

Notes from the 12th National Assembly of the “Banchi di Solidarietà” (Food Banks)
with Julián Carrón
Milan, 15th December 2018

Andrea Franchi (aka “Branco”). Welcome, all of you, to the 12th national assembly of the “Banchi di Solidarietà” (Food Banks). A warm welcome to you and to those who are following us via video link in 50 cities. I immediately want to thank don Julián, here with us to help us look deeply into our experience of the charitable work we carry out; namely, that of the Food Banks. As you know, we have set ourselves the task in these months of comparing our experience to the dialogue Julián engaged in with the CLU students, which was published in May’s *Traces*. This is to continue on a path. In this brief introduction, I particularly wish to underline the moment in that dialogue in which Julián tells us that the act we are carrying out is much greater than what we may see. This became clear to me a few weeks ago upon meeting a girl who said to me: “I deliver food parcels to several families. The other day I was due to meet a new family; I went, got out of the car in a hurry because it was starting to rain, and rang the bell, but the rain was getting heavier and no one was answering. I thought: How is this possible? I called you a quarter of an hour ago, and you said to me ‘I am at home, come ’round.’ Finally, as the rain got even heavier, she answered: ‘Yes, I will send my daughter down to let you in.’ I said, ‘Could you just press the intercom? I am here getting all wet.’ After another five minutes, the daughter finally arrived, and said, ‘I was in the bathroom.’ I went home a bit annoyed: ‘How, with everything I am doing for them, have I come home wet and annoyed?’” I asked this girl, “Is that how it ended? Was it just a day to forget?” She replied, “No. I went home angry, full of questions, but at a certain point I started to look at the text for School of Community.” I replied: “Like the medicine to make the bad taste disappear?” She responded: “No; rather, it was the only possibility I could think of, that came to mind that afternoon—to look deeply at what had happened, so as not to reduce it to the rain and the anger I had had simply because it had taken a quarter of an hour to be let in.” This struck me, because this is what is implied by the experience this gesture of charity offers. Even the songs we just heard are not selected at random: “To become children again and remember.../remember that everything is given to us” (C. Chieffo–M. Neri, “Amare ancora,” *Canti*, Soc. Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan 2014, p. 213)—this is the aim of charitable work. In other words, it is to remember the needs you have, and Who has said to you “I am the answer.” We also heard, “You care about many things, but there is only one/that matters” (C. Chieffo, “Marta, Marta,” *Canti*, pp. 251–52). In everything we do, what do we rely on? What is of value to us in terms of our needs? If charitable work does not help us understand this, what is its use? Let us immediately begin recounting the experiences we have had, and with Julián’s help, let us try to look at those experiences deeply.

For many years, a friend of mine frequently invited me to engage with the Food Bank experience. For many years I continued to refuse, certain that I did not need to do such things in order to live well. I did not yet know that this was a story I was telling myself; I was wearing a mask, albeit a believable one; yet this was not living, it was merely surviving. Then, on the May 10, 2014, at the height of a personal crisis that made me feel pulled apart, and from which I could not see an escape, I remembered the words of a priest friend of mine. “During weddings, grace is felt for the newlyweds, but also for those who are participating.” I went to the wedding of a friend from the movement (one of the few who I like, because she is not a classic “CLina”) with open arms, with the certainty of returning full of grace, and this in fact happened. Toward the end of the day, I was chatting to one of the guests, who I honestly did not get on brilliantly with. Suddenly, I could

not help recognize that he had a light in his eyes that I also desired to have; surely, then, I had to look where he was looking, and I would find there something good for me. It is as if, in that gaze, I encountered the gaze of Another announcing Himself to me; that was the grace I received. Even if it required some work, an attachment to that person began that day, an attachment to the community of CL in my city, and I began to go to the Food Bank. Initially, it was because I wished to spend time with people who kept me aware of that hope. Slowly, however, I started to see that spending time with them in a certain way generated small changes in me. I tend to do things in my own particular way, in the manner I have in mind; therefore, my acceptance of being told what to do did not seem possible, not least because of my overorganization of everything. Yet without dwelling on it at length, I realized that I was not there for me—I was there for others. Therefore, I fell into place and stayed silent, even when the women who came to help got in my way or messed up the really tidy boxes I had prepared. Those Saturdays began to be occasions I did not want to miss, so much so that I did not make any other plans, and I even invited others to join me. Yet something was missing; it was not entirely true that I was not there for myself. At the last Food Bank dinner, someone spoke about the unity between charity and the rest of life. In terms of this, I was not doing very well. In fact, at the start of this year, something I had carried with me for a long time, yet had silenced, emerged very powerfully. My work was beginning to weigh on me, not because of problems I had to face there, but because it was not enough for me. I felt the insufficiency of many circumstances in terms of the potential they gave for generating relationships to the point that I even struggled to get up in the morning, since it did not seem worth it. One day, though, things started to happen. The Chair of an education tribunal called me to ask me if I wished to continue in a previous role, that of tutoring unaccompanied foreign minors. He also informed me that the tribunal was taking on further responsibility for minors living in another nearby city. I saw the whole thing as a further nuisance and decided to step back; however, so as not to look bad in front of the Chair, I decided to wait until the next day to say so, so it did not look like an immediate refusal. Obviously I forgot, and the Chair, with remarkable tact, sent me a message asking me to let her know. I started a draft response by thanking her for the kind offer, but stated that it was impossible for me to take on that responsibility at that time. I deleted the message a total of four times because it was never quite right (of course it wasn't, because it was not the truth). Between one attempt at formulating the text and another, I started to think of a phrase often heard around election time: "Are we going to watch from the window?" This thought became so insistent that on the fourth attempt I cancelled everything and wrote "OK, I will take on that responsibility." I was struck when the Chair, in thanking me, said, "You know, when we say yes to this, we are saying yes to Christ." She was right, but I did not have that consciousness. A few days later, there was a food collection day. I found myself in a middle-school class, trying to get the children to understand why we take food parcels to people's houses rather than making them pick them up themselves. I was asking them questions; I kept turning in particular to a foreign boy who sat in the front row and who was looking at me very curiously, making me curious about him in turn. I asked him questions like, "Would it be the same for you to come to school and learn without meeting your classmates? Would this be the same as learning while you are with them and getting to know them?" He replied, "It is the same, there is no difference." I thought it strange, and thought he did not understand the question; maybe he is mocking me and not taking me seriously because I am a woman. Or maybe he really thinks this; if so, why? Later, I recounted this to some friends of mine. After a few days, I received instructions from the tribunal for the next day—I had been assigned to tutor a young man. This has not begun well, I thought; they could have told me earlier, or asked me if this was OK. I did not have any issue with the date or time that had been indicated, yet I was annoyed at being summoned in that way; it seemed disrespectful of time constraints, and did not fit with what I had in mind. In any

case, I went; I arrived and found the same boy I encountered on the food collection day. As soon as I saw him, I felt an overwhelming happiness, and thought to myself, “God, who are you to give me something so beautiful despite my poor mentality and attitude? Even if I were to flatter myself, it is obvious I could not give myself this gift.” I began working with this boy with this happiness, saying to him, “You are the boy from the food collection day, amazing!” He smiled and said that he remembered me. The Chair and her colleague were watching us, shocked: “Do you know each other?” So, we told them about our previous meeting. The interview with the Chair became very informal—I explained my role to the boy, and that the Chair would act as his mother and father here in Italy from the moment he turns 18. He threw me an unconvinced glance, so I said to him: “Let’s say I am an aunt”; everyone laughed at that. My work, however much I moaned about it, was allowing me to participate in experiences like the Food Bank, and proved moreover to be a place where I could encounter Someone. On the boy’s birthday, I was invited to his community, and something important happened for me there. As soon as they understood I was there for one of them, the other children began to ask themselves, “Why do our tutors not come to our birthdays?” At a certain point, to attract my attention, they started to muck around and raise their voices. The teachers were disappointed and apologized to me for what they perceived to be a lack of respect toward a guest. For me, however, it meant something else: in them I saw eyes that were saying, “Look at me! Look at me!” In that moment I was moved, because I saw in them the same desire and cry that I have: “Look at me!” There, I became aware of my true need. Suddenly, I found myself asking God the question: “Do You really choose to show Yourself to me like this, through a group of children, Muslim children? You really are inventive! Is this all true? Am I definitely not being overly sentimental about the situation?” The next day we were leaving for the Macerata-Loreto pilgrimage; having arrived at the stadium and upon hearing the contributions of two foreign children, I said: “Are You really responding to my questions? So, it is all true!” Many relationships have been made possible by this encounter; now, I tutor two children, and I see them often; they even come to help us at the Food Bank, and when I spend time with my friends I invite them too, and they come, if only to spend time with us. Our relationship is not institutional; it is a friendship. Almost without me realizing it, the experience of the Food Bank extended itself to the point that it reached all the aspects of my life. Through this, I have understood what my need really consists of, and that I can turn to God, to You. This makes me free, even with all my limits, and keeps open this question in me: “Faced with the things that happen to me, do I wish to merely affirm myself, or do I want to discover what the Mystery has in store for me, and let it grow?”

Julián Carrón. Good morning everyone. What does it mean to you to become aware of your true need? What does this introduce into your life? This is the aim of charitable work. Why is it so important? Don Giussani suggested it to us as an educative gesture first of all for us, not merely to answer the needs of others; it is for us if it does not reduce the gesture to voluntarism. Why do you think don Giussani’s insistence on this is so important? How can you see it as a useful addition to your life?

It is not at all what I expected; living it, I have realized that it is something I could never have imagined. I find a correspondence, a freedom, with which I can totally be myself, with all my humanity. I found that so often I live in a reductive manner in terms of my experience, and I realize this because I recognise the presence of Another. If I exist, it is because Another exists; otherwise, I could not look at myself in this manner. I am never looked at in this manner.

If you are able to look at yourself like this—it is not obvious that you are able to do so because many of us reduce this—you must make this connection: “If I look at myself like this, it is because of the presence of Another.” No kind of mere volunteering will obtain this certainty

for you. Recognizing the presence of Christ as we recognize our own need is linked to what we have said many times: What did Christ come to do? To reawaken the religious sense, or, in other words, the awareness of the nature of our desire; and thus, to give us the right conditions for living. Without this self-awareness, everything becomes confused. To discover and find the presence of Christ in what we live is what can overcome dualism; the dualism of Christ on the one hand and my need on the other, chaos on one hand and life on the other. I discover Him by living. Yet we will only reach this awareness through what she has said: discovering, from the start, a gaze that desires, she could not help but be with that person frequently, because she did not want to lose what she had seen. By spending time with that person, she found herself changing; a hope for her life began to emerge within her, and everything else grew from this. My friends, for us to be truly aware of all that our experience could contain, and to speak like this about everything that happens, it is necessary—not as an empty phrase, or a mere memory, or something we have learned abstractly—that the Word is made flesh and dwells among us. The incarnation is not a fact of the past that somehow makes us live now with particular ethics, being as good as we can. If we think of it this way, we miss out, because this will not answer our need. How is it possible to discover your true need? Have you attempted to answer this? Can you really be happy to have discovered your truly infinite desire? How?

Because everything changes. Everything is so open that there are infinite possibilities....

Yes, but many people have needs, and yet do not consider them in this way. For them, being needy is a cross to bear, being needy is a weight; for the vast majority, being needy is a condemnation. Let us try to understand why we can experience our need and yet, at the same time, not consider it a condemnation like the vast majority of people. Otherwise, we are simply using words without understanding their true meaning. We use certain words precisely because of the experience we live, not because of some abstract reasoning. From experience itself, a way of living can emerge that allows me to become conscious of my need, and to not forget myself, to reduce myself, to cancel my “I.” It allows me to live with a full consciousness of myself. Why? I can welcome my own need because there is Another. So I say: “Blessed need!” that allows me to not merely make myself content. Everything I may make myself content with is insufficient to respond to my need. The recognition of my need makes me grateful for Christ: thank God You are there, Christ, because without You, recognizing my need would be a condemnation. So, who is it that truly saves the greatness of the “I” without reducing it as usually happens? Only One who is present. (L. Giussani, “Alive Means Present!,” *Traces* n. 9/2018, Page One, p. 8). Only One who is present makes this experience possible. This is the origin of what you have said, and this is the hope we all share. We will not understand the School of Community by looking elsewhere; we will not understand the Beginning Day through abstract reflections that concern no one, least of all ourselves. Instead, School of Community and Beginning Day interest us all because of our experience, an experience from which we cannot turn back. Here something is happening, so we must stay on the ball! Thank you.

The food collection day on November 24th was an important opportunity for me to consider how I am carrying out this charitable act of giving people food parcels. While I was assigning roles for my shift, I found myself asking, “If I desire so greatly to participate in the Food Bank because it educates me, why cannot this also be the case for the families that I meet?” I gave this a go; I called three families from our Food Bank with whom I had interacted in the past. I invited them to collect food with me for a few hours. With a lingering skepticism, which is always hard to suppress, I awaited their answers, and, to my great surprise, they accepted enthusiastically, even if they have had some family issues recently and continue to do so. During the shift, they got to know each other, and I saw that a simple familiarity immediately emerged between them; they became

very interested in an issue one of them who was unemployed and struggling with severe depression was facing. They are now attempting to at least solve his employment issue. After this beautiful experience with them, I cannot help but consider how I interact with the people to whom I give food parcels. I thought back to many occasions on which I became resigned when faced with their need, or became uneasy; this often translates into simply making small talk and avoiding discussion of my need or my desire for happiness. It is an uneasiness the risks becoming shame, and there is also an incredulity that Christ can conquer the heart of everyone, and that it is He who builds everything. Yet what I experienced on the food collection day with those people I invited brings me back to the truth; I can offer to others only what I truly desire, and what is true for me.

We can see that in such moments in which we see everything crumbling around us, nothing—genuinely, nothing—can stop us from starting over, even in our attitude toward the families receiving our food parcels. We are not offering any old discourse here, or abstract ideas; rather, it is a life, as we have read in the School of Community: “The Church is a life.” We are inviting them to engage in this life: “Do you want to come with us to collect food?” You invited them to engage with what you were involved in. Do you remember the Beginning Day, or have you already forgotten it? “The announcement [...] is a presence charged with meaning, [...] that involves in that meaning the person who carries it.” (“Alive Means Present!,” *Traces* n. 9/2018, Page One, p. 10). A proposal is full of meaning when it involves the person that carries it. We therefore see that in the present climate, in such a “liquid” society, in which no one cares about anything, people are engaging enthusiastically with a proposal we put to them. We must see this; this is the charity of the Mystery occurring through us! Often we do not understand this. “How is it possible now?” We are overcome by fear: “How is it possible?” Yet we can see that it is possible. It is possible to start again, just as it was in the early days of Christianity. It is possible to start again without overreliance on “Christianness”; in other words, on ideas and methods of behavior that are not able to sustain us. Instead, we can rely only on the event of Christ, on Christianity as a life. We can thus relearn what we think we already knew, and we will be the first to be surprised when we do this. Why must we do this? For us! The Pope says this to us: we must come out of our shells, because only then can we see that it is possible. We will not see this if we stay nice and cozy at home with the fire going. We will not understand it. It is just as well that there is no longer a cozy environment to protect us; this means that we can see what continues to happen. Christ—even if we think the opposite—has not disappeared, He has not left, He is not defeated by our defeats. He is present. Finally, we can avoid confusing Him with the things we so often identify Him with. This is what will save our faith. Otherwise, our faith will interest us less and less until it does not interest us at all anymore; this happens to many people. I can only offer to others what is fundamental for me, and in offering it, I realize that the Lord is giving it back to me a hundred times over!

I wanted to tell you about something that happened to me after I went to give a food parcel to a slightly odd family. One afternoon, I went to visit them. As I was leaving, I was stopped by the police in a parking lot between two apartment blocks in which we give out parcels to several families. After only a few seconds, a crowd had gathered on the balconies above, shouting, “Leave him alone, he is a good person, he and his friends help us!” Obviously, the police did not find anything suspicious during the search and they let me go. I went home very angry, but I told myself that I wanted to judge what had happened properly. I managed to arrange an appointment with an employee of the building. I go, and he tells me it was he who ordered the police search because the woman I was delivering the food parcels to was under house arrest. I was not supposed to be going to her house, and I had also parked in a space often frequented by local gangs. I asked

if I had to stop going to visit her, and he replied: “They need you. Now we know who you are and what you are doing there; as long as she is still under house arrest, go and leave the parcels outside the front door. After her house arrest is finished, you will be able to go inside.” Leaving the interview, I felt that something wasn’t quite right; I became frightened, and decided to stop delivering the food parcels. I did not go for three months when the woman—who was no longer under house arrest—phoned me, but I did not reply. She tried again the next day, and again I did not reply. On the third day, I prepared an excuse; I answered, and she said: “Hi, why don’t you come anymore? Do you not love me anymore?” This flattened me because it forced me to consider my own history, and what has happened in my life. What has happened to me? At the age of 16, I stopped going to school because reality had become too frightening for me. I was frightened of being judged. In the eyes of my parents, I was a failure because I no longer went to school; they were obviously comparing me to my friends, who continued to study. So what happened to me? I met a man who embraced me, who loved me just as I was; for him, I was fine as I was. So I said to myself: “Am I better than this woman?” Obviously, the answer was no. I met someone who literally changed my life; after that I met the movement, and after 18 years I—who had been frightened of the world and could not move because of my fear—found myself without fear, and at peace. I work with marble, and in the morning when I wake up, I am happy to go to work, even if my job is very tiring and difficult; I am happy. I now have a family with two children; this might seem trivial to many of you, but it is not for me and for my friends because we were not born into families from the movement. We have divided families; most couples are separated, and those who are not have dead marriages. But what was the most important thing? Was it my courage that allowed me to marry? No, the Lord showed me happy families, men who enjoyed their relationships with their wives and children. This is why charitable work becomes interesting for me—it reminds me constantly that I only need Christ in order to live. The living Christ. For me, Christ has many specific faces, the people through whom I met Him. Charitable work becomes interesting for me because it makes me face up to my need, my need for Him.

Do you see? The Mystery can use anything that has happened to him. He had to go back over the whole of his own history to realize, in the present, what has happened to him. He asks why the Mystery enables such things to happen, and what their meaning is. He went to carry out a charitable gesture, and then allowed the police to search him. Why? Why does God not spare us anything? Because it benefits us that He does not spare us anything, as you can see! It is as if, through all these things, He is saying, “Do you not realize that everything that happens to you, all that I allow to happen, is for you? So that you do not become an old item of clothing, so that you do not forget what has happened to you.” Thus, He gives it back to you now, in the present moment, with all the awe of the initial event; it is even greater now, there is an even greater awareness of the awe we had at the initial event. This stops faith from becoming formalistic and being reduced to “Christianness” (as don Giussani said at the Beginning Day). Rather, Christianity reoccurs in us. Thus one can learn, not abstractly; we become interested in charitable work because it makes use aware of our need for Christ; without Christ, we would be the poorest of the poor. Yet we are not talking about a Christ “attached” from the outside, or as one of many possible gods. Christ has a specific face—Him, the Son of God, born of a woman in Bethlehem. He is the key that makes life “life”; the reason for which our friend can wake up and be happy to go and work on his marble. This is the novelty of Christianity! No situation, no chaos, no fluidity of society, no crumbling can stop it from happening now. What are we frightened of? Why are we scared? No one can overcome fear with mere thoughts. What removes fear is seeing Him at work. Thus, everything becomes an opportunity for gratitude, because God has had mercy on us, as don Giussani said: “Thank You for showing Yourself and sitting here with me” (*L’attrattiva Gesù*, BUR, Milan 1999, p. 153).

*I have now been engaging with dedication and enthusiasm in the food collection for twenty years, and with the activities of the Food Bank and the collection day in schools. This is the experience through which the Mystery has grabbed me and is the reason I am here now. I wanted to share what you said to the university students recently: "It's one thing to simply respond to an emergency, a need, and it's something else to discover the nature of one's need and the One who can truly respond. You could say, 'I'll go there and do something for others.' That's a good thing, for goodness sake, but the real question is understanding what the other's need is, discovering the nature of their need." (J. Carrón, "What Makes Life Flourish," *Traces*, n. 5/2018, pp. 16–17). In fact, before understanding what the need of the other person is, I have understood a lot better what mine is. Yet the first time I helped with the food collection, I was urged to do so mainly by a desire to do something good for people who might be struggling, exactly as you said: "I will go and do something for other people."*

This is a good thing, of course! It is better than doing something malevolent. But it is nothing compared to a true gesture of charity. We would lose out on everything we have discussed this morning if we reduced it to "doing something for other people." We must be clear: I am not saying that volunteering is a bad thing, but it is nothing compared to people's need. Imagine what a gesture of charity can become if it is lived with the consciousness that don Giussani introduced; instead of waking up and going to work angry, one wakes up happy.

As I began my shift, I remember that I was fascinated by the organization and care given to all the details, and, more generally, by the beauty of the gesture. I am often greatly struck by this because the Lord, who knows me well, knows that I like doing things, and He knows how to attract me to Him. This initial reason was soon replaced by other, more profound, reasons. This makes me feel compassion for friends who perhaps initially, or more generally, do things for superficial reasons; sometimes through those the Mystery enters, just as it did for me. I therefore became more and more involved in the various activities of our Food Bank. Yet after a few years, I began to feel something was missing; I felt an uneasiness that had no clear origin. I had by then assumed a position of responsibility for a large supermarket, and we were helping increasing numbers of families with the Bank, and preparing increasing numbers of parcels. Yet this began to feel insufficient, even if it was not clear exactly what was lacking. A friend invited me to a dinner organized by one of the Food Banks where I met Branco, who helped me (and continues to help me) discover Who can truly respond to my desire. Over time, it has become clear that my desire is not fulfilled by what I do, but rather in recognizing an infinite love, freely given and totally undeserved. I am the object of this love, and it is greater than anything I could ever imagine. From this point, I was moved to infiltrate—that is genuinely the right word—a vacation. I remember it as if it were yesterday—as soon as we arrived, a good friend of mine was waiting for us and welcomed my wife and I with a huge hug. It was as if, instead of correcting me, Christ was embracing me, saying, "I was waiting for you!" These were the first steps on my path to conversion, which is still far from over, and which I am still enjoying so much. Reflecting on the past few years, I have understood and confirmed that my heart yearns for the infinite, and that this desire is imprinted on the heart of every man and woman, of everyone. However, I have seen that often, people are not aware of this, and that this desire for the infinite can therefore manifest itself in a confused manner, a contradictory or partial manner, like the thunderous braying donkey of Pinocchio toward the end of the story. Yet, starting from the fact that we all have this desire and grateful for the freely given love of which I continue to be the undeserving object, it its becoming increasingly easier to look at people with tenderness, even when, as they attempt to answer the desire of their hearts, they might behave in an unreasonable or even a contradictory, annoying, or downright upsetting manner. I am educated in a very specific manner to have this regard for

others when I deliver food parcels to families, not—as we often say—because they deserve it, but simply because they need it. Thus, having experienced infinite love myself, I am educated to look at people for the infinite value they have, not at their actions. As well as allowing me to develop direct relationships with families without them feeling judged in the cynical manner that most of the world employs—by which a person is important for the role they occupy—this is enabling me to experience a more truthful, fulfilled, and intense relationship with reality, marked by peace and a sense of freedom. It is a relationship within which nothing is enough, but everything is given an extraordinary value precisely because it is a reminder of something else. This enables one to face often dramatic circumstances with peaceful certainty. I will conclude by recounting several things that have happened in the last few weeks, which have been very intense, because I think they are significant. The first concerns our Food Bank. We organized a Christmas dinner with our families to be held on December 7th. We could have held it at the Oratory (which would have been fine with me), but we had a crazy idea: why don't we hold it in one of the nicest restaurants in the city? The families we help never go to restaurants, and offering them a dinner in such a place would be an amazing gift. We were also moved by another, deeper, desire—that surrounded by beauty, we could, and they could, perceive the Person making it all possible. So, without really being sure exactly how to organise everything, we approached a concierge; he welcomed our idea with great enthusiasm and engaged several of his workers to liaise with us as closely as possible. The staff that welcomed and hosted us were really incredibly kind. A good friend of ours spoke, giving a simple and beautiful testimony; during the evening, there were also several beautiful songs sung by a choir. We might say: "He likes doing things as God!" Charitable work is not limited to the gestures I have just described; it profoundly affects the way in which I live in many other circumstances. For example, at work it so happened that an employee I had given a raise to (I am the director of a company) wrote me an email a few days later, suggesting he believed he was deserving of a bigger raise. He concluded his email by saying that he would resign if he did not receive the desired raise within a few weeks. I will not lie— I felt an immediate impulse to respond reactively, but my heart was not settled; it desired more than that. So, after a couple of days, I gave in to this desire to face this provocation in a more original manner; I was curious to see what the Mystery had waiting for me in this situation. I therefore did not just reply to the email; I wanted to meet him, to understand his deeper motivation for sending that email given that we had known each other for many years, and have always had a very good working relationship. I wanted to perhaps help him consider factors he might not already have thought of. I realized that his request for a higher raise came from a desire to be respected for the work he did, and, as often happens, there was a confusion between the value of the person and what the person does. Ultimately, it was a request for affection, a request to be loved. It was therefore easier to embrace him with his desire, and to engage him remembering the cry of his heart. In fact, even as I told him that unfortunately for now it was not possible to meet his request, this began to seem secondary. I challenged his freedom, telling him that if he still wanted to resign, I would accept his resignation, albeit unhappily, and I would not hold it against him. I was then struck when several days later he said to me, "I guess you do care for me a bit." Now, when we bump into each other, we greet each other with big smiles; he now works with even more passion than he did before. I saw through this that Christianity generates an intelligence toward life that has many benefits, even from a merely business-oriented perspective. That is obviously a secondary consequence, but it shows how a truly open gaze toward the world is genuinely practical. After a few days, a close collaborator made me aware of another situation; an employee of his had expressed a concern to him, in no uncertain terms. I said to him, "Fine, we must meet with her." He replied: "Perhaps you have not understood...." In fact, I had understood perfectly well because I am ever more curious and desirous of seeing how Christ will show Himself within

circumstances—that is, if I do not stop at my prejudices and reactions. In this case, too, thanks to the peace and certainty that an encounter with Christ generates, I was able to actually feel comfortable in a situation that otherwise would have been problematic. I want to tell you about one last particularly important event. Unfortunately, something very disappointing happened recently in our company: one of our employees began to insult a foreign colleague, and when she insulted her son, the foreign woman lost control and threw an object at her antagonist, sending her to the hospital. The foreign colleague was subsequently suspended and fired; the other person's contract was up anyway and was not renewed. A Solomonic judgment, you might say. Strangely, everyone agreed—the board of directors (which I am part of), their co-workers, even the labor unions, with whom one must usually discuss at length (like Peguy says, the government and the people). Even the people who were reluctantly told the story secondhand agreed. I say reluctantly because in my heart I had an unstoppable desire to see Christ win, even in such a suffocating circumstance. On the other hand, I realized that whatever decision we would have taken would have been objected to by many people. Therefore, as I came home from the Advent Retreat, I said, “Lord, help me, because I do not know what to do, but I want to breathe even in this situation.” A few moments later, I had an idea so crazy that it had to be His. I said to myself: “I wish those two women could see the beauty that I have seen. Why don't I invite them to prepare food parcels for the Food Bank with me?” It would be an opportunity to get to know them better and to walk together on a path that perhaps could end in reemployment. I found myself acting freely, totally unconcerned about the outcome, without anything to defend. I spoke with my brothers, who were initially reticent about the idea, but then—and this struck me a great deal—they began to take it seriously, helping me to organize it. Then I spoke to the union representatives, who were somewhat perplexed, but I repeated to them that, notwithstanding the issues they raised, I thought that something could come of the plan. I finally met up with the foreign lady, and on Thursday evening she came with me to prepare food parcels. Obviously, I also invited the Italian, though for now she preferred to take another path. The next step will be to challenge the freedom of my co-workers, which is very important for me; during an upcoming company dinner, I will ask them if any of them want to work with the foreign lady. I would do so immediately because I have seen that she has the same heart as me, but if no one else is prepared to do so, it will mean that I cannot rehire her. We will see. But with me, Christ has already won, which is fantastic. Overall, thanks to the path I have begun to walk through the charitable work, I am discovering how, with Christ, all of reality becomes more loveable and shows me Him; even the most difficult and complex situations. Thus, life becomes irresistible.

Thank you! As you can see, you can keep trying to do more in life, more, more, more beautiful things, more good things, but experience will not leave you for long without giving you some sort of sign that in striving to do more and more, you are losing your way. You will then realize that nothing you are doing is sufficient, and you will feel uneasy, as if something is missing. Then, you meet someone who says to you, “Who can answer your desire, for whom is it worth trying to do more and more?” This is crucial. Why do we keep trying to fulfill our desire by doing more and more and more; in other words, through our own efforts? It is simple—because we have still not understood the nature of our desire, our need. We go to do charitable work to understand this. If someone objected to me, “You cannot tell me that after reading *The Religious Sense* so many times, I have still not understood it!” I would reply that no, we have not yet understood it. I am not interested in some sort of test of how many times you have read things; I am concerned that we understand the value of charitable work, so that it can help us understand things that we think we understand simply because we have reasoned vaguely about them. In fact, we haven't actually understood them! Whoever does not understand that his or her “doing things” is insufficient will ultimately believe he or she does not need Christ. If doing

more and more were sufficient to answer desire, why should anyone need Christ? We would manage perfectly well by ourselves! Yet “all this is small and insignificant compared to the capacity of one’s own mind,” as Leopardi said (*Pensieri* LXVIII). Therefore, we can start from our experience, and from the uneasiness that our “doing things” generates, and from the fact that we do not feel something more. So, when we go to a Food Bank meeting and hear the question, “Who can answer your desire?” we can understand. How many times have we spoken about Christ? Yet still, it is as if my desire and Christ are from two different worlds; on the one hand, my reduced desire, and on the other, a reduced Christ. Ultimately, the two never meet. We read in *School of Community*; “The Church [...] is this very experience of man it is addressing and not the masks of humanity which dominate the various forms of society” (L. Giussani, *Why the Church?* McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2001, p. 205). Christ addresses our true “I,” our humanity as it is. Yet, so often, we identify our humanity with its reduced forms. These “masks” can only be defeated by encountering something present, not by our own ruminations. One might say, “Why should I do charitable work if I already do *School of Community*, where I learn everything?” This is not the case, because the way of life the movement proposes is organic; it helps us avoid the risks of intellectualism, which is a reduction of experience. Reasoning is not sufficient, because what changes our conception of things is an event, that is, an opportunity to rediscover Christ. Do you see how everything is connected, unified? We need to understand the details, as the *School of Community* tells us. Otherwise we will only be dealing with fragments, which will never give unity to our lives. Instead, by accepting a proposal—despite erring, making mistakes, confusing our need, or trying to respond to it by doing more and more—we can realize that nothing we do will be enough. This is how can begin to understand that the human heart yearns for the infinite. Which of us does not repeat this continuously, to colleagues, to children? The human heart yearns for the infinite: we repeat this, but we reduce it to a statement. I do not say this because we need to rebuke ourselves, but so that we can realize how vulnerable we are, how much we truly need someone to make us aware of the nature of our need, so that we can discover Christ. Otherwise, I might not notice Christ, as Giussani says: “Christ posits Himself as the answer to what ‘I’ am, and only an awareness which comes from a tenderness and affection for myself can open me up to recognizing, admiring, thanking, and living with Christ. Without this awareness, even Jesus Christ will become only a name.” (L. Giussani, *All’origine della pretesa cristiana*, Rizzoli, Milan 2011, p. 3 [*This sentence is not contained in the English edition of the book*]). It is not that the religious sense is on one side and faith on the other; the Church on one side and charitable work on another—as if Christianity were a mix of things that have nothing to do with each other. Now we have the possibility, as seen in the section of *School of Community* we are studying at the moment, to understand a very simple concept: unity. One of the characteristics of the Christian experience is unity. A unity of life, without which we would constantly be in pieces. Everything we are telling each other here is to help us better understand what Giussani says in the *School of Community* in a very simple manner—no need, as I always say, for a master’s from Harvard; one can begin to grapple with the great mysteries of life by engaging with the life of the Christian community. Then one can understand that an employee threatening to resign actually comes from a desire to be loved. But where should one go to be loved? This person thought that resigning would solve his problem. This is astonishing—not understanding the nature of our need, we carry out various gestures and make decisions that contradict what we actually desire. It is as if someone taken to the emergency room tried to escape, ripping off his life support, an act which is cruel to the self, against one’s ultimate needs. This is why, if we still do not understand, nothing stops us from thinking that resigning will resolve the issues in our lives. We think we are different from everyone else, yet in recent decades so many Christians

have resigned from their commitment to life! I am simply offering a signpost for all of us. This is why it is crucial for us, as don Giussani says, to accept the proposal of the movement in its entirety. So that what we may not understand in one way can enter into us in another; something can always happen and everything can be unified. Thank you.

For about six months now, a friend and I have been taking food parcels to a particular woman. It is not a simple relationship; in fact, it is rather arid. For example, when we go to visit her, one child shuts himself in his room, and the last time he only came out to ask his mom, in front of us, why she was welcoming us. After the summer, she did not get back in touch; I tried to call her several times, but we could not reach her. We decided to go anyway to give her a parcel; we rang the doorbell and there was no reply. It was raining and we were outside in the cold. We decided not to give up, so we went to her work; it was Saturday afternoon and the school was closed. We rang the gate, and the guy was a bit confused; he had us talk to his wife. We asked her about the woman, if she still worked there, and if they had heard from her. She looked at us, a little confused, and said: "Yes, she still works at the school," then sighed and added, "unfortunately!" (This made us realize that she was a tricky customer at work, too.) I left a note with my address and phone number, and a couple of lines asking her to get in touch with us if she wanted to. We got into the car and looked at each other; we were struggling with a frustrating day, but most of all were hurt by that "unfortunately." For us, trying to deliver the food parcels, that moment was the start of a journey of recognition; we had encountered and immersed ourselves in, with all our inadequacy, the need of that person, and in the uneasiness we felt because of that negative judgment. We asked ourselves why we were not just surrendering to that judgment, accepting that this woman, despite her problems, seemed not to deserve our help. We answered ourselves by saying that what we were doing was a Christian gesture because it alters, amplifies, and deepens our questions about life and does not allow us to surrender to the contradiction posed to us by the circumstances (that she was not answering, it was raining, the son wanted us to leave). Our actions opened up a new question for us about the meaning of companionship, about the meaning of waiting and patience, about who can truly answer our need. We summarized in two points: first, we realized that our question had shifted from "What can we do for her?" to "Who are You who gives me a dissatisfied heart?" In other words, a heart that does not stop at "unfortunately," at my own limits and those of the other person. It does not stop because it embraces the possibility of there being Another at work in reality. The possibility is there, so our heart gives us the courage to go and ring the doorbell of the school. And second, the nature of the gesture appeals to our freedom and that of the woman because it forces both of us to take a position and begin a path. We could have left her to her destiny and would have found excuses to do so, and she must continuously decide whether she wants to see us, whether we are useful for her, and whether her son is right to reject us.

Thank God for freedom! Yours and hers. No restrictions, no shoehorning in of anything else. We can challenge everything as Christ did: he became flesh and challenged everything with His Presence.

I have begun university and have been, together with a friend, delivering Food Bank parcels to a young man for two years now. The third time we went, he was very unsettled, telling us he was ill and that his mother had died from the same illness, a very serious degenerative disease. He told us that, at a certain point, he had decided he would go to Switzerland for an assisted suicide. We remained silent, without any notion of trying to change his mind, but simply desiring to spend time with him, to discover why our lives, and his, were of value. Admittedly, in the subsequent weeks, we began to want to change his mind, to convince him not to go to Switzerland; as a result, he often tried to avoid us.

Do you see? As soon as we attempt to shoehorn what we think is right into the heads of others, they will avoid us. Impressive! We must learn from our inclination to behave in this way. This does not mean we should do nothing, but we have to do something different from what we have in mind.

Some time later, he read us a motivational letter that he was going to send to Switzerland, and that he told us he had also sent to the Pope. This struck us because it was a sign that something was happening that was responding to his need. When the Vatican replied to his letter, he was very happy. So we tried to organize an encounter between him and the Pope. We managed to go with him to a General Audience that Wednesday, and the man managed to speak for fifteen minutes with Pope Francis. Everything was beautiful, Rome, the Pope; he was very happy and kept thanking us. Coming home, we asked to see him again but he replied: "No, I'm back in my routine, I want to be left alone."

See? A miracle is not enough. In fact, he received a miracle—he went to the Pope and spoke to him!—but a second later, he was reduced back to how he was before.

A long time has now passed, and since the visit with the Pope our relationship with him has seen some real highs and lows. There are times he is happy to see us, and others in which he is depressed and treats us badly, or simply does not answer our calls. I could recount many instances of note, but the thing that strikes me most is the reason I keep trying to spend time with him.

Why do you keep doing this?

I bring all of my questions to my relationship with him. I rub up against the hardship of life, against pain, but without my relationship with him, I would not have such urgent and radical questions. I keep trying to spend time with him because he keeps me awake. I recognize more readily in my relationship with this man that the reason for my life is the truth of Christ; the only way a situation like this can have any meaning for me is if Christ truly did die on the cross and rise again. Only then can such a horrible situation be redeemed. This is our only hope to keep life from cheating us, mocking us. I am also discovering that I am happy when I freely offer myself to serve others, even if I may not fully understand what I am doing, as is often the case in my relationship with him. There are still moments when he says he still wants to go to Switzerland, but there is always a reason for not going; for example, this year a friend sent me the presentation of the Job exhibit from the Meeting. I sent it to him and he replied: "I have just read the testimony of the guide from the Job exhibit; first, thank you for sending it to me. Without realizing it, these are words I also use—'I do not want to suffer,' 'I do not want to speak to anyone,' 'I do not want to do chemo anymore, I want to die.' These are emotions that any sick person might feel. I would also like to hear said to me what the girl says at the end. In some way, though, I feel that God is with me. Even if I struggle, He is showing me, through people, that He is looking after me and will not abandon me. I am never left wanting a plate of food or a word of affection. I do not lack these things, but I also feel that I am moving toward the completion of my life. It is a difficult path, but there is an end for everyone. Yesterday you told me that sooner or later we will meet again in Paradise, and I believe you. I would like to live for many more years, but I understand that it is not possible. I think that you, your friends, and the nuns are the people God has sent me to accompany me in this adventure of life with my illness. Thank you." The thing that strikes me most about this message is that, at the start of our relationship, he could not see the small, good things in his life, and now he has begun to recognize them. Plus, there is also the change in him and in me, which is a sign of something happening.

What have you learned from all of this? What do you take away from it? Why do you think that man is still alive, despite previously wanting to die?

Because he encountered something.

Do you realize what you bring him? It is beautiful that he went to see the Pope, but why is he still alive? We must realize that, even if we are not the Pope, even if we are all poor people, we bring “something” to a person in that situation. We must realize that this closeness, your insistence, your coming back to him (even if the response is sometimes yes, sometimes no), bring something to his life. For the sake of the rest of your life, you must realize what it is that you bring—you, who like me are nothing, but who have encountered Him who answers the need of your heart and of his. You cannot shift this onto anyone else, not even the Pope, because the hope is within you—as we heard at the Beginning Day—and you must become aware of this.

At the end of this discussion, I feel urged to say one thing to you all. We must understand the connection between specific, singular things, and the whole. Otherwise we will not understand. Why did don Giussani insist so much on the need to understand this connection? We saw it in the contributions this morning: Branco told us at the beginning about that person who was upset that things were not going according to plan; to face the uneasiness that that circumstance generated, he had to read the School of Community in order to be able to understand. Understand what? What was contained within his experience. On the one hand, School of Community can help me understand the true depth of charitable work; on the other, charitable work helps me acknowledge my need so that I can more readily comprehend fully the import of what the School of Community offers. Do you understand the connection? You can be at ease moving forward, with or without the assembly of the Food Bank, because you have the School of Community. I really want you all to understand that in the gestures we participate in together, we have everything we need to live. We do not need to await some incredible event in order to live because we already have everything we need: the School of Community, the Fraternity, charitable work, the gestures we participate in. Therefore, push on with the knowledge that you have everything you need to avoid reducing charitable work to mere volunteering or reducing the School of Community to mere intellectualism that will not convince anyone. By doing so, we can understand the true nature of Christianity; in other words, the true significance of Christ for our lives, and we can celebrate Christmas in style! Christmas is not a memory of something past or the anniversary of a historical event; it is a celebration of something that is happening now, reoccurring now.

I thank you for this discussion, which has been amazing—as always—for the experiences it has recounted, as each of you have seen. Let us ask to be constantly aware of the things we have said so that we can be ever more conscious of, and grateful for, what has happened to us.

Merry Christmas to all of you.