

THE ONE VOICE OF THE IDEAL

*Meeting with Fr. Julián Carrón
and Student Youth members finishing their last year
of high school. Rome, May 16, 2010*

Friends, this moment of your life is particularly decisive, because in us, in each of us, there is a battle between the “one voice of the ideal”¹ (as we sang), that we all feel vibrate within us, and all those circumstances that often seek to stifle this voice, so that we do not know which way to go. This is a battle each of you experiences inside, and therefore this moment is particularly dramatic, because choices like the ones you are about to make are decisive in life, because one begins to become aware of all the factors and see one’s own face emerge: “What am I here for? What am I to do for the world?” I understand very well the drama that each person can experience in this period of life; it is a period that forces us to choose. You are about to finish high school. You have to choose. You have to begin to choose. Life does not wait for us. You have to choose, because not choosing is already a choice. Everybody at the end of high school chooses. They place themselves in life with a face, and there is this battle: “Don’t stop at the court of dwarf souls who repeat gestures and don’t know how to understand. Don’t go up to the castle of the just youth who adore the sun.”² Instead, the ideal invites us to battle against this reduction. The first awareness we must have is of this battle underway.

The second question is the road, to know the road for reaching that ideal, because “man walks when he knows well where to go.”³

Fr. Giussani teaches us: “Only in clarity and confidence can we find the energy to act.”⁴ For this reason, we want to help each other to clarify what we need in order to live, so we can throw ourselves into life, because it is a need of the moment in which you live, an urgency that is born in the depths of your being, the discovery that life is vocation.

1) WHAT’S WORTH LIVING FOR?

The first question of vocation, that we have to look in the face, is not about what to choose. This is the consequence. The first question, the one that urges so often within our hearts, is “Why do I exist? Why am I in the

world? What's worth living for? What use am I? What use is my "I"? As you can see, it is the first question of life, the fundamental question of each of us. The very first decision is to take this question seriously, this urgent need, because as R. M. Rilke says, "All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope,"⁵ to make us act according to other criteria. Stopping this question would mean committing violence against the nature of man, killing the nature of man, blocking our "I" in its course toward life. For this reason we are together this morning, above all so as not to block this question, not to block the voice of the ideal.

Let's imagine that a piece of anything, for example, the wheel of a car, asked itself, "What is my utility? What am I here to do?" The wheel could only understand in the context of the relationship, in its nexus with the entire car, because every piece of reality understands itself in its nexus with everything. For this reason, if we ask ourselves "What does my life serve? What am I called to do?" the issue is to find the criterion that binds us to everything, "that criterion, following which, man makes himself useful to the world in such a way as to walk continually more toward his personality, toward his happiness, [...] not toward his loss."⁶ Pay attention, because this is fundamental: serving the world does not mean a loss of ourselves. Serving the world is a gain for us, our realization. Understanding this is fundamental, because many think that the only way to fulfill yourself is through self affirmation (not affirming yourself in relation to the totality, but in relation to yourself) and for this reason, then, end up alone in a hiding place, asking themselves what meaning there is in life. This is why it is so decisive. For my fulfillment, I have to understand what I am here for in the world, because without this I inexorably lose myself. How can we understand this? How can I understand what I am in the world for? What am I useful for? In order to answer this question, you have to understand the sense of the world, what the meaning of the world is. This, my friends, is mysterious for us: what is the meaning of the totality? What is the meaning of the world, of history?

As Saint Paul said, "He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us."⁷ It would be truly difficult to discover the meaning of the world – or, in other words, God – and therefore my usefulness in this world, if we remained in the dark, in this mystery. "For one's whole life, the true moral law would be that of waiting for the nod of this unknown "lord," attentive to the signs of a will that would appear to us through pure, immediate cir-

cumstance. I repeat: man, the human being's rational life would have to be suspended on the instant, suspended in every moment upon this sign, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, yet the circumstances through which the unknown "lord" drags me, provokes me toward his design."⁸ In theological erudite terms, Saint Thomas Aquinas affirmed, "The truth concerning God that reason is able to attain is accomplished only by a very few, and this only after much time and not without the inclusion of error."⁹

But the Mystery has had mercy on us; seeing us so lost, He had mercy on us and entered into history to reveal to us what we by ourselves cannot penetrate. He became man to help men be themselves, to reveal the ultimate sense of the world and help us to understand the meaning of life. Jesus Christ used an expression to describe the meaning of the world: the Kingdom of God. All the value of reality is to build the Kingdom of God, to participate in the construction of this Kingdom, that is, to participate in the building of a world that corresponds to the Ideal made flesh. Therefore He gave a fundamental contribution for understanding our place in the world. My value and your value lie in the measure to which we collaborate in the Kingdom of God, in the measure to which we help humanity to walk toward happiness. Because it is only in participating in this Kingdom – which is the acknowledgment of His presence among us – that the individual can reach his own happiness, his own fulfillment.

You have to work on each of these sentences, asking yourselves, "Is it true or not?" It's not that repeat the sentences like a logical sequence and the problem is finished, no! You have to ask, because otherwise you won't understand the importance of what we are saying and after you will decide haphazardly because you do not understand. In these passages, life is truly at stake. Therefore, this is a precious, fundamental moment for making a leap in the awareness of who I am, what I am doing here for the world, and what the meaning of the world is. "So the criterion for the choice of vocation cannot be anything else but how I, with all I am, spiritually or intellectually, with my temperament, my upbringing, and my physical condition, can be most useful for the Kingdom of God."¹¹

2) THE DISCOVERY OF VOCATION

How can I understand the signs that enable me to clarify how I can best serve the Kingdom of God? I have to identify that complex that I am in order to be able to understand how I can use everything I have, everything that has been given me, to serve the Kingdom of God. I'll take what Fr. Giussani said and for clarity divide it into three major criteria. The first criterion to look at is the complex of natural inclinations or

gifts. Each of us has a series of capacities, desires, drives, a temperament.

They are precious gifts that we have to put to the service of something else. They are given to us, all these gifts, for something in life, to use them, to live: how can I use all these gifts that the Lord has given me to better serve the Kingdom of God? “For example, there is a temperament of intelligence that seems idiotic when applied to mathematics and genius when it’s a matter of building [...] a short story: it’s a literary genius, that in mathematics would seem idiotic.

If such a person is forced to enroll in the Polytechnic, they block a contribution to humanity.”¹¹ If the teacher, father, mother, little sister, nanny, and dog tell you, “No, you have to do the Polytechnic,” they ‘kill’ you. It seems banal. You cannot be happy, able to render good, able to serve. You have not found your place in the world and for this reason you have been ripped off, because you choose something from outside, not having taken seriously your gifts. “For example, there is a type who is brilliant in musical art. If you force him to do Private and Public Law, certainly that individual’s contribution to humanity will be diminished, and thus his journey will be made more toilsome, because the two things always coincide. The intensity or the beauty – the beauty of the journey – since beauty is the splendor of truth – coincide with the usefulness that we achieve in the world [...].

The beauty of the journey corresponds to the fulfillment of our vocation. Thus, in order to identify this conditioning [this complex of received gifts, inclinations, talents], it is necessary first of all to pay attention to one’s natural talents or capacities [that for which I have a tendency, a facilitation, a genius].

What is the name for the phenomenon that brings to the surface the talents, the natural capacities? It is called “inclination,” inclination. [...] Nature introduces us to ideals, but always through a gusto or inclination, pleasure, or need. [...] Therefore, the first major rule is [...] simplicity,¹² the sincerity of looking at and acknowledging and embracing these talents as the first sign that reality offers me for understanding what I am doing in the world. The most serious error that you can commit in determining your own vocation “is putting yourself in a condition of distrust of your own inclinations, of the gusto, the pleasure inasmuch as it is authentic, [...] inasmuch as it is inborn.”¹³ In summary, the talents, temperament, and tendencies of which we are constituted are those we have to look at because it is through them that the Mystery calls us, giving us these capacities, these inclinations within the flesh. He does not send us an angel; rather, He molds our inner depths to tell us what He calls us to, because He is the one

who made us this way. Therefore even one’s professional orientation, for example, must take into account these inborn tendencies as the road for walking where God, through the capacities He gives us, calls us.

He calls you, but He calls you not from outside. He calls you giving you all these inclinations.

Second criterion: the inevitable conditions or the inevitable circumstances. Fr. Giussani says that “the inevitable circumstance is certainly – how can I put it? – the thing that is most friend to us in the whole world, because it is the most evident factor of our existence. Because in the evaluation of our inclinations and gifts, often there is the possibility of uncertainty or fear...”¹⁴ Not everyone is Mozart or has the such clarity of gifts and talents from the beginning; at times it is not so evident, while the unavoidable circumstances are evident and, for example, a young woman could want to do astronomy because she is truly gifted for this, but – let’s think – because of a family circumstances, for lack of resources, a truly inevitable circumstance, she cannot do it, because her family had an economic collapse with the recession. So then it turns out that she has to get a job. Inevitable circumstances determine the chance of doing certain things or not.

A fellow wants to be a cyclist or go to the Olympics because he is truly gifted athletically, but he has an accident and ends up with a permanent limp. In order to understand what you are in the world to do, the first thing is not to get angry, but to accept this inevitable circumstance. Imagine the fellow who ended up with a limp, being stubborn and insisting, “No, I want to go to the Olympics.” I would be pig-headedness, a tantrum! From the vocational point of view, Fr. Giussani says, “The inevitable circumstance is a hundred percent with absolute certainty the index of the road to take.

Therefore there is nothing that is more friend to us than the inevitable circumstance, the fact.”¹⁵

I’ll add a fundamental aspect, a fundamental observation: nothing is fatality in this. Destiny is not fate: everything, really everything, is an instrument of vocation! Are you sure that by being an athlete you would reach your fullness and your satisfaction better than through that inevitable circumstance? No. To embrace this accident as part of the journey toward destiny is to await with curiosity how the Lord will manage to bring me to happiness through my being lame. It does not introduce a doubt! I am not there crying for the rest of my life. Rather, this inevitable condition becomes the fundamental element through which the Mystery will make me reach destiny, the ideal, happiness. If instead we stop at the anger, it will be our tomb, because in life many accidents can happen along the way that

are inevitable, but if we had no possibility for life continuing to have meaning (and we think only certain people with certain capacities can reach the goal), we will depend only upon chance. Instead, any circumstance is part of reaching destiny and happiness.

This is truly liberating, because happiness does not depend on worldly success, but on my service of the whole, of the Kingdom of God (therefore being the Minister or being the doorman can be the same).

Third criterion: social need, or better, the need of the world and of the Christian community. At this historical moment, you have to look the world in the face: what does it need? What does the Church need? What does the Christian community need? Each of us has to look at what he or she perceives as more urgent, because there can be periods and situations in which the urgent need for total dedication to God is stronger, while in another moment it is more decisive that we be men and women in the midst of reality, in work, in families, who can testify from within the fabric of society where everyone lives what life is, what the meaning of living is. So in this way, too, we can discover what we are called to.

“Judgment must flow from the complex of those factors put together. But his involves another consideration: without reflexiveness and without a comparison – dialogic comparison – with the community in its typical function, that is, with those who guide the community, it is inevitable that our way of proceeding will be instinctive and mechanical.

For all other things we reflect, while for this, upon which depends the entire structuring of our life in its most personal value, we automatically let what we feel inside lead. We have to reflect, and reflecting means comparing with our own destiny, our own end, God, the purpose of life, service of the Kingdom of God.

Those who still have the problem intact must feel the need to immediately recover these criteria, and even those who have behind them ineliminable factors, albeit in another way, must recover the same criteria.”¹⁶ Imagine winning the lottery and receiving several million dollars.

The normal thing is to ask someone where to put the money so you won't lose it with a crazy investment, right? Asking is not a duty: it is in your best interest. It is in your best interest to talk to someone so as not to lose this money.

Certainly, in the end I decide, but I would like to decide with full awareness so I can get the most out of the winnings. If this happens with money, imagine what happens with life: I want to be sure I have taken into consideration all the factors that enable me to make a complete decision, because reason is the awareness of all the factors.

3) THE CHOICE OF VOCATION

With all this, there are two fundamental issues to decide, two fundamental choices that each of us is called to make in life.

a) *Vocation as choice of state of life*

There are two fundamental states of life: one is the “normal,” natural one of placing yourself before God through the mediation of another person.”¹⁷ What does it mean to place yourself before God through the mediation of another person? That, falling in love, the person who makes you vibrate, who most opens you, who most revives you, who most calls you to something other is a mediator. You are called to open yourself to the totality through this fact that has happened to you, that you find yourself with. If God gives you this person, it is not to block you there, but to open you more to the Mystery, to open you more to that totality for which you were made: so then you begin to have some sign of what vocation God calls you to. You walk toward God through a mediation, in the company of the mediation of an other. In this sense one follows the great law that unites man to God through worldly reality, and so one says, “With this person, I'll go to the ends of the earth,” I'll go to destiny.

I am called to go to destiny with this person because she calls me more to the purpose of life. It is not that this person will make me happy, because she will not make me happy – be careful, because you always err in this – inasmuch as my desire is too great and this is most evident precisely here: no person can revive all your desire of happiness like that person, but at the same time, no person is more incapable of fulfilling it than that person.

This is why one must not reprove one's husband or wife for this incapacity, but understand that he or she is part of the vocation, that this person is given to reawaken all your desire to walk together toward He who fulfills it (this is why it is a vocation, because it is the possibility of reaching destiny). If instead you identify destiny with that person and you stop there, then you think, like everyone, “Ah, now I know why I was born.” So in your head, what does your usefulness for the world become? Loving this person, period! “Why do I have to go further? Why do I have to open myself further?”

Afterwards, people suffocate and separate because they cannot stand it anymore: they are so made for each other that they cannot stand each other anymore! If we make this error, we end up as we see so many ending up today, because we do not understand the nature of the experience of love, of that for which the

Mystery makes us this way: to open us more to He who can fill life. “In the Christian context the reality of this state [which is forming a family] is

fundamental because to it is entrusted the very possibility of prolonging the Kingdom of God in the world [through children].¹⁸

But in the life of the Church there is another state of life, that of virginity, “that also constitutes a fundamental function and that will appear even more clearly if we recover the ultimate and exhaustive reason for which one offers oneself to God: this reason is the imitation of Christ [Christ, the Mystery made flesh, put into history a modality for being useful to the Kingdom of God which is to live for this Kingdom, to live to do the will of God giving all one’s life for this. It is precisely what Jesus did, who did not form a family, but gave His entire life to this].

The imitation of Christ is the law of all Christians, but in the choice of a state of this kind, it objectively reaches its apex [a vocation to virginity touches its apex] because it is the imitation of the state of Christ in its fullness. The state of Christ in its fullness was a relationship with the Father that, from a certain point of view, as person, was not mediated by anything [just as in marriage the relationship with the Father is mediated by an other, here the relationship with the Father is not mediated by anything].¹⁹ Those who are called to this state are called to a unique, immediate, direct relationship with the Mystery.

This is virginity: God calls, God introduces a seed into life, an experience of living that makes you so full, so grateful, it makes possible for you an experience of life because of which you say, “I want this,” and this makes you free to give all your life, not in order to mutilate it. It is because of a fullness, not first of all because of a sacrifice, because of being fascinated by Christ that one can feel the urge to give Him everything: “I am for you, Christ.” Pay attention. Nobody should think of this road for any other reason than this fullness! It is not because it is more perfect. It is not because it is more beautiful, no. It is because one lives a fullness and does not want to lose it for anything in the world, so much so that those who find it within perhaps had thought of a different road, had never thought of this, and find in themselves such a fullness that they say, “This is too, too beautiful not to follow it.” This is why Fr. Giussani says, “Christ, with His virginity, was not a mutilated person.

Therefore, the concept of renunciation, if it indicates the psychological reverberation that existence generates in that case, from the point of view of value, from the ontological point of view, is not renunciation of some thing, but is the entering into a deeper and more final possession of things. The virginity of Christ was a deeper way of possessing woman, a deeper way of possessing things. This had, so to speak, its fulfillment in the fact of the resurrection, through which Christ possessed all things as we will pos-

sess them at the end of the world. In this sense, virginity, in the sphere of the Christian community, is the paradigmatic, exemplifying, ideal situation to which all should refer.²⁰ It is the paradigm, the example, the ideal not of a non-possession, but of a truer possession.

The other day, during a break in lessons at Catholic University, a girl came up to me and said that after years of having a boyfriend, she would like to return to that first moment, that first glimmer of the relationship with him,” before even touching each other: this is virginity! Why, after all these years, did this girl feel nostalgia for that moment? Because everything that happened afterwards did not create even a shred of the fullness she experienced then. This girl is still with her boyfriend, but she desires this, desires a possession of the other like this, and to be possessed by her boyfriend like this, like in that first moving instant.

Virginity is a deeper way to possess woman, a deeper way to possess things. And today, the Feast of the Ascension, is the celebration of this: when the risen Christ entered into the profundity of things, possessing them. We, too, will possess them at the end of time. It is a true fulfillment affectively speaking, because it is what everyone is called to: “Virginity, therefore, in the life of the Church [in the Kingdom of God] represents the supreme function, so much so that the history of the Church identified testimony in its supreme forms in two points: virginity and martyrdom. Virginity, in the context of the Christian community, constitutes function and witness at the end of life.”²¹

In it we can cry to all, “Look, what you love your girlfriend for, your boyfriend, what you marry for, what you have children for has a name that I cry out to you with my life: Christ. What you are made for, having a wife and children is possible; it exists; I testify it to you. Why? Because I have given my life to this, and my life would not exist, would not be, if He were not present. It would be impossible if Christ had not entered into history and fascinated us so much as to be able to live for Him.”

Which of the two roads is to be embraced, then? “The choice between one or the other road cannot be our own “creation”; it must be our “acknowledgment.” We have to acknowledge something for which we have been destined. It must not be our own decision in the sense that our will builds its own position, but in the sense that our freedom adheres to the indication that marks the road for us.”²² So then, the fundamental question for the choice of vocation is to educate ourselves to the Mystery, educate ourselves to being entirely wide open, reaching out to discover the signs through which I can understand what I am called to.

And many times, my friends, this is complicated, because we are made

for the “therefore;” we have to reach clarity and so we want to accelerate the journey when it is still unclear – we feel a strange discomfort, impatience. Since this position is dizzying, we want to get over with it immediately and often we err; instead of waiting for the signs to come forth through which the Mystery gives me all the indications to obey, we either decide or we let someone else decide. Because deep down, the road is an obedience, an obedience that has within all that for which I am made, that keeps in mind all the factors that make me truly myself: it is not “my” decision.

b) Vocation as choice of profession

All that we have said also helps us to understand the road of the profession to undertake, but I would like to underline fundamentally one thing.

“The modern conception of life never shows itself so far from the Spirit of Christ as in the whole question of vocation. Today’s mentality accustoms us to look to the future with a criterion focused on profit, enjoyment, and comfort. The road to choose, the person to love, the profession to undertake, the faculty or department in which to enroll – everything is determined by the criterion of absolute utility for the individual. And this seems so obvious and taken for granted that the shock of the provocation seems to be a challenge to common sense, an infatuation, an exaggeration, even to many educators who conceive of themselves as Christians or parents who are worried about the worldly success of their children. Judgments in public and private life, advice for the good life, warnings and corrections – everything is dictated by a point of view in which the total devotion to, and preoccupation with, the Kingdom is completely absent, in which the reality of Christ is missing.”²³ We can belong to Student Youth, we can have encountered Christ, but in the decisive moment of fundamental choices He is extraneous. Therefore this moment is dramatic, just talking about it gives me the shivers. I can just imagine what shivers you must feel, who have to choose, so contrary is it to the entire mentality in which we are immersed.

Do you understand why it is a battle? The battle in us is between following the one voice of the ideal (may it be this one that indicates the road) or letting ourselves be swallowed up by the mentality of the world. If we do not say this to each other, we are not friends; I tell you this because I am a friend for you, because the issue is the goal of life, the issue is what we are here for. If, in this key moment of decision-making, we do not connect the choice of profession with what we are here for, we will get lost along the way. “How can I make the world work to my advantage? How can I get the most out of everything and everyone?” -- these are the criteria dictated by

collective wisdom and pragmatism. The Christian mentality overturns, contradicts, and represses those questions, forcing the exact opposite to the fore: “How can I give myself as I am, serve all things, the Kingdom, and Christ evermore?” This is the only educative criterion for the human personality as redeemed by the light and strength of the Spirit of Christ.”²⁴

“In the choice of work and profession, what must come to the fore is that third category mentioned before: the needs of society. For the Christian, these cannot be a criterion isolated from the other, deeper concept: the need of the Christian community”²⁵ So then, deep down, what does this openness mean, if not readiness, openness to vocation? This is what we have to ask: that the Lord give us the grace to see all the signs that enable us to identify our vocation in such a way as not to mistake the road, and to make us open – because at times we can see it clear as day, but not be open to it.

“The profound availability of our complete life to the service of all things is also extremely important for understanding *what* it is we are called to carry out, *for understanding our personal vocation.*”²⁶ Because, my friends, vocation is not a command. Nobody commands you to do anything here, this morning. Not even Christ gave a command. It is a suggestion, an invitation, a possibility glimpsed, and it leaves you all your freedom. After all we have said, all the freedom, dramatically, is in your hands.

¹ C. Chieffo, “Parsifal (Song of the Ideal)” in *Canti*, Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milano 2001, p. 236.

² *Ivi.*

³ C. Chieffo, “Il Popolo Canta” [The People Sings], in *Canti*, op. cit., p. 238.

⁴ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006, Montreal, p. 78.

⁵ R. M. Rilke, *The Duino Elegies, II*, in *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, Vintage International, translated by Stephen Mitchell, 2009, p. 13.

⁶ L. Giussani, Intervento alle Vacanze Maturati, Campitello, 28-30 luglio 1964 [Archivio di Cl]. [Talk at the Vacation for Students Graduating from High School, Campitello, July 28-30, 1964] [CL Archive].

⁷ Acts 17:26-27.

⁸ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 135.

⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 1.

¹⁰ L. Giussani, “Life’s Vocation,” in *Traces*, June 2005, Page One.

¹¹ L. Giussani, Intervento alle Vacanze Maturati, Campitello, 28-30 luglio 1964 [Archivio di Cl].

¹² *Ivi.*

¹³ *Ivi.*

¹⁴ *Ivi.*

¹⁵ *Ivi.*

¹⁶ L. Giussani, «The Vocation of Life», in op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ivi.*

¹⁹ *Ivi.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 2-3.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

²² *Ibid.* p. 4.

²³ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, op. cit. p. 79.

²⁴ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, op. cit. p. 79.

²⁵ L. Giussani, “The Vocation of Life,” in op. cit., p. 5.

²⁶ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, op. cit. p. 79.