

Companions Toward Destiny

Notes from the Assembly of the Equipe of Teachers and Educators of Communion and Liberation with Fr. Julián Carrón

in video conference, September 4, 2021

The Equipe of the teachers and educators of Communion and Liberation (CLE) is an occasion of friendship, dialogue, and encounter. As such, it showcases the experience of many adults who, engaged in various roles in the world of the education of young people, have taken part in recent years.

The meeting of the Equipe this year—on the eve of the beginning of the school year—was anticipated in a particular way, not only for the joy of coming together in person and in a more extended way, but also because of the awareness that we are facing a dramatic moment, that we are immersed in a time that challenges our very identity.

The last academic year, lived between the awaiting of a return to normalcy and a quarantine more or less burdensome, was characterized by new formats and occasions for meeting—through internet platforms—in the sphere of the life of Gioventù Studentesca (GS), including testimonies, assemblies, and study groups, which saw the young people engaged creatively as protagonists.

The summer vacations, provoked by a strong desire for life and friendship, were wanted first by the kids, who often involved the adults before the adults had taken any initiative, and became places of unexpected encounters and events.

“There’s a crack in everything: that’s how the light gets in,” goes the song “Anthem” by Leonard Cohen. This line expresses well the journey of recent times. Within the numerous cracks in a reality that showed its least tranquil and reassuring face, including the lockdowns, distance learning, the feelings of fear and uncertainty, possibilities of an unforeseeable light were born in encounters, friendships, and rebirths. No one could have imagined the explosion of such richness within circumstances that were so unfavorable. And yet, it happened!

And yet, as we are often reminded, it is not enough for something to happen before our eyes (even the most incredible things); it is necessary to have an attitude that strains to intercept that which vibrates within the things that happen, going to their depth; only in this way will they become truly ours, never to be lost.

The wonder generated by and gratitude for these facts have reopened questions about ourselves and our own humanity, about the grace of the charism that we have encountered, and about our personal responsibility toward the world. From a desire to face these questions and to judge the path of these past months, an idea was born of conducting a dialogue with Fr. Carrón, which made up the heart of the Equipe and is proposed in this format.

Fr. Andrea Mencarelli
Francesco Barberis

Francesco Barberis. Hello, Julián! Thank you for your time. “Everyone bears responsibility for the charisma he has encountered” (L. Giussani-S. Alberto-J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s, Montreal, 2010, p. 83). We arrived here yesterday evening with all of the urgency arising from the need that we are, and today we had an intense day: this morning with Fr. Andrea, César, and Alfonso (on TV series and newspaper articles and their, at times, dramatic relationship with our heart), and, after lunch, the video from the exhibit of the Meeting titled *Living Without Fear in the Age of Uncertainty*, which documents, among other things, your friendship with Rowan Williams and Charles Taylor.

We too, Julián, like you, do not want to let up for a second in the striving to embrace own humanity, made up of joys and fears, in order that we might grasp all of the weight of Christianity in our lives. This morning, at Morning Prayer, I was moved by the words that we recited—“You shall be My witnesses to the ends of the earth,” (“Responsory”, Morning Prayer, Saturday Hours, in *Book of Hours*, Milan, Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, 2009, p. 185) and I asked myself: witnesses of what? And so, we want to remain in relationship, in dialogue, with you, Fr. Julián; it is for this reason that I thank you, that we thank you.

Let’s begin.

This year, several things have happened to me that became an occasion for me to return to what is essential in what we have encountered. A girl sought me out and began a dialogue with me, a bit like Nicodemus, without telling her classmates. She told me: “Everyone thinks the same way and I need someone who can, instead, introduce something different.” Another student, during the last lesson on St. Augustine, intervened by saying, “How can you imagine a God who would just create the world and then stop, and be done there? It’s impossible.” I was surprised by this: for years, I have suffered from the fact that many students, during certain lessons, have glimpsed an originality, a diversity, but then this did not become a story; no conversion happened as a result and they didn’t even dream of coming to GS. I understand now that this is not the problem; the problem is the presence of moments in which a crack opens up, through which a point of light can be introduced. The question, then, is in their hands and in the hands of God, and their dialogue with the Lord will be necessary. When we say, “Be free from certain formats,” I used to think that it meant freeing yourself from certain formats within GS; in certain respects, it could be that I do need to free myself, like, for example, from the thought that “if so-and-so doesn’t come to GS, it is not OK”; but this is not the point because this is not in my hands. The point is becoming a reference point for conversion, which is possible because of the journey we have been on in recent years, from Disarming Beauty onward. I realize that the most important question is that there be places of freedom in which one can educate toward freedom. This year, in a moment in which public school was closed and it was not possible to meet the kids in the afternoon, that there was a place like Portofranco (a center of academic help designed for kids in middle and high school) where it is possible to invite them, is a most precious thing. In all these things, it seems that there are also certain aspects of an overcoming of dualism; it is not as if you said, “The question is that they encounter God” because you forgot to judge the situation in which you are operating. These things are very striking to me personally.

Julián Carrón. This explains the journey we have made: how, slowly, through that which we have before us in reality, in this case, the reality of your students, you are called to decide—you embraced them just as they are, you gave them space to make their own journey. You said, in fact, that what

interests you most is that, above all, “there be places of freedom” in which your students can pose their questions, exposing themselves, before even wanting to “educate” them to something. This will be able to happen only if they accept being drawn into a relationship. It is revealing that the girl you spoke of sought you out. Deep down they are restless. Even if they have the possibility of saying something, of expressing themselves, this is not enough to put them at peace with their questions, with something irreducible. It is this that is necessary to recognize in them. This is the thing that emerges most clearly in the exhibit on television series that we saw at the Meeting, as well as in the literature and art from the time of secularization: there is an irreducibility that awaits someone who is able to grasp it, someone who knows how to embrace the questions that make up the human person. It is not about involving people in some project we have made up, but involving them in a dialogue that is completely loyal to our humanity, a dialogue that is personal, so that every person can make their own journey. It seems that this, as you said, calls all of us to conversion—to embrace the humanity we find before us, the Samaritans and the Zaccheuses of our time. How that encounter will develop will depend on the freedom of your students; it is a problem of their relationship with themselves and with the Mystery. There is one thing we need to do: to be ourselves in front of them, verifying whether we are able to dialogue with their irreducibility. It is a great challenge for us!

We've been talking about the decline or the growth of the charism and lately I've been saying to myself: "I don't know if I am bearing fruit; I know, for certain, that in these two years, following the charism has made me more free to listen to my humanity and, therefore, more attentive to the wounds and drama that are hidden in the lives of those I meet." There has been more yearning and therefore more expectation that we would see how Christ would make Himself present. And this began thanks to your letter from two years ago on the pandemic—"To Live the Real Intensely"—and to the work of this summer on how we must not be mistaken as to what is our true enemy; namely, nihilism. There is, however, a question about which I feel very fragile and that, in these days, certain friends have continued to ask me; that is, before the dramas that we encounter, the question for us is not how to analyze things or what do to, but how to stay present, aware that we have been seized and that He is already in us. We don't need to do anything other than be present there and to exist. Now you said: live before the dramas, in dialogue with them. I'm interested in going deeper into this point because it seems that my "I," my self, even if it has been seized, is never enough. I'll tell you a little story. This summer, a group of our students invited me to spend a day with them in the mountains; they insisted, but I vacillated. Then, at a certain point, since they were so insistent, I said, "I'll come for dinner," and they began to say, "So you're coming for dinner! We're looking forward to it!" They were at the summit of a valley and I was in the city, so it would have taken an hour-and-a-half drive to get there. It also began to hail and people in my house said to me, "You can't go! Are you crazy?" I responded: "No. The kids are waiting for me. I'm going." While I was going, I asked myself, But why do they want me there? At the beginning, I had said to myself: So that I could bring them up with my car, but then they made it up there all by themselves. I realize that so many times, before the openness of certain students and certain colleagues of GS, I do not consider myself as a point through which Jesus comes to them. I would rather invite them to follow someone else. But, in the end, I go because the yearning is too great for this person and that person, but I come apart...

Me too!

What does it mean, then, to grow in the awareness that “it is You who live in me,” and to be truly free from your own inadequacy?

The first thing to recognize is that you do not decide how this will happen. In your story, it was the kids who made you aware of that which you had not been aware before, made you aware of what you carry. For this reason, they are precious for you (and this is the reason I have always said that “the other is a good for me”). In this case, they perceived a difference in you; at other times they might criticize you, but they always help you to be aware of yourself, they introduce you to a journey and, therefore, become your friends, your companions toward destiny. You were not able to come to terms with their call, with that insistence, before coming to the decision that you made! They did not stay there waiting for your to resolve your struggles; they called you and called you again, and that’s it. It’s like a baby with his mother: he doesn’t know what time it is, how tired she is, how worried, but the baby is completely oriented toward her because of the need he feels and so he calls her, and the mom must decide if she should welcome his cry, pay attention to him, listen to him, or else ignore it. It is a maternity and a paternity that we are called to. Every one of us, at certain moments, can face the temptation to avoid a relationship, and this is normal. It is part of the path of conversion that is never accomplished from the outside as the result of a project we take on. For this reason, this phrase of Fr. Giussani’s has always struck me: “Our responsibility is the conversion of our self to the event that is present”; in other words, to the event that is present before our eyes. It does not happen through our ascetical projects designed at a roundtable, but it is through the modality with which He calls you to respond to Him that your conversion is renewed and deepened. What happened and what you have recounted builds up your own life just like it builds up the lives of your students. In this truly surprising fabric of events, they become companions toward your destiny just like you become a companion toward theirs. How different than some formal system! On these occasions, a dialogue that is vertiginous and, at the same time, exceedingly beautiful opens up because we find ourselves before a fact that, in the situation that you have described, as shown from the exhibit and from the dialogue of this morning, in this humanly dramatic moment, there are kids in whom the irreducibility of the human emerges clearly. This is already the first step toward defeating nihilism. And it is dumbfounding for us—at least it is for me! Thank you.

I am a doctor, not a teacher, but I am involved with the reality of GS. At the end of this school year, we needed to decide whether or not to do a vacation together. I did not want to do it: I was very tired, work was very difficult, and I would say to myself that “kids are so flighty these days” and that it seemed like we were trying to force things in some way. Until one day I called a parent and he told me that his son, after an entire year in shutdown, did not leave the house anymore and even when his friends came to invite him to go out, he didn’t want to go with them: the house had become his refuge. This really struck and pained me; it even surprised me how difficult it was for me to hear, and I had the perception that this kid, in a certain sense, belonged to me and that I belonged to him. This thought changed me; I went against what I had been leaning toward and proposed the vacation. Even those kids who seemed the most “flighty” decided to come almost immediately. I understood, above all, how superficial my judgment about them had been. I thought that it was the kids who were distant from themselves and, instead, it had been me who had not understood what was in their heart. What is very clear for me is that I went on the vacation not to explain reality, or how to live, to the students, but because I needed to encounter them myself, to

know them better and to better understand what they are facing in their lives. Even the form of the vacation was affected by my position because I was not able to think about it except in light of that kid who did not want to leave his house. The vacation had as its theme the five senses, or, the discovery of reality. Joking, I would tell them, “Guys, this is the discovery of the five senses!” It was a super-beautiful vacation, in which we discovered reality in all its beauty and positivity even more so than in its incapacity to respond to the heart of man. Sometimes, we linger too long on this second point—that reality does not respond to man’s heart—but I had the perception that, on that vacation, there was a need, above all, to discover reality in its beauty and positivity. In that moment, I thought about something I could not have even remotely imagined without the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense*, which has given me a completely different attitude toward reality. Let me add another thing. Because among us adults we were encouraging a just sense of prudence with respect to the health conditions, when I proposed a permission slip to the parents, I had the sudden idea to cross out “vacation organized by GS” and I wrote, “vacation organized by myself, name and last name”—I took on all the responsibility because it seemed like this would be the most respectful approach toward all the factors. Not even for a second did I perceive this as a sort of personalism or a division between me and GS. The words of the School of Community came to mind, where it says that the totalizing encounter is not an environment of relationships, but the form of relationships, and it seemed that this was the case for me because the true place of the temple is the “I”: there cannot be temple if not in the “I.” This is the true challenge. This year has been an enormous challenge for everyone to grow in responsibility. All of my friends have in some way faced this challenge but, paradoxically, those who knew how to face it better were those most wounded by what was happening in the kids and in their children. This year, in my view, has generated great problems, going far beyond the change in instruments (from physical presence to social media platforms), in which what was at stake was identity, a sentiment toward oneself. These are great challenges and it is understandable if one feels lost in front of them. The more one discovered that he was wounded or inadequate or unprepared, the more he was able to take a step-by-step welcoming this inadequacy, one became not only a better teacher but more of a mother or father, with a greater flexibility in being with the kids. In the end, it is true that you need a crack in order for the light to pass through, as we said this morning.

This year, because of all of the health restrictions, we were not able to enjoy gestures together. The situation was fragmented: one group here, another group there. Each of us adults felt pained at the absence of the friend, of the other. I discovered the beauty, the desirableness of the “we,” not as some sort of external tie, but within the experience of my “I.” Even in the historical circumstances we are living through, this seemed like an important point—the possibility of discovering the beauty of the “we,” not as an external bond or for other formal reasons, but as a gain for the self, strong only in disarmed beauty, in attractiveness. It is a challenge that I am very happy to be facing.

It is a stupendous challenge! You feel that the kids are avoidant, but as soon as one appears who strikes you and wounds you because he does not want to leave his house, you feel a bond with that kid and this puts you into motion, making you realize that your initial judgment had been superficial. Then you begin to see how much you yourself need them. A path opens up that brings you to continually discover more, together with them, about what reality is even down to its origins, as the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense* talks about. With regard to the totalizing encounter not as an environment of relationships, but as the true form of relationships, on the one

hand, your “I” takes a risk in front of them, but, on the other hand, at the same time—as you saw afterward—you cannot have the experience (because it is not possible to do things together now) that it is not enough to bring them on “your” path, so much so that you desire to introduce them to the experience of a “we.” It is beautiful to see how this happens: affirming the real just as it comes toward us, we are brought to widen our gaze all the way to a belonging; it is enough to follow the attraction, and—as you said at the end—it would not be true attractiveness if the “I” did not find itself involved with a “we.” Many times, due to formalism, the “I” is set up against the “we.” If one takes seriously the presence of the other, it is inevitable that he will feel nostalgia when it is not there, as you felt this need for the young people you stay with—this year you were not able to do things together, and this brought you to miss them, to feel a nostalgia that opened you up to a new way of relating to them because your “I” has within itself the “we” as the true form of relationship. It is beautiful to discover this intersection, that this dialogue with the kids is useful primarily to us; we discover that they are forever companions on the road, a good that “pushes” us into a relationship with them, which is dramatic and, at the same time, totally respectful of the time they need, just as it respects the time we need.

I wanted to recount two brief episodes that happened to me at the end of the year. On the last day of the year, I went into the room of the seniors and found them in silence; rather than being in “party-mode,” they were circled up in absolute silence, sharing their academic experience with a colleague of mine. I felt wonder and admiration, while at the same time, I was a bit troubled because—I’ll admit it—I felt a bit envious. I have desired many times that a moment like that would happen to me but instead someone else, who I did not think much of, was able to do it. This fact brought up two questions for me. The first arises from the fact that it is not true that we are better because we belong to CL; in fact, my colleagues are methodologically and humanly more advanced than me. I myself am evidence that it is a myth that we are better. And so I asked myself: How am I different? It is certainly not a difference of performance. The second question that arose was a demand for meaning, powerful and melancholic—What remains of my presence with these kids? If I am thinking clearly, a question of this kind has always been with me: I think back to when I was a seventeen-year-old girl, when I could not stand the summer (because I felt alone, given that all of my classmates would disappear), or I think about when I fell in love with a boy who rejected me. How could I make sense of these things? My question about the good did not find a solution because my desire for love and friendship were becoming mortified; I was becoming violent and a corrosive resentment prevailed within me. The question about the good and about meaning is the same, but I am different after thirty years of walking that have allowed me to remain in front of my questions in a different way. I understood that if I wait for a response, if I remain in order to truly look, something always comes. In other words—I now know to whom I can address my questions. Everything lies in this.

At the end of the year, I proposed to a few students that we spend a Sunday together and out of all those I invited, only one responded; in the meantime, I had extended the invite to another friend who is a teacher who was organizing a trip to the mountains for that day. Given that my program had gone up in smoke, I invited the one student who responded to come on the hike. In this way, the group that formed was rather heterogeneous, composed of students, teachers, alumni, various friends, and the parents of students. At the end of the hike, we stopped at the edge of a trail, in the shade, to eat lunch. A university student had prepared some poems of Ungaretti to share; as she

was beginning to read them and comment on them, another group of hikers arrived who needed to pass by where we were, but who decided to stop and listen with us and to sing the alpine songs that had been prepared. The hikers were blown away by all the beauty and they asked us: “But who are you all? What are you doing?” They were also teachers and could not imagine that something school-related could end up in the mountains with poetry recitations and alpine songs. Finally, one of them blurted out: “This is the kind of Italian school that I want!” And it was truly a special day, for three reasons. One: because if I had dug in my heels for the program that I had created and seen fail, then nothing would have happened. Two: I entrusted myself to and affirmed that which a friend had proposed. And three: sometimes I do not even realize what kind of education I myself have received in these years, while others do see it, so much so that it provokes a longing in them. It is not about a performative or organizational capacity, but about my awareness of being a daughter of a history that generates me and continually gives me life. This is everything.

Do you see? This is what remains, in the end, of the path that we have followed. Sometimes we ask ourselves: What is the difference? If we follow a path, slowly, the difference cannot but emerge evermore clearly. But this does not always become manifest in the form or in the way that we have in mind. At times, it can happen in the silence of a class or during a hike. We do not decide ourselves when a difference becomes evident and can be recognized. But when it happens, we must not stop at the reduced measure with which we are always tempted to judge ourselves, but let’s give weight to the path of self-awareness, which is the thing that is necessary for us to live! How this will be decided in real life or when it will flower, what the Mystery will do with our yes, we will discover when He wants us to. And so, let’s not get stuck on the results, and even less on our “performance” but let’s continue to live our yes so that life doesn’t get away from us. However the Mystery will use our yes will be up to Him who makes us realize, sometimes in the most unexpected moments, as you saw when you all became a spectacle for those hikers who found themselves saying: “This is the school that I want!” The simplicity of a gesture such as a hike in the mountains gives a glimpse of the maturation of that self-awareness that many times we have doubted ourselves. In any event, independently from what is seen by others, the issue is the fullness that living life in this way represents for us. The rest is in the hands of Another.

I wanted to recount two episodes that seemed to indicate an increase of the charism for me. The experience of GS began again for me in the midst of the lockdown. My husband and I decided to welcome into our home a CLU student who needed a place to live for the months of the lockdown. The intensity of the friendship that we lived with him, and the fact of having accepted risking ourselves sincerely with him, changed us and changed him. His and our gratitude marked the beginning of a newness. So as to give back to us for the welcome he had received, the kids of the eighth grade came to his mind—kids about whom I had spoken to him—and he was moved. He didn’t know any of these fifteen kids, but he got all of their phone numbers and called each of them, one by one, to invite them to our house. We passed the summer full of meetings, songs, games, and dinners. Following what had happened, at the beginning of this year, about thirty young people started coming to GS: it was without any strategy, as we said this morning! Everything was born in the experience lived during the lockdown, in that intensity of relationship and in the gratitude that followed from it, both of which made me look at the kids in a different way. This seemed to me to be something really new. Now I come to the second episode. Last September, the adults gathered

to decide when to do School of Community with the GS kids during the year, and we decided to do it at one o'clock in the afternoon. Only one kid went to a school that was far away; he got home around four in the afternoon and, therefore, would never have been able to come. Thinking about how I had encountered the movement when I was that age and how the Lord had come to find me in the specifics of my situation, I said, "Even just for this one boy, I'll make a small group of School of Community so that, if he wants, during the evening, he can come." We began with just him and me, but he slowly invited his friends and now there are about twenty kids whose friendship is growing stronger. I came out of this experience with a clear perception of growth. I have a question, however, that you have already somewhat answered, but I still need help. A few days ago, the adults met and we were already dug into our positions about what to do this year, how many groups there should be, who, how, and where. This morning, Fr. Andrea said to stay attentive so that we do not immediately establish a format, and so I want to ask: How do we not immediately cover what is happening with certain formats even while wanting to control it?

Do not worry. These are questions it is right to ask oneself because it is normal to give our gestures the organization they need. The question is not so much this, but realizing that when a kid did not fit into the plan for the School of Community that you had come up with (as you see, there is always something that eludes our scheming), you accepted the provocation that his presence represented for you, eventually generating a larger group than what you already had: from one you went to twenty kids, all responding to the invitation of their friend. The point is our growth in this pliability, this conversion to that which happens. You could have said: "Fine, this is the plan we've arrived at; those who can come will come. What else could we do?" Instead, out of gratitude for what has happened to you, you were set into motion before that kid. Things are always more simple than we imagine; the important thing for us is not to have the perfect organization or initiative, but to be in dialogue with reality because it constantly goes beyond our plans. We just need to be available for this dialogue, as you are. Who would have ever said, when you began to dialogue with that boy, that this would have become the way that the Mystery would reach others? This flexibility, this attention to the hints of the Mystery, as you had—and it is amazing, first welcoming the CLU student, risking yourself in a relationship with him, and then taking initiative with those other students—makes it so that everything contributes to your growth. This growth is tied to your availability before someone who does not fit into the idea that you had—as necessary as that idea was—of doing the School of Community at 1 pm, with which, with all of your goodwill, you sought to respond to the needs of the majority of the kids. All of this has made you see that the Mystery can use a different path to reach one person, and you were simple enough to welcome the way in which the Mystery was calling you through that kid. We cannot ever arrive at an organization so perfect that it will spare us from having to be good; that is, attentive and available to the hints that arise out of what happens. You could have said, "Since we have decided upon a plan, those who cannot come to School of Community will just have to deal with it." Instead, no, you realized that even for one kid who did not fit into the plan, it was worth putting your own skin in the game. And then you were amazed that this became the way that the Mystery was preparing a surprise for you!

In these two years of the pandemic, I've always followed the same group of students, who are 10 to 12 years old. One of them has mild autism and is quite a handful; my coworkers do not notice this difficulty in him and just think that he prefers to be alone. It is difficult to encourage the development of relationships when you don't see the problem. His mother is great and very

encouraging with him. Recently, we spoke a great deal about how he could throw himself into bite-sized challenges: “Buy a chocolate bar at the school cafeteria”; “Learn the names of your classmates”; “Ask a question”; “Take notes.” After the first lockdown, it seemed like he had taken many steps backwards, so much so that in the summer, he said to his mother that he wanted to keep doing distance learning and did not want to go back to school in September. He did end up returning and the challenges have been manifold. In the second lockdown (from January to April of this year), we saw that he had grown up a bit, even if he was facing many of the same difficulties. At the end of the year, his mother was worried because it seemed like he had not reached very many objectives, even though his grades were fine. At a certain point, I asked her: “How was the lockdown at home?” and she responded: “He couldn’t wait for lessons to start again in April.” I replied: “This is fantastic! It is the most important step he has taken in the past two years!” The mother looked at me with surprise on her face, as if she hadn’t noticed the same thing. And so I went on: “This says that he is in relationship with reality and that, in his own way, he realizes that there is a place that challenges him daily to relate to others—both teachers and students—and that takes him out of isolation, that fishes him out of his games and to which he wants to return!” The mother looked at me, moved, and began to cry. She said, “It’s true, it’s true!” because she had not realized it before. This episode provoked many questions in me, but one stands out: What allowed me to see what I described to this mother? As a teacher I have many objectives in mind, but that student had reached an objective that had not even crossed my mind: the desire to be present at school. How did I see this and his mother, who is always with him and is so attentive to him, did not? I realized that this capacity to see comes from the experience of the charism. One of the things that has most helped me this year has been the monthly School of Community with you. The way in which you take up every intervention, revealing the greatest point of truth in each person’s path, has educated me; it has above all educated me to attention, making it possible, for example, for me to see the giant steps taken by my autistic student, which might have easily passed unnoticed. I see that the greatest discovery of this year has been—through the episodes I have related—that the generation of my Self, of my “I,” does not come about when I analyze myself or when I am preoccupied about my performance, but when I benefit from the instruments that are given to me, that a “You” gives me in a specific community, and that generate me when I let them. Thank you.

Thank you, stupendous! Because this generation of the self, as you witnessed, which comes to us thanks to the charism, that comes from following the way that Fr. Giussani taught us to look at things in all of their fascinating and meaningful presence, is what makes the difference. Everyone had the autistic child before them, from the mother to your teacher colleagues, but only in you, to your surprise, was there that way of looking at things that allowed you to begin to issue small challenges to him (learning the names of classmates, going to buy a chocolate bar from the cafeteria at school) instead of trying to play it safe, thinking that “he cannot: he’s autistic, the poor thing!” Slowly, all of these steps helped the child to gain a trust that allowed him to do the things he thought he couldn’t do. The attitude that passed through you was so generative that he began to want to return to school, which had not happened during the first lockdown. It is at this point that I understand that one can ask themselves, “But where does such an attitude come from? Where did we learn it from?” One learns it in a generative place because, as Fr. Giussani always said, “No one generates unless he is generated” (L. Giussani, “Joy, Happiness and Boldness. No one generates unless he is generated,” *Traces*, n. 6/1997). It is striking that we can continue to develop

the capacity to stay in front of the real thanks to a place and to an awareness of a You that is made present in that place, as is apparent in so much of what you have all said. It seems like nothing, apparently without consequence: Who in the school saw that there was a person who looked at this boy with autism with this difference? Not even the mother was able to look at him in this way! From within that different point of view, his destiny is on the line just as ours is. How can we not feel overwhelming gratitude for belonging to a place that generates us in this way? How can we not thank Fr. Giussani every day for this?

I would like to return to the topic of the crack. What we heard from the talk on TV shows is not an exaggeration. It has been a while now that I have had a great wound within, and I understood this when I read your lesson by chance. I understood that the wound was there and that it was painful, pushing me to tears, and so I had to say to myself: "What is happening? You are sixty years old, thirty years into your vocation, what is going on with you?" And I told myself to look at this wound, which comes from my life story, things that have happened in my life. I began to do everything I could to forget about it: I distracted myself, I tried to find an answer, but the wound remained. One day, during silence, I noticed that within all of that pain, there was a speck of gratitude. This was a point of no return, the only point in me that is not banal, not satisfied, not superficial, not presumptuous, the only point in which I can truly recognize that I "am" need, the only point that eludes all of my calculations, all of my attempts to do things myself and the point where I can begin again to ask for His presence, that is, for salvation. It is the only point that, deep down, keeps me awake—and this is reason I was grateful, because it does not allow me to perish in a life that is mostly non-dramatic, that always goes well, in which I have everything under control. Immediately afterwards, I said to myself, "The first victory of Christ is there, inside of me" because without Christ, without the way in which Christ reaches me today through your face and those of this companionship, I would not even be able to look at my wound. I don't know if what I am saying makes sense, sorry.

It certainly does!

I finally understood the importance of this crack, and so I do not want to get rid of it, because it is my true self. I touched my true self. It isn't showing me that I am made differently, or made poorly, that I am too dramatic or whatever. I think, instead, that this is the point of humanity, a fact that affects us all. It is from this point of view that I can now look at all that is happening to me and at my students, my colleagues, the new school year, the people I live with. It is extremely urgent for me to keep this in mind so that I can recognize the answer when it appears. For this I am grateful. Within the pain, in time, a great gratitude is beginning to emerge victorious. This is my experience of the crack.

Why are you so grateful? What have you discovered in all of this? In my view, it is decisive that we understand this because we can live for years in the life of the movement or in our vocation without being able to perceive and embrace our wounds. It is something we cannot do by ourselves, right?

Right.

Right. This is crucial: because you cannot embrace your wound on your own, you need silence. But what is silence?

It is a dialogue.

It is not being alone with yourself. Silence is allowing the gaze of Another to fall upon you; by

yourself, you would not be able to look at your wound. You randomly reread the text from a retreat and this helped you to look at yourself. Our humanity is the greatest resource that we have for an ever more intense, profound, and fascinating dialogue with Christ, and it is this dialogue that in the end makes us grateful. I said this—as you saw—in one of the videos from the exhibit: I believe that a certain loyalty to my humanity saved my life. Fr. Giussani always said this; here is what he wrote: “Christ proposes himself as the answer to what ‘I’ am and only an attentive, tender, and impassioned awareness of myself can make me open and lead me to acknowledge, admire, thank, and live Christ.” (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill, Montreal, 1998, p. 6). It is this that can help you to discover who Christ truly is.

This cannot be compared to anything else. Only the one who takes this path will be able, in the world in which we live, to embrace the wounds of the other; instead of seeing the wounds of the other, their disasters or things that do not make sense, as obstacles, the one who walks this road will see them as an occasion to encounter Christ. “I came not for the healthy, but for the sick” (cf. Mk 2:17). It’s a nice quotation, but deep down we do not believe it! We do not truly believe that only in the poor—in the most beautiful sense of the word—in those who have nothing, who cannot stand on their own, who live this drama, can a crack open, into which enters the grace of Christ, as it entered into us. If we first follow this path, we will be able to not be scandalized at anything—at anything! We will be able to embrace the wounds of the other, like the friend from before embraced the autistic boy or as you did with other people, in whatever way it happens. What happens—as you can see in TV series and as you see constantly at school—is that the kids, as happened to you, can come across a gaze that can embrace them, a sign of the gaze of Christ that bends over their wounds. He leans toward them through those He has called; He allowed us to receive this embrace first so that we could in turn embrace others. Otherwise, with all of our calculations, we would not enter into relationship with anyone!

Or we would do so in a superficial way.

I insist. Only the one who has personally made this journey will be able to embrace that wound and will be able to see the crack through which the light can enter. Then, when the other feels our embrace, how much time will they need, how many smiles will be necessary in order to elicit the first smile in response: all of this is not in our hands. But the mere fact of feeling this gaze in ourselves makes us grateful that You exist, O Christ. This is the charism. How often, as we sometimes see, rules pile up before all of the wounds of the people to fence in those who stray, without, however, touching the depth of the “I”; instead, we realize that what we need is also what others need: as you said, not rules and fences to contain the expression of our wounded humanity, but a gaze that is able to embrace us to our core. Only the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, has looked at us this way; “only Christ takes my humanity completely to heart,” as Fr. Giussani said in St. Peter’s Square in 1998. We are not made wrong; we were made excellently by God! The problem is that many times we think that our being “need” is, in the end, a limitation...

Yes.

...and that our structural disproportion is something to cancel out. We should remember that our aspiration is to be autonomous, to not have need, to not be needy, because we think that if we are needy, it is a sign that we are made poorly, that there is something that doesn’t work anymore. Instead, God made us needy precisely so that He could fill everything with His presence. For this reason, one can be grateful that everything serves to continue a personal and dramatic dialogue with the Mystery. Only by this means will we be able to know Christ; otherwise, “even Jesus Christ

becomes just a name” (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, p. 6), as Fr. Giussani told us. We saw it in the exhibit of the Meeting titled *Living Without Fear in the Age of Uncertainty*: it will not be a Christ reduced to a name that will block our descent into nothingness, just as it did not impede the emptying of the churches (which were made into swimming pools, libraries, and restaurants), nor will it be able to connect with the need of the people. As Charles Taylor said at the beginning of the video of the exhibit: “How did I avoid ending up like most of the inhabitants of Quebec, who after a certain period became enraged with the church? Suddenly, in the 1960s, there was a rebellion and many people left. Why didn’t I follow this movement?” And why did we too not end up like this, leaving the church? It was certainly not because we heard a generic religious discourse, but because of something real, concrete, historical, precise: the charisma through which Christ was made present in our lives, fascinating us and seizing us. If this is not the charisma, then it will interest no one, beginning with ourselves.

I have a question that arose out of something that happened to me this summer. An adult invited me to get to know the responsables of GS from another community: “This could help you to revitalize the reality of GS in your city,” he said to me. It was not a bad idea! The problem was this: I didn’t have a deep friendship with him. His provocation opened an abyss in me because I felt judged in my inadequacy in staying with the kids. Today, I asked for help from a responsible who here and the same provocation, in the friendship with her, became an occasion of growth, of being welcomed. It seems that a provocation made by a friend are occasions of growth, while the same provocation made by a stranger becomes a problem to resolve in order to avoid a growing feeling of inadequacy. I ask: How can I be more open to provocations, even when they do not come from a friend and slowly begin to take the shape of self-criticism and perhaps even a closing into myself?

I think that this openness is born from need. If you have the flu, you do not have the perception of needing someone to cure you, but if you have tumor, it becomes urgent to find someone who can respond to your need; for this reason, because of the depth of your need, you would not be hindered by the character of the doctor who is taking care of you. If the surgeon is a nice guy, all the better. Our difficulty is that many times we are not truly aware of the need that we have. Instead of feeling judged by the other, I could suggest to myself: “Why don’t we see what there is to what he is saying; maybe there is something he can offer me.” It is not certain that the adult’s suggestion to you was a good one, but you need to verify whether what he said to you facilitates your journey, kicks you into gear. The fundamental question is whether we begin from an awareness that encountering the other can always be a good. This is easier to recognize if we see the nature of our need.

Only an awareness of my need allows me to welcome the need that is clearly emerging, at times in surprising and dramatic ways, in our society. And it is an awareness of my true need that allows me to connect with anyone who can offer me an adequate response. Something that happened at the International Assembly of Responsibles struck me. A university professor who got pregnant shortly before the pandemic had a conversation with one of her doctoral students whose wife, who had been pregnant like her, had just lost the baby. The student asked her, “But you, knowing everything that is happening in the world, would you do it again? Would you bring a child into the world?” Later, the professor asked him why he had asked her that question, and he said: “Because there are not many people to whom one can ask a question like that.” (“Perché lo chiedi a me?”

[Why are you asking me?], *Tracce*, n. 8/2021, p. 30). The need that we have is the detector that allows us to connect with the persons to whom we can ask the urgent questions within us. For this reason, the more we have needs the more we can treasure the experience of another. For this reason I said that it is simpler, easier to be open when we have a need. I always recall the example of Naaman: after having tried to become healed from leprosy, he goes to the prophet Elisha, who tells him, “Go, and wash yourself seven times in the Jordan.” He goes away indignant, thinking that there are better rivers than the waters of the Jordan in his nation and that the Jordan was an inferior river. This is presumption. But the servants tell him, “If the prophet ordered a great thing from you, would you not have done it? So much more now that he has said: ‘Wash yourself and you will be purified.’” He went and was purified (2 Kings 5:10–14). When one is aware of his needs, he is open, in my view, to welcoming a suggestion. You can see if what the person is telling you can help you find the answer to your question.

My experience this year led me to experience a surprise that I wanted to entrust to you and to everyone here. The surprise is that the charism is something that happens in the renewal of the humanity of the people you come across who grasp some aspect of the presence of the Lord. It seemed to me like I was understanding in a new and deeper way that the charism is the reoccurrence—in encounters, in events, in the gestures that we make—of the traits of an authentic humanity that carries an excess within itself; these are the traits of the presence of the Lord, the traits of Another. I’ll give three examples. The first: during a dinner, one of the deans whom I did not know approached me and said: “I have to offer you my great thanks because after the two webinars that you led and that I participated in (I had held two meetings on some professional issues), I decided to begin again.” She had just lost her adolescent child. The second: another dean enrolled in our association after having encountered some of us and sent me an email that said, “It will seem superfluous or excessive to you, but I feel the need to sincerely thank you for your hospitality. I, who truly struggle to feel like I am a part of something, found a style that and people who stimulate me, who complete me, making me feel like part of a community. The third: I went to see a dean who belongs to the movement and who is going through a difficult stretch; after expressing some negative thoughts, he began to speak about how to run the school, how to work for the good of the kids, how to be with them. At a certain point, over a Sicilian cannolo, I asked him: “In your opinion, from where does this capacity to persist in our efforts in the school come?” and he began to cry. I said to him: “Do you see? The charism is something that has taken root so deeply in us that—almost in spite of us—it prevails and allows us to be that which we are.” At the airport, he embraced me before dropping me off, asking me to come see him again. I gave these autobiographical examples by way of saying that it seems to me that the blossoming of the humanity of those we encounter gives us back the possibility of discovering an unmistakable trait of Christ and trait of the charism. It seems that this immersion into the charism, following you and the gestures and history of the movement, is the most pertinent thing for our profession; I would almost say that the charism is the most professionalizing experience that can exist and that we are able to live solely off of this—all the rest comes later, all of the institutions, creativity, cracks that open, ideas that arise, new relationships. In the School of Community, we read that each person must take care to compare his criteria with the image of the charism; now, as can be seen in the facts I have related here, I have understood better that this image is not something of my own, but is something that happens, something visible with which I can compare myself. The School of

Community says that this is our virtue. I would like to be virtuous, and therefore I ask you to go deeper into this point.

Fr. Giussani affirms that “everyone [...] must be concerned with comparing his criteria with the charism, just as it emerged at the origins of our common history” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 84). For this reason, the question is not about opening a discussion on what is the image of the charism, because each person will have his own. The question is not resolved with discussion, but begins to be clarified when things begin to happen like those we are seeing, as you all have documented. Why did the charism take hold of us? Because we came across the phenomenon of a different humanity that embraced our entire being. This is the same reason that people became attached to Jesus: “We have never seen anything similar, an intensity of life like this!” And it is this that is continually documented: the blossoming—as you said—of a humanity touched, generated, in a place like this, through the grace of the charism. Fr. Giussani helped us find a path for looking at the human in the same way he did, so that we could verify in the present the pertinence of faith to the needs of life, and therefore, to our professions. We have seen that many attempts are able to awaken the humanity of others: a person can begin after the death of a child, another who was reticent to be part of something feels embraced and begins to see that belonging does not eliminate her self, but allows her to be more herself, and another who feels embraced and asks you to return to see him after he brings you to the airport. What do all of these things have in common, if we look at them well? It is not an agreement on the image of the charism; each person verifies the image of the charism according to the capacity it creates in us to dialogue pertinently with each person we encounter. Each person should verify in the way in which he lives the persons with whom he is able to dialogue. One can remain attached to a correct image and that’s fine; he can also think that everything else is wrong, and that’s also fine, but he must concretely verify what is necessary for him to live and what is useful in order to dialogue with others. For this reason, it seems that the present moment is a crucial occasion, as I said in the exhibit, for understanding the true nature of Christianity and the true nature of the charism. It is not enough to say “God,” nor enough to say “Jesus”; it is not enough to say “the church” because everyone says it and the churches are empty. This is why Charles Taylor’s question is so striking: “Why did I not go the way of the others?” Why do we have this desire, this gratitude within us? Why do we experience an intensity that we want to share with others? Why do we have a capacity for welcoming? Where does it come from? I cannot offer a response other than this one: our faithfulness to the charism. Before the current challenges, each person must see the places in which humanity is vibrant; if this does not happen, if, through the experience of the charism, humanity does not flourish, I do not know how many more people will ever become interested. It seems like this is an amazing opportunity for us. This is the only “virtue.”

I wanted to share a thought and a question. The thought concerns our emotions toward and gratitude for the path of grace that we have experienced this year in the reality of the Graal (a proposal of Christian life for middle-school students). We set out with a great need that had been made explicit, and this need brought us together with a faithfulness we had not experienced before. There was the gift of a communion in which the most important factor was not our roles, but our need to be, our vocation. We began at the beginning of the last year with a meeting with the alpinist Cucchi (which the kids also attended) that launched the theme: “I do not want to live uselessly.” We had the Beginning Day in small groups. When the Food Bank collection happened, it seemed

like nothing could be done, but one of us just began and the rest followed. Among the adults, someone asked to go over the path of the “promise” (a gesture in which the kids promise to help each other as brothers and sisters and to be faithful to the friendship of the Graal, to grow in friendship with Jesus, and to witness to Him in the world): we held four meetings on this and many kids came. Then we prepared the Triduum and encountered Rose. The meeting with the archbishop of Milan was grand and was an impetus for the vacations that we did in small groups. As a side note, many bishops whom we know have asked if they can participate in our gestures. When I began to take note of all of this richness, I asked myself, But how is it possible? Where is it coming from? The second thing I wanted to say is that I have understood with certainty that the pandemic and TV series have unleashed the existential questions of the kids (I’m speaking about those in middle school); however, I also see a risk—that one crumples up in the face of these questions. It is typical to see in kids of this age when they are in groups that there is someone who cries with all of the others around; the gravest problem with this is that often this kid does not speak with the adults, and even less with his parents. When an adult is able to take in their questions, it seems that something changes—there is an authoritative place that welcomes them and at the same time there is a proposal that, paradoxically, does not speak about them explicitly, but opens up a path, a companionship. For example, now there are things to study and exams to prepare and we study together every day. I wanted to know if the risk of making these questions a fad is only felt by me or if it is a real risk.

There is always a risk that we will lick our wounds. The question is whether these kids can find in real life adults who embrace them and relaunch them into life, instead of closing them into a “bubble,” supporting them in their desire to fold in on themselves. It is up to us to relaunch the kids, each according to the initiative that he or she perceives to be most adequate—from small proposals to just keeping them company, continuously provoking them, instead of leaving them alone to complain.

I teach in both middle and high school. When yesterday evening Francesco asked us again the question about the increase or the decline of the charism for which we are responsible, I thought to myself that I don’t really understand the question; however, while I was trying to answer it, an episode from the vacation of the middle school students from this summer came to mind. At a certain point, the girls of the eighth grade, who are very lively, began to have drama among themselves that is typical of that age; there were girls crying everywhere you looked, and they were sad because the vacation was ending and they would not be able to see each other. They continued to provoke each other and would come to us and say, “Teacher, there is something important! I have to speak to you!” and they would tell us about these things. At a certain point, on the third evening, while we were going into the meeting room for a witness, three of them came up to me and said, “Teacher, we need to talk; it’s urgent!” I listened to them as I was entering the room, and then I stopped and said, “Look at what is happening now, and look at what will happen this evening. Let’s go on the hike tomorrow together,” because I do not have anything to propose to them other than asking them to look together at what we are living. I thought about this all summer and even now, at this beginning of the year, after what Fr. Andrea said yesterday evening, understood that each of us arrives before reality with the heart he has and that reality brings forth this heart; I realized that the only thing that interests me with the kids is being able to look together at reality and to see together with them what reveals their heart.

That they come to you just as they are with the questions they have and the confusion they have—do you consider this to be a problem or a resource?

It is a resource, even for myself.

If it is not this way, the alternative is that which the intervention before indicated: they fold in on themselves. The kids can fold in on themselves or else they can take initiative. At times, they come with the chaos they have within, with their wounds, and the fundamental issue is to not fear that they come to us just as they are; when the girls become attached to you, the important point is where you take them. You said to them: “Let’s go on the hike tomorrow. Let’s look at what is happening tonight.” I have always been astounded by these words of Fr. Giussani: “Jesus did not see the attractiveness He had for the others as referring ultimately to Himself, but to the Father; the attraction was to Himself, but so that He could lead people to the Father,” (*The Miracle of a Change*, Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity, 1998, p. 29). For this reason, you do not need to worry about the fact that they become attached to you, thinking that it is necessarily a sign of personalism; it is inevitable that there will be this attachment when one has a need, like a baby who goes to the mother when he needs something. The problem is not so much this; otherwise, we would need to send them away so that they do not become too attached to us. The problem is where we take them when they come to us. What do you need in order to live? To those girls you need to propose that which helps you live. Only the person who has discovered this for himself can give the kids some suggestion of a path—not a theoretical, abstract solution—on which they can have an experience of living that takes them out of the situation they are currently in and invites them to participate in a life, which is the simplest thing in the world. “Whoever follows me will have the hundredfold here below” (cfr. Mt 19:29). In just a few words, what does Christ invite us to? To participate in a place—in His company—where one can taste an experience of living that no one could even dream of, let alone be able to make for themselves. The invitation begins from the need of the kids, who assail you precisely because of this need. If we see this cry, we have the possibility of looking at it as we have been looked at—not to attach them to ourselves, but to bring them with us to a place that expands the horizon of their lives, that brings them to an experience of life that is completely new and more fascinating for them. As one of you was saying before, when they see this possibility for themselves, the kids desire to participate in this place, so much so that even a student with autism, who had regressed during the first lockdown, cannot wait to return to school. What must he have found that made him desire to return, whatever his wound may be, instead of crumbling in on himself? A place that overflows with life.

Barberis. Julián, I have nothing to add, and so I’d like to say good-bye and thank you for this time that you gave us!

Carrón. Thank you. Stay well!

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