

Notes from Julián Carrón's Synthesis
For the Communion and Liberation University National Central Meeting
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This morning, we could all grasp the magnitude of the challenge that familiarity with Christ poses for each of us. At the beginning, our friend asked how we can come to recognize this “ultimately unique face,” that has “unmistakable traits, distinguishable even from those things that He created as a sign of Himself” (L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, BUR, Milan 2001, p. 148). This is the decisive question. And he added that what amazed him was that this personal relationship with Christ was the stated origin of the joy he saw in some of the friends around him.

The steps we tried to lay out this morning helped us to better understand what this familiarity consists of. It came out right in the first interventions that this familiarity does not happen abstractly, outside of reality, but rather right before our eyes through the facts that happen. Certain facts introduce something else in our life, pointing us to see His presence. Just like the rediscovery that happened for the first person who spoke, telling us about the conversation with an old high school classmate whom he saw again after a few years. A passionate student of Nietzsche and Sartre with a brilliant mind and lot of initiative, that classmate sought him out because he was going through a rough time: “I’m going through some circumstances that are making me think there’s more out there than, until recently, I believed,” he wrote to our friend. “Since you have been working on your heart for a long time, I’d like to see you to try to understand if you can help me to see more of myself, too.” And then, when they met, he said, “I found myself to be weaker, more fragile than I realized, and the most beautiful things that have happened to me over the last few years aren’t the ones that I wanted to create or control, but rather those that I didn’t make myself. I’m starting to think that they were given to me.” At that point, our friend broke in to say, “It’s the same for me, right now this beautiful conversation with you carries the same evidence: the evidence that you, right now, are being given to me.” Hearing these words, his classmate was awestruck; he stopped, repeated those words and thanked our friend. What makes it possible to perceive another person that way? “I was able to say those things because of an awareness that I learned while walking a certain road. Thanks to his amazement, though, I was able to regain this awareness as an event, as something that happened and not just an idea I’ve appropriated over the years.” His classmate was amazed, overcome by that gaze he received. For both of them, this gaze was an event that introduced them to something “other.”

This event can happen in one moment of one’s life, and then have a person detach herself from it, like the girl our Florentine friend told us about. Despite having encountered the experience of GS, in her first years at college she distanced herself from it. This year, her father got sick and passed away, and she reached out again to a person from the Movement who had made an impression on her before. That friend invited her to come and spend a day together. Afterward, the girl wrote, “Something inside me said, ‘I want to live this way, how I saw them living today.’ I don’t want to admit that all of this comes from an Other with a capital ‘O’, no matter how evident it is. I know it’s my problem, a question of familiarity, and not of abstract knowledge. But after what has happened, despite my nihilistic leanings, I have to confess that I desire this familiarity.” When a person detaches himself, the risk we all run becomes clear: that life could end up empty. Our only real options in life are these: nihilism or familiarity with Christ. It’s a decision we have to face not only this morning, but in all our time; so we’re not just here to throw words around. What tore that girl away from nihilism was not a lecture, but seeing the beginning happen again: it was her experience of a person present, not of an idea, not of an image, not of something from the past or of something she’d learned in her time in GS. If Christ becomes a fact from the past, as He had become for her, then nihilism worms its way into life, life ends up at the mercy of nothingness. You can tell, in contrast, when the same event from the first time happens to her again in such a radical way that it makes the highest demand on her freedom, forcing her to decide. She said, “I want to live this way,

even though I don't want to recognize that this newness comes from an Other." Her freedom is at play: she, like each of us, is called to make a decision in the face of what happens to her when she encounters someone. We all realize that, though we find ourselves in front of many facts like the one she described, it's often as if we turn away our gaze; we close the door on the path that leads to familiarity with Christ. If this familiarity doesn't invade all of our life, our "I" remains divided, falls prey to nihilism.

But what exactly is this familiarity we're talking about? The path described in the intervention one of you made was critical in this sense, in that she noted that this familiarity is not determined by the quantity of data we have about Christ, by how much we can say about Him, or by the quantity of facts that we've collected, but rather by our wonder at His presence that is happening; in other words, by an experience in which our entire "I" is seized, attracted, taken hold of. It's not a question of knowing more things; it's finding something, or someone, in front of you that grabs your heart, like that girl we were just talking about. It's not a question of collecting more data about the other person, because we know the "life and miracles," of many, but they don't grab our hearts even for a minute. Familiarity does not come from all the new information I have, from the many facts I learn about: there can be theologians who write book after book about Christ, but how many are taken hold of by Christ? The same goes for each of us. It's wonder at His presence, a wonder that permeates our entire "I," that leads to familiarity, to a heart close to Christ. And you can see when someone's living this by the freedom they have toward the present and the future, toward the way their relationships, situations or work may be going. Familiarity with Christ is not the consequence of a syllogism: "Therefore, I have to say, 'Jesus,'" like something added on. It is something that blossoms within the experience of a unique correspondence with our humanity that makes our wonder at His presence even greater.

How many times were you surprised, listening to the facts you've been telling this morning, by a wonder drawing your whole being to say, "You," to say His name? Or was this "You" like the conclusion of a syllogism, the result of a "therefore?" I'm asking to help us to take a step; otherwise we tell each other exceptional facts, but it's as if we already knew the answer ahead of time, so we stick it on to the end of the story and our reasoning. If we are not truly in wonder of the event of Christ happening, we will not surprise ourselves by saying, "You." What a far cry this is from what our friend witnessed to us earlier, when she said that, after the conversation with her classmate, realizing she was facing the same problematic situation with the scandal of sacrifice and hatred because of how things had happened, but with a gladness and a freedom, "I could not avoid saying 'You.'" Full of wonder, she recognized that this gladness and freedom were in her because Christ was taking hold of her life more and more.

It's what happened to the disciples in the miraculous catch of fish. What does the Gospel tell us? Go back and reread it. What was Peter's reaction to that overabundance of fish? The disciples, too, knew many things about Jesus, but when they see that "great number" of fish, what happens? Do they go through a whole series of logical steps to get to that "therefore..."? No. "Astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him [Simon Peter] and all those with him" (Lk 5:9). They had seen a fact whose only explanation was that "You," that man who was present, who told them to cast their nets, even though they had not caught anything all night long. The recognition of that man, of who that man was, of his exceptionality—the recognition that started to dawn in Peter and the other disciples—was not the conclusion of a line of abstract reasoning; it was the result of an incomparable wonder that filled their entire being. They found themselves in front of an exceptional presence that set all of their reason and affectivity into motion, defying all their measures, opening up an inescapable line of questions and bringing about deep change in their lives, making them ever-more fully themselves.

I can see what Christ is because He is so substantially real that He makes me free, glad. Our friend from Bologna, speaking about a friend he recently met, said, "When she is there, I'm happy." He didn't say, "I'm happy because the earth exists," because of her, because of a presence, a "you." This is critical in order to understand when we're saying something real. We realize that Christ is

there, present, because He makes us free, glad; he helps us to have an experience that would otherwise be impossible. If Christ weren't a fully real presence, we could not explain that freedom, that gladness. We are not visionaries, we don't have to imagine anything; we simply have to recognize what is there, to follow through in being faithful to what happens. If we don't get there, to the recognition of His presence, to the familiarity with Him, we will not find the true response to the need for totality and unity in life that each of us carries engraved in his or her being, a response each of us needs in order to be him or herself.

Those who have begun to experience the newness Christ brings into our lives and to recognize His presence—in the concreteness of living, through the human signs He uses to make Himself contemporaneous to us—can truly grasp the method that Christ established to respond to our need for totality: “Follow me!”

The method is none other than living our life with His presence, as the Gospel tells us. It's radiantly clear in the episode of the miraculous catch of fish. They weren't able to catch anything all night long. Jesus sees them as they, exhausted, are cleaning their nets, and tells Simon, “Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.” He responds, “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets” (Lk 5:4-5). Because of the trust that man had already generated in them, they throw out the nets. We can put forth tons of effort our whole lives, as they did all night long, without anything happening, because fulfillment is not something we can generate ourselves. Each of you can make all the attempts you want, following your own images, but you always have to verify if these efforts and images bring you what you hoped to accomplish. Now, if you've worked all night and haven't gotten anywhere, always remember that there's another possibility, just as for the disciples: that someone arrives, proposes something to you and says, “Throw out your net,” and you, a fishing expert, but who hasn't managed to anything all night, leave room for another possibility, precisely because you understand that your attempts, following your own images, following your own measure or following what you have in mind, no matter the good intentions you have, cannot produce what you're looking for.

And it may be when we're feeling similarly wretched that we are most open to a possibility offered by someone else, that doesn't come from us and that we don't control. Like the girl whose father died, when she became open again after many years to a possibility that had already entered her life. She sought out the person who had struck her back then, who called her and said, “Come spend a day together with me,” and something unexpected happened: that event that breaks her open, brings her back to life and provokes her freedom happened again. Christianity is this event, not our attempts. It's not something you produce through your own efforts, with your plans, or that you can customize by choosing whatever parts of what is proposed to you that you like to make your own soup. Christianity is an event: something unexpected, unpredictable, that is not the work of your hands and cannot be reduced to your projects, that gives you an experience of fullness that you cannot obtain on your own and that awakens an attraction in you that's unlike any other, inviting you to follow. “Lower your nets.” They did, and “caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. [...] When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, ‘Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man’” (Lk 5:8). He's someone present, a “you,” to whom Peter says, “Depart from me, Lord,” seeing all his own poverty compared to the man in front of him. He fell at the knees of a person, a “you” with flesh and blood. Without that “you,” the other consequences, starting with the overabundance of fish and their wonder, would not have followed. This is the point: without that “You,” nothing would have happened. So following Him, staying with Him, going fishing with Him was more interesting for them than going to see one rabbi or another to study the Old Testament or going to the temple in Jerusalem. They had run into the presence of the Mystery, God incarnate. This is the difference that entered history with Jesus; and if we don't understand it, we'll never escape from what we've planted, the short-lived realm of our attempts.

What, then, is needed? What is the method? Following after His presence as it happens, following it to the point of going fishing with Jesus, embracing His initiative: “Lower your nets.” If we do not follow after His presence, we will not be able to construct even a second of that wonder that

invaded Peter, because it is Christ that makes wonder possible, to the point that it takes over our entire person. This is the greatest challenge to ever erupt into history: going fishing with that man was the key to access what we're all looking for, it was the way the answer to the expectations we all have, albeit confusedly, made itself experienceable: the truth was a person in front of them. And the method has not changed since then. If you don't want to miss out on the best part, if each of us doesn't want to miss out on the best part, the first essential step is recognizing where the Mystery is happening, where Christ makes Himself present, and deciding to follow His presence, according to the way it moves each day (today going fishing in Capernaum, two days later to Nazareth and the next day to Cana...). If we don't go along with the way this presence moves in history, we will not experience the hundredfold ("Everyone who follows me will receive a hundred times more...;" cf. Mt 19:29.) If we had not come this morning, we would not have been able to see what happened before our eyes. And this is true for all we will propose in the upcoming months; therefore you have the criteria to decide, because only a person who is aware of the method Christ chose will be able to properly decide. Just as we sang in *Along the Jordan River*, "Without Him I can't understand the things anymore." This is why we follow Him, following the footsteps of His presence as it happens and proposes itself in our life. Without what happened to us, we aren't able to understand things fully.

A recent incident documents this very clearly. Last March, a university professor from the Movement, who is a *Memor Domini* and has been living in Kazakhstan for 17 years, was supposed to participate in a gathering of CL leaders from formerly Soviet countries which was scheduled in Vilnius, Lithuania. She had already bought the plane tickets, but just before the deadline she realized that, in order to participate, she would have to skip the last two days of class before final exams. She was in a tough situation and asked herself if she should participate: she was really tempted not to go, to fulfill her duties school. She gets to the university and the dean of her department sees she is out of sorts and asks, "What's wrong?" "I'm upset because I was invited to go to a meeting,"—she explains what it's about—"but there are so many things to do here I've realized I can't go. The dean—who is Muslim—responds immediately, "You have to go! If you don't go there, what good can you do here? I'm asking you to go, because if you don't go there, to a meeting that's so crucial for you, we will not be able to benefit from the way that you live your work, the way you treat everything. That's why you have to go." She replies, "But I have a lot of commitments." "Make me a list of all the things you have to do; I'll do them for you." This cleared the whole landscape (you can read about it in the June issue of *Traces*). Sometimes someone has to come from the outside to make us aware of what it means to participate in a gesture that has such a vital significance for your daily life, to make us aware of how much the encounter we had is what determines the newness in our way of perceiving and treating everything.

If we don't keep what we have seen this morning before our eyes, if we don't grow in the awareness that it's only following His presence just as it happens that can generate a freedom, a gladness and a fruitfulness in the way we live every situation, we will get lost at the first turn in the road; we will not have the criteria to decide what to do—starting with the proposals for this summer. That dean in Kazakhstan understood perfectly that if that teacher from the Movement didn't participate in that place, in that meeting in Vilnius, she would be useless there in Kazakhstan, because the truly original contribution that she offers through the way she works depends on her "going fishing with Him," and He was fishing in Vilnius, in that case. We are not just talking about fishing two thousand years ago; for her, "Going fishing with Christ," coincided with participating in that place where Christ, through the Movement, had invited her. Each of us can decide how to respond to the proposals that the Movement makes, but whatever decision you make, you need to verify what happens. Do you think you can do without following the modality through which His presence happens and provokes you? Okay, then verify it—as that girl who came back years later did—and you can understand if the image that you concocted corresponds with the truth or not. If we don't verify that only the familiarity with Christ regenerates life, and that this familiarity grows in participating in that place where He makes Himself present, "going fishing with Him," we will end up forgetting

about that familiarity and will be like a time bomb, looking for any crumb of satisfaction and becoming more and more skeptical, easy prey for nihilism. This is the real decision we face: familiarity with Christ or nihilism.

We're not here to waste time; we're in front of the real challenge of life, that everyone has to face: verifying if the last word on life is nothingness or if there's another possibility. For that high school classmate who was reading Nietzsche and Sartre, when life really started to push him, went knocking on our friend's door, because he had seen him live differently. Each of us needs to see His presence happening again and no one is exempt from the risk of losing their way, of thinking they can make it with just their own projects.

If we're announcing a schedule now, during the announcement, it's only to say, "Look, this summer, these are the ways His presence is moving, provoking and sustaining you." Jesus doesn't disappear and become just an inspiration, so each person can imagine Him as they please. No! Christ is a presence, an event happening now, and this summer He is offering you certain points to come together to remind you in the most clear and persuasive way, that you can follow more easily and face your daily challenges in a human way. It's up to each person to decide. Don't come to the gestures the Movement proposes because the leader tells you to. Save yourselves that trouble! If you want to do something else, go ahead and do it, because each of you can then verify. And even if a person makes a mistake, that's not what interests me; what really counts is that you can understand the difference between following your own thoughts and following the proposal the Movement offers to you (just as the girl our friend was talking about understood). It's not all the same.

We have all seen, with the example of "charitable work," how simply following a gesture brought about a change in the "I" of many people which affects the totality of factors. The importance of an announcement, then, is that it says, "Lower your nets." Those who agree to do so can participate in the miracle, can be invaded by that same wonder Simon Peter had. Every gesture the Movement proposes to you is a renewal of this invitation: "Cast out your net." "But I didn't catch anything all night!" "Do you have any reasons, based on your history, to trust now?" Only those who trust will be able to see the fruits.

I would add that every gesture is proposed as a complete whole. A person can freely decide not to accept, because he is not sufficiently convinced of its value. It's like Jesus saying, "Come fishing with me," and someone responds, "No, tonight I have other plans." Fine, stick with your other plans, who's going to stop you? But—think about it—if Jesus came up and said, "Do you want to come to this gesture with me?" and all a person answers is, "It depends," maybe he hasn't understood what's really at stake. The Movement challenges us to look at every gesture as the tenderness of Christ who is inviting us to "go fishing with Him." You can decide whether to adhere or not: you will verify what happens to you, one way or another. Don't worry if there are many of us or just a few. Jesus stayed with 12 people; we, too, can start over again with 12. It's only if there are people who live with a passion for what happened to them that they'll be able to attract others.

Have a good summer, everyone!