It’s interesting to see how the invitation to be faithful forced her to ask herself: “What interests me in life?” It’s impossible, with the exam that she has the next day, for this question not to come up at a certain point: life itself doesn’t let her get away from it. The question of being faithful to it is crucial, because it forces you, whether you like it or not, to consider and make a decision. What’s really interesting is to then verify whether adhering undermines your studies or if it is actually something that increases your desire to study and make the most of your time. Otherwise, I’m a good Christian but I don’t study, I let it slide. But no, she is discovering that charitable work is infinitely tied to her life, so she starts to see the connections between charitable work and her studies; she realizes that the gesture doesn’t take away from her studies, but helps her to face them in a different way, and she notices how time is even more useful than she had ever dreamed it could be.

**Anna.** *I do charitable work in Bresso, where there's an afterschool program for students from elementary school up to high school. Two things have been really important to me in these months. The first happened one day when I was studying with three kids from elementary school. One of them is Chinese; he was really unmotivated, he didn't respond when I spoke and I couldn't drag a word out of him no matter what I did; when he did speak, what came out seemed random. I was get-*



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ting flustered: I was trying everything, various strategies, but without finding a foothold to win him over and get him to work. I was talking to a wall. Instead, the other two kids were doing their work on their own and asked me a hundred questions; they were very curious. At a certain point, at my wit's end, seeing all the evidence of how powerless I was in front of this student and looking at the other two, I said to myself, "How much I wish that reality could win you over, so you could enjoy things as the other two do!" convinced I wouldn't win him over myself but that something would have to happen for him. The only thing I could do was be with the other two, who were calling for me; I started to pay attention to them without worrying about him. After a while, he asked me, "Is this right?" and showed me a piece of paper on which he had done an exercise. With that, we started over again in doing his homework together. I was really struck by all of this, for two reasons. First because a sincere desire that another person be won over is new for me. At the end of the day, I thought to myself, "How funny: before today that boy was no one to me; I didn't even know he existed, but for a second I desired his happiness." I asked myself if this was just a natural impulse. I didn't think so, because it's much more common for frustration to prevail in me, rather than that desire. So then, what has happened to me to fill me with that desire? The second reason I was struck is that something happened—I don't even know exactly what—to reawaken that boy, without me doing anything. At the Spiritual Exercises in November you said, "The power of reality is really impressive when we let it speak to our heart (...) So impressive! What a great capacity reality has to turn daily life upside down!" The second episode happened a little while after the first. One afternoon, I was with three other kids who were really good from the beginning. This had never happened to me before, but I was there with them watching while they si-



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lently did their work. In that moment, I felt useless and I asked myself, "What am I here for?" A second later, however, my question shifted to: "Can even just the fact that I am here have a value? The only thing that I'm giving them in this instant is the fact that I'm here with them." I thought of the point about charitable work that says, "The supreme law of our being is to share in being with others, to live in communion." That was what was happening to me. I also had the intuition that even my just being there could be useful, not because I was doing something, but because I was sharing in their being, I was in communion with them. What I saw in both episodes is that through charitable work I discover the truth about myself. This happens more and more often in front of everything—in my relationships with my friends, and with my studies, my parents, my sisters, and my friends in my department—so that I find myself saying: 'I need to go back to charitable work.' The more I see the promise it contains, in other words, the more I start to see something in me changing, the more I recognize how much I need this gesture in my life.

**Carrón.** Impressive: with all the challenges she described, it is precisely because of what is happening in her that a desire grew in her to go to charitable work without missing a single day. If we don't get to this point, sooner or later we'll stop going. It's a matter of time.

**Margherita.** I also do charitable work at Martinengo; I help students as they study. A while back I was having difficulties with one girl. As a result, I consulted with one of the sisters who lead the gesture, and she said to me, "In any case, you don't know how, but she is for you and you are for her." This shed new light on my going there. In the following weeks, working with the same girls but with that hypothesis that

*they are for me and I am for them, I realized this: they're not mine and I'm not there to rule over them. In the same way, their needs are not the same as what I believe them to be, and yet they are for me. The same thing is happening for me with the girls I live with and my friends and those I see around the university: they are not mine and I'm not there to rule over them. I perceive the needs others have, which I often don't even completely understand, more and more as a road for me.*

**Carrón.** We can see how discovering these things while doing such a simple gesture is crucial for all relationships: with your boyfriend or girlfriend, with your friends, with others. When you don't understand what the other person needs, maybe your boyfriend or girlfriend, and you think you are the answer, that's the beginning of the tragedy. It doesn't seem like much, but it would be worth going to charitable work just to learn that. Ninety-nine percent of fights turn out to be because you don't understand this: you blame the other for not giving you what they cannot give, because your need is infinitely greater than him or her. The other person is like a drop that can never fill a glass.

This is not something you discover because you repeat the right phrases; it's only by running up against the need the oth-

er has over and over again that you begin to see his or her true need and begin to perceive your own need at the same time. How much more human everything would be if we really understood these things!

**Paolo.** Learning about gratuitousness in my relationships is perhaps the best thing that has happened to me as a result of going to charitable work. One afternoon, I was studying with a little girl whom I had already known for a while and I liked. That day, she didn't want to do anything. I tried to push her: "Come on, you can do it." Nothing. So I resorted to Plan B: I took her over to Sister, which usually works. Nothing. I found myself facing two possible alternative attitudes: continuing to try to insist based on what I had in mind; in other words, thinking I knew what was good for her and what she needed, or love the point she was at along her path. This latter attitude has been fundamental for me and my relationships. I had been with my girlfriend for two years, and while I was starting to become more attached to the Movement, she was actually starting to distance herself, to the point of giving up on everything: the Movement, the Church, etc. It was really difficult and also painful for me. My first instinct was to try to force her: "Come on, come to School of Community; I know you need this." This went on for a few months, with her feeling like I didn't really see her. I could tell something wasn't right. One day I took her with me to School of Community: for me, it was beautiful, but when

*I brought her back home, she was sad. That's when I found myself once again facing the need for that attitude and I told her, "Please, don't come to another one of these gestures if you're just coming because I insist!" I found myself loving her for the point she was at along her path. That was what opened everything up again; who knows where the relationship would have gone if we hadn't made that step. This is the most beautiful gaze I can have on other people, and it's only possible because it's what I have received in my life. When The Meaning of Charitable Work says, "We do charitable work in order to learn to live like Christ," this is possible not because we see God come down to earth, but because we feel that gaze of love, the one the prisoner described in front of the guards, the one you speak to us about; I experience it, and that is the thing I most desire to give to others, most of all to my girlfriend. And the faithfulness mentioned before is needed because it's not true that after understanding something once, we've understood it forever. I constantly need to be educated again by that gaze.*

**Carrón.** This connection Paolo made is really beautiful. It's proof of what I was saying before. If a person faces life thinking he already knows—"I already know what you need"—to the point of "dragging" his girlfriend to School of Community, the only thing he accomplishes is that she becomes sad. Loving the freedom of the other person, loving the point the other person is at on their path, means waiting for the unfolding of a

design that is not ours. I always think back to an episode Fr. Giussani talked about that can be applied to what Paolo says. They asked him what happens “if, following this logic of the power of a presence and embracing another’s need, I invite a classmate I meet at the university and he says to me after awhile, ‘Look, this is a need you have, but not me.’” It’s dumbfounding to see how Fr. Giussani reacts to certain provocations. Each of us can say, “How would I have responded?” and then compare his response to Giussani’s. Instead of prodding the other and trying to convince him that he too has the same desire, Fr. Giussani said, “You know what is in the human heart, because it’s in you. [...] And you understand that the other person doesn’t understand what you understand because he or she is stuck somehow.” So, how can you help them? The starting point is not an argument (“now I’ll convince you that you have this desire”) but rather an awareness that the other has to follow a path, just as we had to. Therefore, above all, Fr. Giussani goes on to say, first you have to “ask the Creator Spirit to renew the face of the earth of that person, because we can’t do it ourselves!” You begin to pray that the other become aware, and, second, “you have to stay with him, not impose on him” (*L’io rinasce in un incontro [The ‘I’ is reborn in an encounter]: 1986-1987, pp. 364-366*). The same goes for children: you have to stay with them, because only if you stay with them, as you all said, can something happen. Our friend who told us about the three kids described it: two were there ready to do their work and the other wasn’t; she tried insisting with the third with no results; as soon as she left him some peace and started working with the other two, the third started to have the same desire as them and started to act. This is the method of God: God chooses a person or persons to attract another. So we can’t get stuck on ourselves, saying, “It has to happen to her as it happened to me.” No. Something was given to Paolo so it could also reach his girlfriend, but according to a design that was not his own. At a certain point, he too began to see. It’s not a question of imposing on her, but of being with her. This means starting to become familiar with the humanity of the other, which is not a mechanism that I can manipulate. The other person doesn’t move because I start the engine, like Paolo starts the engine of his scooter and it goes. Your girlfriend isn’t like a scooter, she has an autonomous engine, and so she doesn’t bend to your insistence; you therefore have to provoke her in another way, by placing a life in front of her eyes, so that at a certain point, according to a design that we don’t understand, a spark can break loose. Just like the witness that was read at the last School of Community: for years

the husband lived in the Movement and the wife didn’t want to hear about it, until she—after 30 years—sent a letter to enroll in the Fraternity. Her husband waited all the time it took. Only God loves freedom like this. It’s not that He doesn’t care: He sends His Son, and then all those whom Christ chooses to remain in history as a presence—the cloud of witnesses—show that it is possible to change. He’s not there on the balcony—He continues to act, to challenge men and women, while at the same time loving their freedom. In the same way, we continue to live in front of others, but we don’t know when they will begin to recognize something and adhere.

It’s a grace, then, that we are offered this gesture we spoke about this evening, that has such power to change us, to help us understand the nature of our need and that of others, and to influence every other part of life. Let’s continue, then, to propose it to everyone, following the modality and conception of Fr. Giussani. Each of us has to live it entirely. If you go sporadically and then say, “None of what you said this evening happened to me,” I understand, but it’s as if you said, “I want my scooter to run without gas because gas is expensive.” It doesn’t work. The gesture must be embraced in its entirety: it has a specific nature, and if it’s proposed in a certain way, it’s because that’s the only way it can bear fruit in our experience. We can verify what authority figures tell us by looking at the hundredfold it brings into our lives. This is confirmation that we, when we follow someone, are not doing so in an unreasonable way; we have plenty of reasons to follow. The verification of our following is the hundredfold. That’s when you see that it’s in your interest, on a human level, to follow. When we don’t see the hundredfold, we have to ask ourselves: am I following? We can start from following to verifying the hundredfold, or from the hundredfold to verifying whether we’re following. If I don’t experience the hundredfold, maybe it’s because I’m managing everything myself; I’m not embracing the gesture in its entirety as it’s proposed to me. We have all had the chance to see, in this afternoon’s witnesses, that when the gesture is lived as it is proposed to us, what happens is the hundredfold. If it doesn’t happen to you, you can stop to verify how seriously you are taking the gesture.

**Dima.** *One last question, which has to do with the nature of the gesture. Earlier you said, “Charitable work is not volunteer work.” Could you briefly go back to that comment?*

**Carrón.** It’s a question that I would leave open. I will say this: it’s one thing to simply respond to an emergency, a need, and it’s something else to discover the nature of one’s need and the One who can truly respond. You could

say, “I’ll go there and do something for others.” That’s a good thing, for goodness sake, but the real question is understanding what the other’s need is, discovering the nature of their need. Do they just need breakfast? We always begin with more external needs: breakfast, tutoring, being accompanied because of a defined disability, etc. You start there, but slowly what emerges, as we have seen, is the whole depth of people’s needs, and you understand that volunteer work alone cannot respond, because the need is so vast in relation to what I can do. This is how you begin to understand that you have something else to learn. It’s what Fr. Giussani wanted to introduce us to through the gesture and the booklet. It’s as if he told us, “Look, there’s a lot to learn from this gesture.” If we reduce it the same way the common mentality does, we’ll find ourselves disappointed, we with the others, because sooner or later our true needs will emerge, and if the gesture in which we participate doesn’t help us to understand who can respond to these true needs, we’ll grow skeptical or start to despair. Jesus responded in His own way to immediate needs, like hunger, for example. Right then, He could have found-

fulfill other people’s needs; they don’t see these depths and therefore, in the end, what they do is not truly loving of the destiny of the other in its fullness. It’s only by beginning to see the nature of our needs and realizing that we are not the ones who can answer them, and that it takes opening oneself to an Other (“It’s an Other who can make them happy”), that we can truly face our humanity and that of our brothers and sisters without fear, and in fact constantly break it open. Maybe we can begin to grasp the difference between charitable work and volunteering; these are just a few thoughts we can develop next time. I’ll leave this point open: What difference do you see between what some of your classmates at the university experience when they volunteer and what you experience when you do charitable work? Start to look at the experience they have and your experience, because more than the explanation you need to verify the things you heard this afternoon in practice. It’s only by seeing them emerge in your own experience that you can understand how the gesture of charitable work, as it is proposed here, has a weight and educational capacity that is infinitely more powerful than any volunteer activity.

*“If you too begin to understand the depth of human need, at the same time it will become clear that it’s not you who can respond to your own need or the needs of others.”*

ed a non-profit: why did He found the Church? Because He knows hungry people have a greater need. Not that those people who were fed through the multiplication of loaves and fish weren’t happy: they wanted to make Him king, they were so amazed! But, understanding human nature, Jesus says, “Don’t you realize that this doesn’t help, it’s not enough for you? If you do not eat of the flesh of the Son of God and drink of His blood, you cannot be truly happy. The need for food that you have is just an introduction to understanding the true nature of your need.” Now, if you too begin to understand the depths of human need, at the same time it will become clear that it’s not you who can respond to your own need or the needs of others, of your boyfriend or girlfriend, the kids you work with, etc. The majority of people who do volunteer work think—having good intentions—that they can

Volunteering is good, don’t get me wrong: doing *something* is better than wasting time. We have to recognize its value, but at the same time understand—thanks to what you’ve said today and what you will observe going forward—how it is different from charitable work. Each of us can compare. What will convince us to go along with the gesture just as it is proposed to us, not being influenced by the common mentality and reducing it to a volunteer activity, is only experience alone, comparing this experience with what we see around us. To keep it from being reduced, the gesture is guided, which is not an external “add-on.” Along with that, we have a tool available to us: a reading that makes it harder to reduce the gesture. The full gesture, then, is made up of the gesture and the words intrinsically linked, so as not to reduce either. Keep it up! ■