

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, December 21, 2016

Reference text: L. Giussani, Why the Church?, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2001, p. 117-128.

- *L' assenza [Absence]*
- *Ballad of the Old Man*

Glory Be

“I would like to see you God [...] / But it is impossible.” (*Ballad of the Old Man*, C. Chieffo). It is the desire of all religious men. It was Plato's desire, who in *Phaedo* reminds us how much he wished to cross the Pelagos, the sea of life, “upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine” (*Phaedo*, p. 36), but couldn't possibly imagine that that word would become flesh, coinciding with the face of Someone.

Each time we sing, in the way we sing, we verify the journey that we are making. What happened while we were singing? The more we become aware of it, with an ever growing trepidation and intensity, the more everything speaks to us. “There is only one place where you can return,” because “there is only one heart you can go home to”. (*Absence*, F. Mannoia).

We resume our work on the chapter “The Human Factor” in *Why the Church?* The context in which we live can help us to better realize the importance of this chapter. By becoming more aware of the circumstances that are essential to our journey we can better grasp the implications discussed by Fr. Giussani in all their depth. What is this context? To say it in a few words, as we have often repeated in the past years, it is the “collapse of evidences”. Things that were previously obvious to everyone, shared by almost everyone, become less and less evident to the point where we find ourselves—to use a fashionable expression—in the post-truth era (we are no longer tied to the facts!) The great geniuses have seen this clearly for decades and now it is becoming obvious also to all of us. In Page One of the December issue of *Traces* you can read a quotation from Henri de Lubac who already in the mid-Forties was writing that modern society “often preserved [...] many values that were Christian in origin, but having cut those values from their source, they were powerless to maintain them in their full strength or even in their authentic integrity.” The reason for this collapse is that the values have become separated from their historical origin. What are these values? “Spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice: these great things, without which there is no true humanity, that ancient paganism had half perceived and that Christianity instituted, quickly become unreal [a strong word!] when they are no longer seen as a radiation from God, when faith in the living God no longer provides their vital substance.” Then, “They become [...] empty forms. [...] Soon they are no more than a lifeless ideal,” because “Without God even truth is an idol, even justice is an idol. Idols [...] too pure and pale in face of the flesh-and-blood idols” they are required to compete against (H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, pp. 70-71, Ignatius Press). Only if we understand this can we truly grasp what kind of challenge we are facing. What is the answer to this historical situation that worries us so much, that makes us suffer so much and at times we even argue with people about? The fact is that these great values, these great things without which there is no true humanity, may again become something that radiates from

God. How? They must pass through a human reality. This is the connection with the chapter of *Why the Church?:* through a human reality!

Lately we have repeated it in many ways by quoting Fr. Giussani, “The twenty-first chapter of John’s Gospel is a fascinating documentation of the historical birth [of a new way of living] [...]. The particular story narrated there is the keystone of the Christian conception of man, of his morality, of his relationship with God, with life, and with the world.” (L. Giussani, S. Alberto, J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010, p. 59). The entire Christian conception passes through a particular history. Yet, in the modern age, in our time, we run into a difficulty. The conception about which Fr. Giussani speaks clashes with a culture that he himself describes like this, “Today’s culture holds that it is impossible [pay attention: impossible!] to know, to change oneself and reality ‘merely’ by following a person [that is, it considers Christianity impossible]. Our era cannot conceive of the person as an instrument of knowledge and change, because these factors are understood reductively, the first [knowledge] as analytical and theoretical reflection, and the second [change] as praxis and application of rules. Instead, for John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, it was precisely by following that exceptional person that they learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality. From the moment of that first encounter, the method began to unfold in time.” (L. Giussani, “From Faith the Method,” *Traces*, no. 1, 2009, p. III). Modern culture holds that it impossible for a person to convey truth, that “I would like to see You, God” can happen and coincide with a face, in short, it considers God’s method—that the divine is communicated through the human factor—impossible. The scandal has to do with Jesus’s and the Church’s claim.

How can we respond to this objection? Obviously, we cannot do it just by stating the opposite with words. How does Fr. Giussani respond? From where does he start? How does he introduce us to understanding the answer? By starting from experience. Only experience can be an adequate response to this objection—there are no alternatives—it has been like that from the beginning of Christianity. What does Fr. Giussani put in front of our eyes at the beginning of the chapter that we are starting to deal with? Saint Paul’s letters, in which we read, for example, “When I came to you brothers [...] I did not come with any brilliance of oratory or wise argument to announce to you the mystery of God [...] I came among you in weakness, in fear and great trembling, and what I spoke and proclaimed was not meant to convince by philosophical argument, but to demonstrate the convincing power of the Spirit” (*Why the Church?* p. 124). This argument, the manifestation of the power of the Spirit, is the only one capable of convincing man, the only one able to convince both us and others. That is why the true question is: “What about today?” It isn’t enough to invoke something from the past to convince today’s man, because even Lessing acknowledged that if he had seen the miracles of the past happen again, he would have been interested in Christianity and become a believer. Friends, people will not become interested in Christ based only on a memory of something past. When I was reading the Gospel to my students who didn’t know Lessing’s and Kant’s theories, they told me, “This is beautiful, but it doesn’t happen today.” This objection can only be answered with facts.

I am going to recount a fact that happened last Saturday which helped me discover a little better what the Church and what Christmas is. I went with a friend to deliver a bag from the Food Bank to a Tunisian Muslim family that I have known for a little over a year. It is our charitable work. As we entered their house we met the lady and her three daughters. While I was playing with the

little girls, at a certain point I realized that their mother was crying. Her husband has been out of work for months. There are issues between the two of them, she feels very lonely, and I heard her saying that at times she doesn't have any snacks or anything else to give to her daughters who are crying. She ended by saying that this kind of life is meaningless. I had never seen her so sad. I was moved and wanted to do something for her, but I didn't know what to do. I thought of saying some nice words or leaving her some money, but it didn't seem enough. What can really help her to begin to have hope again? How can I tell her not to cry? In that moment, I thought of the friends who were waiting for me at the living Nativity that was going to begin in two hours, and of the beauty of that gesture. So, I invited her to come with me. She accepted and came with her daughters. While we were watching the reenactment of the birth of Jesus, the mother was moved and cried. She told me that she knows that that story is true, and that among all the people she has met in Italy those who help and love her belong "to Jesus." She told me, "I understood that you were Christian," and so she thanked God. When I brought her back home, I saw that she was smiling, and she thanked me. What had happened to her? What makes it possible to smile and hope? One who is present among us. That fact that began two thousand and sixteen years ago happened again, for me, for that mother, for my friends and for the whole world.

Obviously, not only from the fact of the living Nativity, but also from the fact that among all the people that she had met, she found a human difference—and she recognized it clearly—in those who belong “to Jesus.” This made her hope again. A young woman who is in Russia, and therefore, unfortunately cannot be here, writes me the same, “In the recent Schools of Community you made the unthinkable proposal of verifying the form of my belonging explode in my heart, as well as the statement that the only source, the only possibility of newness is in the experience of Peter’s “Yes.” With the proposal of verifying this newness for myself, there was an immediate challenge since my 40th birthday was getting close. Usually, my birthday celebration has always felt cumbersome, due to my friends’ and my own habit of living that day superficially. I understood that because of the fact that it was my 40th birthday and because of my friends I couldn’t avoid a celebration [she couldn’t avoid it and thus she accepted the challenge]. An older friend who had come to visit us had encouraged us to show the exhibit on Fr. Giussani. I thought that this could be the way to celebrate my birthday: what better way to celebrate my birthday than telling my story? So, I invited my friends to the party and I told them a particular fact: my story and my friends’ story, referring to the history of the movement as the root of what had happened to us. That is, I proposed the story of my belonging, not to avoid my birthday, but rather as an opportunity for me to deepen and celebrate it. I also decided to share my experience of charitable work by proposing to my guests to offer, instead of gifts, a contribution to the Salesian Children’s Home where we had the party. The result exceeded all expectations. The gesture itself turned out to be more vibrant and beautiful than I could have imagined. Everyone’s judgment was, ‘Beautiful!’ My judgment was, ‘It is Christ’ [and she goes on to tell of a chain of reactions in front of what she saw that day]. The director of the Children Home exclaimed, ‘Who are you?’ A strange question, because we have known him for more than ten years. He told me that he had been struck deeply by everything, by ‘how you prepared the party, how you tidied up everything afterwards, how you spoke of your experience, of the relationship among you. I have never encountered such people. You were able to surprise and bring to conversion an old priest like me.’ He added, ‘Your story and the story of your friends is really important.’ Then we gave him the contribution we had collected and he told us, ‘We have never collected at any Mass as much as we did today during your party!’ A friend of mine who

attended the party felt judged first-hand on how she is educating her children: ‘I watch TV and the whole world is so terrible...But today, in seeing you, I understood that there is a possibility of hope. I am educating my children in the right way, I enrolled them in the best schools, I give them the best food and the best clothes. However, I don’t give them the most important thing: from me they don’t learn how to get to know life.’ [she said this simply after participating in one of our gestures!] Yet, I was especially struck by what this provoked in me, that is, certainty. Certainty about what? That we can make beautiful gestures? That we helped a Children’s Home, that it was an opportunity for my friends to discover goodness and beauty? Not at all. It was the certainty about the place and the journey, about a place capable of generating a new creature, a new gaze, and a new people not in an abstract place, but rather in a concrete place, the movement. I realized that the desire to follow and belong grew in me. I wish to follow your directions that continually propose this work. In the following days, the reactions didn’t wane but rather increased, together with my interest and curiosity toward moments and events. The morning has become simply the passionate desire to see Him again. Also my awareness of praying daily for you and your task increased.” Yet, sometimes, even if we continue to see facts like these and constantly witness them to each other, it isn’t so easy to recognize the presence of the divine in a companionship that is full of limits.

Sometimes I realize that unless that irresistible exceptionality happens in the companionship of the Church, I am truly incapable of truly living. I am not able to say, “This is a good for me,” but I can only say, “Lord, I am yours, why do you give me this situation?” I haven’t found an answer yet and this makes me sad. Very beautiful things happen, but they are short-lived and therefore I succumb again to sadness, to the daily grind that “cripples a man”[. So, I ask you: Before this companionship so shaky and full of limits, how can one look at the other’s origin and not at his limit? Is it only a grace to be asked for—which I am already doing—or is there something I can do to make this happen?

Can we do something? It is evident that it is Christ who makes these things happen. Yet, we can do something, not to directly generate them, but to recognize them, to recognize what happens. When these questions arise, I always remember the beginning of Chapter IV in *The Religious Sense*, where Fr. Giussani reminds us that, “Our search for the ultimate meaning of our life is not a matter of a particular intelligence, or some special effort, or even exceptional means. Rather, finding the ultimate truth is like discovering something beautiful along one’s path. One sees and recognizes it if one is attentive. The issue, then, is this attention.” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s, Montreal, 1997, p. 34). That is, learning to have this attention. I asked some of the people who wrote us to witness to what can help us, what education is necessary to live so that we can recognize Him in everything that happens, without having to censor the limits of the companionship that was given to us?

“He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help.”(Saint Bernard de Clairvaux). For me, the stories I will recount are a sign of this. An ex-student of mine—I teach in a university in the US—who was born and raised in China, came to us for a Master’s degree. We met her four years ago. This year at Easter she was baptized and received the sacraments, asking me to be her sponsor. In the parish where the baptism was celebrated they have a tradition of asking the catechumens to decorate their baptismal candle. She decided to

draw Fr. Giussani's image with the arrows and the X—that is the first thing I had talked to her about when she asked me about my religion. I could relate many things about my friendship with her that sustain and educate me, because it is all based on experience. In fact, I cannot explain things to her in terms of cultural and intellectual categories (even less religious ones). I live the vocation of Memores Domini, but we never spoke about this because it was very alien to her way of thinking. A couple of years ago, I invited her to spend Christmas Eve with the people of my house. After that day, she told me, "I understand why you live like this, why you are happy." Through traits that are unmistakably human, she perceived the reason for such a divine thing, a thing of God, as vocation. I was struck that she was able to make the human correspondence of her heart coincide with the exhaustive reasoning which explained something very alien to her. The second story is about a young man that we met in prison several years ago. His prison is three hours away from the city, in the middle of nowhere. He went to prison more than twenty years ago, when he was very young, after receiving a long sentence. His parents had divorced when he was still a child and because of this his mother was asked to stop being the parish choir director. She was angry at this and stopped following the life of the church. Hence, the son grew up without faith and he committed a serious crime. During his first year in prison, at the invitation of his grandfather, he decided to read the Bible, but only to prove to his grandfather and to his brother that it was all nonsense. As he told us, after reading the Bible he realized that he was a Christian, but didn't know to what "denomination" he belonged. At a certain point, he was retried due to a technicality, and he was released from prison for a year. During that time, he again grew close to the Catholic Church and received the sacraments. However, his sentence was confirmed and he went back to prison. He started to read every possible thing about faith, earned an on-line Master's in Theology (taking eight years) and by chance read that Benedict XVI was close to CL. From there he got to Traces and then to us. In August he called me and told me that quite unexpectedly he had been transferred to home confinement and therefore now lived in our town with his mother (who in time had grown closer to the Church again). On his last day in prison he wrote us a letter, "I really need your help to find a job and to face all the challenges that are waiting for me. But you have already given to me what I need most, that is, the awareness that there is someone who is waiting for me outside. I know that I am loved." Also in the case of this man, "He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help." These stories make me live what we have called "God's way," that is, the fact that something outside this world uses a totally human and specific story to manifest itself. I need this, because I understand that God acts in the same way with me.

When we encounter a person with such simplicity, poor in spirit, we can say, we understand that to recognize the facts we need only to have this poverty. Because what our Chinese friend encountered is what we also encounter: some facts. However, if this original openness, if this curiosity, if this opening our eyes wide in front of reality is not constantly educated—Fr. Giussani always says to us—we do not see. The problem isn't that reality, even with all its limits, doesn't exist, but rather that we don't see it. That young Chinese woman can only encounter people full of limitations like us, she cannot meet anyone else. The same is true for the example from Russia.

I will recount something that happened during the past few days that really re-awakened my awareness of how important the newness we carry is, and that it is clearly not our own. Eighteen years ago, a kid met us at the welcome desk for freshmen at the university. He had distanced himself from the Church, but became attached to us and became our friend, studied with us, came to our School of Community meetings and once even to the Spiritual Exercises in Rimini. After graduation, we lost contact with him. Until two weeks ago, when out of nowhere he came to our School of Community meeting after 15 years. We had dinner together, because I needed to know what had happened to him that made him look for us again after such a long time! He told me that while attending the Pre-Cana course with his fiancée he heard a friar speak and was struck by him, to the point of thinking, "I wish this didn't have to end, what a pity that at some point this evening must end." When he shared this judgment with his fiancée, he also told her, "Wait a minute, but a long time ago I experienced something like that, a place where I felt good, to the point of wishing that it wouldn't end." He added that he had suddenly realized the full importance of what he had encountered 15 years before, to the point of needing to find that reality again. Thus, he followed his desire, pulling along also his fiancée, and returned to School of Community. While we were having dinner, he said, "The thing I found most striking and interesting at the time was to see the enthusiasm you had for doing everyday things: studying, going to class, having dinner, playing soccer, singing together. As time went by, all of this stayed with me and when I met that friar I understood that I wanted to go beyond the boredom of the day-to-day grind and live my entire life like that. That is why I need to find again the only place that I have seen in my life where that question emerges so clearly." I was moved, because in an instant I realized that the Mystery put this friend next to me again to help me recognize in my experience what kind of event has entered my life, an event that is able to rekindle a man's desire and need after 15 years. Therefore, today I can say "Yes" to this event, eliminating my taking things slightly for granted, which often reduces the event's newness and cognitive power to something mechanical. The Mystery really leaves no stone unturned in re-proposing Himself, and really doesn't simply settle for giving us help. Moreover, this evening this friend should have joined me in connecting to this School of Community, but instead he came with me right here!

Do you see? What makes us overcome taking things slightly for granted, which affects our way of looking at the event that has happened, is the fact that the event happens again. "A place where I was feeling good, to the point of wishing that it wouldn't end." As we were singing at the beginning, "There is only one place where you can return / there is only one heart you can go home to." But, what does one need? Attention to the signs. That friend could have let things go, but instead what happened connected him again to something that had happened 15 years before, so great was the mark it had left on him.

I was struck by your last School of Community and its witnesses, and I would like to ask you very simply for some help with how to go forward now. What struck me about those witnesses is that they saw the presence of Christ in small things, whose meaning might be debatable. The point is precisely this. After hearing in the witnesses the example of the room that had been tidied up by the mother, and of the train trip, I thought of my roommate. Often, if I leave my things in a mess, she tidies them up. I thought of a meeting with a client who kept bringing up the Church and how

that had re-awakened me. I thought of other small facts that are a sign of grace, but to become that they must be recognized. Just speaking about these small facts with my friends in the movement would embarrass me, and yet they are no different from what people were recounting in the School of Community. I will try to explain myself better. During my days many things happen to me, things that could move me a little forward, but it is as if I didn't see them, as if I didn't notice them because they are small, and their meaning could be debatable, and I tell myself, "How lucky!" or "How unlucky!" Yet, what I noticed in the witnesses is that when your need is urgent all of reality speaks to you of Him. I have experienced this in my life as well. Now, instead, it is as if I have to make a great effort to go back to those facts and witnesses—not that many—in which I either think that Christ is present, or that I am delusional. The real point is not so much the effort of going back to the memory of those facts, but rather that I feel that I am missing out on something. Five years ago I was won over again by the movement through a young Portuguese woman (for me it couldn't be just anyone!) What won me over again was the relationship she had with everyday things. When we met in the evening for dinner we were telling each other about our day, and, for her, every encounter she had had was a question, a question to her self who belonged to that relationship. She recounted her day saying, "He is so clever, look at how He made me come upon this," or "Look, He used this to make me understand." Then, I had the desire to follow the movement more and more, because in living like that faith and life were much more appealing. Unfortunately, this intuition wasn't enough, the desire wasn't enough to live like this. Therefore, now I am working on it, trying not to get lost. I don't want to be delusional but I intuit a possibility of living things to the core. If during my day I were able to take notice of everything that happens to the point of recognizing Him, everything would be more beautiful. Maybe He is trying to take hold of me and I don't even look at Him. How can I get rid of this "maybe" without becoming a visionary? Thank you for your presence and for helping us freely.

Like you said earlier, the problem is that you are aware of what you are saying. These facts "must be recognized," you said. What is the problem, then? "It is as if I didn't see them," you added. It isn't that the facts don't happen, because there isn't an occasion in which we get together and don't tell each other about them. There isn't a dinner, a small Fraternity group meeting, or gathering of friends anywhere in the world in the life of the movement, where we don't tell each other things like those we have listened to this evening, but one must recognize them. What strikes me in your contribution is when you said that what makes it easier to recognize Him is to need Him: "When your need is urgent all of reality speaks to you of Him." Fr. Giussani always reminded us: when your need is urgent it is easier to recognize Him, so much so that at the beginning of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* he says that there is no more important condition for recognizing the Christian fact than "an attentive, tender, and impassioned awareness of myself" (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1998, p. 6). Because, when we feel this urgent need we are in a better position to identify the answer. Thus, the goal is that each of us may be more and more aware of the need that constitutes us. How? As it happened to you: "I had the desire to follow the movement more and more," because it is the place where one who has the desire to follow in a way that is not automatic, little by little becomes so aware of his own need that—like you say—it is not enough to answer it with just anything, but one needs to constantly go back to that memory. This summer a novice said, "I am longing for myself, for this experience I have in my relationship with Christ, so that I am not content with

something less than this.” If one has this need, then one can discover what the Mystery is making happen in this daily grind that “cripples a man.” Facts happen, and we need to understand that if we can’t recognize the Presence that makes them happen, we return to our previous condition when the emotional repercussions wane. But from where does that fact, even if it is fleeting, those repercussions, even if they are experienced by a person full of limitations, that intensity, even if it is fragile, originate? If we don’t recognize the presence of Christ in what happens, the next morning when the repercussions have passed, we will be back to square one and then our certainty will not grow. Then, we will find ourselves alone instead of living a life interwoven with that Presence that shapes us completely. All the limitations that we actually see, Fr. Giussani tells us, cannot become an excuse for not recognizing Him. “A Spanish friend wrote me, “While I see that the human factor grants us the possibility of the divine, I also see that I become a slave to sin. Does our life consist of this struggle? But, isn’t this then a condemnation? In my personal struggle sin almost always wins and the fact that sometimes the divine wins is not enough.” We find ourselves living this relentless inner struggle. Why isn’t this a condemnation? And why isn’t it true that sin wins? Because, this friend continues to fight, he continues to write, he continues to desire. We don’t realize that if even a crumb of desire, of need, of tension remain in the midst of our growing evil, then little by little the victory of the divine becomes possible. “The first individuals who spread Christianity were perfectly aware that the divine shone forth in the world from what they said and did [with their words, even if] [...] their words were insufficient, their gestures weak” [like a birthday party, a casual meeting at dinner, gestures “without epic intent,” as Fr. Francesco Braschi said at the presentation of Fr. Giussani’s book *From a Lived Liturgy*: Jesus’s Eucharist is a dinner, a daily gesture. What Fr. Giussani found most striking about Christ was the relationship He had with the normal things of life.] (*Why the Church?* p. 126). At the same time, all of this, continues Fr. Giussani, “did not mean that they were acquiescent and resigned [like saying: since our fragility is also part of experience, we can ignore it and justify it. No! This predicament generates a daily struggle] [...] [and were] constantly reaching out for the gift of salvation.” (*Ibid.*) This is part of our life, so much so that we can no longer live without facing this struggle, not—as you say—to live up to our attempt, but rather to avoid missing what is happening. Like another friend, who couldn’t be here in person because of his work, says, “I often resist, I feel a sense of resistance to the fact that He may manifest Himself in the usual people whose story I already know. What amazes me is that often you, Julián, learn from everyone [one can learn to learn from everyone!] and this is clear when you ask people to give their contribution at School of Community. I would like to understand the value of this condition of mine, from where to restart so that I don’t get stuck again.” From where do we start again? Fr. Giussani tells us. Pay attention, because these are nuances present in the text that we sometimes miss: “It is not so easy to realize in existential terms that this is precisely the problem of the Church: God *wants* to pass through the humanity of all those he has taken hold of in Baptism.” (*Why the Church?* p. 126). It is normal to have this difficulty. We perceive it when we are the ones who have to carry Christ’s witness, or when we have to recognize it in others. We understand these two sides perfectly well, together with the drama. This doesn’t happen only to others, it happens also among us: how difficult it can be for us to recognize what is in front of us! Yet, this cannot stop us from recognizing what is happening. From where should one start? Fr. Giussani says that my inadequacy cannot prevent me from recognizing that Christ can happen through the others.

I will recount an episode that happened to me about ten days ago which clarified in my life a question that I have been carrying within since the last School of Community. Due to a minor accident, I ended up in the emergency room and I was seen by a doctor who, after spending the entire night there, was justifiably burdened and irritated by the difficult night shift (I didn't know that he belonged to the movement, I discovered it later). After a brief exchange with me and my husband he must have realized that we belonged to the movement as well and he suddenly became very talkative, pleasant, and present. My first thought was: What a hypocrite, first he behaved like that and now he has changed! Yet, my second thought was: This is his truer self, because in front of two poor people like us, who recalled him to a greater reality, his self-awareness gave its best, all his awareness that had gotten lost in the tiredness. This clarified my question. If one lived always as if in the presence of someone—like that doctor before us that day—one's self-awareness would be awakened. Yet, for me this "as if" is not enough. My question is: I recognize myself...

It isn't enough! It isn't enough, because you always want something automatic. It isn't enough, because we always want something that doesn't force us to be involved. That is why—if you let me—in the text Fr. Giussani says, “[Everything we have said up to this point] implies that we accept human factors as part and parcel of the definition of the Church” (*Why the Church?* p. 128). But one has to become aware of this, in the same way you became aware of the doctor's reaction. The problem is that often we don't become aware of things. When you do, instead, you see how everything begins to speak to you! Therefore, this needs to become more and more ours so that we begin to look at what we usually take for granted. If we take it for granted, then we don't recognize reality, we don't recognize that what we see has an origin. This is the problem. To do this, to become aware of this, Fr. Giussani says also something else, “Anyone seeking to verify the announced presence of the divine in the midst of this human wretchedness, cannot dwell on this wretchedness and conclude that the divine cannot possibly be present. For this reason, another criterion will have to be adopted, that there is no wretchedness that could ever annul the paradoxical nature of the instrument chosen by God” (*ibid.* p.128). Therefore, when we don't recognize Him, it isn't because He is not present, but because we stopped at the level of the thing in front of us that can be completely true, but that doesn't express what we have before us in its totality. So much so that others, perhaps a new person, recognizes it. And not because the new people are more apt to have visions (?!). They recognize it because they have a simplicity that perhaps we no longer have.

In the past weeks, I kept reading the text of School of Community, and each time I read it there were always some phrases that I liked and some aspects that surprised me. Nevertheless, this didn't change my way of judging the circumstances and myself. They were beautiful pages to read, but not a tool for my education. For this reason, I would like to discuss again the work on School of Community. What kind of work is it? Why does it sometimes affect my ability to look at myself and at the circumstances, but other times, even if I enjoy the reading, does it remain isolated from what I live? Does this happen also to you? How do you start again?

I will tell you a simple fact that happened to me and that allowed me to understand in my experience how helpful the journey that you propose to us is. Taking seriously the work you have

proposed to us in the past months, and ultimately also the work on the flyer on the referendum, was, for me, an occasion to verify in many conversations and encounters with friends and co-workers that the other is a good for me; first and foremost, because it allows me to become aware of and deepen the encounter I have had that changed my life. But—the famous “but”!—despite this beauty that I experienced often, it happened that on the Monday after voting I had to work with a co-worker with whom I find it very difficult to relate. On that day and on the following days I did my best to avoid him—so much for the fact that the other is a good! Then, I had the grace to attend the Exercises for university students, where I could really experience again the event of Christ in everything that happened in those three days. When I went back to work on the following Monday, I immediately looked for that co-worker to work with him, and it was very helpful and interesting for both of us. All my prejudices against him disappeared, so much so that in the end he asked me, “Where did you go in the past days [it was the holiday of Saint Ambrose] that you are so happy and available?” Thanks to him I understood what you wanted to tell us in Page One when you ask from where Fr. Giussani begins to answer the problems of reason, knowledge, and morality: “Instead, for John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, it was precisely by following that exceptional person that they learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality.” It was the same for me. I experienced that only the event of Christ that happens again now allows me to look at the other and at reality as a good, and from there I can begin again. This is a judgment that little by little, by following your proposal, is becoming clearer and clearer in my life in the small facts that happen.

Thank you. “But I rebel with all myself against the fact that it is possible to change oneself and reality only by following a person,” one of you writes to me, “I ask for your help to judge and understand what it means to follow a person. Which person?” We always have the fortune that Fr. Giussani had already thought about these questions, or someone had already asked him about them. For this reason it is easier to answer, because nothing we say will do. “When can you trust someone? [When what is at stake is a matter] [...] of life and death, of being useful or useless for the world, of being glad or not glad in the world, of being dead before really dying or being alive also in death [...]? When do I have an adequate reason to trust someone enough to follow and obey that person?” He gives three reasons. “*First*, it is reasonable to follow another, to obey another, when this person communicates and reveals to me a conception of life and its destiny that rests entirely on the original needs of the heart that all mankind shares; when it establishes a conception of life that **rests on the needs shared by the human heart**. [...] *Second*, [gratuitousness]. The other tells me those things not because he has an agenda, or for his personal advantage. But [...] **gratuitously**. Gratuitousness is love for the destiny of the other and nothing else. The only reason he is saying that to me is out of love for my destiny, for my life’s gladness and for the happiness I can reach [without any calculation]; it isn’t the fruit of some calculation.” This second factor is extremely important, but sometimes one understands it only when “we have been educated by life to love people gratuitously, [we learn] to understand when someone loves you gratuitously.” *Third*, that person “not only explains life to you,” but also offers to you “a conception of life that is founded on the common needs of man’s heart [...], that **helps you**: it helps you to overcome what is against these needs, that is, that aspect of awareness that makes you feel that by adhering to the needs of the heart you are going to lose something. If a person, in the conception of life that he explains and communicates to you, clearly appears to be motivated by and to rest everything on

the needs of the heart, yours and of all people; if he does it gratuitously, wishing for your good, so much so that the first strange thing that strikes you upon encountering him is this aspect of gratuitousness [...]; if he gives an adequate help, then to obey this person is something you must do, like it is a duty to do what is reasonable.” (L. Giussani, *Si puo` (veramente?!) vivere cosi` ? [Is it possible to (really?!) live like this?]*, BUR, Milan 2002, pp. 219-222).

First and foremost, I want to read to you the handwritten letter sent to us by Pope Francis,

“Reverend Fr. Julián,

I would like to thank you and the entire Fraternity of Communion and Liberation for the offering you collected during the pilgrimages and generously sent me for works of charity.

It does my heart good and consoles me to know that from more than two hundred Marian sanctuaries in Italy and the world, so many people wanted to undertake the journey of mercy in the spirit of sharing with the needy. In fact, the poor remind us of the essential core of Christian life. Saint Augustine teaches us, “There are certain persons who are more ready to distribute all their goods to the poor, than themselves to become the poor of God.” This poverty is necessary because it describes what we truly have at heart: the need for Him. Therefore, we go to the poor, not because we already know that the poor person is Jesus, but to return to discovering that that poor person is Jesus. Saint Ignatius of Loyola in turn adds that “poverty is mother and wall. Poverty generates, is a mother, generates spiritual life, life of holiness, apostolic life. And it is a wall; it defends. How many ecclesial disasters began for lack of poverty.”

In a world lacerated by the logic of profit that produces new poverty and generates the culture of waste, I never cease invoking the grace of a Church that is poor and for the poor. It is not a liberal program, but a radical program because it means a return to our roots. Going back to our origins is not a form of reverting to the past, but it is the strength for a courageous beginning directed at tomorrow. It is the revolution of tenderness and love. For this reason, I ask you, too, to unite your intents toward this objective. May you work with serenity and fruitfulness, and courageously testify [to] the authenticity of the Christian life.

To each and all of you I send wholeheartedly the blessing of the Lord.

Please do not forget to continue to pray for me.

Francis.”

As you just heard, the Pope thanks us for the offering we collected during our pilgrimages to Marian sanctuaries throughout the world on the occasion of the Holy Year of Mercy, sent to him for his charitable giving. But Pope Francis did not stop at thanking us. In fact, he also wanted to indicate to us where we must look in order to continue our journey, so as to “courageously testify [to] the authenticity of the Christian life.” I ask you to read the letter attentively and reflect upon it, to help each other understand it more and more with the help of friends, in your Fraternity groups, to cherish and apply its contents. God never ceases to amaze us. How can we not be struck and grateful for this unexpected gift of a father who cares so deeply for the destiny of his children?

My prayer for you is that Christ finds each of you open to the way He has chosen to come to meet us this Christmas. This is not something to be taken for granted. As Fr. Giussani always reminded us during the Advent season, we can await His coming but without truly loving the way in which He chooses to come each time. Let us ask Our Lady to make us open like her to the

surprise which the Mystery visits on us today. I urge you not to let a day pass without praying for Pope Francis, as he has asked of each of us.

The next School of Community will be held on Wednesday, January 18, at 9:30 pm.

We continue the work on the text *Why the Church?* We will go over the second point (the *Implications*) of this first chapter (“The Human Factor”), pp. 128-146.

I wish you to live this feast of Christmas with gratitude, because His coming reveals to us, as we can see, God’s plan for us: to make us become the people whom He had “chosen before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him [...] destined for adoption to Himself” (*Eph* 1, 4-5). Christmas is for us the opportunity to return to a true relationship with people and things, as we witness to each other each time we follow Him. Since we cannot but wish to be happy and we were the ones who broke the relationship with Him, in the text we chose for the Christmas Poster Saint Bernard reminds us of the tenderness of the Mystery: “He comes, the One who will hurl our sins into the depths of the sea, who will heal all our illnesses, who will carry us on His back to restore our original dignity.” He wanted to become flesh to allow our freedom to live again all of our daily life within a relationship that had been severed, so that we can look again at ourselves and at reality in a true way, like John and Andrew did by following Jesus, so that they could begin to know and change themselves.

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas to everyone!

Veni Sancte Spiritus