

## THE WELLSPRING OF GRATUITOUSNESS

by Julián Carrón

Notes from the Assembly with the Families for Hospitality Association. Milan, May 19, 2012

**Marco Mazzi:** Dear friends, here we are at this moment, which is so central for our history. It seems just yesterday that on May 19, 1982, here in Milan, the Families for Hospitality Association was founded. Thirty years are a good long piece of road, with hundreds of gestures, stories, and people welcomed, full of testimonies, attempts, pain, and miracles. We have in our mind's eye the innumerable situations in which charity and hospitality [foster care, adoption, embracing children with severe disabilities, elder care] have supported the conversion to which we have been called, recently as well: living faith as experience.

First of all, we would like to thank Fr. Julián Carrón for being here. Fr. Giussani's heart gave life to this story, and Fr. Carrón's paternity has deepened our awareness of its value. We have journeyed on and now, in belonging to the Movement and following those who guide it, we continue to find vigor and light. For this reason, today's gathering is intended as a moment for comparing ourselves to what is said, being corrected and renewed.

**Contribution:** I am a foster child. After foster care with my brother, fights and chaos with my foster parents and social workers, at the age of 18 I obtained the right to return to my mother, where I thought I would finally be free to do whatever I wanted. After a few years, though, something was not right. I felt adrift and disoriented. I did not want to talk with others. I cried and asked myself whether anyone heard me up there. When I was 22, my foster parents asked me to participate in a film to tell about my brother's and my experience of foster care. In front of the cameras, I cried. The director and my foster family asked me a thousand questions. "Where is your home? What is your point of reference, your point of good?" What a pain in the neck that director was! I am fine on my own; I do not need other people. After about a year, the film was put together and shown, and afterwards I gave testimonies all around and had the opportunity to truly see the faces that make up Families for Hospitality. Many praised me for how good I was, but actually I myself learned from them.

These encounters have changed my life greatly; slowly but surely I have embraced my history. I returned home to my foster parents. In my room, there are a ton of books by Fr. Giussani, among them *Il Miracolo dell'ospitalità* [*The Miracle of Hospitality*] (Piemme, Milan, 2012). I did not know anything about Communion and Liberation, but this book piqued my curiosity, above all because I wanted to know what motivated my foster parents and the people of Families for Hospitality whom I had met. When I read the book, it seemed beyond my reason, because I could never be so hospitable, detached from the outcome, so free; it moved me. Now I give my testimony in Italy and abroad; I learn a great deal from those who host me and ask me questions—it is another way of life. I am thirsty for humanity and want to understand better what motivates them and makes them so happy and smiling. I ask the foster families to tell me about their experiences, and today I still remember them all, not so much by name but because of their smiles and their moving stories.

I finally trust the world; there is Someone who fulfills my absolute need for trust, and I also have a new appreciation for my own history. I even went to Vilnius, a town in Lithuania, so far and different from us, where I did not know the right thing to say. There, I even went to Mass: after years of anger and being closed, I was curious and I wanted to share this moment, too, with my new Lithuanian friends. They explained to me that that day was the Feast of Hospitality, in which John was entrusted to Our Lady by Jesus. Last November, I was asked to give my testimony at the national seminar of Families for Hospitality. I want everyone to know the good I have received, in order to share it. Motivated by this desire, I want to ask you a question that is particularly important to me: How can this good be spread and transmitted?

**Fr. Julián Carrón:** If you look at your experience, how would you answer your question? How do you transmit this good you have received?

**Contribution:** I asked this at that seminar and a friend responded, “Encounters and testimonies are needed; little steps are fine.” As soon as I finished speaking, there was a line of people who wanted my name and number to go give my testimony, even though I have never given hospitality to anyone.

**Fr. Carrón:** If we look at what we recount about our experience and what happens in us, we identify the road immediately. You said you do not remember the names of the people, but you remember their smiles. And in their smiles you discovered everything. Their experience was transmitted to you through a very simple method, very easy to grasp in any situation, in any culture, in any position, because the smile is the first communication of the experience, and in fact it fascinated you.

So then, how is it communicated? The way Fr. Giussani taught us: the content and the method coincide. It is not that they explained things to you and then they smiled; it is not the content on one side and then the gesture on the other. In the very gesture of the smile, which is what stayed in your mind and shaped you, something was communicated to you. So now you communicate it. There is nothing more to do than continue living an experience in which your whole life, your being, are communicated through what you are. The way you live reality, the way you get up in the morning, the way you face your relationships with people, is communicated through your smile. If you do not smile, even if you speak about beautiful things, it will not be interesting for you or the others, just as what you heard would not have been interesting for you.

**Contribution:** I have been part of the history of this association for 30 years and, surely struck by her freshness, I believe that in her story and my own the same freshness is being renewed. In fact, I am passionate about my life and that of my friends, and in these years we have worked because of this passion that has moved us. I believe the thing we have most in common is the encounter with people moved—me, first of all—by the desire for hospitality (either because of a superabundance, because one has much to give, or because of pain, because one has much to seek). We have always questioned ourselves, have always been in front of this question, at times with the temptation to substitute the question, to answer that question through an acquired skill, through our own ability. But who am I to respond to a question others have? The reality to which you and Fr. Giussani educated us fortunately always brings us back to the right position. It is clear that the Association was not born to substitute itself for the question, but to support and accompany this challenge of life. This is why it is fascinating.

Through our experience, we have also seen that many people, starting from the true challenge of hospitality, reach the more radical challenge in encountering the experience of faith, and this is the other very beautiful, consoling thing, because the challenge is deeper than what I see, and together we help each other to respond. However, precisely because we are serious, we cannot fail to work on the facts of reality, on the specificity of hospitality, and in this the Association has grown greatly; we have taken on an impetus and a profundity of work. It is the same seriousness with which I live my work as a physician, a mother, and a grandmother. It has the same importance and must have the same form. As you said in Pacengo: a work is a work, not a game. There is a risk in us of a reduction characterized by being self-sufficient, and this is the first problem. The other is belonging, in the sense that either I belong or I am self-sufficient; either I belong or it is difficult to stay with those with whom I have to share the road. What helps us renew the awareness of belonging, which does not eliminate responsibility and freedom?

**Fr. Carrón:** That we be loyal to our “I” helps us, because the Mystery made us so well that, as we heard testified to in the first contribution, one can leave home, but realize in her experience that something is not right. As Fr. Giussani tells us, in any human effort, everything we try to do has the goal of responding to our religious sense, to our need. It is inevitable that we try to respond to this need, but it is equally inevitable that in the attempt to respond we realize (using evidence) whether our attempt is enough for us or not. It is inevitable that we will come to such a realization; we do not have to add anything. Our friend simply tried to live away from home, because she thought that this effort was the most likely to fulfill her

need. But she soon gave a judgment: she was lost. No special genius is needed, simply this loyalty; each of us can acknowledge it in every effort we make. So then, what helps us to not succumb to this self-sufficiency? Beginning to look at belonging not as something to defend ourselves from, but as a good, a good! If we do not perceive the other as something good for us, then we defend ourselves from the other; but in order to perceive him or her as this good, it is not enough to make a resolution (“Now I have to convince myself he is something good for me”). What helps us acknowledge him or her as good for ourselves is simply the awareness of our need, because any other attempt we make does not respond to all our need. This is what happened to her; she was not beaten over the head; she did not do penitence. No. Simply, at a certain point, she realized that it was more in her best interests to return than to stay away doing her own thing. Nobody had to be forceful; simply, from the guts of her own experience, if she was loyal, a need emerged that was so powerful that it made her return home. This is what makes one belong. We can live belonging in a formal way (and so we belong but, deep down, we are almost suffocating) or we can belong with the awareness that the belonging is a liberation, the greatest good, and then we do not defend ourselves from belonging, but are grateful to have a house where we belong.

**Contribution:** In the third chapter of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, Fr. Giussani says, “No longer is the focal point the striving of the intelligence, the drive of the will to construct, the stretching of the imagination, the weaving of a complex moralism. Rather, it is simple recognition, the reaction of one who, watching out for the arrival of a friend, singles him out of the crowd and greets him” (*At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo, 1998, p. 31). Within this analogy, the most beautiful experience that explains this overturning of method is what happened and continues to happen to my wife and myself in our experience with hospitality. Looking at our history is looking at how the relationship with the Mystery of life is possible, the Mystery that has entered our home. I have two children, a ten-year-old who is adopted, and a five-year-old born to us. Each of them arrived through particular circumstances, totally different from the drive of the will to construct we had when we got married, in imagining how our married life, our vocation, would develop and be fulfilled. We are not the ones tracing the road; it is the Mystery who visited and visits our house through our children, first of all because they exist. One day, my son exploded, saying, “You try to be adopted. You think it’s easy? I think about it every day: why did this happen to me?” I understood that a wound like this could never be healed, but can only be embraced. This episode put my back to the wall, forcing me to stay in front of the evidence that I am not the solution to the drama of my son’s life, nor is he the solution to mine, and that his dignity is not defined by what has happened to him. He is much more. He is defined by the relationship with the Mystery who wanted him, and the same is true for me.

My wife and I find ourselves accompanying other families and, starting from the provocation of my son, I would like to ask you for help. It seems important to me that the questions that arise as we walk this road should not be hurriedly resolved, while trying to determine the best course of action, but these questions should be left open. At times, this attempt at resolving and closing the questions happens with psychologists or technicians, to whom one rightly turns to find the best way to face particular situations, but there is the risk of putting off the discovery of the meaning of what happens and that we do not fully understand. How can we avoid reducing the hunger and thirst you spoke of at the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises, so as not to anesthetize the experience of pain or failure?

**Fr. Carrón:** What helps you not to reduce? A son asking you why this happened to him. Try sending him to some expert to answer this question! This is the question that arises from the guts of being. We cannot respond to this question with mere owner’s manual instructions; we have to empathize, accompany him in this experience. Listening to this question, I wondered what the difference is between him and me (I was not adopted). He stands before the same drama as I do, which is welcoming an Other who made me. It is no different. In order to embrace myself, I have to embrace an Other, let myself be embraced by an Other. We all have this need, and the true battle, the true drama is not the fact of being adopted or not; the true drama is that each of us has to deal with this question every day, respond every day, every instant, making the choice between self-sufficiency and being welcomed, being embraced. We have to deepen our experience

because, often, due to our culture and our stubbornness and stupidity, we think it would be better to be self-sufficient; we are all tempted to cut ties, and delude ourselves that we would be more ourselves if we did not depend.

To enter into relationship with the questions our children pose, we cannot simply get by with some instruction manual; we have to share this drama deep down. In doing so, our difficulty and his emerges, because he can use this situation to say *no* (almost seeking a justification in the fact of being adopted). But when we say *no*, what are we saying? Often our children or those who have suffered a deep wound think that this can spare them the drama of living, the drama of having to decide in front of the ultimate Mystery of being. Can we spare him this with some technique? So often, I find myself saying, “Look, what happened to you has not happened to me, but I have your same identical drama: letting myself be embraced, now, by an Other.” In fact, what is the danger? Identifying all your drama of living with that wound. No! I do not have that wound, but I have the same drama as you have! If we do not help them to take this step, all their restiveness is tied only to this particular aspect. It is not true that this one aspect is the root of all their restlessness. It is not true because we—who have not suffered this—are in front of the same drama, and nobody, no technician, can resolve it for us, either: it is the mystery of the “I” that cannot be reduced—as we see—because the drama of each of us, out of the fact of being human, is to respond to this.

Recently I took a taxi in Milan (a rare occurrence) and I happened to have a “theologian” taxi driver. He was reading a book of theology, so we spent the entire trip talking about these things. At a certain point, we began speaking about freedom. He was scandalized that certain things happened because God gave freedom to human beings. I told him, “Would you prefer to have a wife who loves you freely or, in order not to run risks, a wife who loves you mechanically?” “I prefer a wife who loves me freely.” “And do you think God enjoys it less than you?” That is, the Mystery could have generated other sparrows who sang differently or other dogs that barked differently, but this is totally different from creating a human being who freely says *yes* to Him. For this reason, the Mystery generated a being, running the risk of our freedom, because the *yes* of that human being is worth the whole universe, just as, for the taxi driver, an instant of his wife’s love, freely given, is worth the whole universe. This is far different from a mechanical *yes*! If we do not understand this, we think that the drama, which is the most beautiful thing of existence (being able to say *yes* to Christ, being able to say *yes* to the person you love, being able to say *yes* to your son or your father), deep down is something that it would be better to spare ourselves. And our kids have this mentality. If we do not help them understand that the drama is the most beautiful thing there is and that a son is not defined by his history, by his wound, but that now, no matter what happened, in this instant, he can call the Mystery “You,” can tell a girl he falls in love with that he loves her (no wound can stop him and nobody who is not wounded can spare him this), we reduce the question about our own existence. Reducing the question, reducing the drama, would mean building a world where maybe there would not be the evil that so often frightens us and makes us suffer, but it would be an absolutely suffocating world, without the opportunity to say, even crying, full of pain at one’s incapacity: “I love you” (because one knows the inadequacy of what he says compared to what he is able to do), almost begging to be able to say it, because when one says it with all the awareness of his incapacity he cannot say it except as a supplication: “I would like to love you the way God loves you.” So then, the question is how to introduce sons and daughters to the mystery of living.

**Contribution:** My wife and I have been married for five years. As soon as we got married, we wanted our family to grow, and right away tried to have children, but they did not come. My wife really suffered because of this. So I proposed we do a novena to Saint Riccardo Pampuri to ask for the gift of a child. One evening, after one of the usual dinners with our very dear friends, as we were having coffee on the couch, they said, “There is a two-and-a-half-year-old girl to take in on Saturdays and maybe Sundays. What do you say?” I remember our amazement at that unexpected proposal, because we thought that before welcoming someone you had to be experts, that is, you had to have had some children first, to have learned how to take care of them, and we, instead, had been married for just six months. Actually, to take in a child, you simply have to have experienced this embrace yourself, and this was happening for us in our friendship, and so we said *yes*. That evening, as we returned home, we remembered we had just finished the novena, and it moved

us and made us smile because that was the answer to what we had asked, though it was not the way we had imagined. And so, we began being a father and a mother but not with a child of our own. That experience of hospitality brought good to our family, and so we decided to continue leaving our door open, and since we lived in a very small house, we moved to a bigger one so we could foster someone on a stable basis. While we were moving, we received the request to host a nineteen-year-old who had helped us with the move. He lives with us to this day. Four months after his arrival, there was a request to host an eight-year-old boy, quadriplegic from birth. In that period, we were very attentive to the requests, but when that one circulated, we let it pass: "It's not up to us." After a few days, the request was circulated again. So we said *yes*. That child arrived in our home, which in the meantime we had changed again to find a place with a room for him, too. Asked how we decided to say *yes*, we respond that, each time, we yielded to certain evidence, the fact that what was happening was something good for us. The hundredfold is not a joke, but it is here and now, because on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, our first natural son was born. As soon as my wife and I discovered we were expecting, in addition to the obvious gratitude, we said to each other that it would not have been the same if he had arrived right away, as we had hoped before, and that it was all a hundred thousand times more beautiful than we could have imagined.

**Fr. Carrón:** Thank you.

**Contribution:** I'd like to ask you a question about this most recent contribution, because their *yes* generated many other *yeses* around them, as very often happens; that is, it spreads from family to family. What dimension of gratuitousness and of hospitality is this? Where is it rooted? How does it endure? Sometimes we are able to reduce even this! As was said earlier, it can become a show of how good we are. And then another thing seems linked to this. You reminded us that virginity is the overturning of the usual relationship: not reaching God through creation, but the *primum*, the predominant thing, is Christ in me, Christ in history, Christ in the world, the mystery of the Kingdom of God. The predominant thing is this, and through this one sees everything and everything is recovered in the unity that otherwise it would not have.

**Fr. Carrón:** The thing that can give rise to and maintain this dimension of gratuitousness and hospitality is the Christian encounter, because even our natural openness fades away, if it is not constantly reawakened. For this reason, the only method for understanding the nature of this gratuitousness, this hospitality, is to constantly return to reading the text on charity in *Is It Possible to Live This Way? Vol. 3: Charity* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008) because there we have all the conception and the experience of how God communicated the nature of Being, the nature of this gratuitousness. Everything is born of, has its origin in this boundless gratuitousness of the Mystery. How does Fr. Giussani make the passage from this gratuitousness of the Mystery to our gratuitousness? This is one of the most beautiful aspects of that volume. So often, what happens? One says, "Okay, this is what God does, so now I have to do it," as if gratuitousness were born of another origin, as if it were born of my attempt, my energy, my capacity. But Fr. Giussani truly writes a masterpiece, showing us how the superabundance of this communication of God generates in us such a spectacular experience that it makes us, too, capable of such gratuitousness. We are moved by what we have received, and only this enables us to have a gaze full of gratuitousness and of hospitality for others. But this can be reduced to a lesson that one learns and, in the end, the point of departure is not the experience of this, but something else. So then, if the wellspring is shifted, a sort of dualism is produced: on the one hand, I say the right thing, but then the wellspring of my action is elsewhere. How do you see that the wellspring is different? By the fact that it does not remain, and we tire; we are not able to generate this gratuitousness. We can give only what we receive, what overflows in our heart of what the Mystery gives us continually. For this reason, without being rooted in Christian experience, in faith, in recognition of an exceptional Presence that evokes hope in us, that moves us, that fills us with this boundless charity, sooner or later—as often you can see this in our experience—nothing suffices for us, nothing enables us to start anew. Returning to that wellspring: this is the great challenge of life. We can have an experience of living that, deep down, starts from the religious sense, that starts from a

lack, and so, in hospitality, too, we seek the method for filling this lack. I'll tell you ahead of time that this is not only mistaken, it is worse than mistaken, it is useless. Not even in fostering all the lost children of the universe will you be able to fill your heart's desire for the Infinite. Everything is teeny tiny for the capacity of the soul. This has to be clear, because otherwise foster care is reduced to the attempt to solve an unresolved personal problem. You will not solve it this way; rather, you will complicate it if you do not understand this, because the point cannot be that the child comes to fill a hole, a void. The child does not fill it, just as the husband or wife did not fill it and natural children did not fill it—nobody fills it, because this is the nature of our desire, this is the nature of the need we find inside. If another thing does not happen, if the encounter with He who responds does not happen, the point of departure, even though we are Christians (all of us here are Christians), returns to being the religious sense, that is, our attempt. And then we get angry because it is not enough. Instead, as Fr. Giussani always says, when the wellspring is identical to the fact of Christ, that which is born of the Christian experience comes because we are grounded in fullness. The Mystery lacked nothing when He created us: "This happiness I experience in the Trinitarian Mystery, this fullness, I desire to communicate to someone, I desire that it spread." So He created us to be able to share that fullness, that superabundance of life, of fullness that He experienced; He made us for this. He made us with this boundless desire precisely to fill it with His presence and with His sharing of this fullness. So then only He can fill the desire, and only if we have this experience can we be grounded in this fullness and thus relate with everyone (also in foster care)—not because we lack something, but out of the desire to share with others what we have received. This is what virginity introduces into history. Virginity is this: that God anticipates this experience in history. The more I relate with reality, the more I fall in love with a person, the more I become aware that she is absolutely incapable of responding to that promise she arouses, and so I get married, because it is the great opportunity that points me to something else, points me to the Mystery. Nobody more than your husband or wife has challenged you so much, has made such a powerful promise, and therefore has made you understand all the desire you have for fullness, and at the same time made you understand that he or she is not able to fulfill it. This is the usual way, says Giussani: through your husband or wife you open yourself to the Mystery. Jesus has introduced another road into history. Young men and women who maybe are in love, have girlfriends or boyfriends, can find within the power of a Presence, the presence of Christ, that fills them so much, that is so predominant that it makes them say, "This is everything." And then they feel a freedom in the relationship with the other, and they say, "No, I give Him my whole life." The call to virginity is the form that the Mystery uses to testify to everyone that the thing for which we are born, and for which it is worthwhile to get married and have children, and for which it is worthwhile to go to work, is Christ: Christ is the predominant thing that is able to fill my life. When one lives this way, it is not because one is capable, but because the Mystery imposes itself. I wish you could all see the young people when the possibility of the vocation to virginity buds in them: it is the experience of the power of a Presence that makes them free, that makes them absolutely dominated by Christ. If you happened to see the emergence of this form of vocation in someone, you would understand what it means to live life starting from this fullness. It seems to me that this interests not only those who are called to virginity; in fact, through them, all of us are called to live this experience of fullness, to be able to relate to reality gratuitously. Without this, self-interest is inevitably at the heart of our relationship with reality, with people, with children (adopted or natural), not out of ill-will—pay attention—but because it is inevitable. Since, in fact, we have this boundless need for fullness, the alternative is not trying to be good, holding ourselves back a bit, halting the desire (so that it will not induce us to make mistakes). This moralistic attempt to halt desire is useless, because we know that we can not halt it. The only adequate response is faith, that is, an experience of response to the desire that is so positive that it enables me to relate to everything with charity. If you remember, in *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*, when Fr. Giussani speaks about poverty, he says that the relationship with Christ makes it possible to have such a full experience that one can relate to things freely and gratefully because nothing is lacking. It is not that I am poor because I cannot be rich or because it is a problem of asceticism, of work to be done. No, I am poor in that I lack nothing. This is true poverty. The true relationship with people that is born of the Christian experience is called virginity (with things, poverty; with people, virginity): being so full, being grounded in fullness, we can relate gratuitously with everything and everyone. Aware of the boundless charity of the Mystery toward us,

God's being moved for us, we discover we have a free, gratuitous relationship with the other, without claims, without the attempt to possess, the will to hegemony. This is another world in this world. Therefore, when one touches it with his hand, when one by chance brushes against the "mantle" of an experience like this, he cannot help but be bowled over, cannot help but be challenged, cannot help but long to desire it. So then the dimension of gratuitousness becomes desirable, not out of voluntarism, not out of showing how good we are, not in order to be coherent, but in order not to miss the best, not to miss the opportunity to live life with this superabundance. Otherwise, we succumb to the logic of everyone, that is, we seek satisfaction where everyone seeks it.

For this reason, what we wrote in *la Repubblica* concerns everyone, because we can have the same logic, even if the way we live it might be different—but the logic is exactly the same. This is not a moralistic problem (of not being up to it); it is a problem of faith. Let's not confuse things; the problem is what experience of faith we have, what living experience we have of Christ. If we do not have this experience, we will seek satisfaction where everyone else seeks it. If we do not have this experience, we do not have to justify it, but we have to recognize whether we have been faithful or not to the origin of what has happened to us, because the problem is faith and hope and charity, not moralism.

**Contribution:** We have been married for 12 years and have three children, two of whom are twins. One of the twins is gravely disabled, but she is a very sensitive and intelligent girl. From the very first days, in the midst of the bewilderment and anguish, we had a clear understanding that for us she was an unimagined gift, and that she mysteriously presented a great opportunity for our life. We said to each other, in front of this daughter who has such big problems: either the encounter with Christ, faith, is ultimately a swindle, or there must be a possibility of good, a "something more" that we must discover. The friendship and shared life with the Families for Hospitality educated and continues to educate us to not diminish the desire for happiness for ourselves and our children. This is a daily challenge through which we can acknowledge the greatness of the love of Christ for our life.

**Fr. Carrón:** Thank you.

**Contribution:** Since starting my family, up to this day, I perceive that I am changed because, over time, the certainty has grown that this is the place in which my heart's desire for happiness opens to fulfillment. It is true that my life has changed in following my children, who have needed a lot of care, but above all my way of being with them has changed, because in my history Christ has made Himself attractive in the present through the new unity with my husband and through the hospitality with my children (two of whom are adopted), a staying wide open to reality just as it is, a newness for the sense of beginning. The pain of my experience is what has enabled me and enables me to accede to reality and the truth of facts, to love reality. If I wanted to stay in reality without feeling pain, how could I know it, how could I remain intimately close to my children? In my current reality, I live a deaf and persevering pain in staying before the offended humanity of my children, but at the same time I feel peace because I have learned to ask forgiveness for the evil that has been done to them. In affirming that the experience of pain exists, and is for a good, I want to say that not withdrawing from it, I live the companionship of people I love with the profundity of the encounter with Christ. In pain, I have encountered very dear friends and have rebuilt family relationships that are very important for me. My children are a continual and faithful call to prayer, to friendship with Christ; thanks to them my affection for the charism of Fr. Giussani has grown, as has my desire for friendship in this companionship. Pain is the opportunity for staying in the position of one who looks at the Cross and is certain of the Risen One. What can be said of our pain in extending hospitality and of the pain of our children? At times some of us vacillate under this burden. What enables us to stay at the Cross, in sadness, without feeling trapped?

**Fr. Carrón:** In these questions, we can all touch with our hand what we were saying before: there is no answer our capacity can give to these questions, precisely because our incapacity is the issue. The more dramatic the situation, the greater the pain. The greater the wounds of our children, the more we see and

perceive our incapacity. This can introduce us to truly understanding the meaning of Christ: the Mystery wanted to involve Himself with us precisely to share this suffering deep down, all the way to death, in order to free us from it. The Lord involves us in this experience of His and, since He was the first to pass through it, can become the Companion who makes us truly capable—in our incapacity—of passing through it ourselves. This reveals what kind of companionship is needed among us, because this need cannot be fulfilled by an association, no matter what kind, or by experts. We are touching the deepest depths of human existence, which can be faced only in not reducing Christ. As it says in the beginning of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, only a passionate gaze full of tenderness for our need can ensure that Christ is not reduced to a mere name. We cannot explain why there is the pain that the Lord permits; instead, what we can know is that we are not alone in this situation, but we are accompanied. At the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises we said: not a miracle, but a journey. We often want a miracle to resolve everything. A week ago, at a lesson at Catholic University in Milan, I had to explain the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense* (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1997, pp. 100-110). We all remember the initial image: if we were born in this instant with the awareness of someone in her twenties, the first thing we would experience would be wonder at reality. After the first hour, during the break, a young man came up to my desk and said to me, "I understand this very well, because I had a motorcycle accident last year and miraculously survived, and when I woke in the morning I was so moved by the fact of *existing* that such a wonder was born. I do not have to 'imagine' what Fr. Giussani says; I have experienced it. It is as if my life has been given back to me. But today, I got up distracted. Today, like many other days, after that moment faded out, I have returned to the same-old-same-old, with this reduced gaze upon my 'I' and my reality." This is the best example of what Fr. Giussani says: a miracle is not enough, because a miracle happened to him, but without a journey, everything reverts to being taken for granted. Why? Because the miracle shakes your self-awareness, but if this is not the beginning of a journey through which a gaze like this upon your own "I" becomes familiar, even with a miracle you return to the situation of before. At times, we think we are more intelligent than the Mystery; we think it would be easier if the Mystery gave us a miracle right away. At times (as in the case of this university student), He causes us to experience it. What does He demonstrate this way? "Do you see? I have given you the miracle. And now what do you do with it, without a journey?" It is not enough. It is not enough, if we do not make a journey in which the amazement of the miracle becomes ours as a way of using reason, as a way of living freedom, as a way of relating with reality. The miracle, by itself, is not enough. Do you understand why Giussani says that this is "the time of the person"? (Cf. "Self-Awareness, The Reawakening Point", *Traces*, Vol. 14, No. 4 [April], 2012, p. II. No miracle can spare us the journey that each of us must make for this gaze—which every so often we have—to become ours. Only if the person grows in her own self-awareness does this gaze become hers. But this self-awareness is not the fruit of a mere miracle. The miracle is a great help, the stimulus for a journey, but it cannot be the alternative to it. If we conceive of the miracle as the alternative to the journey, in time we will find ourselves back where we started. This shows us what kind of help and what kind of companionship we must offer to each other, because without accompanying each other at this level, we end up carrying burdens we cannot bear, if we do not look with a different gaze at all the pain and all the challenges the Lord does not spare us. When the Lord does not spare us from them, it is for something more, for a good, because this makes us aware of the true need we have, and makes us capable of acknowledging the grace of the fact that He is here, that we are not alone with our nothingness, with our pain and that of our children. Only if we realize this boundless charity of the Mystery with us can we truly feel all our need satisfied. This is the drama that each of us must face: opening oneself constantly (whatever the pain, the suffering, the situation, the challenge) to this imponderable, to this predominant thing that has happened in our lives. Life is easy. Once Christ happened, the challenge is not to return to the religious sense, beginning again to search for twenty thousand answers as if nothing had happened. The challenge is to return to Christ, which is the same drama you have with your wife, with your husband, with your children. You do not have to look for anything else; you have to set yourself in motion every time, responding to the "you" who is in front of you. The fact of having encountered Christ does not spare anyone this work. But we would like to have something automatic: "We have encountered the great You, and so the game is over." No, it is not over: it has begun! I have to be thankful for His presence every morning in a



way that is not formal. Christ is not the magic wand that spares us challenges. No! What would life be if He spared us everything? Total boredom. Let's hope it never happens! Because at times this is how we imagine eternal life: total boredom where nothing happens at all. Instead, it is the opportunity for everything to be fulfilled, the opportunity to say "I," moved in our innermost depths, to say "You" to Christ, moved in our innermost depths. I hope it is like this more and more, otherwise life declines. Instead, as I said at an assembly with the students of Catholic University, we can affirm the opposite. For those who have not encountered Christ, Eliot was perfectly right: "Where is the Life we have lost in living?" (T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock," Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1<sup>st</sup> edition [September 25, 1991], p. 147). But we can say that, living life, we gain it! This is the verification of faith.

**Contribution:** Taking into consideration the characteristics of our Association, which is composed of families, how can we help each other take appropriate steps in terms of what we are, the characteristics we have, without letting ourselves be overtaken by the frenzy of exploiting occasions for the charitable work, or by the worry of being "present"? How can and must that companionship to which you just called us help us in this? You said that we have to be loyal to ourselves. Now, I realize that the experience I am having with Families for Hospitality is to my advantage.

**Fr. Carrón:** We can help each other only if our companionship is true, that is, if we let ourselves be constantly corrected in every attempt we make (every attempt, as Giussani says, is a humble attempt), by the experience itself, because every experience has a judgment inside. What did today's first contribution show us? That in the attempt each of us personally makes, or that an association makes, one must first of all be loyal to one's need. If there is something that is not right, if there is something about which reality begins to give signs, if alerts begin to light up, we must not dig in our heels and say everything is going well. It seems banal but, at times, we would rather die than acknowledge that something is not right in our attempts, because we are proud. Giussani wrote a letter to *la Repubblica* when, for the Jubilee of 2000, John Paul II asked forgiveness in the name of the Church for some historical facts, and, among the many beautiful things he says, one that struck me more than any other was: "The Christian is attached to no one but Jesus" (L. Giussani, "That Great Strength of the Pope on His Knees," *Traces*, Vol. 2, No. 4 [May], 2000, pp. I-IV). Articulated this way, it might seem to be a pious, devout line (what else do you think Giusanni, being Giussani, would say?!). Instead, no. Stop right there! Precisely because we are attached to no one but Jesus, we can acknowledge any imperfection in every human act without having to defend it to the bitter end (as if it were what allowed us to breathe). In fact, listen to what he says next: "All the ideologies have an aspect for which man is sure of at least one thing that he himself does, and it is that which he will never want to give up nor allow to be challenged. But the Christian knows that his efforts and all he possesses or does must always yield before the truth" (*Ibid.*). An association like Families for Hospitality would be impossible without the desire of many people to get involved with boundless charity, but precisely because it is a humble attempt—and this gives us enormous freedom and breathing room—it is not always perfect—or rather, it is always correctable. We always find things that must change. This is the humility we must have toward our life and reality. Correcting each other gives us the opportunity to travel a road, to let ourselves be guided by the data of experience. So then, how do we see that we are attached to no one but Jesus? We see it in our capacity to acknowledge when something is not right. In fact, what was the first sign Zacchaeus had that an "event" had occurred? His capacity to acknowledge his error. He did not engage in dense reasoning; Jesus was simply such a superabundance for him that he said, "I can also acknowledge my mistakes. I am not defined by my errors. I am defined by this attachment to Him, so I can acknowledge the errors without a problem." Helping each other in this, to my mind, is the only possibility for being true friends, caring for the truth we live in the attempt we share to respond to a need; otherwise, at a certain moment, we do not know whether we are responding to a real need or whether we are responding to our hunger to be at the center of events, to find satisfaction that we do not find where it should be found. We all know that there is a very fine line between the one and the other, between the project of responding to a need in a gratuitous, virginal way, as we said before, and the attempt to respond to a need in search of personal satisfaction. Look at the temptations of Jesus. The devil says to Jesus, "Turn these stones into

bread: You will solve the problem of hunger” (cf. *Mt* 4:3). Is it not something truly suitable to the need of man and the glory of Jesus? But then why does Jesus not yield? Why does He consider it a temptation? Because it would mean affirming Himself instead of the Father’s design. This is the same temptation that He would later reject when Peter asked Him to renounce the prospect of the Passion: “Get behind Me, Satan. You think according to your own project, and not according to the design of an Other” (cf. *Mk* 8:33). This is the issue: we offer true companionship if we are constantly defined by the design of an Other, if in responding to the need we obey the Mystery (and if we are able to host two children, we have two, instead of trying to affirm ourselves by having five; but if we can host five, we do not host only three out of laziness). If we go to extreme lengths to reach the outcome of a project of ours, it is a sign that it is not the design of God, because if God wants precisely that outcome, He will give us all the opportunities and tools for attaining it. The challenge is to do the will of God; the challenge is to follow an Other according to the method that emerges in reality. The will of an Other is not defined by us, but by the possibilities in which we invest everything and to which we then obey. Affirming ourselves or affirming an Other: this is the choice of life. For this reason, I ask you to stay attentive to this point, because we are together to make personal responsibility grow. If, instead, out of our desire to work together on certain things, we are complicit in certain methods, then we find ourselves in trouble. We need to be there, with all our reasons, asking to do things in a suitable way, because this is true love for the work. If we put such a work at risk by doing things that are unrealistic or imprudent, we put everything at risk.

I’ll tell you one last thing: in your way of operating, do not make your project prevail over the spread of the charity of God. If you shift attention only to certain project-oriented aspects, you will not find among yourselves a companionship that is an authentic response to your solitude; you will do many more projects because you will be more skilled in doing them, but the origin of your experience will begin to be emptied. I think this is decisive because when one separates from the origin, one begins to lose what nourished one at the origin. We must ask Our Lady to help us remain constantly bound to the origin. So what do we need most absolutely? School of Community. If the way we live everything is not constantly nourished and corrected by the School of Community (which is the most regular instrument we have for changing mentality, for introducing us to a new method, a new culture in the way of relating to reality), no other gesture will be able to solve the problem. Even if we gathered here every three months, it would be useless. When I was in Spain—I’ve recounted this other times—two people came to ask me to officiate at their wedding (we had been doing School of Community on *The Religious Sense* for two years). At a certain point, I reached the question: “You don’t think your fiancé will make you happy, do you?” They said, bewildered, “Otherwise, what are we getting married for?!” I said, “Good question; you should have asked it earlier.” What did this episode help me to understand? Two years (two years!) of weekly work on *The Religious Sense* had not introduced them to the sense of the Mystery. Do you think a five-session wedding preparation course could open a breach in that wall that two years of work on *The Religious Sense* had not made a dent in? So, let’s not increase the nihilism by performing empty gestures. We have no other instrument as suitable, regular, and simple as School of Community. Friends, I urge you: do School of Community.