

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, January 22, 2020

Reference text: L. Giussani, S. Alberto, and J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 17–29.

- *Ballata dell'amore vero (Ballad of true love)*
- *Give me Jesus*

Glory Be

When one sings, as we have just heard, “You can have all the world, but give me Jesus,” is that person crazy? Is it something that he has made up in his mind? What an experience must the author of that song have had in coming to the realization that he can have the whole world, but that that wouldn't be enough for him to live if he didn't have Jesus! “In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus.” How can we attain this self-awareness, this way of getting up in the morning, surprising ourselves with this thought? It is clear. We can do this only if something happens in our life that makes a presence so familiar that it generates an “I” that cannot help thinking of Him when he wakes up in the morning. Yet, for this to happen it isn't enough to “speak” of Christianity as an event, reducing it to an abstract category — a temptation to which we succumb often. It is necessary to experience Christianity as an event. That is what happens to those who fall in love — they have such a powerful experience that their lives are taken hold of! As we have seen in the pages of *Generating Traces* on which we have worked: “*To be recognized, God [the Mystery] entered man's life as a man [...] so that man's thought, imagination and affectivity were, in a way, 'blocked,' magnetized by him.*” The text continues, “*This encounter is what continually orients our life, imparting meaning and synthesis to our existence. Without it there is no source of awareness of life's newness.*” The encounter is “*something different that attracts us*” (pp. 17–18). An abstract category doesn't attract you like your beloved. The category of love does not attract like the person you love!

So, in order to truly understand what we will face today — how faith is born, how faith is part of the Christian event — the event of Christ must happen; otherwise faith is something added from the outside that doesn't come from our depths as a response to that event. Fr. Giussani speaks of an “*impact with an irreducible diversity*” and of “*something different that attracts us*” (p. 18). In this regard, I will read the contribution of a person who lives far away and couldn't be here tonight: “During the last year — as happens to all mothers and fathers — my husband and I have experienced a sense of dizziness with respect to our children, particularly in watching our eldest face life in the transition from high school to university and in his friendships, etc. [It has been a troubled transition.] I went to school late the other morning, and turning to me at a certain point my son said to me, ‘I finally understood that the question is not whether you do this or that, but how you do what you do. You, for example, are a person with such certainty that you are capable of doing things that would normally be embarrassing [to say that he must have seen this with his own eyes; it wasn't that his mother told him this]. I thought about all the socks I never found [of all the things he was mistaken about), about my poor cooking on Sundays, about when I want to make a good impression, about the fact that I do a thousand things between school and GS. I was amazed by what he said. ‘Certainty’ about what? What certainty does the way I live express? Certainly it doesn't come from my lecturing [It doesn't come from a category]. Whenever we talk and I fall into lecture mode, he immediately blocks me [thank God she has such a son!]. I am living

a ‘relationship.’ I am certain of a relationship that evidently makes me free of the consent or embarrassment of others. I understood that truly the only responsibility I have is not to be ‘pre-occupied’ for him, but to live what makes me free, to live faith within everything uncensored [that is the good the mother is for her son: to live everything uncensored starting from faith], because — even if I don’t notice it — my satisfaction has a greater impact on him than my worries; to live faith in relationship with authority, following one in which the ‘how’ he lives shows what corresponds to the heart now, in this world, with the questions that the circumstances open wide [that is the paternity of which we spoke at Beginning Day]. In this regard, I wanted to thank you for the letter you wrote to the Fraternity on January 2. Compared to the mentality to which I am accustomed in school, for which prudence often seems to be dictated by fear rather than by responsibility in educating, the perspective that your letter provides to the particular circumstances that we live recomposes the ‘I.’ Indeed, the circumstances, accepted as nonsecondary conditions for the verification of faith, educate us to look at things according to truth, which relaunches us into a free and truly human relationship, so that we are sure that without Christ we cannot do anything, but with Him everything is ours!”

The School of Community says, *“What strikes and moves us are people, faces with an identity that appears truer, that corresponds more to our heart, that is less determined by the whole web of factors that make up the social climate [which affect but can liberate everyone] as it is favoured by those in power and passively accepted by everyone”* (p. 18). This looks like nothing, but it is everything. Why? Because, as our friend documents, even while engaged in the same things as everyone else (being a mother, going to school, facing circumstances and challenges), she lives everything in a different way, so much so that even her son perceives in her a qualitative difference. It would be enough to verify how many times we have experienced Christianity as an event if we go away struck by the qualitative difference that we have grasped in some fact, meeting, or person. How many times have we talked about the event? Plenty! But how many of us were surprised by being struck by an encounter we had? Here the numbers drop, because we can all talk about the event as a category, but being struck in front of something that happens is another story. Be careful, however, because you are not struck because something amazing happens: *“The person we come across becomes an encounter if we find him engaged in a ‘different’ way — with a difference that attracts us — in the things that everyone does; if, that is, as he speaks, eats, and drinks, he perceptibly makes a qualitative difference and offers it to our existence, causing us to go away struck by the fact that eating and drinking have an absolute meaning, and a word spoken in fun has an eternal value”* (pp. 18–19). Fr. Giussani then observes, *“Think of those who saw Christ and heard him speaking, how they must have been struck!”* (p. 19). This is possible not only in front of the physical person of Jesus during his earthly existence — it isn’t that after Jesus everything went down the drain. There are still facts that strike us in the same way.

On December 23, the youngest of our three children turned 18, and to celebrate he organized a party in a restaurant in our area inviting 50 of his friends from school and GS. My wife and I arrived late in the evening for the cutting of the cake and the toast. At one point, the boys began to sing songs that are unusual for boys of their age to sing, accompanied by the guitar of a friend of theirs. Shortly thereafter in the square in front of the restaurant a small group of them began to sing old songs of the Alpine Regiment. These are things that for me are beautiful and normal.

The usual things.

“Usual” yes — I had already heard these songs many times. Seated at dinner at a table in the restaurant, there were some people who were dining and involuntarily attended the party. At a

certain point, one of them, then shortly followed by others, came to me with a startled face saying in a touched voice, "I have never seen anything like this!"

Do you all see the difference?

"How these kids stay together! How did you parents do it? I too would like my children to live like that!"

Did you have any special training to be a parent like this?

No, quite the contrary.

Have you attended any courses on affection, on parental psychology or something similar, as many do today? Where did this difference come from?

I was so struck by what that guy said to me! I replied that we had not done anything at all and immediately I found that my heart was deeply moved; I really felt how the presence of another had entered powerfully and given meaning to that party that previously was only beautiful, but then became an encounter with Christ, totalizing, right there, at that precise moment. Those who knew nothing restored the sight of those like me who thought they already knew everything. How amazing! I said to my wife, "Think — without Fr. Giussani's yes to Christ, this evening wouldn't have happened and nobody would have been able to experience a way of life that generates amazement and envy." Thank you also for your yes, which helps us look at everything with more truth every day.

It is impressive: the "pagans" must appear, as we see in the Gospel, to make us realize what we no longer see (because we are used to it, everything has become normal, already seen, common). A party. We have lived through a thousand parties, but most of the time for us a party is not an opportunity to recognize, to intercept, the occurrence of the event. It takes someone present at the same party who says to you, "I have never seen anything like this!" — repeating without knowing it, two thousand years after Jesus, the phrase reported in the Gospel that people spoke in front of Jesus. If we are attentive to what is happening, we can truly understand the title of the chapter we are working on now: "*Faith is Part of the Christian Event*" (p. 20). Why? Because by being "magnetized," captivated, struck, we can come to recognize a difference, as that person did, and we can arrive at saying, as you did, that such a party could not have happened without Christ. Faith doesn't arise from mental rumination. What made you remember Christ wasn't going to the temple, saying a prayer, or engaging in ablutions, but a party. As in the time of Jesus, it could happen during a wedding party, it could happen on a sycamore tree, it could happen along a public road. It is an event that happens in an unexpected way that allows the exceptionality that reveals the presence of the divine. If that guy who said those things to you had run into Jesus, he might have said — but not as a quote — that he would never leave Him. How many times during this month has it happened to us that we didn't want to leave someone we met? That is why first there is the fact, the experience of the fact, and only later can we understand why faith is part of the event; if we don't participate in the Christian event, we cannot recognize it. At this point, we can understand the definition of faith offered in the text: "*The attitude of one who is struck by the Christian event, who recognizes it and adheres to it, is called 'faith'*" (ibid.).

I went to study with some friends for a few days, and I had a conversation with one of them that really impressed me. He told me that his brother is an atheist. When he met the movement at the university, this friend of ours had tried to share the life he had met with his brother. Now, during the Christmas holidays he returned home and his brother told him that he wanted to go to Mass. Our friend asked him, "How come? What happened to you?" "I listened to a priest at the university speak, and now I have the desire to go to Mass." Then he asked him, "What is the

movement of Communion and Liberation?” It struck me because this friend of mine said that at first he responded to his brother by explaining everything abstractly (the charism of Fr. Giussani, the School of Community, and all the rest), but neither of them was able to understand the other.

Do you see how we return to abstract categories? God makes something happen and we become abstract, we explain the category!

In fact, at one point his brother said to him, “Look, I’m not understanding anything you are saying.”

Thank goodness he said that!

“But I saw how you and your friends were together when you came to have breakfast here at home last summer.”

The explanation of the category of “event” is not needed; the brother saw something different in their way of being together at breakfast.

About that breakfast, we had been traveling all night because we were going on vacation, so we arrived exhausted, zoned out, and we barely said two words to each other; it isn’t that we were — as you often suggest — in top form, yet he saw a new life in us. In the conversation that followed there was the dramatic fact that, on the one hand, we want a person we care about, a brother or a friend, to meet what we have met, we wish the other could meet Jesus; however, on the other hand, it is liberating to recognize that we don’t make it happen, and that the Lord uses us. It happens through me, but it is not me, not my ability, that makes it happen. In those days of study, it was truly liberating for me even in my relationship with my friends; that is, it made me regain the grace that I received through the encounter with the movement.

With respect to the desire of communicating to others what you have encountered, what have you learned from what you have told us? How do you communicate it?

If I think about ...

Stick with what you told us — don’t add anything because you would be wrong!

It isn’t an explanation, but a friendship, a life in progress that communicates.

“A life in progress.” What we have encountered is communicated by living, eating, drinking, and even by having breakfast when half asleep. The first thing that surprised you was that the kid was amazed by something even as you were there like zombies; even in that moment something can be communicated because Christ is not affected by how we feel. The only question is whether we are so immersed in the experience that generates us that at a certain point the newness of it is communicated, almost in spite of ourselves. What passes to others is not our performance, but a difference that — as we can see and the text says, pay attention here! — is something different from our ideas and our strategies, but at the same time, “*originally corresponds to the profound expectations of our person*” (ibid.). Yet, exactly because it is different from our ideas, because it communicates itself in a totally different way, we are challenged. What does it take to be available to this difference? The simplest thing: sincerity. You don’t need a performance or who knows what strategy. It is enough to let yourself be struck in simplicity by what happens. “*Faith is having the sincerity to recognize, the simplicity to accept, and the affection to cling to such a Presence*” (p. 21). It is striking that Fr. Giussani describes faith by means of such a simple thing as sincerity.

Last Saturday, a very close friend of mine organized a party for his 50th birthday. He invited all of his friends who have been close to him over the years. In the end, there were many people there, about 150. Among the guests there was also a dear friend of mine, with whom I practically grew up, but who has been absent from the movement for at least ten years, and moreover lives, for work reasons, in another city. The reasons for his growing distance from our experience were

mainly linked to the results of quarrels and misunderstandings with some of his friends in the community that never healed. The few times I saw him, there was an huge distance that seemed to me to be unbridgeable. The party didn't go exactly as I had expected. A little disappointed, on the night of the party and the next morning I thought of that friend of mine who had come from afar, wondering, "What did he see during and after dinner? A situation that wasn't measuring up to our experience!" Unexpectedly, two days later, early in the morning, he called me. He wanted to express his deep gratitude for that evening. He told me that in recent years he had searched and searched everywhere to no avail for a group or friends who were commensurate with his desire for fulfillment, and only in staying with us that night had he come across the impact of a clear and full difference, which was present in every gesture: at table with us, in the singing, in the way we served the dishes, in the way we looked at and welcomed him after so many years. He ended by saying, "I need to be with you, I would like to start again, I don't want to lose certain relationships; I don't know if Christ is involved in all this, but I really think He is!" I was stunned! On that evening, in our attempt to approach him with the best of intentions, but which in my opinion had turned out to be a bit clumsy in many ways and which had left a bad taste in my mouth, for him the event had happened again! Within our attempt, more or less clumsy, grace was revealed to him and, while as he was speaking to me, also to me! This was Grace, which uses everything so that it can happen, even our miserable attempt. We need only eyes full of need and a willingness to see Grace.

Our clumsy attempt. We cannot make anything but clumsy attempts, yet they are exactly what the Mystery uses to communicate a difference. We gave our best to organize a good party, which then seemed unsuccessful to us, and someone who might have been skeptical because he had been disappointed in the past — not someone new who didn't know anything yet, someone pure and transparent — but one weighed down by the crust of what he had seen before and by his wound, was able to see what we no longer see. The prodigal son sees what the older son no longer sees; history repeats itself! even to point of saying, "I don't know if Christ is involved in all of this, but I really think He is!" As you can see, faith, the recognition of Christ, flows from experience, even in the face of a clumsy attempt. A story like the one you recounted could not happen except by virtue of something else. Yet, sometimes, instead of this sincerity (which anyone can have, even someone who has been gone for years, because there is no need for any particular predisposition), something extraneous is introduced into our daily lives that prevents us from looking at things with simplicity.

Indeed, that is what struck me. Reading the text of the School of Community, I realized that when Fr. Giussani speaks of faith as an event that involves you, he uses the terms "extraneous," "external," and "foreign" six times on a single page, stating that we introduce "extraneous factors" that have nothing to do with the event and that make us lose touch with reality. I asked myself, "Why does he insist so much on these words, repeating them again and again on the same page?" Then, in looking at my life I recognized that what Fr. Giussani says is true, that I continually insert extraneous factors into things. Some examples came to mind: when I insert extraneous factors into the truest relationships, I ruin them; when in the morning I think about the day, if I don't start from what happens and strikes me, I complicate my life; when I meet a new person, if I reduce him or her to my preconceptions, I lose my chance with them immediately. I admitted to myself that Fr. Giussani is right, that I continue to insert extraneous factors. Yet, these extraneous factors don't disappear magically just because I admit this.

They don't disappear simply because one realizes what is happening.

Exactly. Even if I see them all. Then I realized that the most important thing for me isn't to spend time analyzing those factors. I have been in the movement for some time and know that this isn't enough for me to overcome the extraneous factors I insert every day.

Thank goodness, because this frees you, at least from your moralism.

Eh, at least from that!

Unfortunately, many still have the illusion that they are able to succeed by virtue of what they do.

Exactly. I have understood that I feel anxious about my performance, that sometimes I don't trust authority, and that at other times I think that my idea is better than what others think. Yet, that is not the problem.

We both share the same opinion!

The problem is whether I decide to work on what He has brought into my life. There lies my serious problem.

What work?

Taking seriously what He has brought into my life, which is stronger than my "extraneous factors," my inconsistencies, and my inability. That means that there is room for me even if I am bad, even if I am a sinner — there is always a possibility for me, but I have to work on what He introduces into my life.

Has anyone done this work? Has anyone been surprised to see Christ win despite their having introduced factors unrelated to experience?

At the meeting of a small group of School of Community, a friend, the mother of a seriously ill friend of ours, spoke, saying that her brother had died unexpectedly over the holidays. A few days later, just as unexpectedly, they had discharged her son from the hospital. She had found herself experiencing both circumstances (one painful and the other beautiful) in the same way; that is, as a call, and for this reason she said that she felt gratitude. A friend pushed her, asking, "Why did you not reproach the Lord in the face of your brother's death?" She replied, "I cannot reproach Him because the experience I have had in recent months with my son teaches me that nothing belongs to us and that there is a good plan for everyone. I wouldn't be able to look at things without thinking about that." I had arrived at the School of Community with an open wound — an extraneous factor — the cause of which I attributed to something that was painful for me, and her words offered me the key to deal with it in a different way from what I had imagined. They provided a disarming concreteness to the pages of the School of Community (point 7) that I had read but had somehow remained "mute" for me.

This is fundamental from the point of view of the method, otherwise we complicate our lives by trying to understand the words of the School of Community abstractly, making our heads run in circles, instead of starting from a fact that facilitates an understanding of what we read.

In fact, this woman's contribution enlightened me with respect to Fr. Giussani's insistence on being "simple and sincere" in the face of the event, in which there is nothing "foreign in the relationship with reality" (p. 21), and which allows us to look at things with simplicity. Listening to her enlightened me because many times, faced with something that happens, especially if it involves me in conflict or if it is something bad, I think that the problem is the circumstance, and so I blame the circumstance. Instead what she said made me realize that the problem was not the circumstance (in her case, the death of her brother, and therefore a big thing), but what the thing that happened revealed about my position. I quote Fr. Giussani: "Our position regarding the event of Christ is the same as that of Zacchaeus [...] [or] of the widow" (p. 20). It is in front of what happens that I become aware of my position. What does my position rest on? On the experience of

a love. Fr. Giussani says, “To know, we need an attitude of openness, that is, of ‘love.’ Without love man cannot know” (p. 22). *I thought of myself while she spoke and asked myself, “Where do I go to find my position in front of what I don’t understand, what saddens or hurts me?”*

Everyone must ask themselves where to look for their position. With this question you enter into dialogue with everyone.

My position rests, or not, first on an experience of love, and therefore on a judgment. I have understood that there is a fundamental position in me that rests, or not, on my experience, on the judgment of that Love, that Good, that has taken hold of my life. When I don’t consider Him, then anger, recrimination, and resentment dull my sight and prevent me from truly living. Rediscovering that the consistency of my life is based on a judgment that is played out in every aspect of life has opened up a horizon that I couldn’t possibly imagine. That woman’s contribution was fundamental for me; first of all, it freed me from what had hurt me for a long time because I was able to immediately look at and judge it, and second, because it allowed me to begin looking at all kinds of circumstances that come into my life, not as problems to solve, but as allies – they do me the “favor” of revealing to me the position I in fact took with respect to the love that entered my life.

This is crucial: the problem is not what happens, but our position with respect to what happens, because if we don’t have the right attitude, we don’t understand, says the School of Community. “*In the end, only that lively openness to the object that becomes affection enables the object to touch us for what it is (affici, to be touched by)*” (ibid.). Why is this crucial? Because “*the eye of reason sees [...] to the degree that it is sustained by affection, which already expresses freedom’s engagement*” (ibid.). This is impressive: we can truly look at reality only when we are so caught up in affection that it opens our eyes wide, so that we don’t just look through a keyhole. If we can’t open our eyes to see reality, then in trying to get out of a situation that hurts us, we turn Christianity into a Herculean effort. On the contrary, it is enough to widen our gaze so that everything becomes different, causing the nature of Christianity to emerge: “*Faith is part of the Christian event because it is part of the grace that the event represents*” (ibid.). Without the event, I can’t have this way of looking to all of reality. We have experienced that. When a person falls in love, the presence of the beloved opens the way in which he or she looks at everything. In the same way, the presence of its parents opens wide a child’s gaze, and everything becomes different. This is the value of what happens: the event, Fr. Giussani says, “*enhances the mind’s cognitive capacities, tuning the penetration of the human gaze upon the exceptional reality that has provoked it,*” preventing man from reducing it to a measure of his own. That is how Christ wins in us. “*We call this the grace of faith*” (*The Risk of Education*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019, p. 87). Having this openness is a grace; faith allows me to see. It is very simple: the atheist brother sees something different during a breakfast, and the friend who has been gone for years sees the difference during a party and recognizes that it has something to do with Christ. No particular ability is required. What is needed is only the simplicity of adhering — that is the work we need to do — to what happens, without replacing it with strategies that are an expression of our moralism. It is simply a question of asking, which causes faith to reach its apex beyond reason: “*Faith,*” we read in the School of Community, “*flourishes on the extreme boundary of the rational dynamic as a flower of grace to which man adheres with his freedom*” (p. 24). If we didn’t start from experience, for us all these phrases would be as if they were written in Chinese; we would pass over them without understanding their meaning in the slightest.

How then does this flower of grace that is faith flourish?

I was immediately struck by this statement in the School of Community, “So the question arises when faced with a Presence, otherwise it is not a reasonable question”(p. 25). I remembered something that happened to me with a friend just before Christmas. I met him at the university. He was a classmate, and we studied for exams together, often in the classroom of the student representatives. He noticed that the room was full of leaflets and Christian phrases here and there, and asked me what all of that was. We became very close friends and I invited him to the CLU Spiritual Exercises. He came; I introduced him to my friends and he was amazed. Then, after the university, with one thing and another, we didn’t see each other again. Just before Christmas, he began to bombard me with messages asking me to get together. He wrote me, “I have to tell you something dramatic and ironic. I haven’t talked about it with anyone. I am waiting for you to have an opportunity to discuss it.” He told me about a young woman he knows well who attempted suicide, and we discussed what remains steadfast, what holds in life. We talked for a while, and then he said to me, “Look, I only know that as soon as I heard about her attempting to commit suicide, you and the companionship of the movement came to mind. I wish she could get to know you.” What does it mean that the question can only arise in front of a presence, otherwise it is unreasonable? It means that because of what he saw and lived with me and my friends, he could ask a question about the meaning of what had happened and what is sustaining us in life when circumstances get tough only to me. He waited to ask me, not because I am great, but because of the Presence he saw in me and in others from the movement, a Presence that he evidently understands has to do with his need. The second thing that struck me was that his question made me think about what saves me today. In fact, when he said to me, “I thought of you and the companionship of the movement,” I answered him instinctively, “Look, actually it is not even me, nor the companionship of the movement that can save your friend.” In fact, I realized that there is a judgment that is increasingly certain in me; namely, that what make the companionship, me, relationships, and all circumstances exceptional, are not things in themselves, but the possibility of being able to say “You” in all those things. Without that “You” even the movement would ultimately be a huge bluff: something that certainly makes us feel all its human warmth, but that in the end brings nothing new, and certainly doesn’t save us. We really have to get to the point of saying that “You”; otherwise, everything loses consistency and things that happen and encounters pass by without leaving a trace. This is memory for me: that I can today, when I meet people and experience the things that happen to me, recognize that You, even though You were born two thousand years ago, are still alive today.

The rational dynamic ends, it can’t help ending, in the “You” — as you said — if one is loyal to its impact. “We really have to get to the point of saying that ‘You’; otherwise, everything loses consistency and things that happen and encounters pass by without leaving a trace.” It is as if a child, a son, seeing all the things that this woman does for him, never says, “Mom.” He says it because he connects everything that happens to him, everything that that woman does in his presence. In fact, the things that the mother does pass away, but what remains is her presence, to which the son is increasingly attached. If everything that happens is not to increase this familiarity with that “You,” if we don’t get there, nothing leaves a trace, and everything disappears. We need to be aware of that.

At school, our principal, who is in the movement, is trying to help us make a journey on the three premises of The Religious Sense. There was a faculty meeting on the first of the three premises. I was not comfortable enough to say anything. Then the principal came in and started asking us questions, displaying a beautiful face, so grateful to have encountered Christ in her life. When I

*saw her like that, my heart started beating fast, like when I have something to say and if I don't say it I feel like a fool. Immediately afterwards, in fact, I recounted something that had happened to me the day before in class, from which a discussion with my colleagues then ensued, a normal discussion, but I was present and I was myself. What amazed me was the sudden freedom that I experienced, even to the point of speaking about myself, after spending the whole morning hiding; this only happened because I saw my principal like that. Her changed face changed mine, her regaining an awareness of her history helped me regain an awareness of mine. The thing that struck me most of all is that in the hours after the meeting, I erased this from my mind, as I almost always do; that is, I just forgot about it. In the evening a friend of mine sent me an email to tell me about a project she is doing in the classroom, an email that I didn't read for several hours because I had other things to do, and in any case it seemed that it had nothing to do with me. She nagged me with a text insisting, "Read it." At that point I read it. It was about Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and it recounted two positions of the character Bilbo Baggins, one facing reality and one facing his own thoughts. When I read it I instinctively replied to my friend, "This is exactly what happened to me today!" In telling her this, I became aware of what had happened to me. The thing that surprised me most is this: not only do You, Jesus, happen while I am being petty and hiding, but You also give me the grace to make me realize that You happened, even though I usually forget You.*

That is grace. That is the grace that He makes happen; otherwise we continue on as before without even realizing it. Instead, the encounter, like the one our friend described, is the beginning of a journey. Has anyone recognized within themselves this beginning of a journey?

*On the day we met to sell Traces for the month of mission we organized sales shifts in our department. After my shift, I went to class and put a Traces on the table because I was in a hurry. Unexpectedly the young man sitting next to me, intrigued by the title, asked me if he could take a look. I thought, "Good, he doesn't know CL, but when he realizes that it is a Christian magazine, he will certainly throw it away." After a few days I saw him again, and instead he asked if he could talk to me. He told me about his journey of faith (he comes from Africa, was Protestant, then skeptical, and finally had recognized because of some things that happened, that God is acting in his life) and asked me difficult questions that arose in him in reading the text of the *Beginning Day* (which was included in the issue of Traces we sold), about which he gave me a precise summary — while I didn't even remember what the text was talking about! — glad to have someone to talk to, to make a journey together. I was moved because my attempt had been nil — I didn't want to sell Traces to him — and that meeting was pure grace. The dialogue has continued in recent months. His sincerity and simplicity in asking his questions take me aback. That is why I wanted to introduce him to someone in our community, and last week I had lunch with him and a friend of mine. This lunch was also shocking for the simplicity with which he asked us questions and made himself available to listen to our experience. It struck us because at a certain point he asked us, "How do you manage to have faith? Why are you Christians?" We told him about our experience and the encounter that had happened to us. This strikes me because it made me understand that the first thing that must happen is grace: I don't produce this event, it is an Other who emerges and comes forward through me. But that is not enough, because it is really true that without the freedom that adheres to this exceptional presence, there is no faith. The day before, in fact, this friend of mine from the community told us that he had had a lunch scheduled with another student to talk about a place in his apartment, but as soon as the student learned that he was part of a religious movement, he got up and left, leaving my friend with his sandwich still in his hand. One really needs a loving recognition and the simplicity of adhering to something exceptional that*

happens. The questions that arose in my classmate in reading the text of the Beginning Day, his relationship with me, the lunch with this friend of mine, are the beginning of a journey, for him but also for me. In fact, at lunch he told us that he wants to become Catholic, that he is following a path toward baptism, not immediately, but in time, because he has many things to understand. He was in an attitude of true asking, of searching...at a certain point he also asked us if we really believed, for example, that Jesus had walked on the water. All these questions caused him to look with simplicity at what he had before him (us, the text of the Beginning Day, the testimonies reported in Traces, n.9 / 2019), trying in everything to take a step along the journey of faith.

These two examples in your story make us understand how freedom is always at play, even in the most beautiful, striking moments, including the moment in which the African student was enthralled, when it seemed that freedom is not involved (as we sometimes think). The reaction of the other kid, who as soon as he perceived that your friend was involved with a religious movement got up and left, implies an exercise of his freedom. For those who let themselves be struck, a path opens up. An encounter aroused in the young African student the desire, as we heard, to become a Christian, made him begin a path toward baptism, not immediately, but in time, because he has many things to understand. What does he have to understand? What does he want to understand? This need to understand is absolutely proper since he wants to take such a significant step as that of receiving baptism. That is the value of the last point of the School of Community (“*A Fact in the Present, a Fact in the Past*,” p. 26): one cannot have an encounter without trying to grasp its origin. Where does a present encounter sink its roots? That young man has to find out, and that is why he is interested in Jesus. But what does Jesus have to do with meeting you at the university? If the passage from a fact in the present to a fact in the past doesn’t take place in us, the fateful question will cyclically re-emerge — not in the last person to arrive, but in us who are here. After seeing a newness in life and hearing all the amazing things we say to each other every time we meet, why in the end we must say “Jesus”? This is the usual question! In other words, what does what I am experiencing in the present have to do with Jesus, a person who lived two thousand years ago? Why does that student feel the need to be baptized? As you can see, the passage of the last point from the first chapter of the School of Community is crucial, and if we don’t realize this, we will continue to ask that question. The encounter is the beginning of a journey that brings us back to the origin, as with Polycarp, who when he met John wondered where the difference came from and did not want fail to understand John’s encounter with Jesus. Fr. Giussani says that this also applies to us now and to that student: he too tries to understand. There are two directions that describe the dynamics of the Christian event, and we must follow them both if we want to understand: an event from the past takes place again in the present with all its exceptionality (that is the nature of the Christian event that has not remained in the past of two thousand years ago, as one of the people who contributed said), and a present event cannot be adequately explained except by an event of the past of which it is an expression now. With this key for understanding we can understand why that student, in order to arrive at baptism with full awareness, must begin to understand that the meaning of life is within a present event that has a whole history behind it, and that has its source in that Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary, whose birth we celebrated on Christmas, who died, rose, and continues to be present among us. In this way it will not be incomprehensible and abstract to ask for baptism, due to his discovery that the exceptional correspondence he is experiencing is possible only because the Word became flesh. Then he will have his entire life, as we do, to understand what is described in a beautiful and concise way in the statement by Laurence the Hermit that ends the chapter: “*I was told, All must be taken in without*

words and safeguarded in silence; then I understood that perhaps the whole of my life would be spent in recalling what had happened to me. And the memory of You fills me with silence” (p. 29).

The next School of Community will be held on Wednesday, February 26, at 9:00 p.m.

This month we will begin the second chapter of *Generating Traces*, addressing the first section entitled, “*The Event Goes on in History Through the Companionship of Believers.*” Let’s try not to turn the page, erasing what we have said thus far as if it had nothing to do with the origin, because the point is exactly about how that origin, that initial event, remains in history. Then, we will be able to understand why, when we see this event happen in the present, we say “Jesus.” We will also work on the second section, “*The Generative and Dynamic Law of ‘Companionship’: Election.*”

Pharmaceutical Bank. This year, on the occasion of the 20th year of the Pharmaceutical Bank, the Medicine Collection Day will last a full week, February 4–10. (The main day will still be Saturday, February 8.) We felt it necessary to extend the collection one week to respond to the continuous increase in need for health assistance for families and people living in conditions of poverty. Volunteers are needed in order for the initiative to take place, especially on Saturday, February 8. You can notify us of your availability by contacting the Pharmaceutical Bank. All relevant info is available on their website.

During this period, Masses are celebrated in Italy and abroad to commemorate the XXXVIII anniversary of the recognition of the Fraternity and the XV anniversary of the death of Fr. Giussani. This is a gesture of thanksgiving because, as we have heard in several contributions this evening, it would have been impossible for us to realize what faith is without the grace given to Fr. Giussani. So it seems to me that we have much to give thanks for. What we have received is a precious gift. The circumstances we find ourselves living, many times dramatic ones, help us to understand more and more the value of this grace.

Veni Sancte Spiritus.

Good evening everyone.