

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, November 23, 2016

*Reference text: J. Carrón “The Form of Witness,” Traces, September 2016, pp.VII-XII,
<http://www.tracesonline.org/2016/09/page-one-the-form-of-the-witness/>*

- *Al mattino*
- *Cry no more*

Glory Be

These days there is no shortage of challenges, from the earthquake to the US elections, from Brexit to the referendum on the constitution, in addition to the personal challenges (illness, work, etc.) that each of us must face daily. They are all occasions to verify what we are telling each other about the relationship between belonging and cultural expression. Also the song we just sang - and I hope that in the future you will all bring the Book of Songs so that we can sing together – says this, “Cry no more, for the passerby has not passed you.” (R. Veras - M. Maniscalco, “Cry no more,” Song Book). Such cultural expression can be born only from a certain kind of belonging, because unless I live a belonging that allows me not to cry in front of the normal situations of life I end up crying like everyone else. That is why we said, in short, that the origin of cultural expression is either rooted in existential insecurity or in certainty. This becomes visible to everyone and to ourselves, especially in how one faces the present circumstances. Each of us has seen how he or she has faced and is facing these challenges, and therefore has been able to verify what we tell each other in *The Form of Witness*, quoting Fr. Giussani, “I ask you if the problem of a faith that becomes culture [that becomes cultural expression], capacity for culture, has more to do with the certainty of faith than with the shrewdness [with intelligence and analysis] of its passage to the culture.” (pp.VI-VII) This is what we must verify: what places us in reality with a different cultural expression? It is interesting to see, based on all the questions that you sent us, that there is a desire to better understand the meaning of the words we use: witness, belonging, desire, certainty, task. They are all words that emerge from your questions, because we realize more and more that we cannot take them for granted, that is, that life’s challenges are so great that what is “already known” is no longer enough. Therefore, these challenges are opportunity to re-learn those words in all their depth.

I have been working on The Form of Witness for a few weeks. I need to thank you for this text, because it is raising in me questions that I didn’t have before, and therefore a great desire to understand. You speak of belonging. But what is belonging? I will explain where this question comes from. For many years, I confused belonging with a mask to be worn and this prevented my “I” from emerging. A belonging that consisted in complying with a pre-set plan suffocated me, to the point of hindering my understanding of what vocational path I should follow. When I rebelled against this idea of belonging I began to understand who I am and what I really want; I started to go to the core of the words “heart,” “reason,” and “desire” on which Fr. Giussani always insisted. Even now that I have embraced my final vocational form for the past ten years, the question remains: What is this belonging? What I think I understood is not enough, because life poses new challenges and I don’t want to be unprepared. There exists a risk of responding to the

challenges inadequately. Thank you for your presence; for me you are a stronghold of fidelity to the charism of Fr. Giussani and a great comfort in the faith.

As you said, life's challenges raise in us the desire to understand more and more deeply the nature of our belonging, which is linked to the meaning of the words we use. Therefore, also a great desire to understand and go to the core of the fundamental words emerges. One is no longer content with what one already knows. Why? The reason for this are the challenges, because if I don't go deeper into the things that we say to each other, I find myself unprepared. The reason why we want to understand more and more is precisely because life often finds us unprepared. This lack of preparation shows to us the connection between the challenges we find ourselves facing and our understanding of the words of the charism. If we weren't constantly challenged by the provocation of reality, by what happens, we would be content with repeating what we are used to. Instead, no! The challenges aren't something incidental, but like Fr. Giussani says, they are crucial to our understanding. Therefore, only by taking them seriously can we understand. In your case, you want to clarify the question of belonging: what is belonging? Before such a question each of us is provoked: how would I answer this question? And one has to start to do the work. We aren't here just as spectators, but rather as protagonists of what is happening. Even though we don't all make a contribution—it is impossible for all of us to speak—we can all be protagonists if in this moment each of us asks himself the question: what do I think about belonging? By doing that, by starting to formulate a possible answer, then we can compare our tentative answers with what will emerge in the experience that we will have this evening. Thus, our participation in a gesture like this sets us all on a journey. I will say briefly what belonging is by quoting Fr. Giussani, simply to begin to understand. Afterwards, though, I expect that as we go on a contribution to the answer will emerge from your witnesses. "Belonging is a structural dimension of the 'I': we were nothing and now we exist... [it means that] we belong to Another!" We depend on, we belong to Another. That would already be enough. Instead Fr. Giussani goes further, "Understanding this [it is obvious that we all depend, because no one creates himself, but] depends on a providential event, merciful and full of love. [It is an event that makes me understand the answer to this question]. That event can be a *charism*. It is a way in which God makes you understand that you belong to Him. "Only if you realize that you belong to Christ through the history that has taken hold of you, will you be able to see whether this history generates an 'I' that can face any challenge, as we will see later. Because of this you are no longer able to walk away from that event, from that charism, from the form in which God has handed over to you this truth [that you depend on Another] without betraying the truth itself. Grace is precisely the gift with which God makes happen the event that brings you to understand that you belong." (L.Giussani, *Realta` e giovinezza. La sfida* [Reality and Youth—The Challenge], SEI, Turin 1995, p. 203].

I just came back from Kazakhstan where I went to visit some friends, and I was struck particularly by something a Muslim woman told me—I found it relevant to the work we are doing now. She has been working for 10 years with one of our friends in a youth center where they care for refugees and assist families with disabilities. This Muslim woman told us that about 20 years ago her father abandoned their family and started living with another woman, and she began to hate him and no longer wanted to see him. She told us that for years between her and her father there was only a wall of silence, a wall made of not seeing him, not looking at him, of not being able to face the situation. She told us that, as she lived the past 10 years at the center with our friends, a thought

took shape in her, almost a doubt, that perhaps the childhood her father had lived (his parents had given him to another couple as a newborn) had not allowed him to look at reality adequately; and likely also the religious experience he had had with his family didn't allow him to appreciate and enjoy reality. In contrast, she had realized that her relationship with her Catholic friends had changed her perception of reality, introducing a gaze on people and things that—she told us with amazement—was unknown to her before. At some point, this gaze had allowed her to break the wall with her father. In fact, she had started to realize that her father had not lived the experience and the encounters that made her able to reconsider his presence in her life. In the meantime, her mother became gravely ill and needed constant assistance. About four years ago, after her father had been left by the woman with whom he had been living, and had succumbed to alcoholism, our Muslim friend completed her journey: she met her father and proposed to him that he come home, which he did. For the past three years, he has been caring for his wife around the clock. She added something that I find important. She said that this choice was not made once and for all, but that every day she still feels in her guts, like a volcano, the magma of resentment, like a wound ready to explode. She added, though, that there is a great correspondence in her in seeing the fruit of forgiveness, seeing everyday her father with his wife. When I heard this story, I thought of the letter of the inmate with his gaze full of mercy for the prison guards who were searching him. For me this was a further verification of what you said in Page One, that the main reason of our friendship is the fulfillment of the heart, and that only the fulfillment of the heart is the answer to nothingness, a victory over nihilism precisely because of the experience we have had.

The father and the daughter: they were both lost. What is the difference between them? That an event happened to the daughter. The friendship with her Catholic friends changed the perception she had of herself and of reality. Without this encounter, she would have continued to live—like she said of her father owing to his religious and emotional experiences—without acquiring this awareness. And only thanks to this new awareness did she begin to look at her father without judging him only for what he had done, but understanding that he had not experienced what had happened to her. It was her belonging to a place that changed her gaze on reality. A particular story, belonging to a specific place, involving some specific faces, changed her, and instead of a moralistic gaze on her father a different gaze started to enter into her, so much so that she recognized that in his childhood her father had not lived an experience that could allow him to be open to reality like had happened to her. At that point she stopped recriminating and went to see him, to look at him like she had been looked at. It is simple! This is the belonging that changes everything. That is why last time we were saying that a particular history (like that of the “Yes” of Peter or of that young woman, or like the story each of us can recognize in ourselves) is the keystone to the concept of man, to the way in which we think of ourselves and then stay in reality. A person who couldn't be here this evening asks a question on another word: certainty. “I don't know why, but the work on Page One is making many questions emerge among us that hadn't happened in a long time, or at least not at this level. For example, this desire for certainty arose very strongly in us. We need certainty, said a friend, but this clashes with our fragility, with the difficulties of everyday life.” The circumstances make our lack of certainty emerge with simplicity. It isn't that it wasn't there before, but now we feel free to stare this lack of certainty in the face. It may seem inconsequential, but it is different. The whole step we are taking is to be able to embrace our fragility, the questions we have about these things, to be able to start looking at them and make

a journey that allows us to face them. Is the certainty of faith that we are speaking of the fruit of a work?

I am experiencing a difficult time and I would like to ask for your help. In the past years, a question started to form within me that lately has become stronger and more dramatic: why does it happen that the heart desires things that later clearly show themselves not to correspond to its truth? Why does Jesus allow your heart to desire something, and you follow that desire because there you glimpse a possibility for yourself, but then He decides not to grant it to you? Lately for me this is a very painful point, and I have a very hard time in trusting that within this sorrow there is a good. I may say I trust in words, but deep down my heart is doubting. Despite this, He never tires of revealing Himself again in my days in simple and small things, as if He wanted to tell me, "You see, the truth is that I care for you, I didn't forget you." For example, one evening last week, as I was going home from work, my heart was upset, I was exhausted and by chance I met on the way some girlfriends. Even just seeing their faces, seeing their love for me, cheered me up and I went home feeling more at peace. Did it ever happen to you when you were a kid to go into your room and, upon finding it all tidied up thinking immediately, "My mom has been here"? For me that evening was like that, I really recognized His hand in it and I said, "It is You!" This lifted me up, because I no longer felt alone and I rediscovered that I am loved. In my weeks, there are many of these moments of grace, and yet I realize how this is not enough, because with each new day sometimes it takes an instant and that sorrow comes back, the doubt shows up again and it sinks me. However, I don't want to live like this, with these ups and downs. Thus, I realize that there is work I need to do, but what kind of work?

What work? We go back to the point of the work that allows us to attain the certainty that we are asking to have. Is it only the fruit of a work? Is it only for those who are luckier, only for those who encounter some witnesses? Also: "I have a very hard time trusting," because sometimes Jesus makes you desire some things and then He doesn't answer you, or He doesn't answer in the way you thought He should answer. Despite this, we can't help but recognize some moments in which something truly happens that documents that Jesus is present. It can be an encounter, it can be a totally unexpected fact. The point is that we all begin to glimpse that we need to do some work, which is precisely what a friend wrote to me about, "A very small fact. As I read Page One to clarify what witness means I was very struck when you speak of being sterile [is it only for the lucky ones, for those who are good?]. The witness—you say—is Christ in us"; the rest is a consequence. I am struck by this, because the form of witness that I see in action in my life occurs precisely through my being sterile [it isn't for those who are good, or for those who are able to accomplish something]. The way in which I recognize that God is at work is that I, who am sterile, produce fruit. I don't have to use who knows what kind of strategy or to prove something, but rather I need to discover His witness within myself. I will give you an example [an example of this work that is within everyone's reach]: the other evening I was going home and I was very sad. I had to take the train and go to an empty home because my parents and my sister were away. In short, nobody was waiting for me. I still had to have dinner and on top of that I had to walk alone from the train station in the cold. The situation was a bit distressing and on the surface it looked as if it would make my mood worse. I got ready to take the train and as I got on I thought, "During these 45 minutes it takes me to get home I will sleep and stop thinking about it." I was struck, because as I was thinking about it, I told myself, "Well, but if I sleep, then when I wake up how

will I have solved my human problem? I will simply postpone it by 45 minutes, but it will not change. Sure, sleeping would have also helped me to rest because I was tired, but it was more a way to say, ‘Enough with this!’ It was a way to face my sadness, but it would have gotten me nowhere. Not only would it have postponed the problem, but it would have also intensified it. In front of this prospect I thought, ‘I have a better idea [each of us can think of what is the most interesting option we have, perhaps some Hollywood show?] for facing this sadness,’ and I pulled out the text of School of Community. As I was reading, I was struck by many things, but most of all by the point on being sterile, because it was describing something that was speaking of me. ‘That is who I am, the sterile woman, and You, Lord, make Yourself manifest precisely because I am sterile, and nothing coming from me could produce the newness that You bring.’ This struck me so much, and helped me recognize very clearly the nature of the witness of Christ in my life, that it reawakened me [one has only to open a crack for Him, it is enough to just let something different come in], and I read the entire School of Community with an eagerness and an amazement that I never thought possible, lingering to meditate on each sentence. Moreover, I walked home skipping all the way, in the cold. There was a boldness in me due to this newness that I had rediscovered and recognized as real in my life. It blew away even my last resistance about not feeling adequate (ultimately, I live the problem of feeling inadequate in everything I do), because One had told me, ‘The newness is that I came into your life to answer your human drama precisely starting from your being inadequate.’ What a change in perspective! That is why I understand you when you speak of being surprised, because recognizing Him has transformed my sadness into boldness, my being sterile has become fruitful and the loneliness I thought I would feel upon arriving home became the opportunity to have a dialogue and companionship with Him. Therefore, once home, even when I was eating alone, I wasn’t alone.” Christ doesn’t conform to our ideas, because He wants to give us something more, something more crucial, something that truly answers our deepest need. Why don’t we trust, then? Why do we have such a hard time trusting what we have seen many times and touched first-hand in our life? Why, before so many facts that happen to us, don’t we still trust?

I can’t get the last School of Community out of my mind, particularly the first and the last contributions that to me seem strongly related. During the past two weeks, a fact happened that allowed me to understand something. My brother’s son had to go through some tests due to a possible illness, and the results arrived after several days. During the whole time we were waiting I was full of uncertainty and fear, to the point that I wondered: Where has my journey gone, my experience, my work and my faith, if ultimately it doesn’t take much to take away all the certainty that I thought I had? So, in this circumstance I realized how little I know reality, myself, and the facts that happen, and how much, instead, I think that I already know. The last witness of the School of Community, on the “Yes” of Peter, seems to me the only way to begin a true journey of knowledge, that in my case is often interrupted, generating fear, uncertainty, and discouragement. This is what happens to me. Often, every time actually, I am struck by the people and by the facts that they recount, but I am hardly struck by what strikes them.

Pay attention!

These people are struck by something that comes before the facts. How can I think that I know myself and what happens if I don’t know the One who is at the origin of myself and of everything that happens? That is why I think that the journey of knowledge, of facts that become a

companionship in life and are no longer “disposable” (like the last School of Community was saying), is not a true journey if the origin that generated and generates them is missing, but only an infinite series of demands is present that in time leave one sad and alone. Peter’s “Yes” didn’t seem to me to be a moral effort, because Peter had reached the point of not having much morality left after all his betrayals, like I have all my own betrayals. His was a “Yes” to what the origin of his life, his only possibility of knowing himself and what was happening to him. May I ask you to better explain how this position that generates this “Yes,” this new way of knowing, happens?

What do you think? What are we lacking, so that often this “Yes” is not generated, despite everything that happens?

I notice that what comes before is often taken for granted.

What comes before?

My relationship with Christ.

The origin of what happens. If in the facts that happen we don't recognize the origin that causes them to happen, why should we trust? How can we really trust? Only if we recognize what is coming toward me in those facts, in that face, in that circumstance, in that moment of School of Community, in that text: the presence of the only One who can answer and reawaken your desire for change by asking you, “Do you love me?” “Yes.” The “Yes,” as Fr. Giussani told us, morality, the movement of our freedom, is born only in front of the Presence. As the friend who spoke earlier said, the problem is whether in going back to our room and seeing it tidy and clean, we can't help saying—and not because we are good—“My mom has been here!” This generates an affection for our mom that doesn't make us feel alone. We must not succumb to the reduction that the room got tidy on its own from some sort of magic, or that the fact that we saw and that struck us was due to someone's extraordinary action. No. The facts document the origin, something that comes before. If we don't arrive at the faith, to recognize a Presence that touches me now through the facts, these facts will leave no trace, and in each situation I will find myself not recognizing what I had indeed seen. I am not saying that the fact of having seen erases the need to enter into a relationship with that origin each time, but that having seen, I no longer think of myself as being alone. When we realize this, when this history penetrates us little by little, this generates a different way of being in reality.

My father had a stroke and became paralyzed, losing the ability to eat and to speak. This news made all of my need for meaning that characterizes the heart emerge, and this struck me, because it had been a long time since I had felt all its power and drama. Immediately, the problem of knowledge came up: why this? That evening, while I was going to the emergency room, I was oddly filled with the thought that through that fact Christ was calling me, was asking for my “Yes,” reawakening me from the numbness that had overtaken me. This thought made me feel that I was in His company and it gave me peace. I couldn't help but recognize that He was already present in that very painful circumstance, because the experience of that unusual peace was very clear. The dominant note of the past 50 days has been the desire to understand, to know and see Christ at work, because in front of a fact that is so much greater than me I cannot begin from what I know or from the good I imagine and desire, or from a religious discourse. As I have observed myself in action often, I have seen myself dominated by two ways of looking at reality. The first starts from my idea of how my dad should be, of what he needs, of how he should be looked after by the doctors, of how he should go back and live life. Yet, each time I find myself in front of his room

defined by these thoughts, I can't breathe and I become very distressed to the point that I can't go into the room, because reality doesn't budge. The other gaze has a different origin, loaded with my history and vocation up to that moment in the car when I was driving to the emergency room, and this makes me truly free and glad, because everything that happens (whether he sleeps or he is awake, recognizes me or not) doesn't make me feel depressed. On the contrary, it is part of the dialogue between myself and the Mystery. It is proven: when I go into the room striving to recognize Christ, I see things that otherwise I don't see, or better, I see that the usual things have a core of goodness, like the face of my dad that doesn't express only suffering and confusion, but above all says that he exists, that he is alive, tried and wounded by life, but alive, and therefore made, created in that instant by Another. One day my dad was upset and he kept gesturing at me to go away. I decided to sit on the side of the room where he couldn't see me, and I let myself be provoked. I didn't want to complain, but rather to understand where he was coming from, and to understand I had to obey what was in front of me without moving one inch. As I was watching him, I noticed that he was frantically moving the leg not affected by the stroke. Timidly, I asked him whether he wanted to do some exercises. As he felt that his need had been understood, he brightened up, and I, who had never felt my dad looking at me like that, was moved and understood that Christ was happening again. What was my father's need? To do some exercises, or to feel understood in his true need, that is to be loved the way he is right now? And what do I need, if not the very same thing? That attracting gaze has conquered me and I would never exchange it—never!—for all the gazes, even ones full of affection, that we have shared during our entire lives. This is the lived belonging that can generate a gaze that allows one to see something that otherwise one wouldn't even dream of. How much time will be needed? We don't know, but it is possible. It is possible. This determines everything and therefore everything we do has the purpose of generating an "I" like this, including participating in the upcoming referendum.

I want to thank you for the work that the movement is making us do with regard to the referendum. As our School of Community worked on the flier last Monday, there was a moment of tension. At once, I felt sorry about it and I didn't know how to react. Afterwards, as the minutes went by, some things became clear. We are affected by the disease of dialectics like everyone else, and we must truly make the entire journey, learning again to have a dialogue. The misunderstanding arose because, while one was speaking, the other was already convinced of certain things. The flier is the road, not the premise. At the beginning I also had a hard time understanding why such a discreet, soft position had been chosen. Now, instead, I recognize that it is born of certainty, so that we don't have to impose something, but only propose a gaze that is the reflection of His gaze. A cultural position is truly always born of belonging. In fact, when our belonging wanes, we fall prey to the experts, to our instinct, or to a nostalgia for past patterns and ideas. I think that I can say—but correct me if I am wrong—that a position based on these things is necessarily on the defensive and ultimately "against," the opposite of that "going forth" to which the Pope invites us. None of us can cling to the presumption of having the right answer, but there is also the risk of a fake openness, a do-gooder stance that is false. The openness we are talking about can only spring from begging for the other person's heart. The next day I felt a bit awkward, but sincerely grateful. Do you know what I enjoyed most about these discoveries? To understand a bit better God's method, of the father with the prodigal son, that is, of waiting for the other in such a poignant way that one can surrender one's whole self: principles, good rules, pride, up to political

convictions and the side one is on, to look for a greater good, a true communion. I have tasted a great promise of this in the relationship with my children. It may not be easy, but it will be a compelling proposal to my freedom and to theirs. After that day, we decided to write to our friends in the School of Community to define some points that had emerged: “First: our gratitude for what had happened. The liveliness of the encounter is a grace. The presence of some friends was a gift for which we are grateful, because undoubtedly it helps us to better understand the issues at play. We ask that our School of Community may strive ever more toward that level of seriousness with and commitment to life and openness to all. Second: the recognition of a free and personal proposal. The flier of the movement is a free and personal proposal, the only irreplaceable road for attaining a deeper, truer, and more fulfilling knowledge of life. We would miss the best if we were to file away its contents as “already known” to get to the conclusions. To take a test, let’s ask ourselves: Are we open to changing our ideas when we encounter a more compelling and corresponding reason? Are we dominated by the fear of losing the certainties of the past, or are we ultimately open to another beginning? Third: a hidden treasure. There is much more than the referendum at stake: to begin again with dialogue instead of discussion. The hidden treasure within this circumstance is to learn to “be with,” with the person most familiar to us as well as with the stranger we just met, with the student as well as with our coworker. A position based on right principles, but not affecting history, ultimately ideological or closed in on itself, will not help the world, and it especially doesn’t help me. Only an openness to the other full of human sympathy, without prejudice, willing to sacrifice itself for the common good, will be able to win over the differences and the indifference, and bring to us what we hold most dear in our life: Jesus.”

Thank you. A circumstance like this can be a path for a journey. But when life is pressing on in an even more dramatic way, when something like the earthquake happens?

Our entire self is involved, including our fragility and all the questions that we thought we already had answers to. By the way, we lost our home to an earthquake for the second time in 19 years (one would have been enough!). Limiting ourselves to the idea of giving all of ourselves to rebuild, to go back to the life we had before, to put a Christian label on suffering, is no longer enough. So, the question about what keeps us standing, what has saved us and how to recognize it, has been pressing, with all the dramatic and anguished moments, and at times even feeling a bit depressed. No organization, no effort on my part or made by my family or by any group of people can close this hole. My wife immediately felt that she had been asked the question asked of Peter, “Do you love me in this circumstance?” But she couldn’t answer. A priest friend of ours told her on the phone, “To answer one needs a path, a journey.” And our journey began badly, I would have said, because it was a journey of hardship, after a second shock stronger than the first, a journey of fear, of running 70 miles away to the coast together with thousands of people, like an exodus. Yet, there was also the desire to hear from our friends and acquaintances, to be reassured (it is normal), together with the gratitude for being alive, for having been saved, feeling moved by the discreet welcoming that was what we needed, where we are now. At the same time, there was the uncertainty, the fragility, the sense of powerlessness, of being incapable, inadequate, fearful, useless, full of confusion, undecided: wasn’t the encounter we had had supposed to save us from all of this? Where is it? We were almost ashamed of being scared and full of sorrow, of having fled. But we didn’t cover it with a mask. I think that this saved us from many things; it is saving us from many things. We didn’t wear a mask first and foremost because some friends welcomed us

just the way we are. Our daughter, when I was trying to reassure her a bit telling her that everything would be OK, at one point, annoyed, told me, “But I need my friend [that was the point] now.” It was the same for my two older sons, who had something within them that allowed one of them to say, “Our conditions have changed, but I am always myself,” and the other to go back to work in the area of the earthquake, in spite of all the fear one may feel, to the point of saying that ultimately the earthquake is just speeding up our journey of awareness. Good for them! Well, it is a rather strong speeding up! Yet, they taught us how to make the first step. We immediately thought of other people, whom we called right away, to have them there even just for ten minutes, people who stayed with us, welcoming us. Yet, the need has always been and still is to recognize in this moment, in this chaos that affects us and everyone else, the presence of God who made us, who encountered us, who made us become Christians. We couldn’t separate ourselves from His presence, but we also had all the questions, because we could no longer take for granted that something would happen. On October 31st, it happened that we had lunch together, our entire family and a friend of one of my sons. It was nothing out of the ordinary, we just ate together. The next day the friend wrote, “You have a certainty that I haven’t seen in anyone who was affected by the earthquake even in a less dramatic way. You are unusual. You have a point from which you can begin again.” I called him and told him, “What are you saying? I don’t even know where this certainty is, I feel empty.” My wife was saying, “We are empty.” A week later a friend came to visit with her husband. Also in this case, it was something very simple. Then she wrote us, “Your serenity witnesses to the certainty in what doesn’t collapse: Christ alive among you. We need to see that, and you show it to us, because it is clear that you need only this.” We were a bit astonished. In fact, we felt that we had nothing. The following week another friend stopped by (all relaxed and chatting about personal things) and then she wrote, “When I speak with you I feel comforted.” Then the son of a neighbor, “Your countenance is different from my parents.” Another person brings to my attention what we are living and says, “Excuse me, but do you think that this is normal?” Even the person who drove me here has been saying more or less the same things until a minute ago. At first we were almost annoyed by this, sort of like: I don’t see anything, what are these people seeing? Then, little by little we realized that they are like hands that restore us to ourselves, that tell us what is the relationship that constitutes us. Actually, we are the ones who said it to them. It is like a circle of help, I don’t know how else to say it. I need these places of freedom that allow one to say, like Prosperi told us (when he came to the Marche region), that one can even be afraid, but in a different way. Earlier you were saying, “We cry like everyone else.” Yes, we cry like everyone else, but obviously in a different way. Here I understand the question of the form, of the expression, because One who is in me is this form and this expression. It is One who is in me and who gives himself back to me through people, faces, places of freedom. Then, God will let something grow, perhaps in a basement, but that is not what matters.

This is the ultimate reason for belonging and you explained it very thoroughly. Because, when everything collapses and one wonders, “Wasn’t the encounter supposed to save us from all of this?” you discover in yourself a difference of which you weren’t sufficiently aware. This situation makes you totally aware that you cannot generate it, so much so that initially you are not aware of it, while all those around you notice it and tell you about this difference that you are carrying even if you are as afraid as they are. The others aren’t wrong. They see in you something that is deeper than their fears, deeper than any psychological description, something that can take hold of the core of the “I” and amaze them. Who is giving witness? Where is a person adequate? Precisely

when one is most inadequate, most sterile, the One who gives witness through us appears, and his name is Christ. How did Christ reach us? Through a specific history, through a place of belonging to which one immediately refers and that allows us to recognize the Presence who made us. It is precisely what we read at the beginning in the description of belonging proposed by Fr. Giussani. We are together only and essentially for this. This is our cultural expression. When life becomes very demanding the others tell us what our contribution to the world is. The others tell us what we are in the world for, making us aware of the difference we carry, so struck and grateful are they. Like also another friend who in these days has been helping to rebuild writes to us. At the end of his stay, saying goodbye someone told him, "Look, the people of Norcia who worked with you want to give you a gift." It is a bag full of sacks of lentils. I was speechless. While I was going to my car they told me, "Here nobody was given a gift before." I went to say goodbye to the engineer responsible of the whole technical team and he told me, "I am not saying this as a formality; in the past two months, with all the people who went by, I said it only to one person before you: in a short time, you became a point of reference among us. You should stay two or three weeks longer. And if you don't come back we will ask the mayor to call you directly!" It is the others who tell us what we carry that interests them. When this happens, we don't become clowns, but rather a presence that introduces hope into everyone. This is the witness He gives. However, if we stop at the appearance and don't go to the ultimate origin that makes this difference possible—because no one will ever think that it is something generated by us—when we are confronted by life's challenges we will not be prepared to face them. When we recognize it, we can't help but be grateful, grateful! Here the whole drama of the question arises: "Do you love Me?" "Do you love Me?" Not a generic "Do you love Me?" but a: "Do you love Me while I am coming to take hold of you through the face of a concrete companionship, a historical belonging that makes you become like this?" Christ makes us understand the belonging, generating a place where this belonging to Him happens, for us and for the others, generating a human attraction that opens us to everyone without fear.

The next School of Community will be on Wednesday, December 21 at 9:00 pm.

Having finished the work on Page One, we will resume reading *Why the Church?* We will start the Second Part: *THE EFFECTIVE SIGN OF THE DIVINE IN HISTORY. The Church's self-definition.* "Effective sign": now we better understand the reason for that "effective." In fact, all that we need to look at in greater depth is what we heard this evening. If we separate what we read in the book from what we heard this evening, the words in the book will become empty and will not say anything to us. If they appear empty to us it isn't because they are truly empty, but because we separate the words from what happened here tonight.

During this month, we will work on the Introduction to the Second Part and on the first point of the First Chapter "The Human Factor" (pp. 117-146), because the communication of the divine passes through a human reality.

School of Community helps us to verify that faith has to do with everything, as we just saw, so that our experience may become a critical and systematic judgment on everything.

I remind you that your contributions should be sent to the following email address: sdccarron@comunioneliberazione.org by Friday evening for people from outside Italy, and by the evening of the Sunday before our meeting for those in Italy, so that there is time to read them. I

ask you to add also your cell phone number, so that we can easily contact you if you are invited to speak personally.

This year's Christmas Poster shows the image of a fresco by Giotto, the *Nativity*, in Assisi. The text is a phrase by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: "*He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help.*" He could have sent some help without coming in person, like the centurion said to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed." (Mt 8:8) He could have helped us from Heaven, sparing Himself the Incarnation, and instead "*He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help.*" Now you can begin to understand why we chose this phrase that I will read in its entirety, "*All you who lie in the dust, wake up and sing praise, because the healer comes for the sick, the redeemer for those who were in slavery, the way for those who were lost, the life for those who were dead. 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. Great is His power, but greater still is His mercy, because He wanted to come among us in this way, when He could have simply settled for giving us help.*" (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

The Book of the Month for December and January is *Dalla Liturgia vissuta. Una testimonianza* [From a Lived Liturgy—A Witness] (San Paolo Press). It is one of the first books by Fr. Giussani published by Jaca Book in 1973, but it had become unavailable. We thank Francesco Braschi, editor of the new edition, for his work. It will be interesting to see, even with regards to the liturgy, Fr. Giussani's great ability to plumb even the smallest details, connecting them to the depth of the life of the Church and to each person's vocation.

The liturgy is presented because it is the synthesis of a cultural position. The way in which one not only celebrates but also understands the liturgy becomes the expression of the originating root of one's attitude toward all other areas and aspects of life.

It is striking to see the concern with which Pope Francis keeps encouraging us to be attentive to the poor and to our society's many needs. The AVSI Tents and the Food Collection, together with the Charitable Work, are simple gestures that the Movement has been proposing to us for years to help us learn the reason for this attention. As Fr. Giussani clarifies in the booklet *The Meaning of Charitable Work*: "I am able to understand the word 'charity' when I remember that the Son of God, loving us, did not send us His riches (as He was able to do) and revolutionize our situation; instead, He became poor like one of us ["He was pleased to come"]: He 'shared' our nothingness. We do charitable work in order to live like Christ." We go to share, like Christ has done with us.

Next Saturday, November 26, the Food Collection will take place. It is an event that by now has become a gesture in which everyone participates: there are so many people, associations and organizations—far beyond the reality of the Movement—involved in making the Collection happen, because it is such a clear gesture that others also recognize its value. The participation is also high among those who give, who make donations, so much so that Fr. Giussani called the Collection "the Italian people's Common Fund."

This year the Tent Drive in support of some AVSI projects in the world, as I mentioned before, follows the common theme of migrants and refugees, with special attention given to the questions of work and education. On the AVSI website you can find information and tools to make the Tents. Also, this gesture can be carried out with the creativity and passion of each person in different walks of life.

Veni Sancte Spiritus