

**THE POINT FROM WHICH WE START AGAIN**  
**Notes from Davide Prosperi's Introduction**  
**to the International Assembly of Leaders of Communion and Liberation**  
*La Thuile (AO), August 26, 2022*

- *Come Holy Spirit*

Welcome! I would like to thank each of you personally for having come here to spend these days together, gathered from all over the world, after the crisis of the pandemic and in a certainly delicate moment in the history of the Movement. Fr. Carrón also wanted to participate through a message he asked me to bring you, and which I'll read now:

“Dear Friends, I send you a greeting full of affection at the beginning of this International Assembly of Leaders, which is gathering you from across the world to take a new step on the journey started by Fr. Giussani. ‘The circumstances through which God has us pass are essential and not secondary factors of our vocation, of the mission to which He calls us. If Christianity is the announcement of the fact that the Mystery became incarnate in a man, the circumstance in which one takes a position about this, in front of the whole world, is important to the very definition of witness’ (L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino. In cammino*, [Man and his Destiny. On the Way], Marietti, Genoa 1999, p. 63).

I was surprised to see this suggestion by Fr. Giussani embodied in a group of sick people whom I met with recently. I was struck to see that the gift of the Spirit given to Fr. Giussani allows our suffering friends who support this gift to face illness and even death in the certainty of the Father's love; they respond to this love in obedience, surrendering to it with a joy that is a surprise to all those who can see them experience the circumstance of their journey in such way.

There is a phrase by von Balthasar that has accompanied me in this period of my life and that I could see shine in these sick people, ‘This primal trust [of Jesus] in the Father, which no mistrust ever clouds, rests on the Holy Spirit common to Father and Son. In the Son, the Spirit keeps alive the unshakable trust that the Father's every ordinance [...] will always be an ordinance of love [the love of the Father], which the Son, now that he is a man, must reciprocate with human obedience’ (H.U. von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991, p. 31).

This same ‘unshakable trust’ has matured in those who have supported the encounter that marked our lives forever, immersed in a place—the life of the movement—that made us familiar with Christ by making us experience, with Fr. Giussani, that ‘the greatest joy of a person's life is feeling Jesus Christ alive and vibrant in the flesh of one's own thought and one's own heart’ (December 21, in L. Giussani, *Lettere di fede e di amicizia ad Angelo Majo* [Letters of Faith and Friendship to Angelo Majo], San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2007, p. 53).

I wish that your gathering from across the world on the centenary of Fr. Giussani's birth will be dominated by gratitude to the Spirit who gave him to us. Let us recognize with simplicity of heart that the gift of the charism in which each of us participates is to help us live any circumstance in the life of the Church with the awareness to which St. John Paul II called the priests of the Movement, ‘An authentic movement therefore exists as a nourishing soul within the Institution. It is not a structure that is alternative to it. It is rather the wellspring of a presence which continually regenerates the Institution's existential and historical authenticity. Within a movement, therefore, a priest must find the light and warmth which make him capable of fidelity to his Bishop, well disposed towards the duties of the Institution and attentive to ecclesiastical discipline. In this way the vibration of his faith and the enthusiasm of his fidelity will be more fertile.’ (*Message by John Paul II to the priests participating in a course of Spiritual Exercises promoted by Communion and Liberation*. September 12, 1985).

Likewise, each of us is called to discover the fertility of our own faith and the taste for fidelity to the present Mystery, obeying the one whom the Church has instructed us to follow now, Davide, for the unity of the movement, and disposing ourselves to welcome what Pope Francis will tell us during his audience on October 15. All these years I have tried to serve the movement in the responsibility entrusted to me, personally following the signs of the Mystery at work in our great Fraternity. And now I wish to continue to serve our unity as any one of you.

‘Over the last few months, how have you assessed the invitation to take personal responsibility for the Charism? What findings and questions have emerged?’ The questions identified by Davide for AIR are decisive for our vocation. Indeed, the mission to which the Lord calls us in the Church and in the world will be defined according to the answer each one will give.

I will offer my days for those of you I know and for the many I have never met, but who I feel are equally friends on the way to Destiny.

Your companion on the way, Julián Carrón.”

Now let’s sing together.

Song: *La strada [The Road]*<sup>1</sup>

This evening I will not give a simple introduction; rather, I would like to summarize and give an overview of all the fundamental questions that have emerged this year, in the dramatic events we have experienced. I want us and the friends we will tell about the fruit of these days to have a deeper awareness of the task that is being asked of us in this phase of life of our Movement by the present circumstance, our history and the Church. I want us to understand the factors that can best insure the conditions for the continuity of his story.

The work these days will be based on the things we will say this evening and what we have experienced this year, with a dialogue to reach a summary that will help in the next steps. So, we can consider this International Assembly of Leaders as having a historic mission; you here have a historic mission for our Movement. I will talk about six points.

## 1. The question from which to start again: what do we hold fast to?

“The circumstances through which God has us pass are essential and not secondary factors of our vocation.”<sup>2</sup> We have just heard this in Julián’s message.

It seems to me that in the light of the moment we are living as a movement, these words of Fr. Giussani, which we have repeated often in recent years, have a particular weight and intensity. In effect, I think we all agree that looking at the year gone by, we cannot help but acknowledge that the circumstances through which God has had us pass have shaken the boat of our companionship and caused bewilderment and concern for many, and for some bitterness and anger. So then, like never before, it is important to ask ourselves in what sense *this particular circumstance* we are going through is an essential factor *of our vocation*, that is, contains a word that the Mystery wants to say to us, an appeal, a call from the Mystery. What does the Mystery want to say to us through everything that has happened and what answer does He ask of us?

I am certain that each of you has reached or is reaching their own personal response to these questions, and I hope that the fruits of this work can emerge in the assemblies we will have together so as to enrich everyone, be they answers reached or active questions and perplexities. We are here to help each other walk forward and none of us, certainly not me, already has all the answers in hand.

<sup>1</sup> C. Chieffo, “La strada [The Road],” in *Canti [Songs]*, Soc. Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan 2014, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> L. Giussani, *L’uomo e il suo destino. In cammino [Man and His Journey: On the Road]*, Marietti 1820, Genoa 1999, p. 63.

Having said this, I would like to begin by focusing on an initial fundamental answer, which is this: in stormy times when everything seems to be in flux, you are forced to ask what you truly hold firm to, what the foundation of our hope is. Fr. Lepori reminded us of this in his powerfully evocative way when, at the end of the second lesson of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity, he painted the image of Saint Paul who, while the boat he was travelling on was being driven by a terrible storm, understood that in order to save all his companions together with himself he only had to do one thing: hold firm to Christ. “Paul clung to the presence of Him who is all of his substance, and he was tranquil and glad, without a flicker of fear, because Jesus was enough for him, the Risen One”.<sup>3</sup>

I think this is the first great word that the Lord has told us and is telling us through the “recent shocks” inflicted on the boat of our companionship, a word that actually is a question, “What do you *truly* cling fast to? Or more precisely, what is the dearest and most important thing for you in the experience of the Movement? I did not use just any words here: this is the same question the Emperor asked the Christians in the famous passage of *The Antichrist* by Solovyov. “What else can I do for you, you strange people? ... Tell me yourselves, you Christians, [...] what is it that you value most in Christianity?” At this, elder John rose up like a white candle and answered quietly: ‘Great sovereign! What we value most in Christianity is Christ Himself—in His person. All comes from Him...’<sup>4</sup>.

Paraphrasing the words of the elder, I think we, too, must say that what we value most in the Movement is He who is the origin, source and substance of this life, that is, Jesus Christ. If we are so fiercely fond of Fr. Giussani, this is because nobody like him made Christ familiar to us, made us experience the correspondence between the reality of Christ and the deep expectant awaiting of our hearts and our humanity. In the same way, if we are so fond of all those children of Giussani who introduced us to the experience of the charism of CL (and I’m thinking here not only of Julián, who I thank for the message he sent us, but also the many women and men who gave their lives to communicate to others the beauty of the encounter made, like the Servants of God Enzo Piccinini and Andrea Aziani), it is because through them, their eyes and their voice, we were able to encounter the gaze and voice of He who changed their lives, that is, in the final analysis, that man of Nazareth, the only one who can say of Himself, “I am the Life of your life”.

## 2. “Christ, the Life of life”: at the heart of the Event that seized us

In Fr. Giussani, we did not just encounter an extraordinary man. Without a doubt, those who met him know well that he was *also* this, but we are not here today *because of this*. We are here because this man, certainly through and with the help of all that he was, his temperament, sensibility, intelligence, gaze, and voice, was able to communicate to us at least something of the wonder he experienced, a wonder that seemed to emanate from his eyes when he spoke, as many of us remember, a moved wonder he experienced in front of *the event of Christ*, felt and acknowledged as the fulfillment of the boundless thirst for truth, beauty, love, and life that burned in his heart, and thus as the source of a gaze full of moved compassion in front of the mystery of the heart of anyone he met. Permit me to read once again the words Giussani himself used to describe the day, almost the moment when the event of Christ bowled him over and changed his life forever.

“Camus says in his *Notebooks*: ‘It is not by means of scruples that man will become great; greatness comes through the grace of God, like a beautiful day.’ For me, everything happened like the surprise of a ‘beautiful day,’ when one of my secondary school teachers—I was then 15 years old—read and explained to us the prologue of the Gospel of St. John. At that time in the seminary, it was obligatory to read that prologue at the end of every Mass. I had therefore heard it thousands of times. But the ‘beautiful day’ came: everything is grace. As Adrienne von Speyr says, ‘Grace overwhelms us. That

<sup>3</sup> M.-G. Lepori, *Christ, the Life of Life*, Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, April 29–May 1, 2022, <https://english.clonline.org/publications/other-texts/fraternity-exercises/christ-the-life-of-life>, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. V. Solov’ev, *I Tre dialoghi e Il racconto dell’Anticristo [The Three Dialogues and the Story of the Antichrist]*, Marietti1820, Genoa-Milan 1975, p. 190.

is its essence [grace is the Mystery which communicates itself; the essence of the Mystery's communication is that it overwhelms us, fills us]. It does not illuminate point by point, but irradiates like the sun. [...] Forty years later, reading this passage from Von Speyr I understood what had happened to me then, when my teacher explained the first page of the Gospel of Saint John: 'The Word of God, or rather that of which everything was made, was made flesh,' he said. 'And therefore Beauty was made flesh, Goodness was made flesh, Justice was made flesh, Love, Life, Truth were made flesh. Being does not exist in a Platonic nowhere; it became flesh, it is one among us.' [...] That is the whole story. My life as a very young man was literally invaded by this; both as a memory that continually influenced my thought and as a stimulus to make me reevaluate the banality of everyday life. The present moment, from then on, was no longer banal for me."<sup>5</sup>

So, the charism that won us over, first and most of all has to do with the experience Giussani recounts here. Certainly, we could spend hours describing in detail the exceptional nature of Fr. Giussani's human personality, and it is also important to do so, if it is true that the charism of the movement does not exist in the abstract, but communicates itself to us through the humanity and even the temperament of a specific man.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I realize more and more that the same word "charism" seems to contain an ambiguity, at least to the ears of a layperson like me and most of us, who do not eat bread and theology for breakfast. In fact, in everyday language, a person who has a charism, a "charismatic" person is one who draws people, who is a born leader, who fascinates others. Certainly, this idea is also present in the way we use the word among ourselves. In fact, in Giussani's and, I would add, the ecclesial understanding of the word, it means a particular way of living, feeling, speaking and communicating the faith of the Church that, precisely because of its own particular accent, draws people together, is attractive, and thus generates a people.<sup>7</sup> But this is the point: the ultimately crucial thing is not so much the fascination of the exceptional personality of the "charismatic person," but the *fascination of Christ*, awakened in those who encounter and follow him or her, also through and thanks to the attractive force given to the charismatic person. It may seem obvious but it is worthwhile saying this again. As then-Cardinal Ratzinger said in his memorable homily at Fr. Giussani's funeral, if we venerate Fr. Giussani so much, it is paradoxically precisely because in thinking of him, we think of a man who spent himself totally to guide us not to himself, but to Christ, to that man of Nazareth who made his eyes tear up when he spoke of Him. "By guiding people not to himself but to Christ he has truly conquered hearts, he has helped to make the world better, he has helped to open up the doors of the world to heaven."<sup>8</sup>

### 3. From the fascination of an encounter to the judgement of the faith

I would like to dwell a little longer on this point because I believe it has deeper implications than we may think, not only for our way of understanding what the charism is, its function, and the purpose for which the Mystery raised it up and made us encounter it, but also for our way of understanding the content of the experience we want to help each other to live.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. L. Giussani, *How a Movement is Born*. In *Communion and Liberation: A Movement in the Church*, ed. Davide Rondoni, transl. by Patrick Stevenson and Susan Scott, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2000, pp. 107-110.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo, [From the Temperament A Method]*, Bur, Milan 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. L. Giussani, S. Alberto, J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World. New Traces of the Christian Experience*, transl. by Patrick Stevenson, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 78-79. Fr. Lepori spoke about this at the Exercises: "If we reflect well, we see that every ecclesial charism is a particular modality, a particular incarnation of the transmission of Christ's call to the freedom of women and men, so that those it reaches can rise up like Mary in Bethany from their mute pain to reach the presence of the Risen One [...]. For those who are involved, every charism is the bearer of the fascination of this call, a fascination because it corresponds to everything my heart desires even without knowing it. The charism that God chose for you is the one in which this call reaches you with more beauty, concreteness and truth." (*Christ, the Life of Life*, p. 59).

<sup>8</sup> J. Ratzinger quoted in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, translated by Mariangela Sullivan and Christopher Bacich, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2018, p. 1168.

First, as we have learned,<sup>9</sup> on an existential level the charism has been and is for each of us the concrete modality through which the Event of Christ bowled us over, became interesting and significant in our life. You can say that the charism is the human face through which the Event of Christ came to us, fascinating us. In the beginning there is the encounter with the fascination of a different human presence that mysteriously and irresistibly corresponds to the heart, without being able to say why. Fr. Giussani helped us so many times to understand the crucial importance of this beginning in the dynamic of the faith, helping us with his unique sharpness of psychological penetration to identify with John and Andrew's experience in the first encounter with Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

But this initial fascination is just that, *initial*, a point of departure for a journey, *not the point of arrival*. Or better, this beginning already holds everything, but in the form of a seed that must develop, mature, reach explicit awareness of the content of the fascination experienced, that is, *of the reasons for the fascination*. Fr. Giussani stressed so many times that the disciples themselves, even though they were certain from the very beginning that they had encountered the Messiah,<sup>11</sup> still understood little about *Who* Jesus really was, what it really meant that He was the *Messiah*. Even for them, even though they had encountered the most exceptional humanity ever to appear on the face of the earth, the "Sign of signs,"<sup>12</sup> as Fr. Giussani called Him, even for them, in front of the humanity of the Son of God in person, a journey was necessary, one made also of corrections, that is, demolition of their partial interpretations, so that in the end, through the help of the Holy Spirit, they would come to a mature judgement of faith, the judgement of faith that made Saint Paul say, "yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given Himself up for me".<sup>13</sup>

If you do not reach this point, if the human fascination of those we have encountered does not lead us here, to know more and more and speak on increasingly familiar terms with that "*blond man*"<sup>14</sup> as Giussani dared to call Him, almost as if to give us the living perception of the unmistakable features of the person of Jesus, that man who is God made man "*for me*," then it is as if that fascination has missed its mark. Allow me to read you at least one of the many passages in which Fr. Giussani describes this itinerary.

"The encounter—the starting point of the persuasive image of Christ, in which you sense that Christ is something pertinent to life, something that interests life—is with a companionship, or also with just one person, not inasmuch as you understand that Christ is there inside, but inasmuch as it makes you say, 'How is it that these people are this way?'. Later, when you hear them say, 'The Lord is here among us, this is why we are this way,'" you begin to understand that maybe what they say is true. [...] So, you encounter a companionship and you say, 'Look at how these people are!' And they say: 'Jesus Christ is here; it's necessary to go to Communion,' and someone has Communion in order to go with them, and begins to hear and hearing and hearing again, at a certain point says, 'Well! So it must really be so, there is something Other.' Then the passage happens, and woe if it doesn't happen: this something Other begins to take on a powerful presence that even exceeds that of the companionship; then the companionship becomes stable and secure. Therefore, you begin this road finding a companion, a companionship, or seeing a little group that has something interesting and you go after it. And you hear these people who say that they have something interesting because the Lord

<sup>9</sup> "The Charism is the way the Event reaches you. You are a paralytic, and He reaches you, and for all your life you will start from that memory. [...] Your face, your character will be shaped, that is, your character will be empowered, highlighted by that memory. [...] The charism always reaches you through words, a talk, more precisely, through an encounter. An encounter: you have encountered this companionship; this is the modality by which the mystery of Jesus [...] knocked on your door." (L. Giussani, "Dentro quello sguardo [Within That Gaze]", in: Id., *Dal temperamento un metodo [From Temperament a Method]*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L. Giussani, "Riconoscere Cristo [Recognizing Christ]", in *Il tempo e il tempio: Dio e l'uomo [Time and the Temple: God and Man]*, Milan 1995, pp. 37-74.

<sup>11</sup> Jn. 1:41.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. "The Sign of Signs," *Traces, Word Among Us*, March 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Gal. 2:20.

<sup>14</sup> L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, Bur, Milan 1999, p. 141.

is there, and you go after them, a bit curious, but without being defined by that thing there, without being determined by that thing there. However, at a certain point this call gets bigger [...]; and you are more struck by the fact that the people tell you, ‘Look, we are together for That One there’. This is a qualitative leap from the initial impression; then you begin to take that one there seriously. Before, you did not go to Communion, but now you go to Communion even daily or you say prayers daily. The more you follow this evolution with continuity, the more Jesus becomes more important than all the faces put together. Or rather, He becomes so important that you understand that otherwise all the faces would disappear and you ‘would get fed up!’. [...] The companionship says, ‘We are together for this here’; someone does not take this seriously and gets gratification out of the companionship, likes the companionship, but does not look at this motivation. After a while, I swear he also leaves the companionship! Because a reality without an adequate reason disappears. The adequate reason for our companionship is something Other.”<sup>15</sup>

I think the last words of this quote from Giussani help us focus on the important and negative other side of the question: in the beginning it is normal that the fascinating sign by which the Mystery came to me is more affectively powerful and affectively engaging than even the Mystery of which the sign is a sign. But if *over time* things do not change, if that passage Giussani describes by which “Jesus becomes *more important* than the faces” to whom I am indebted for my life (because they led me to Him!) does not happen, then the problems begin because it is as if I, a 50-year-old, stubbornly insist on having the same type of relationship with my mother that I had when I was 2 or 3. It is normal that for a 2-year-old his mother is everything, but if this is still the case when he is a 50-year-old (like me) well, then it means something in the educative process got stuck.

Fr. Giussani warned us so many times of the serious possibility of this stopping at the fascination of the sign. Certainly, he always repeated to us that in the sign we encounter the Mystery, even to the point of saying, in a stunning expression, that “Mystery and sign coincide.”<sup>16</sup> But saying that they *coincide* means that they *fall together*, that is, One comes to me *through* the other, not that they are *identical*. If we lose sight of the fact that between sign and mystery there is not only similarity and participation but also difference, or rather, *infinite* difference, then the sign ceases to be such and becomes an idol. The sign is such if it leads me beyond itself, if it takes me by hand and leads me to know and love that Mystery more and more, that Jesus Christ of whom the sign is, to use another famous expression of Fr. Giussani’s, an “unsatisfied analogic anticipation.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> L. Giussani, “*Tu*” (*o dell’amicizia*) [“*You*” (*Or About Friendship*)], Bur, Milan 1997, pp. 175-176.

<sup>16</sup> Among the many talks in which Fr. Giussani spoke of this theme, see for example: *All things: Mystery and Sign*, in: *Traces, Word Among Us*, June 1999; see also: L. Giussani, “Mistero e segno coincidono” [Mystery and sign coincide], in *Affezione e Dimora* [*Affection and Dwelling Place*], Bur, Milan 2001, pp. 239-259.

<sup>17</sup> “Let’s be aware that among us Jesus can be the origin of the entire world of humanity, full of gladness and friendships, of formally unexceptionable reasons and of help formally, but also materially concrete that He is ready to give us [...], however, Jesus could be reduced to the ‘portrait of a beautiful woman carved on her funeral monument.’ If Jesus were to come here silently and softly and sit on a chair there, near her, and everyone at a certain point realized it, I don’t know in how many of you the wonder, gratitude and joy, I don’t know in how many of you the affection would be truly spontaneous, even while conserving a certain self-awareness. [...] I cannot love without this message, memory and adoration and obedience and discipleship and following and avid gaze to learn and willingness to sacrifice even unto death with which I think of You, look at You, follow You, without all this becoming concrete, so concrete that You, O Lord, are the one I love: You, Lord, are the one I love. ‘What do people desire more powerfully than the truth?’ What is the truth? A man present, a man present: it cannot be squandered or washed away from the beautiful and glad emergence of the companionship of faces that should be the hinted sign of Him! This happens when you say ‘You’ to Him really, with all the awareness of your ‘I’: the more you are aware of yourself, the more powerful, great, true, simple and pure is the devotion to Him [...]. The presence of Christ in the world is the miracle of our companionship. But this is the emerging point of a sign that ‘plunges deep down where it is most true’ or better, it is the point of a sign that in all the rest shipwrecks in the common meaning, in all the rest shipwrecks in the common naturalness. For this reason, the more you love intensely, preferentially—where the good is to say ‘I’ with an impetus that the others do not know, or to say ‘You’ with an impetus that the others do not know—it is not a matter of softening the weight of our friendship, of making foggy the charged efficacy of eyes, lips and face, of words, songs, heart of a beautiful companionship like this, but it is like a kind of heightened tension—of all that I named and that forms our companionship—to cry your name, O Christ: ‘Thank you that You have made Yourself seen and You are sitting here.’” (L. Giussani, *L’Attrattiva Gesù*, [*The Attraction of Jesus*],

In this sense, the text I just quoted struck me also for another accent that I find precious: what does it mean that the human sign, through its fascination, attracts me to itself but at the same time pushes me beyond itself, launches me toward a reality that exceeds it, that is, Christ Himself? Certainly, it means many things; I don't want to start listing them. I was struck that here Giussani stressed Communion, Eucharist: "Before you did not go to Communion but now you go to Communion even daily."<sup>18</sup> This emphasis struck me because it is as if he cast a clearer light on this relationship between the sign and the Mystery, between the fascination of the charism and the relationship with Christ of which we are speaking. In effect, what's exceptional about eating a piece of bread? In appearance, nothing. And I believe that even the knowledge that that piece of bread is the body of Jesus Christ, as the Church has always taught us, would have little effect on me, would evoke little interest, curiosity, or emotion in me, if I had not had an encounter that made this Jesus Christ a living presence in my life, thus making even that little piece of bread I swallow when I receive Communion so interesting and vital.

The encounter with the charism of the Movement is what made Christ familiar to me. Therefore, I literally owe everything to Fr. Giussani and the Movement. At the same time, the more I go ahead, the more I understand that there is the other side of the coin that is no less important than what I just said. I would say it this way: which Christ made the encounter with the charism familiar? Giussani's Christ? Does a Christ of Giussani exist, or a Christ of the Movement, a Christ you can experience without the Eucharist, or without the teaching about Him that reaches me through the Church? Evidently no, evidently the Jesus that Giussani made me fall in love with is the Jesus I encounter in the most powerful and efficacious way in the Eucharist, even when the priest who gives it to me is the most unpleasant or petty person I know.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, as Fr. Giussani himself taught us<sup>20</sup> and Carrón reminded us in his message, there is no opposition between love for the charism we have encountered and esteem for everything we can call the *institutional dimension* of the Church, which includes not only the authoritative magisterium of the Pope and the bishops, but also the objective sources of the experience and knowledge of Christ, which the Church safeguards: the word of God and the Sacraments. As I said, there is no opposition because the grace of the charism that invaded our lives neither substitutes nor should cause us to disdain the value of these other "signs" or "instruments" the Lord Himself wanted as the sure road to Himself. Rather, it should give us eyes capable of appreciating *a hundred times more* the value of these instruments. For example, I don't think I would ever have thought to read the gospels or the letters of Saint Paul if I had not heard Giussani reading and commenting them (my first true encounter happened listening to Fr. Giussani read the Gospel of John at the CLU Spiritual Exercises). This does not mean that Giussani's word is above the word of God for me, but rather, that he was and is the person who most helped and helps me to penetrate the meaning of the word of God: he is the person who made it interesting and understandable for me. The same holds for many other things, like prayer, the enjoyment of friendship and cultural judgement, and so on: they are all dimensions of the life of

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pp. 150-153.)

<sup>18</sup> L. Giussani, *"Tu" (o dell'amicizia)* ["You" (Or About Friendship)], p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> We read in *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, "As John Paul II affirmed, 'the true charisms cannot but tend towards the encounter with Christ in the sacraments'" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 12). See also: "I feel I must entrust once more to Your Holiness, as vibrant as ever in my heart, the deep emotion aroused by the most authoritative and clear judgment on this fifty-year-old experience of ours. It was when Your Holiness wrote, in the letter sent to me on February 11, 2002 for the twentieth anniversary of the pontifical recognition of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, 'The Movement has chosen and chooses to indicate not a road but the road for the solution of man's existential drama. The road is Christ.' Not only did I have no intention of 'founding' anything, but I believe that the genius of the Movement that I saw coming to birth lies in having felt the urgency to proclaim the need to return to the elementary aspects of Christianity, that is to say, the passion of the Christian fact as such in its original elements, and nothing more." (L. Giussani, *In fidelity to the Magisterium we have always wanted to bring people to discover how Christ is a presence*, The letter sent by Fr Giussani to John Paul II on the 50th anniversary of the birth of Communion and Liberation, January 26, 2004). Available at <https://english.clonline.org/archive/altro/fr-giussani-s-letter-to-the-pope>

<sup>20</sup> Fr. Giussani dealt with this theme at length in an important contribution in *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, pp. 78-79, which I recommend you read.

the Church as such, but which the encounter with the charism helped me to understand and live in a way that is fascinating for me.

So this brings me to the next to last point. I'll use an expression that was in style 25 years ago, but then was a bit lost.

#### 4. The co-essentiality of institution and charism

I want to be frank: I have insisted on what I call the other, negative side of the question, with deliberately strong emphasis, because in recent months during my visits to communities and in many of the letters I have received from Fraternity members, I have observed with sadness that for many among us, speaking of the Institutional Church, the Church of the Pope and the bishops, means speaking of a superstructure that weighs down life with rules and teachings that have little or nothing to do with the lived experience of the faith, with the lived experience of the charism. It is as if to say that on one side there is life, the lived experience of Christ brought about through the fascination of “*charismatic presences*” who help us to live, while on the other side there is the institutional authority of the Church with its regulations and doctrinal indications, which has little or nothing to do with life, even if, certainly, one must obey *obtorto collo*, reluctantly, because after all, we are Catholics! Well, I believe we must help each other overcome this conscious or unconscious dichotomy at the root, because it seems to me that here lies the root of the difficulty many of us have in understanding the step of maturity the Church is asking of us.

I'll try to put it this way: the problem is not an overemphasis on the charismatic element, as if it were mistaken to insist on the fact that the experience of the charism is reinforced and grows following authoritative presences who attract us because of the maturity with which they live the charism itself. This is right and sacrosanct, and it all began this way. We have said this many times and have just reaffirmed it: Christianity is communicated through attraction. Instead, it seems to me that the problem lies in considering this factor of attraction as the only one that counts, the only one that merits attention, as if it alone counted in nourishing our relationship with Christ, considering our personal taste or preference (even if we call it “correspondence to the heart,” using the expression very loosely) to be the only criterion for establishing what is the voice of Christ and what is not. Well, permit me to say that thinking this can only be a trick and a lie, even if only for the fact that as we have just said, the Christ we fell in love with because of the charism given to Fr. Giussani, is not the Christ of his imagination or *our* imagination, the Christ of our interpretation, but rather the Christ who entrusted His real Presence in history and the true testimony about Himself to Simon Peter and the apostles, that is, to that reality that we call “Institution.”<sup>21</sup>

In this way we arrive at one of the central themes we are called to reflect upon in coming times, a bit more deeply than we have so far. I am referring to the theme of *co-essentiality*—to use John Paul II's famous expression, taken up later by Pope Benedict and then in the letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*—between the institutional element and the charismatic element in the life of the Church.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that this question is anything but abstract and far from life, from the experience we live in the Movement. In fact, whether we are aware of it or not, the way we conceive of this relationship between the function of authority in the institutional sense of the word and the function of authority in the charismatic sense of the term, significantly determines the

<sup>21</sup> In *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* we read: “The gift of the Spirit in the Church is bound to the mission of the Son, accomplished definitively in his Paschal Mystery. [...] Through this, the Holy Spirit can in no way inaugurate an economy other than that of the divine incarnate *Logos*, crucified and risen. [...]. The bond in origin between the hierarchal gifts, conferred with the sacramental grace of Orders, and the charismatic gifts, freely distributed by the Holy Spirit, has its deepest roots, therefore, in the relationship between the divine incarnate *Logos* and the Holy Spirit, who is always the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Precisely to avoid equivocal theological visions that would posit a ‘Church of the Spirit’, distinct and separate from the hierarchical-institutional Church, it must be repeated that the two divine missions mutually imply each other *in every gift* bestowed freely upon the Church.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 11).

meaning we give to two words of central importance in the experience we want to help each other to live: the word “follow” and the word authority.<sup>22</sup> What does it mean to *follow authority*? This is the true, central question about which the Church is asking us to make a step of *critical awareness*, that is, to look again at all of our experience in depth.

In brief, what is meant by the co-essentiality of the hierarchical and charismatic gifts (to use the terminology of *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*)?

In order not to go into detail here, as I hope we will have time to do later, I would like to make three brief points, more to open than close the discussion or, if you like, offer some avenues for reflection. First point: co-essentiality means that hierarchical gifts (that is, institutional authority) and charismatic gifts (that is, the charisms that God distributes to those He wants *ad utilitatem*, for the building up of the Church) are “reciprocally related from their very origins.”<sup>23</sup> Here it is saying that charisms and institution are not only not opposed—pay attention!—, but they are not even simply juxtaposed, as if each bore fruit independently of the other, in a parallel way. As if you could say, “Yes, there are both in the Church, both are needed, institution and charisms, but each one acts and builds the Christian people on its own, independently of the other. No, co-essentiality means that each bears fruit only—only!—in communion with the other, in synergy with the other, with the help of the other. The institution, that is, the Church of the Pope and the bishops, needs to be nourished and helped by the dynamic and prophetic power of the charisms to bear fruit in her mission. (For those of you who were at the Conference on the Movements and New Communities last June, do you remember the talk by Cardinal Marc Ouellet?).<sup>24</sup> On the other side, the charisms cannot truly bear fruit if they do not put themselves at the service of the Church guided by Peter, if they do not let themselves be guided and corrected.”<sup>25</sup> Thus each element needs the other, and you could say that neither bears fruit “*solitarily*,” almost as if to be effective it only needed the grace that reaches it directly from God. No, all people, even the Pope (!), need *the help* of other people like them for *their gift* to bear fruit.

At the Exercises of the Fraternity, Fr. Lepori touched on this idea in a beautiful way, speaking of the relationship between Peter and John, “perhaps the most ‘charismatic,’ the most mystical of the apostles of Jesus,” in particular dwelling on the famous scene of Peter and John running to the tomb, as reported in the fourth Gospel. “All the manifestation and work of Christ and the Spirit that the Risen One blows on the disciples, all the charisms (because charisms are the life of the Risen One in the life of the Church and the world), everything is certain if Peter confirms it with his experience of Christ present and alive. [...] John, perhaps the most ‘charismatic’ of the apostles, the most acute, mystical, prophetic, and ardent in love and friendship with Christ, did not feel superior because of this, but understood that in the teacher’s choice of the primacy of Peter, there was the sure way to live out his own charisms that followed Christ. When they ran to the tomb on Easter morning, John arrived first but stopped and waited for Peter. Why? Because he wanted to enter the tomb *following* Peter. He wanted to believe within a following, as he had learned following Jesus Himself.”<sup>26</sup>

On the other side, also Peter is called not only to acknowledge the great charisms the Lord gave to John, but even to be nourished by them, so that there is a sense in which Peter is called to follow John no less than vice versa, “as when John told him, ‘It’s the Lord!’ after the miraculous haul of fish. And here Peter *obeyed the charism of John*, because John helped him recognize the Risen One present, to

<sup>22</sup> L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?) vivere così? [Is it (Truly?) Possible to Live This Way?]*, Bur, Milan 2011, pp. 215-222.

<sup>23</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> “Movements and New Communities,” Formation on the Charisms, afternoon session, June 20, 2022, available at <https://english.clonline.org/news/current-events/2022/07/11/prosperi-communication-conference-movements>

<sup>25</sup> We read in *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, which quotes *Lumen Gentium*, n. 7: “In order to sanctify every member of the People of God and for the mission of the Church in the world, amongst the various gifts, ‘a special place’ is held by ‘the grace of the Apostles to whose authority the Spirit Himself subjected even those who were endowed with charisms’.”

<sup>26</sup> M. Lepori, *Christ, the Life of Life*, pp. 60-63.

whom Peter went first, throwing himself in the water so that all the others could follow him, still and always, to Jesus.”<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Authority and authoritativeness: from the Church to the Movement

The second consideration: Benedict XVI further developed this idea introduced into the magisterium of the Church by John Paul II, by adding an important specification for us: this co-essentiality, this dynamic unity of the institutional element and the charismatic element, does not only concern the relationship between charismatic realities like CL and the authority of the Church. It also concerns the internal life of the charismatic realities themselves, above all when it is a matter of ensuring the continuity and development of these realities after the death of the founder. We read in *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*: “Pope Benedict XVI, in addition to confirming the coessentiality of the gifts, deepened the affirmation of his predecessor, remembering that ‘in the Church the essential institutions are also charismatic [that is, the Holy Spirit efficaciously acts in them, let’s think of the Sacraments] and indeed the charisms must, in one way or another, be institutionalized to have coherency and continuity. Hence, both dimensions [...] together they concur to make present the mystery and the salvific work of Christ in the world’.”<sup>28</sup>

Pope Benedict states that the two dimensions “*concur together*” to make Christ present, a bit the way Simon and John *run together* to the Sepulcher. Pay attention here, because this is the case *in all ecclesial realities*, also in a charismatic reality like ours, if it wants to endure over time. Well, is all this a betrayal of Fr. Giussani’s thought about what the Movement should be after his death? Is it a betrayal of Fr. Giussani’s *idea of the future of the Movement* to say that also in our reality it is necessary that there be this interweaving of objective authority and charismatic authoritativeness, where the one needs the other but is not to be identified with the other? I think we need to think about this question seriously. I am convinced it is not the case. In these months I have often heard repeated, above all referring to the ending of the famous text, “The greatest sacrifice is to give your life for the work of an Other”<sup>29</sup>—which there will surely be the opportunity to reflect on—that Giussani proposed a vision of the function of authority in the Movement that is analogous to that of the Church. With the necessary clarifications, ones I cannot dwell on here, I share this observation. There is no doubt that Giussani proposes this analogy. But the question is exactly how we understand authority in the Church, whether we understand it as founded on the unity but also distinction between Peter and John, between the institutional element and the charismatic one, or in a different way, for example theorizing that Peter and John must *always and necessarily* be fused into one person, which means that the head must be the most charismatic (granted that the identity of that person can be established) and the most charismatic must be the head.

Allow me to conclude this second point with a quote from Fr. Giussani. As is well known, Fr. Giussani himself, especially in texts from the 1990s, often distinguished between two different understandings of the word authority, understandings that correspond exactly to the Peter/John polarity of which we were speaking.<sup>30</sup> For example, at the 1993 Spiritual Exercises, he was asked:

<sup>27</sup> M. Lepori, *Christ, the Life of Life*, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> I quote here from *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, where the passage most often quoted was published in definitive form: “This is our virtue: the comparison with the charism in its originality through the fleeting things that God uses. Here again we meet the importance of the ephemeral. For now, the comparison is with the person with whom everything began. This person can be dissolved, but the texts left behind and the uninterrupted succession—if God wills—of the people indicated as the reference point, as true interpretation of what happened, become the instrument for correction and for reawakening; they become the instrument for morality. The line of references indicated is the most living thing in the present, because a text alone can be interpreted wrongly. It is difficult to interpret it wrongly, but it can happen.” (L. Giussani, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, p. 84).

<sup>30</sup> Worthy of attention here is also this text, drawn from “L’*autorità diventa preferenza* [Authority Becomes Presence]” in: L. Giussani, “*Tu*” (*o dell’amicizia*) [*You (or About Friendship)*], pp. 130-135: “First of all, it is necessary to distinguish

“What is the relationship between the authority of the charism and personal authoritativeness?”. Here is his answer: “To put it simply, the authority of the charism is the one that the Church recognizes. The church recognizes the responsibility of a charism. Personal authoritativeness comes from living participation with a person who has authority. I can have an authority in the charism that interests the Movement and it can be the littlest person among us who lives this charism with such vivacity, sincerity and humility that he or she surpasses me on all sides and I myself look to him or her and try to learn the meaning of the charism of which I am the protector and guide. The meaning of this charism is revealed by those who in simplicity of heart live the gift given by the Spirit and thus are authority in actual fact. The person who has authoritativeness encourages and builds up. The person who is the authority assures the road, the right road, the authority inasmuch as recognized by the Church. The person with authoritativeness warms the steps, makes the road beautiful, makes the journey persuasive, makes us more capable of sacrifice when it is required. Authoritativeness is a holiness; authority is a task.”<sup>31</sup>

## 6. An intriguing corollary: why Peter and not John?

The third point, more than a point is a dual provocation or question. At this point we could ask why Jesus Himself, the Lord, wanted to give the Church this form, this polarity between charism and institution, John and Peter? To put it roughly—as did my friend Fr. Paolo, a passionate scholar of the Gospel of John—if it is true that the whole Gospel of John stresses how John was *the beloved disciple*, the one closest to Jesus in the crucial moments, the most intelligent and deep and even most obedient and docile to the Teacher, how is it that in John 21 Jesus gives Peter and not him the responsibility to feed His sheep? Why did Jesus choose Peter, who denied Him, and not John to be the leader? Well, I’ll leave you with two questions.

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between authority as *moment* and authority as type of presence, capacity of presence that *normally* becomes a call, that normally tends to become a call: when there is that person, and you know this by now, that person calls you, be it little or a lot. Then, third, there is the authority that carries out a representative *role* of the call in the vocational group, in the organism of the body of Christ, therefore in the organism of that piece of the body of Christ that is the vocational companionship. Here are only the answers to your questions that can clarify, otherwise one conducts an analytical discourse, makes the effort to conduct an analytical discourse. Because this third case leaves intact the fact that the person who carries out that role is like that reminder of the Lord or reminder of the Lord remains his or her role, the objectivity of the role. By the fact that there is a person responsible for the house, the idea of the person responsible for the house is a reminder of God: by role, by structure that person is a reminder of God, points to God. It may happen that this person is the one who blocks us most of all, and so in order to accept this person you have to struggle or overcome many preceding impressions that are in the middle. So then, these are the three cases of authority as miracle. *First*, authority as isolated event, as *exceptional moment*, for example, a contribution at a gathering that strikes you. [...] Above all, authority as an exceptional moment where you are called, corrected. *Second*, authority as physiognomy of life that makes the person’s *presence* something normal, a *summons* to the Lord: when that presence is there, a summons to the Lord is there, sooner or later in one way or another. And then, *third*, there is authority as miracle inasmuch as it is a *role*, because it is an absolute miracle that an ultimate authority exists in the world that says the truth, that judges all behaviors of people from the point of view of the ultimate truth: I am speaking of the Pope. But, it is also a miracle that in a gathering of people who come together because the Lord is present, there is one who leads, claiming the right words, ultimately judging behavior, a person who even without knowing how to demonstrate it has a spirit in line with that of the Pope. This person may be a rascal or scoundrel but have this role. Therefore, authority as role should not be neglected; it reveals the purity of our gaze. And you should follow that person because he or she says the content of the role, not because he or she is that person.

*What does ‘say the content of the role’ mean?*

What is the content of the role? Summoning to Jesus. So then if he or she tells you, ‘Morning prayer is at 7:30,’ he or she summons you to Christ. It is the content of the role. If he or she says, ‘Now let us observe silence. There is not enough silence in this house,’ he or she summons you, carries out a role, and maybe he or she observes this hour of silence badly. You are helped not by their behavior but by their role; this is what strikes you. He or she says to you, ‘No, this yes, this no,’ not as opinion but as the summoning of the rule.”

<sup>31</sup> L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento nella vita dell’uomo [An Event in the Life of the Human Person]*, edited by J. Carrón, Bur, Milan 2020, p. 249.

First question: Why did the Lord want there to be this irreducible tension between authoritativeness and authority, between charisma and institution, such that there is no *single point* through which all the prophecy, grace, and action of the Spirit pass, even though there is *an ultimate point* that is the criterion for discernment?

Second question: Why didn't Jesus choose the most charismatic person, John or maybe Paul, rather than Peter to be this ultimate criterion of discernment?

I do not want to answer these questions here and now. I invite each of us to reflect on them. It is the way we can look at this moment and at the future of our companionship.