

WHAT CAN WITHSTAND THE TEST OF TIME?

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Notes from the First Meditation by Julián Carrón

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8)

In front of the question “What can stand the test of time?”, the answer cannot be our feelings or moods, our thoughts or lines of reasoning, which “no longer stop anyone in their tracks.”¹ Therefore, let’s look our question straight in the face! We are not afraid to take seriously the most challenging questions that can emerge in our life: we do not want to turn aside or settle for hackneyed consolations. We want to be women and men able to look at everything.

A university student at a gathering of leaders asked me a frank question that helps us understand the problem. “Last weekend we did a two-day live-in to welcome first year students. It was really beautiful for me, and it happened in a very difficult and tiring time in my life. At the end of those two days together, I realized I was different. The point is that when I returned home, in the space of twenty minutes some little thing happened and I was right back to my normal irritability, as if the beautiful thing that had happened in those two days and changed me could not last. So my question is, what happened there, and what can hold up in the face of the demands of daily life?”

Simplifying greatly in order to clarify, we can say that often we come from an experience A (in this case, a very difficult time in her life) and then B happens (she went to the live-in and something happened that changed her), but after a while, as if nothing had occurred, as if B had never happened, we return to A and are back where we started from. It seems that what happened to us disappears, that it lacks the strength to last, to endure in time, and to continue to change us.

Maybe the university student’s description is a bit simplistic, but the substance is the same as what Fr. Giussani told us at the Beginning Day. A radical new thing happens to us, unforeseen and unforeseeable, an incomparable encounter, a beauty that changes us, but then it seems that this event is confined to a moment, like a wave of the sea that touches the shore and withdraws, and everything goes back to the way it was before. We are tempted to attribute this event to our previous experience, our previous wisdom.²

This is our dramatic situation. Well then, let’s face it straight on, as that girl did so directly! What factors are involved in this apparent disappearance of the newness that has happened to us? Why are we suspicious and wavering?

¹ Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *La percezione della forma. Gloria. Una estetica teologica*, vol. I, Jaca Book, Milano 1975, p. 11. [*Seeing the Form. The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991.]

² Cf. L. Giussani, J. Carrón, *Living is a Present!*, Page One, Traces, October 2018, p. 9. Available at <https://it.clonline.org/cm-files/2018/10/12/gia-assago-2018-ing.pdf>

1. Something “from which you do not turn back”

In order to face the question of what stands up to the test of time, the first thing to do is to look at our experience.

The Kierkegaard quote from last night offers us the criterion for grasping the answer. “What really counts in life is that at some time one has seen something, felt something, which is so great, so matchless, that everything else is nothing by comparison, that even if he forgot everything he would never forget this.”³

Has something happened in our life that we have never forgotten, something so great, so magnificent, that it was able to challenge time, circumstances, and our moods, and to accompany us even in the most dramatic moments? As expressed in one of the letters I read last night, “Why do I [still] come? [...] I come for [...] the ultimate indestructible attraction of something that lives in the Movement and from which I can’t detach myself. I come to search for the one thing I truly miss.”

This duration, this endurance, the indestructible nature of the attraction that caused our friend to come here, is the “sign” that makes us understand the import of what has happened to us.

As Ugo di San Vittore said, “Eternal misery pursues those who live every day, if they do not find a love that lasts every day.”⁴

a) *The encounter*

The first clue for the answer to our question, following the criterion offered by Kierkegaard, is the very fact of being here. If we are here, as our friend wrote, it is because we have come across people who made us experience a unique preference, totally gratuitous, a fullness, a human vibration that revived us, made us be ourselves, removed our fear and filled us with hope and joy. It happened in an encounter in which we had at least the presentiment of something new and different, something that brought forth what we are in truth.

This is the experience we have had. The love that God showed me through certain faces “makes me what I am in truth and [...] makes me unique, too”⁵ as Von Balthasar said. You could be a hundred times more fragile, more incoherent, more encumbered than you are, but there is someone who makes you experience this absolutely free preference. “You are precious in My eyes.”

It is evident. It is incomparably evident. We are here because, to use once again the words of the Beginning Day, we have been reached, each in our own particular circumstances, by a presence charged with a proposal

³ S. Kierkegaard, note 1068, in *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Volume 1, A-E*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1967.

⁴ Hugues de Saint-Victor, *De arra anime. L'inizio del dono*, Glossa, Milano 2000. p. 13. [*Soliloquy on the Betrothal-gift of the Soul (Soliloquium de arrha anime).*]

⁵ H.U. von Balthasar, “Significato dell’antica Alleanza [The Meaning of the Old Covenant]”, in H.U. von Balthasar-L. Giussani, *L’impegno del cristiano nel mondo [The Christian’s Engagement in the World]*, Jaca Book, Milano 2017, p. 38.

and meaning for life, and at the same time charged with affection for ourselves, choice, preference.⁶ This threw us wide open and engaged us as nothing else could have done. We have seen a different kind of relationship among people, a more human way of engaging, a “shared life,” a “life” that contained a newness and promise that filled us with wonder. We were attracted and drew closer because we were curious.

The beginning of everything was “an encounter with an objective fact [...]. The existential reality of this fact is a tangible community, as with every wholly human reality. The human voice of authority in the judgments and directives of this community constitute its criterion and form. There is no version of Christian experience, no matter how interior, that does not entail, at least in the ultimate sense, the encounter with the community and the reference to authority.”⁷

This may have taken the form of an encounter with a living Christian community or a person who demonstrated a perceptible difference of life,⁸ but an encounter happened that attracted us and, as Kierkegaard says, we cannot forget or erase it (we could not eradicate it even if we wanted to).

A university student wrote me, “By nature I’ve always loved a life of retreats, playing to the lowest common denominator, the tranquility of my four walls, of studies used to escape from the world. It may be convenient to think that life is disgusting and that there are no reasons for getting involved, but you can do so only as long as you haven’t had the grace of meeting people who live full of reasons, full of gusto and meaning. [This is what makes the difference, and once you have seen it, everything is different.] For me, meeting the Movement has meant this. It was the encounter with people of dazzling humanity, a meeting that gave me no peace, but tormented me, and brought me back to a certain restlessness for my life that I had long neglected.” So, the encounter brought to her life an affection for herself that she had been unable to feel. Once she met this different humanity, she could not help but feel restlessness for her own life. But then she added, “For this reason, I feel afraid when one of these friends of mine writes me and seeks me out, because I know that just one hour with this person would undermine my position and make me feel that by now very recognizable sensation of looking at something enormous and very beautiful and feeling that it could be mine, too.” It is amazing! As Fr. Giussani told us many times, the resistance is to the beauty.⁹ We are afraid of the beauty of what we have seen. Her letter continues, “Certainly, my fear has remained the same. And yet, I’ve forgotten a lot of things, but not those eyes that looked at me, because they held all the good that would be offered to me in the years to follow and that insistently returned to seek me out, to draw me back with a faithfulness beyond all logic, the one last bulwark against the temptation to let live.”

The encounter with a phenomenon of different humanity: this is how everything began. Like John and

⁶ “They didn’t believe because of the way Christ spoke, saying certain things; they didn’t believe because Christ worked miracles; they didn’t believe because Christ quoted the prophets; they didn’t believe because Christ raised the dead. [...] They believed because of a presence. A presence neither transparent nor opaque, not a faceless presence: a presence with a very specific face [...] A presence charged with a proposal is, then, a presence charged with meaning. (L. Giussani, J. Carrón, *Living is a Present!*, op.cit., p. 8.)

⁷ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, translated by Mariangela Sullivan, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2019, p. 87.

⁸ Cf. L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, translated by Patrick Stevenson, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010, Montreal, pp. 17-18.

⁹ Cf. L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora [Affection and Dwelling Place]*, Bur, Milano 2001, pp. 66-67.

Andrew, we have found ourselves in front of an exceptional presence, charged with a proposal, charged with meaning for life.¹⁰

b) The meaning of the encounter

But it is not enough for the event to happen. We have to recognize its meaning, otherwise, as often happens, we return to our previous wisdom, our usual way of looking at things, the common mentality. So now the main point comes to the surface: when we return to A after having seen B, we think everything has vanished because we have failed to grasp the import of what has happened to us. In fact, to truly gain something in our experience, we have to realize its meaning.

This is true for everything. “What characterizes experience is *understanding* something, discovering its *meaning*. Thus, experience entails an intelligence concerning the meaning of things.”¹¹ A reality is never truly confirmed and grasped until its meaning is confirmed.

Here is what one of you wrote:

“In the last six months, I have been devastated by a very big change that has completely overturned my life and caused me great pain. The thing that really disoriented me was that this pain originated in one of the most beautiful things that has ever happened to me, so it was a real paradox. As the months passed and I was still unable to see the meaning of what had happened to me, gradually and almost without my realizing it, I was taken over by a total nihilism, apathy and lack of meaning. One day, a dear friend invited me to participate in School of Community. I went for a few months without any particular reason, but I continued. I realized that the School of Community said something absolutely true about my life, and also showed me a road toward things that seemed prepared for me, that would have made me happier. It’s as if my eyes were opened for me. For the first time, I realized that I followed things that seemed comfortable, attractive and full of promise, but actually were closed in on themselves. I followed them because I was anesthetized by the modern mentality and thus didn’t ask myself too many questions. Instead, in recent months I’ve begun desiring things that stand firm in the face of the adversities of life, things that would not be void of meaning, and true faces. Thanks be to God, I’ve encountered the Movement. This new awareness has made me feel full and truly happy for the first time, with a long-lasting happiness, not limited to the afternoon of School of Community. Evidently Someone knows better than I what my heart desires, and has planned everything so that I can live up to the stature of my questions.”

So then, we have to realize the nature of what has happened to us, because if we do not grasp deep down its differentness, the reason it is different, then we treat it like any of the things that happen in life that promise so much and then disappoint because they end, as if Christianity were one of the many gods in the Pantheon of the common mentality, one of the many attempts destined to fail.

¹⁰ “The first chapter of St John's Gospel documents the very simple and profound manner in which Christianity emerged in history: the happening of a human event, the encounter with an exceptional presence.” (L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., p. 8).

¹¹ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, op. cit, p. 84.

Understanding the import of something we have experienced does not necessarily happen, and is not to be taken for granted. This is seen when the event that has happened to us does not shape our self-awareness and action. There is no growth of our consciousness, the “I” does not mature, and the encounter does not become crucial for our relationship with reality. For this reason, we continue to start out from A instead of from B. It is like a student solving a math problem by chance, without understanding why. The next time she will not face the new problem with increased awareness, and will find herself back where she started from. Having solved the problem by chance, without understanding why, will have done no good. Life is the same way: amazing things can happen to us and we can fail to learn anything. If we do not grasp the meaning of an event, and if it does not shape our self-awareness, then no matter how sensational it may be, it will not serve any purpose. Think of the nine lepers healed by Jesus, or the scribes in front of the blind man He had healed.

Instead, how entirely different it is when you grasp the import of something that enters into your life!

I’ll give an example that can help us understand better, an episode that happened to Fr. Giussani. Listening to *La Favorita* di Donizetti during music lesson in his first year of Classics High School, something happened to him that stayed with him, such that even recounting it years later, you could see that it still influenced him. “When this marvelous tenor sang ‘Spirto gentil, ne’ sogni miei ...’, when the very first note vibrated on the air, I intuited, heartrendingly, that what is called ‘God,’ by which I mean the inevitable Destiny for which a person is born, is the ultimate end of the need for happiness; it is the happiness that the heart irrepressibly needs.”¹² In that moment, hearing those notes and words, Giussani had the intuition of something that did not vanish the next morning. He had such a sharp, clear, unique and evident perception of that “something,” that from then on he could not live without being determined by that instant and that discovery.

There are some moments, encounters, and events that are different from others, not because of any din or clamor, but because they have an incomparable power to reawaken our entire “I” through the crucial thing they bring to our life.

Fr. Giussani described it in a fascinating and realistic way. “What led us here today may have been a fleeting, subtle presentiment of promise for life, without any earth-shattering self-awareness or insight. But there was a day in your life when an encounter happened that encompassed all the meaning, all the value, all the desirableness, all the justness, all the beauty and all the pleasantness.”¹³

These unique moments make us discover what lasts, something that has the unmistakable accent of truth. Speaking of the encounter, Giussani said, “At times it seems like ‘a beacon in the fog,’ but still this fleeting appearance leaves us with the confidence of having discovered ‘something that has something within’.”¹⁴

In order to see this “something” within the something we come across (such and such a person, such and such a community, the “objective fact”), no particular intelligence is needed on our part, though we often think otherwise. You just have to follow the enhancement of the “mind’s cognitive capacities” that the fact itself kindles or generates, “tuning the penetration of the human gaze upon the exceptional reality that has provoked

¹² L. Giussani, *What you are looking for exists*, in the program notes of the CD Spirto Gentil, p. 17.

¹³ L. Giussani, *Qui e ora (1984-1985)* [Here and Now], Bur, Milano 2009, p. 426.

¹⁴ L. Giussani. *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, translated by Joh Zucchi with the assistance of Patrick Stevenson, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 96

it.”¹⁵ We can understand it by analogy with our many experiences: the encounters with certain people open and broaden our gaze, allowing us to see the reality of things more acutely and deeply.

What is this “following”? It is purity of heart.

Think of the Unnamed in Manzoni’s novel, *The Betrothed*. He had directed his life in a certain way, made his choices, taken his position regarding Christianity, seen people go to church often, without being influenced in the least. But in a particular situation in his life, listening from the room of his castle to the festive crowd welcoming Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, he began to feel the goad of torment, and something moved in him. He let himself be attracted by their joy and joined them. When he found himself in front of the Cardinal and was enveloped by his gaze and held in his embrace, his heart yielded. He followed the power of that gaze and the warmth of that unexpected tenderness. “The Unnamed freed himself from that embrace, put one hand over his eyes, and raised his face, saying: ‘O truly great and truly merciful God! Now I know myself, now I understand what I am!’”¹⁶ The Cardinal’s gaze, like that of Jesus upon Zacchaeus, freed him from pride, gave him back a true awareness of himself, and opened him to the poverty of spirit. At the end of their dialogue, the Cardinal said to the Unnamed, “You must not think that I shall be satisfied with this single visit of yours today,” and asked him, “You will come back, won’t you, with this worthy priest?”. “Do you ask if I will come back?” the Unnamed responded, amazed. In this moment, his new self-awareness and his poverty of spirit surged forth. “If you turn me from your door, I shall wait outside as obstinately as any beggar. I need to talk to you. I need to hear your voice and see your face! I need you!”¹⁷ His desire to go see the Cardinal again was the sign of what had happened to him.

For each of us, who is our Cardinal? Who is the Cardinal who makes us truly ourselves, who throws us wide open, the person without whom we cannot live? In fact, Jesus is not abstract, a mere name. Jesus is alive and present. He reaches us now through the precariousness of flesh, through a certain, real gaze and a certain, real embrace. “Living is a present!” we cried out at the Beginning Day. Only something present can make us poor. We have no need of an organization. We have no need of a strategy. We need someone who gives us back to ourselves, someone who makes us poor, who enables us to see what we have in front of our nose and do not see.

It is necessary to become aware of the essential nexus between knowledge and poverty. Ratzinger wrote, “From this perspective, we can understand why the Fathers of the Church regarded the basic formulation of religious knowledge as such this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Happy are the pure in heart: they shall see God’ (Mt. 5:8). Here it is a question of ‘seeing.’ The possibility of ‘seeing’ God, that is, of knowing Him at all, depends on one’s purity of heart, which means a comprehensive process in which man becomes transparent, in which he does not remain locked in upon himself, in which he learns to give himself and, in doing so, becomes able to see.”¹⁸

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, op. cit. p. 86-87.

¹⁶ A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, translated by Bruce Penman, Penguin Classics, London, 1972, p. 418.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987, p. 350. “To ‘cling to God’ is nothing but to see God, and that is given as a special happiness only to the pure in heart. David had a pure heart (Ps. 50:12). He said to God ‘my soul clings to you’ (Ps. 62:9) and again, ‘My joy lies

Fr. Giussani said this and bore witness to it in front of the whole Church in 1998, in Saint Peter's Square. "It was a simplicity of heart that made me feel and recognize Christ as exceptional, with that certain promptness that marks the unassailable and indestructible evidence of factors and moments of reality, which, on entering the horizon of our person, pierce us to the heart."¹⁹

This simplicity of heart that enables a person to be wide open to the unique reality in front of her, is what enables her to see the unassailable evidence. "The entire existence of a Christian, one could say, has this goal: to become simple."²⁰ And only this willingness to open totally to the event of the encounter enables us to perceive its meaning adequately.²¹

c) Awareness of the correspondence

Why did we choose to adhere to and follow the encounter, which, in the final analysis, brought us here today? Why did we never forget it? Because the presence encountered corresponded uniquely to the deep needs of our heart.

It was the same way for John and Andrew with Jesus. They found themselves in front of an exceptional presence, one that finally corresponded to their heart. With Him, there was an unimagined, unimaginable, never before felt correspondence to the heart that made it easy to recognize Him in His unique and incomparable value, "divine."²² "Someone who came across Him would never go away again, and this is precisely the sign of an experience of correspondence. An encounter means coming across such an exceptional presence."²³ Exceptional, that is, divine. The same thing happens for us, as well, two thousand years later: the divine passes through an ephemeral face, "something within which there is something." That "something" that passes through the something ephemeral is what withstands and endures, because it is divine. Therefore, if we do not grasp the nature of the presence encountered, we will end up mistaking it for just any other thing.

This is the passage we have to look at well.

The important point is to realize the content and the origin of the differentness we have come across and that causes us to be here today. Maybe in other moments we could have gotten by without reaching this point, without the need to recognize the nature of this unassailable evidence that has come into our life, but in today's chaos in which everything is in doubt, we will not be able to remain Christians for long if we do not have evidence whose permanent meaning we recognize. During the student protests in 1968, Giussani said, "Now, however, it can longer be passively accepted, the times will not permit it."²⁴

in being near to God' (Ps. 72:28)." Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on the Song of Songs, in *Selected Works*, (Classics of Western Spirituality), Paulist Press, Mahweh, NJ, 1987, p. 235.

¹⁹ L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., p. x.

²⁰ I. Silone, *L'avventura d'un povero cristiano [The Adventure of a Poor Christian]*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan 1968, p. 126.

²¹ "God honors His reason-endowed creature, predisposing her to welcome the gift that He gives her of Himself. This faculty of welcoming is also a gift: it is the very essence of reason." (F. Varillon, *L'umiltà di Dio [The Humility of God]*, Qiqajon, Magnano (Bi) 1999, p. 45).

²² Cf. L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 19.

²⁴ Cf. L. Giussani, J. Carrón, *Living is a Present!*, op.cit, p. 12.

I am enthusiastic about living in this period of history, with all its difficulties. I say so for myself, because I do not want to be spared this difficulty. It is not enough to live in illusion, as in a bubble, thinking that everything is fine, closing myself in a *comfort zone* and coming here every year to spend some time among friends and enjoy a bit of peace. That would be useless for living.

It is a good thing that we are challenged by all this confusion, by the skepticism that surrounds us, by the nihilism that makes it seem that nothing can last! Yes, because in this way we can understand from within our experience, as perhaps nobody in history has been able to do, how different Christianity is. It is like when you see that no relationship lasts and suddenly you find yourself in front of a relationship that *does* last, someone who truly loves you, and you think: “Well, this *is* different!”. In that moment, it is very easy to recognize the difference.

When we do not recognize this “something,” which has the unmistakable accent of truth, we return to A after having seen B. The cause is not our weakness: it is the lack of recognition. Our fragility has nothing to do with it. The problem I set forth is not one of ethical coherence. It is a problem of reason, of simplicity of heart. “It is in you that things must become clear,”²⁵ Etty Hillesum wrote in her *Diary*.

2. The challenge of acknowledgement

Through concrete, specific encounters, we today have been reached by the same event of two thousand years ago. Not only that, but we are also involved in the same experience, challenged to journey the same path, to live the same acknowledgement. Chekov’s short story, *The Student*, beautifully describes the nexus between the initial event and the present event, between the experience of Peter and the first followers, and our own.

On his way home from hunting on a cold, dark evening, Ivan, a young student, finds hospitality in the home of two widows, mother and daughter, who are warming themselves by the fire. He joins them and begins telling the story of Jesus’ passion, the Last Supper, the anguish Jesus felt in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denials, the crowing of the cock and the moment in which Peter “remembered, recovered, went out of the courtyard, and wept bitterly.” Ivan realizes that as he said this, the mother, “still smiling, [...] suddenly choked, and big, abundant tears rolled down her face” while the daughter “flushed, and her expression became heavy, strained, as in someone who is trying to suppress great pain.” Chekov continued: “The student wished the widows good night and went on. [...] Now the student was thinking about Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant that everything that had happened to Peter on that dreadful night had some relation to her... [...] if Vasilisa wept and her daughter was troubled, then obviously what he had just told them, something that had taken place nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present, to both women, and probably to this desolate village, to himself, to all people. If the old woman wept, it was not because he was able to tell it movingly, but because Peter was close to her and she was interested with her whole being in what had happened in Peter’s soul. And joy suddenly stirred in his soul, and he even stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is connected with the present in an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other. And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of that chain of events flowing one out of one another. And it

²⁵ E. Hillesum, *Diario [Diary]. 1941-1943*, Adelphi, Milan 1985, p. 57.

seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of that chain: he touched one end, and the other moved. And when he crossed the river on the ferry [...] he kept thinking how the truth and beauty that had guided human life there in the garden and in the high priest's courtyard, went on unbroken to this day and evidently had always been the main thing in human life and generally on earth; and a feeling of youth, health, strength—he was only twenty-two—and an inexpressibly sweet anticipation of happiness, an unknown, mysterious happiness, gradually came over him, and life seemed to him delightful, wondrous, and filled with lofty meaning.”²⁶

The connection that Chekhov intuited is surprising: “If the old woman wept, it was [...] because Peter was close to her and she was interested with her whole being in what had happened in Peter's soul.”

We are here because of the same experience as those first ones who encountered Jesus. Like them, we have been challenged to recognize the nature of the encounter that has happened to us, the presence that has bowled us over. The first ones were not spared this challenge, and their journey shows us the road to travel today, as well. Therefore, let's return to the moment that the challenge was so great that it forced them to recognize the different nature they saw in front of them.

The day He multiplied the loaves and fishes and the crowd wanted to make Him king, Jesus said things that scandalized everyone and not even the disciples were able to understand. “There was a deathly silence. Jesus Himself takes the initiative and breaks it: ‘Do you too want to go away?’ And it is here that Peter, with all the vehemence of his nature, summarizes their whole experience of certainty: ‘Lord, we do not understand what You say either but if we leave You, to whom do we go? You alone have words which explain, which give meaning to life.’ [...] Peter's attitude is profoundly reasonable,” because, Giussani continued, “they shared their lives with the exceptionality of Jesus' being and his attitudes, that small group of men could only have trusted his words. They would have had to deny evidence [just as we would have to deny evidence] more persuasive than that of their own eyes: ‘If I cannot believe in this man, I cannot believe in anything.’ By sharing His life, by constantly experiencing the sensation that Jesus was exceptional, it became highly reasonable to trust in Him.”²⁷ This judgement is like that of someone who, after years of living with his mother, if he has had a normal relationship with her, says, “No matter what happens, I can be angry or sad, my mood can change, the world can collapse around me, but I cannot deny that my mother loves me.” Living together brings him to a judgement that can challenge any mood.

“Judgment requires facing an experience, taking into account the time of its ‘duration’.”²⁸ We need this time to reach certainty. This is the dramatic thing about life. Jesus treats us like adults. “Do you want to leave too?”. Instead, we often want Him to come and extract us from our difficulties, to decide for us.

“This is why, in answering the question of his friends and enemies alike: ‘So who are you?’ [what is that “something” that is in you, that we cannot define?] Jesus waited until time had made His disciples certain of their attachment [until the certainty of the reason for which they were attached to Him had grown] and His

²⁶ A. Chekhov, “The Student,” in *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Random House, 2000, pp. 265-266

²⁷ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, translated by Viviane Hewitt, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1998, pp. 57-58.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 58.

enemies persistent in their hostility. This is to say, Jesus clarified His own mystery when men had definitively determined to recognize Him or not.”²⁹

Jesus does not want to take advantage or abuse His power, nor does He want to impose Himself. He waits for our freedom to yield and for us to follow Him with full awareness. He knows full well that the acknowledgement of His presence will never truly become ours if it does not involve our freedom. Therefore, He is in no hurry. He does not want to rush things. He gives our freedom space and waits for our recognition of Him to grow and mature.

Since reason is the affirmation of reality in the totality of its factors, we cannot avoid the question about the origin of the different nature that has come into our lives. If the fruit we see in terms of humanity and intensity of life is different from all that surrounds us, then we have to face an alternative. Either this fruit can be fully explained by the special abilities of the people in whom we see it, or, since these people are fragile like us and make mistakes like us, they reveal, they demonstrate, something else that is beyond their abilities, something else that is at work in them (“A tree can be told by its fruits”³⁰).

My reason cannot say or define what this “something else” is, but, as Fr. Giussani said, “[reason] cannot *not* admit that He is here. [...] Because there is a factor within, a factor that decides about this companionship, certain outcomes of this companionship, certain resonances of this companionship, a factor so surprising that if I don’t affirm something else I don’t give reason to the experience, because reason is to affirm experiential reality according to all the factors that make it up, all of the factors.”³¹

I was deeply impressed recently by our friend Mikel Azurmendi, a sociologist from Holland, who met us two years ago. He was amazed by what he saw and was so honest with the repercussion provoked by what he perceived that he spent two years visiting all our communities in Spain, going to the vacations, charitable works, and schools, because he wanted to understand. In a sense, he has given back to us what we no longer see at times. Ten minutes after his arrival at EncuentroMadrid, looking at the difference in the way people treated each other and interacted, “certain resonances of this companionship,” he asserted: “Something is happening here.” He could not see those things without acknowledging that in the way of being together, of treating each other, of looking at each other, of seeking each other out, of being interested in everything, there was something else, and was led to say, on the basis of what he had been told years ago when he was a boy in seminary: “It is Him. Only the divine can be the origin of all this.”

The greatest miracle is the change in the human that Mikel, like each of us, discovered. “A miracle may be defined as an event, an experiential fact by which God forces man to pay heed to Him, to values in which He wishes man to participate, and by which God appeals to man to take notice of His Reality. A miracle is a way for Him to make His Presence felt.”³² It is not something we imagine, that vanishes a moment later.

²⁹ *Ivi.*

³⁰ L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, translated by Vivianne Hewitt, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2001, p. 210.

³¹ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way? Volume 2: Hope*, translated by John Zucchi, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2008, p. 104.

³² L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, op. cit., p. 222.

Precisely in front of a miracle, the miracle of a different, more fulfilled humanity, our position comes to the surface and the struggle between openness and closure, transparency and obtuseness begins. The Mystery does not spare us this struggle, for here freedom reveals its crucial role in the journey of knowledge, in the discovery of reality and its meaning. (“Now, if reaching destiny, fulfilment is to be free, freedom must ‘play a role’ even in its *discovery* [...]. Freedom, then, has to do not only with our movement towards God as coherence of our lives, but, even before that, the very discovery of God.”³³ In this struggle, Giussani said, what we often call a “critical approach” is actually a preconceived idea, what we have already “secretly decided in the beginning³⁴,” an “aridity” that does not allow us to see.

The prize for those who engage in this struggle with honesty is the recognition of the presence of Christ and familiarity with Him.

So then, friends, we must not stop at the threshold of this recognition, but instead must reach the “ultimate source” of what we see, what we have come across, what has put us together.

“We risk living such a great grace as this house [as this companionship] assuming the final step (“Ah, yes, yes!”), admitting the final step, acknowledging the final step, which is for Christ, but not living it [...]. You can live your companionship in such a way that you are kind to each other, attentive to each other, that you enjoy living in such an environment [...]; you can live all that is positive about this companionship, and yet you can stop on the threshold of the recognition of the adequate reason, of the true factor that put you together in the first place [...]. You can live all this without clarifying for yourself the ultimate source, as if you arrive at the threshold of the thing, saying ‘Yes, there is Christ; it is for Christ.’” But in “saying ‘We are together because there is Christ,’ how much existential moved emotion, recognition, and gratitude do you obtain?”³⁵

Christ loves our freedom so much that He even lets us leave Him, waiting for us to discover freely how different He is. Von Balthasar described God’s attitude toward us in this way: “Where a person decides to leave his own self, his own narrow-mindedness [...] there My reign grows. But since men do so unwillingly [...], I must travel long, wide roads with them, an entire life, so they will become convinced of the truth.”³⁶

“God waits patiently until at last I am willing to consent to love Him. God waits like a beggar who stands motionless and silent before someone who will perhaps give Him a piece of bread. Time is that waiting. Time is God’s waiting as a beggar for our love. The stars, the mountains, the sea, and all the things that speak to us of time, convey God’s supplication to us. By waiting humbly we are made similar to God,”³⁷ said Simone Weil.

Think of Our Lady, when the angel left her. It is as if the Lord left the scene in order to leave space for her freedom.

³³ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, translated by John Zucchi, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 121.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 122.

³⁵ L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora [Affection and Dwelling Place]*, op. cit., pp. 361-362. “Attraversiamo i miracoli come ciechi, senza vedere che il più piccolo germoglio di un fiore è fatto di migliaia di galassie” [We cross through miracles like blind people, without seeing that the smallest flower bud is made up of thousands of galaxies] (C. Bobin, *La vita grande [Great Life]*, Anima Mundi, Otranto (Le) 2018, p. 41).

³⁶ H.U. von Balthasar, *Il cuore del mondo [The Heart of the World]*, Jaca Book, Milan 2006, p. 119.

³⁷ S. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge*, translated by Richard Rees, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 1970, p. 141

Think of the prodigal son in the gospel parable. The father certainly was not indifferent to his son. On the contrary, precisely because he loved him and knew well this child to whom he had given life, he knew that only through freedom would his son discover the value of being his son.

Reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son, the German Catholic theologian Ferdinand Ulrich wrote, “The father did not keep his own son bound to himself [...]. He set the other free from himself and made him responsible for the future risk of a loving process of becoming himself, beginning from the abyss of his own *freedom*.”³⁸

How does the father show his love for his son’s freedom? “Simply letting the son go.” The father lets his son go, respecting his freedom, grounded in the certainty that his son will not depart without his sense of sonship. Ulrich continued, “Thus the father so to speak withdraws in the complete calm of his own being himself, and does so not *against* his son, but *for* him. His paternal hiding away, his silence, is the mercy of his accompaniment. *That* son described by the parable is the mercy of the Father made person: far off without his father. We understand the parable only if we listen to *Him* in a spirit of piety and forgiveness! The father remains, ‘rests,’ on his land and lets his son go. In this remaining, in this *apparent* not-acting, he shows himself as freedom that bears witness and is present ‘only through its existence’.”³⁹

Precisely in this space of freedom given by father, the prodigal son recognizes that his father is different, and perceives the accent of truth in him; this causes him to return home. “There is a dreadful emptiness in this spiritual fatherhood. No power, no success, no popularity, no easy satisfaction. But that same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom. It is the place where there is ‘nothing left to lose,’ where love has no strings attached, and where real spiritual strength is found.”⁴⁰

The father’s attitude reveals his true nature as father. As the Second Vatican Council stated, there is no access to the truth but through freedom.⁴¹ Christ respects, loves and supports our freedom, by challenging it.

We need to become aware of the import of what has entered into our existence, because otherwise we will be condemned to live in the fear that everything ends in nothingness. If Christ does not enter into the depths of our being, through the evidence that each of us has perceived (given that we are here), we will be fearful like everyone else, because “if Christ is not a presence now (now!), I cannot love myself now and I cannot love you now. If Christ is not risen, I am finished. Even if I have all His words, even if I have all His gospels, at best, I could even kill myself [Giussani dared to say even this!], but with the presence of Christ, no [because He is not just an event in the past], with the recognized presence of Christ, no!”⁴²

Why is it worthwhile to be here in these days? What can we gain? The awareness that something has happened to us that can overcome the anxiety and insecurity that everything will end in nothingness. This is

³⁸ F. Ulrich, *Gabe und Vergebung. Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie* (Dono e Perdono. Un contributo per un’ontologia biblica) [Gift and Forgiveness. A Contribution for a Biblical Ontology], Johannes, Freiburg 2006, p. 455; our English translation from our Italian translation of the German original.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 452, 457-458; our English translation from our Italian translation. “You let me go when I wanted to and when I did not want to, and even so you did not distance me from yourself.” (Guglielmo di Saint-Thierry, *Preghiere meditate. Opere/3*, Città Nuova, Roma 1998, p. 214). [William of Saint-Thierry, *On Contemplating God: Prayers and Meditations.*]

⁴⁰ H.J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Doubleday, New York, 1994, p. 132.

⁴¹ Cf. Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, I, 2.

⁴² L. Giussani, *Qui e ora (1984-1985) [Here and Now]*, op. cit., p. 77.

not overcome by thinking, “Now I’ll try to make a bit more of an effort.” It is only overcome by the awareness of what has happened, something that you have not produced, that I have not produced. “With age-old love have I loved you; so I have kept My mercy toward you.”⁴³ Only His presence is the substance of our “I.”

3. The need for verification

“Sooner or later, those who come because of a vague intuition or presentiment of a value and then are not stimulated or do not make the effort to verify, will leave.”⁴⁴ Fr. Giussani’s warning to university students holds for us, too, no exclusions. “If Christ is truly the answer to life, this must be ‘seen’ in some way. [...] Therefore, I told the students, ‘We have to watch all the activities of our life so we can see and experience, understand and live, how the presence of Christ truly responds to the urgencies and needs of our human experience that are expressed in those activities.’”⁴⁵

During the presentation of the *Acts* of the Lucerne Convention on Giussani at the Ambrosian Library in Milan, Fr. Franco Manzi, director of studies at the Venegono Archdiocesan Seminary, observed, “Thus we could say that as he himself journeyed in the sequela of Christ on the ‘way of God,’ as the Acts of the Apostles defined Christianity, Giussani on the one hand verified whether the experience of Peter, Andrew and the other disciples was authentically humanizing for himself as well, and, on the other hand, invited the young people he encountered on the train, rather than in the Berchet classrooms, to travel this road with him. Fr. Giussani traced the criterion of authenticity of their ‘movement’ following Christ in the experiences of faith reported in the Gospels and the rest of the Bible. In this way, he came to believe that if his experience with those fellow travelers was humanizing like that of Peter, Andrew and the other apostles, then it meant that the risen Christ continued to be effectively present in history, to save the humanity of our era as well.”⁴⁶

The Church does not want acritical adherents. I have to verify whether what has entered my life enables me to challenge all darkness, doubt, fear, and insecurity. As we should have studied in School of Community, the Church does not take us for a ride or cheat us.⁴⁷

This is the challenge. You understand, then, the insufficiency of the association, the sheepfold, the comfortable places where we think we are living as Christians. We will not make it in this way. Those who propose this to you do not have your best interests at heart. Jesus did not close His disciples in the sheepfold, but gave them the method for challenging the world and verifying His promise: “If you remain in relationship with Me, you will realize that you are living in a way that has no compare.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Jer. 31:3.

⁴⁴ L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose (1979-1981) [Certain of a Few Great Things]*, Bur, Milan 2007, p. 158.

⁴⁵ L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento di vita, cioè una storia [An Event of Life, That Is, a History]*, edited by C. Di Martino, EDIT-Il Sabato, Rome 1993, p. 341.

⁴⁶ F. Manzi, “Punto di vista di un biblista sugli *Atti* del Convegno della FTL: “Giussani: Il pensiero sorgivo”, [The Point of View of a Biblist on the Acts of the FTL Conference: ‘Giussani: the wellspring thought,’] in *Rivista Teologica di Lugano*, anno XXIV, 1/2019, p. 200.

⁴⁷ Cf. L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, op. cit., pp. 204-205.

⁴⁸ “The Church repeats with Jesus that it can be recognized as credible because of its correspondence to man’s elementary needs in their most authentic flourishing. This is what Jesus meant by the expression [...] ‘the hundredfold’ on this earth [not in the great beyond]. It is as if the Church is also telling man: ‘With me, an experience of fullness of

Someone wrote me, “What stands up to the test of time? I’ve often thought that this question was due to latent depression, raging cynicism or in any case lack of faith. But recently I’ve come to understand that this isn’t the case at all. No, this question isn’t the fruit of depression, because over time it has transformed and become a constitutive part of my relationship and daily dialogue with Him. I often find myself asking, “Christ, how do You stand up to the test of time? How do you stand up to my marriage, friends, the relationship with my growing children, in the challenges of daily life, in the fears that grip me, in the things that I used to like and now leave me indifferent? How?” He always makes me find “other, unexpected things” than those I would have expected (this is always a characteristic trait of His happening), and they bring me new life. There was a long period in my life when Christ was a kind of knick-knack on the shelf to call upon in cases of need and urgency, while I could easily handle the rest on my own. But now, without even too many big shocks, I have come to the clear awareness that it was no exaggeration for Him to say ‘Without Me you can do nothing.’” In any case, after hearing Giussani at the Beginning Day wish us the “tenacity of a journey,” after a lot of vacillation, my husband and I decided to get back on the road, first of all by returning to participation in the gesture of charitable work. It was one of the most beautiful moments of our marriage, because in deciding together to do this again, He was among us again. Mysteriously, by adhering to an educative proposal of the companionship that apparently had nothing to do with it, we found ourselves together again, united on the road in a way that hadn’t happened for a long time. What an unexpected gift! Charitable work has been like a tsunami in my life, because right away it lay bare my reduced position in front of life.”

This superabundance of life is what enables you to verify the truth of the message the Church brings you, her proposal of herself as the continued presence of Christ in history. In the experience of a fullness that cannot be experienced elsewhere, you have the “verification” of what the Church says of herself: “I am the Body of Christ, the face of His presence here and now.” In this way, you will be able to say, adhering with increasing reasonableness to what the Church says of herself: “Christ is here.”

In order to reach this certainty, people must choose to live in that place through which the life of the Church arrives, because the Church “is life and must offer life.” This is why a person decides to come here on a weekend, to be submerged in this life. In fact, Fr. Giussani continued, “But neither can man attempt to make such a portentous verification without a commitment that engages his entire life.” For this reason, “if the Church cannot cheat, then neither can man [each of us].”⁴⁹

Time is crucial for this verification in order for the difference of Christianity to emerge in front of our eyes, what truly stands up to the test of time, circumstances, challenges, and disappointments. Never fear: we just need to be loyal to the needs of the heart. They are so irreducible to ourselves and our manipulations that they can unmask any idol we have built! Nothing other than time and comparison with the heart is needed to see what is true, because only what is true lasts over time. We all know that the truth has an unmistakable accent and lasts over time. Why does it last? Because, as we said at the beginning, it corresponds to the needs of the heart. None of the promises of the idols last, because they do not correspond to the heart. “They have mouths

life that you will not find elsewhere will be yours.’ It is on the razor-edge of this promise that the church puts itself to the test, proposing itself to all men as the prolongation of Christ.” (L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, op. cit., p. 206.

⁴⁹ L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, op. cit., p. 208.

but do not speak,”⁵⁰ as the prophets of Israel said. Idols have no substance; they are nothing. After a while, *poof*, they disappear.

To travel a certain road, we have at hand instruments that are irreducible to ourselves and our manipulation. This is the challenge each of us must undertake.

So, to conclude, here is documentation of the verification of the proposal that we all receive continually in the Movement and that enables us not to return to A after experiencing B.

“I’m experiencing very concretely the definitive passage to the maturity of my faith. I’ve been in the Movement for thirty-four years, but in this recent period I’ve been given the grace to experience a leap in my self-awareness of faith. I’ve come to see the disproportion between what I’ve received and my humanity. For a long time I lived with the Gnostic presumption that I understood, and I tried, in a Pelagian way, to apply what I thought I’d understood. Today everything appears new to me and I find myself in a completely different position from the one I had when I met the Movement. I’m beginning to be moved by everything. Words I’ve read thousands of times and that gave me intellectual satisfaction but didn’t change my position an inch, now leave me disarmed. I’ve come to realize that I’ve been following Giussani in an abstract way, without concretely engaging my intelligence and heart. I’ve begun to understand the meaning of affective intelligence, attachment to his person and consequently to his words. Giussani is no longer someone external to my humanity; now he has begun to judge it from within. The real meaning of what I’d learned and almost knew by heart from chapters 1,2,3,5 and 10 of *The Religious Sense* is beginning to be revealed for me. I’m fascinated, because I’m returning to being a child. I discover I have everything to learn, not so much in order accumulate knowledge as to “live reality intensely.”

In the relationship with all our circumstances, the more we carry out a personal verification of Christ’s capacity to change our life (“Those who follow Me will have the hundred-fold here on earth”) and cause it to be reborn, the more charged our acknowledgement of His presence will be, our *yes* to Him and the concrete way He has chosen to reach us and win us over: the Movement.

Thus verification is the great road of personalization of faith, of the maturation of the certainty of the presence of Christ in our life.

⁵⁰ *Psalm* 115:5