



Culture: to be for Christ

**Notes from the speech by Davide Prospero
at the assembly of the Association of Italian Cultural Centers**

Milan, May 18, 2024

I would like to say from the outset that the things I am going to say to you today are the result of a long process of discussion on the subject of our cultural presence, which has taken place over the past few months together with those who share the responsibility for the movement with me. As we have said to each other several times in recent years, authority offers a judgement that is an expression of communion. Included in that judgement is the contribution of my personal experience, lived for so many years in positions of responsibility within the movement, first with Fr. Giussani, then with Fr. Carrón, and now in the role I have been entrusted within our companionship.

Times of recapitulation, discernment, renewal and missionary revival

I would like to start from these words pronounced by Pope Francis at the Audience granted to CL on October 15, 2022: “There has been no lack of serious problems, divisions, and certainly also an impoverishment in the presence of an ecclesial movement as important as Communion and Liberation, from which the Church—and I myself—expects more, much more. Times of crisis are times of recapitulation of your extraordinary history of charity, culture and mission; they are times of critical discernment of what has limited the fruitful potential of Fr Giussani’s charism; they are times of

missionary renewal and relaunching in the light of the current ecclesial moment, as well as of the needs, sufferings and hopes of contemporary humanity.”

It is clear in these words of the Holy Father that within the educational journey that the Church—as well as our own history—entrusts to us at this historic moment, we cannot fail to seriously reflect on the aspects characterizing the relationship with our origin, with what we call the “charism,” also in reference to the contents proposed in past years and those that we want to pursue in the coming years. This is why I would like to take advantage of this meeting to try to outline my concerns with respect to the central theme of culture for us. And I hope this will also help to clarify that my emphases in recent years have not sought to “correct” the teaching of those who preceded me—an intention that is sometimes attributed to me—but rather to develop the terms of a discourse that—also as suggested by the Pope’s words—needs a new step.

In the years that Fr. Carrón led the movement, the underlying judgement, so to speak, dedicated to the cultural presence was identified within a very effective expression that, as we know, gave the title to the book that collects some of his speeches. This was suitably revised, translated into several languages, and presented in various parts of the world: *La bellezza disarmata* [*Disarming Beauty*].¹

This happy expression puts forward—I will summarize for the sake of time—the concept that beauty is “disarmed,” in the sense that the gratuitous witness of an experience marked by the encounter with Christ has in itself such a beauty that it is capable of striking hearts, of convincing the other of its own convenience without imposing anything, but on the contrary, by exalting their freedom of adhesion. I will return to this shortly.

Keeping to this image, I would like to observe immediately, however, that we must not forget that beauty is always, in a certain sense, also ‘armed’, as I will try to explain in a moment. This, I perceive, is an aspect that we are trying to recover and that has perhaps been somewhat lacking in our discourse on culture in recent years. It is, of course, inevitable that in certain periods we emphasize some aspects more, and at other times other aspects are stressed. The problem arises when a particular judgement, or when

1 J. Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2017.

it is given in a particular historical context, is progressively understood or interpreted unilaterally. This is what happened in part, for example, with regards to the topic of culture, causing misunderstandings and divisions, especially among many who had lived the intense experience of our presence in various environments with Fr. Giussani. These are misunderstandings and divisions that drag their consequences to this day. I would first of all like to clear the air of the possible misunderstanding that we are operating a sort of *damnatio memoriae* on our recent past, or even a removal of the teaching of the last fifteen years. On the contrary, what we are trying to do, starting precisely from the recognition of the objectively positive value of what has been said and done so far, is to highlight, or rather broaden our gaze on Fr. Giussani's entire educational proposal, in which cultural presence undoubtedly plays a fundamental role. "I therefore encourage you and your co-workers to continue the work you have undertaken, which aims to preserve an integral vision,"² the Holy Father recently wrote to us.

Beauty is *splendor Veritatis*

In what sense is beauty also "armed"? Let me begin by noting that the beauty we speak of, as history sufficiently documents, has aroused and still arouses attraction and adhesion, but also resistance and rejection. Why? Because beauty, as Fr. Giussani has always proposed to us from within the tradition of the Church, is *splendor Veritatis*. It is the splendor of the true and the good: beauty is the manifestation of the glory of Christ, and this glory, in shining forth, does not necessarily always arouse only attraction, but can also arouse repulsion, depending on the position of the heart of those who encounter it. And I would add that if beauty did not shine to the point of offering a proposal that is the integral proposal of the truth of Christ, it would not be beauty of Christ, but something else. I mean to say, this is the point, that the beauty of Christ is also a sword, it attracts and also challenges, wounds, and in this sense it is also "armed": not because it needs the support of external "weapons" (the support of the power of the State, for example), but because, by its very nature—insofar as it is the shining of what is true and good, incarnating itself, that is, happening, proposing itself—it also

2 "Letter of the Pope," Santa Marta, January 30, 2024, <https://english.cclonline.org/news/church/2024/02/01/letter-pope-francis-audience-prosperi-january-2024>.

opposes our measures, the “world.”³ And thus it challenges us, it enters into a struggle, into conflict with what we normally think, demanding a love for truth rather than love for ourselves, a love that always implies sacrifice. Thus, beauty loses none of its splendor when it has the courage to propose, to take a position, even in opposition to the world, ‘strong’ in ecclesial communion and the riches of its tradition. And not only does it lose nothing, rather it proves itself to be truly so. Hence an important corollary or consequence: we do not have to start all over again every time, but can build on a history that has reached us with all its concreteness. As medieval people wisely used to say, we are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants. Not least because how else would you explain the flourishing of realities such as those you represent here today if the Christian presence and witness were merely the fruit of a subjective force or commitment? It is certainly a personal matter—this is true—but it is necessary to eliminate from this word all possible ambiguity that can reduce it to *individual* or *individualistic*, according to a concept of the “I” that does not imply an ‘us’ as a mature awareness of belonging. Because when this “we” is missing, our presence becomes fragile and remains immature, as we said at the Fraternity Exercises.

A mature faith is a faith nourished by friendship with Christ, which is expressed first and foremost in our lived communion, exercised and expressed in all aspects of our relationship with reality. During a meeting with GS in 1979, Fr. Giussani recounted his first audience—which has just taken place—with John Paul II and expressed this concept thus: “For us, community is, therefore, the expression of an *ontological reality*, of a profound being, of a real truth. Precisely because we are one, we must express ourselves in fraternity, in community.”⁴

-
- 3 Speaking about the beginnings of GS, Fr. Giussani observes, “At that time I often remembered a sentence, apparently anti-ecumenical, from a book by Monsignor Garofalo, read when I was still in high school, which began like this: ‘Christianity entered the world in controversy with the world.’ [...] Because it is like that even in me, even in us: Christianity is dictated or comes to the ears of our heart and conscience in opposition, in contrast, in a struggle, in controversy with what we normally think, what we normally feel and with the way we normally behave” (L. Giussani, *L’io, il potere, le opere* [The “I,” Power, and Works], Marietti 1820, Genoa 2000, p. 135). (Our translation)
- 4 Fr. Giussani continues: “But community is not a huddling together. Community is a dimension that is mine. Even when I change jobs, I carry within me, even if not exactly in detail, the faces of all the people whom I am together with, and I would like the whole Church to have this awareness: it would be out of this world. Because if the whole Church had this awareness of unity and all Christians were truly one, it would be the miracle of the end of the world, because the whole world would be forced to recognize. But this

At the Beginning Day, we heard the words of Benedict XVI: “Our faith is truly personal, only if it is also communal.”⁵ Similarly, in the same 1979 speech that has just been quoted, Fr. Giussani takes up the words of John Paul II [quoting Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*]: “Evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial [...], an ecclesial act.”⁶ Giussani confirms: “We insist a lot on the community aspect, why? Because not only does being together give strength, but above all because it is a duty. The community, being together, is the expression of communion.”⁷

Why did Benedict XVI and Fr. Giussani criticize a faith conceived “subjectivistically”? Because it runs the risk of being emptied of its content of bodily truth—so to speak—that is, of *Fact*, ending up being reduced to a religious sense. The fundamental category of Christianity, so insistently sustained by Fr. Giussani, that is, the category of event, thus runs the risk of losing consistency, being easily confused with the emotion that events arouse—good or bad, it does not matter, the important thing is that they are evocative. This risk is also very much present in us, as we were reminded at the Beginning of the Year Day.⁸

On the other hand, it is a mature faith—Fr. Giussani tells us—that is the true engine of a new presence in the environment, capable of generating not only thoughts and speeches, which fill televisions, newspapers, social networks... but *places*. If you remember, at the meeting two years ago (AIC Assembly 2022) we said that a cultural center, regardless of size, is a meeting place. But for a meeting to take place there needs to be a presence, and so the cultural center is called upon to be a place of presence. A

already vibrates, this miracle of the end of the world, already vibrates in two people who find each other and grasp each other, recognize each other. Because they both have faith, they say to each other: ‘We are one, we are together, and, therefore, we face life together.’ But even when one of them is at home, one of them is at home, they now have this relationship within them. That is, community and fraternity is a dimension that one has within, it is a characteristic that one has within” (Fraternity of Communion and Liberation [FCL], *Audiovisual documentation*, GS meeting with Fr. Giussani, Milan, February 22, 1979) (Our translation).

5 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 31, 2012.

6 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 60, December 8, 1975, in John Paul II, *Address to the 3rd General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate*, Puebla, Mexico, 1979.

7 FCL, *Audiovisual documentation*, GS meeting with Fr. Giussani, Milan, February 22, 1979.

8 D. Prosperi, “Faith, the fulfilment of reason,” <https://english.clonline.org/publications/other-texts/miscellany/faith-the-verification-of-faith>.

faith that matures, even amid a thousand obstacles and even though it is opposed—when not explicitly offended—progressively generates places in which the judgement born of faith casts a new light, the light of the face of the Risen Christ, on the events of all the men and women of our time.

“To return to the elementary aspects of Christianity”⁹

Now allow me to articulate a few considerations on what I feel is our urgent historical task in public cultural action. As members of a movement, or more simply as Christians, we have a mission: the new life, given to us by Christ in baptism and enlivened in the encounter with our charism, opens us up to a universal horizon, in which each of us becomes an essential contribution in the concrete place where he or she lives. What form should this contribution take? The life of the first Christian communities and their missionary activity—as the *Acts of the Apostles* present them to us—helps us to answer this question. In it, we see three characteristics manifest themselves, always co-existing and necessary.

An attractive Christianity

The *Acts* recount that more and more people joined the faith attracted by the life of that group that met under Solomon’s porch. Fr. Giussani writes in this regard: “We can see how the Church began: it literally allowed itself to ‘be seen’ under Solomon’s Portico, it proposed itself through the mere sight of it, through a first perception which can only be described as community.”¹⁰ The life of those early Christians, the fraternal charity, the joy and certainty with which they lived the everyday circumstances of everyone’s life aroused esteem and curiosity. It was an experience of life that aroused attraction. Therefore, each of us is called to live and bear witness to the beauty and joy

9 “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, “Letter to John Paul II, January 26, 2004,” in A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2018, p. 1119).

10 L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2001, p. 73.

of faith in Christ where we are. Let me read from *Disarming Beauty*: “This is the basic task of Christians in a pluralistic society: to be ourselves, witnessing to the new life that springs from the encounter with Christ. [...] The contribution of Christians can be effective only if knowledge of faith becomes knowledge of reality (Benedict XVI).”¹¹

Dialogue and cultural judgement

I would like to dwell on this second point a little longer. The text of *Disarming Beauty* continues: “A protagonist such as we have described is not afraid of having to live in today’s cultural pluralism. And even less does he feel oppressed by presumption or complaint. It is in this context of human crisis, of mysterious lethargy and invincible boredom, that the Christian faith can show all its benefit to humanity. That will happen if we are able to communicate through an experience that faith makes life more human, more intense, more worth living.”¹²

The episode of St Paul at the Areopagus is illuminating in this regard. In fact, the book of the *Acts* presents us with Paul in the city of Athens dialoguing with everyone he meets, to the point of being brought before the tribunal of the Areopagus. In his speech, Paul takes his cue from what he has observed in the city (“cultural pluralism”): a statue dedicated to the unknown God. He is not scandalized by the obvious idolatry of his interlocutors, but takes their religious desire seriously, which is manifested through it. But here, pay attention: in what sense does he take it seriously? Paul transforms what was simply intended to safeguard them against a possible offence to some deity excluded from the Pantheon into the possibility of announcing to the Athenians “what you unknowingly worship.”¹³ That is to say, Paul gives a new and truer meaning to what he encounters in the Athenians’ religiosity: he is not afraid to enter into dialogue with them, to listen to them, and at the same time he does not hesitate to announce what they do not yet know to them, but which he is able to explain to them more fully.

A phrase by Pope Francis, expresses well the condition for such a dialogue: “Reviving a dialogue happens not with words, but with silence; not by insisting, but by patiently

11 J. Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 70.

13 Acts 17:23.

beginning anew to patiently listen to another person, hearing about their struggles and what they carry inside. The healing of the heart begins with listening.”¹⁴ Therefore, an authentic new culture always requires serious listening to the questions, provocations, and ever new challenges that the dominant mentality poses to the Church. This seems to me to be an unmistakable feature of our charism: allowing oneself to be affected, wounded by these questions, having the enthusiasm to be provoked and questioned by them, without shying away from confrontation in the name of a supposedly “higher” interest. Therefore, the provocation that comes from the new and unprecedented questions that the world puts before us, if we humbly listen to them, can paradoxically open us to a deeper discovery of the truth contained in Christ and in the charism. Going so far as to address and perhaps even clarify points, on so many issues, that Giussani or the Church itself have not yet explicitly clarified. Giussani was the first to do so. To give an example, if Giussani, in the same way, did not have to address the questions that the current anthropological revolution poses to us today, this does not mean that because he did not address them they must have necessarily been considered irrelevant.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his lecture at the Collège des Bernardins, explains the profound reason for St Paul’s behavior: “In fact, Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all people, the one, true God, who had revealed himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in his Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to proclaim the message. They saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally.”¹⁵

Sometimes, on the part of certain Christians, dialogue and cultural judgement are seen as an attempt at proselytism, activism, an ideological and divisive “battle over values:” in short, fundamentalism. For them, the only form of proclamation of the faith

¹⁴ Francis, *Angelus*, September 5, 2021.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Meeting with representative from the world of culture at the Collège des Bernardins*, Paris, September 12, 2008.

is the attractiveness of personal Christian life. However, in my opinion, this latter concept has run the risk of ambiguity, even among us. If it is true, as has been said, that attractiveness is the first factor at play, it is also true that it cannot be confused with *pleasing the world* and not wanting to hurt its susceptibility. This cannot be the Christian's criterion for action.

To take this a step further, let me read another passage from *Disarming Beauty*: "To understand what kind of presence we need in order to witness to Christ today, it may be useful to keep one observation in mind. Often, when we have to defend something in the context of a debate, in order to make our response stronger, we almost unconsciously accept the way the other frames the issue. In doing so, we allow our position to be determined by its opposition. It is reactive instead of being original, that is, instead of being a position that comes from our experience of faith. This leads to further reducing Christianity or its testimony to the mere repetition of a doctrine, of some values or ethics."¹⁶

It is a passage that demands to be properly understood. The judgement contained therein is undoubtedly true when testimony is reduced to the *mere* re-proposition of a doctrine; it becomes problematic, however, when it is interpreted in an absolutist and unilateral manner, almost coming to the theorization of a disinterest, if not a disesteem, for doctrine, for values and for any ethical concern, without asking a serious question about the educational implications of this position. To the extent that this has happened, even among us, it has progressively led to a fragility of personal judgement on so many very concrete aspects of life. Let us think, by way of example, of some of the issues we have begun to deal with in the last few issues of *Traces*: from affectivity to morality, to the so-called ethical issues that are still much debated today, such as the defense of life from its beginning to its end. We are often fragile in regards to the reasons because we are fragile in regard to the cultural judgement that a truly lived faith generates. And cultural judgement does, inevitably, have a personal character (personal risk and creativity are fundamental), but if it does not have the experience of a life of communion as its origin, and, therefore, does not take the form of a communal judgement—that is, one that "expresses a life of communion that is lived"¹⁷—, a

16 J. Carrón, *Disarming Beauty*, op. cit., pp. 70–71.

17 L. Giussani, "On communal judgment," *Traces*, n. 6/2001, p. 37.

new culture, a truly Christian culture, is not born, to be proposed to the world. On the contrary, we are ultimately the first to get lost. Giussani writes in *Generating Traces*: “If we reflect on our experience we realize instead how often what prevails is a self-centeredness that decides by itself the factors constituting the Event we claim to belong to and that does not spring from us; in place of obedience we impose the affirmation of our own ideas. This is a non-mortification of our pride, it is original sin introducing foreign bodies, induced by something else and accepted by us, into the original simplicity, the creatural simplicity.”¹⁸

On this aspect, it is not irrelevant to note that if the values originated by Christianity have been founding factors of our civilization for two millennia, evidently their strength lies in the absolute reasonableness of the way in which the event of Christ and his Church respond to the desire of the heart of the human of every age and place. We must not lose, pardon the pun, the reasons for this reasonableness. This is not a sterile defense of abstract values, but a necessary and continuous re-proposition and re-actualization of the foundations of an identity, which has as its source the face of the Risen Christ present in history. In this sense, it is necessary to continuously renew the delivery of tradition. We all remember how, when faced with the situation of the Church in Italy in the 1950s, Fr. Giussani concluded that “tradition, or in generally any human experience, cannot challenge history, cannot hold fast within the tide of history, if not in the measure in which it expresses and transmits itself according to ways and means that possess real cultural dignity.”¹⁹ He returned to this theme many times and in many ways.²⁰

18 L. Giussani – S. Alberto – J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2010, p. 114.

19 L. Giussani, *Il movimento di Comunione e Liberazione (1954–1986). Conversazioni con Robi Ronza [The movement of Communion and Liberation (1954–1986). Conversations with Robi Ronza]*, BUR, Milan 2014, p. 12 (Our translation).

20 For example, again during the aforementioned meeting with GS in 1979, Fr. Giussani observed: “I said [to the Pope] that for us culture is a critical and systematic consciousness of an experience of life. A critical consciousness, therefore aware of the reasons, and systematic, not partial, of an experience of life. This is the point: if faith becomes the experience of life, then the faith counterattacks with a new culture, then the faith becomes the suggestion of a fascinating work for a perception, a conception, and a new approach to life and to the world; for an anthropology, a conception of the person, a feeling of the human, for a conception of history, and for a different cosmic conception” (FCL, *Audiovisual documentation*, GS Meeting with Fr. Giussani, Milan, February 22, 1979).

Of course, the cultural dimension of the Christian proclamation is not without risks and can—as in the case of Paul at the Areopagus—provoke ridicule or even very hostile reactions, even to the point of persecution and martyrdom. If we once again go back to the experience of the early Christians, we can see that the followers of Jesus were detested not so much and not only because they were perceived as *different* from others, but because, instead of cultivating their identity in isolation from others (in a form of self-marginalization), they placed themselves in society by raising questions and making judgements about it and what was happening in it. In doing so, the Christians did not enter into a relationship with their neighbors simply by saying “you are wrong, we are right,” but by showing that they possessed an interpretative key to reality that was more capable of grasping all its factors and that challenged that of their interlocutors.

Martyrdom

In the third part of the *Acts*, Luke proposes the martyrial dimension of the Christian proclamation to us. This is perhaps not the time to go into detail, but it is important to note that by placing these three dimensions in chronological order, Luke wants to preserve us from the temptation to absolutize the dimensions at the expense of the others.

We are undoubtedly in a different cultural climate today than at the time the *Acts* was written. We live in a “post-Christian” age, as it has been defined, characterized by a strong relativism and permeated by the mentality of “political correctness,” whereby the mere expression “cultural judgment” can appear divisive and disrespectful of the freedom of others. How can we be interlocutors today within a society that is no longer Christian, while maintaining the right and sacred respect for the freedom of others, and at the same time without diluting and diminishing the scope of the Christian proclamation and claim to vacuous relativism? Today, nothing seems to resist, nothing seems to remain stable, there are no more certainties, we said, and it is even perceived that it is right that that is the case. For us, Jesus’ words to the Apostles, “You are the salt of the earth [. . .]. You are the light of the world,”²¹ take on the meaning and weight

²¹ Mt 5:13–14.

of an enormous responsibility before the world. That is, we are invited to turn first to that—or rather, to the One—who alone is essential and permanent.

The consequences of a conception

At this point, I would like to try to draw out some of the consequences of the things that have been said, to help us make a judgement on our current situation and the steps we have taken, are taking and will have to take.

Looking at the factors that are external to us, a first element that stands out, in my opinion, is this: it is not true that today there are no longer any ideologies. There are ideologies, but they have changed. Therefore, an ideology of opposition has certainly been replaced by an ideology of dialogue, where dialogue is no longer the instrument for entering into a relationship with the other, as Pope Francis continually sustains, but has become the ultimate goal in itself: “dialogue for dialogue’s sake,” eliminating the possibility of reaching a truth that—it is clear—one is always humbly on the path towards. And the ideology of dialogue becomes the ideology of balance. This is what Benedict XVI prophesied: the *dictatorship of relativism*. The problem deeply concerns us, just as it concerns everyone. It is a problem that concerns the Church and, therefore, us too. It concerns the time in which we live.

What truth do we have to propose? I have no answer other than this: Christ and the newness that He introduces into the lives of those who recognize and welcome Him. “When this Presence [the presence of Christ] is at work in all life’s relationships, when all relationships ‘depend’ on this, when they are saved, judged, coordinated, evaluated, and used in the light of this Presence, then we have a new culture. This culture springs, therefore, from the attitude you have towards this exceptional Presence, which is decisive for life. For this reason St Paul says, ‘This is your spiritual worship’; it is our culture, a new point of view from which to look at the world and the whole of reality. When you look at that Presence with the eyes of a child, whether you are young or old (it’s enough to set aside the ifs and the buts and be full of the question that nourishes the heart), then you penetrate relationships, whether close or distant, with a light that no one else has, unless he has the same attitude before Christ, before God made-man, the Word made flesh.”²²

22 L. Giussani – S. Alberto – J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., pp. 112–113.

We acquire a certainty of judgement as we help ourselves to identify with Christ and His historical body that is the Church. We have no other truth for ourselves! As Christians, we are willing to follow Him to the cross, on the road that Christ, in obedience and unity with the Father, wanted and had to undertake. This certainly made him uncomfortable, and we too are uncomfortable, we will always be uncomfortable, we will always be *without a home*, as long as we are *of* Christ and *with* Christ. Our ideal of form of presence does not consist in not taking sides, almost feeling that we are above the fray: our ideal is to be *for* Christ, which means exactly the opposite, that is, to throw ourselves into the fray with a judgement that is determined only by our relationship with Christ lived in the Christian community.

Why do I say that all these things concern us closely? Because, in my opinion, it is within the consequences that we see when a change of conception takes place. The way we live, the way we are, the judgements we have on the concrete things in life, relationships, morals, the judgements we make or do not make, and so on: these are all consequences of a conception. The lack of a judgement on concrete things runs the risk of introducing something other than the origin. Let me explain: the fall, immorality as a fall, this is always accounted for (we are sinners!) and one recognizes it, is forgiven, gets up and starts again. The problem is when it is justified, when the conception changes in us, a different judgement comes into play. And I say these things because I see this risk among us today. We certainly believe that truth exists and can be encountered, that Jesus lives among us not as a definition but as a presence. But to say that he is a presence concretely has some important implications.

The Christian community in dialogue with modernity

The first implication: in the encounter and dialogue with modernity there is the recognition of *diversity*. I believe that a risk we may have taken was to think that the diversity we bring is measured by the ability to arouse “positive amazement” in others who meet us. As if the verification of whether faith withstands depends on the consensus it is capable of generating. Of course, if this happens all the better, of course, but it’s not a given! It could be exactly the opposite. In fact, proposing Christ is always combined with proposing the truth about the person that the Christian experience introduces. This should be a concern of the Christian that comes before the concern whether the other approves of us, that they immediately agree with us.

Moreover, for Jesus himself it was thus: what guided the urgency of his judgment was the relationship with the Father and the gaze on the human that came from there, not the recognition he received from people. He was also a very uncomfortable, hated presence. “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.”²³ The question is: what is the criterion, that is, the parameter of verifying whether faith holds out?

In this regard, let me open another parenthesis, which is a further consequence. It was said that we need to be certain of who we are, of our identity. What do we consist of? “Identity means membership. One cannot have identity without membership. If I want to know who I am, I must ask myself the question: ‘To whom do I belong?’”²⁴ How many times have we heard Fr. Giussani say that the consistency of our person, of our face, is in belonging to God, to Christ, discovered and lived through belonging to the Church, to the movement, that is, to the companionship in which Christ has put us, and with whom he makes us walk! This belonging is the content of a new self-awareness, which is, therefore, immersed in a story, awakens and develops thanks to a story. And whoever lives this self-awareness invests—I would almost say inevitably—a new judgment and action into everything they encounter, in a profound unity with those with whom they are called. It is a decisive point. Because the cultural impact starts from here, it feeds on this. In fact, when this is not the case, faced with the problems posed by our environment, the pressures of the dominant mentality, or the realities that put us in difficult positions, we fall into the temptation of restricting the terms of our experience and to think that ultimately the only important issue is—in a different sense from the one mentioned—“self-awareness,” one’s “personal” position. One exempts oneself from the risk of a cultural judgment and a presence in the world, ultimately reducing the content of self-awareness and weakening the very verification of faith. I must say that this has also happened among us in past years, to varying degrees. I have often seen the reference to self-awareness—understood in a reduced sense—play out in opposition to cultural judgment or presence. This is an impoverishment.

²³ Jn 15:18.

²⁴ Francis, *Audience with the students, teachers and parents of the Collegio San Carlo of Milan*, April 6, 2019.

The horizon of problems that life poses cannot be reduced to the personal enclosure. Also because often the challenges that affect us personally are part of a vast and complex environmental and cultural horizon, which we cannot face alone. How does belonging to the Church influence addressing these challenges? If it no longer has any impact, this belonging risks remaining abstract. So everyone takes their own path, and we are together only for sentimental comfort, for mutual acceptance, for mutual recognition which does not last over time. This is not what Fr. Giussani proposed to us: “What does a life of communion that is lived mean? A life lived together in order to live the memory of Christ. Because it is in fraternity, in fraternal companionship that Christ’s Presence is most pedagogical, it communicates itself in the pedagogically greatest way, and is assimilated in the way that is most alive and certain. If fraternal communion is lived, then we can also speak of a judgment that is truly communal; but to the extent that there is no effort to live the life of communion, communal judgment will be the locus of presumption, in which we presume or demand to impose our point of view.”²⁵ As I see it, this questions our idea of presence, including cultural presence.

The second implication—the first implication is the recognition of diversity—is presence as *friendship*. Let me read to you what Giussani says, which seems very significant to me with respect to his relationship with Leopardi, knowing full well the decisive importance it had for him and for the entire history of the movement: “When I read Leopardi in my third year of middle school—I read him the whole month of May, without studying anything!—, Leopardi was not my friend. He represented what I felt much better than I would have been able to, but he was not my friend: he was an ecstatic authority, outside of me. When I began to understand certain things during my first year of high school, Leopardi then began to teach me: he gave me the reasons for his being melancholy and I discovered from these reasons that it was not right, the reasons were not exact; he was melancholy because he forgot certain things. So I should have been at odds with him; but not only was I not at odds, I felt sorry for him and he became my friend: he became my friend. Someone becomes your friend to the extent that you internalize them, that is, you understand the reasons why they

25 L. Giussani, “On communal judgment,” *op. cit.*, p. 37.

represent you. When you begin to understand the reasons and begin to be critical of them— that is, to understand them more or to understand their limits—then that authority begins to become your friend.”²⁶

Thus, it is in this sense that presence offers the other a friendship. It is not about squashing yourself against the other, eliminating differences, in order to meet them. After all, Jesus Christ wanted to call everyone to himself, he did not have the problem of separating the good from the bad; they were all his. And I, we, exist with the vocation of calling everyone to Him. This is why criticism goes together with the proposal of friendship.

Tradition and communion judgment

Two final, brief points: the first is on tradition. Soon the Fraternity will publish a new, unpublished book by Giussani with speeches he made in the period 1968-1970. In these texts Fr. Giussani says that the time has come—he already said it then—in which it is no longer enough to re-present or represent tradition. However, this does not mean that tradition is now outdated. In fact, Giussani does not stop there, and in *The Risk of Education* he says: “The past may only be proposed [...] if it is presented *within a present, lived experience*.”²⁷

Tradition does not lose its importance, on the contrary, it continues to be even more important, but it can no longer be taken for granted. Therefore, greater work is needed to value it in light of the new questions that modernity poses. In this sense, I feel the urgency of asking ourselves what it means today to concretely re-propose tradition within the present. It is an invitation that Giussani made from the beginning and that I propose again today: what tools do we need?

A final point: communion judgment. As I have already said, we first of all need to listen. I believe that if there is something we are sometimes sinful of, it is a certain presumption of immediately arriving at a judgment without knowing things. Instead,

26 L. Giussani, “Tu” (o dell’amicizia) [“You” (or about friendship)], BUR, Milan 1997, pp. 35–36 (Our translation).

27 L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2019, p. xxviii.

listening is important precisely because need arises from it, the desire for a truly communal judgment. It is a judgment which is then perhaps made explicit through a voice, not necessarily always the same voice, which says how we see things. After all, what is judgment? It's saying what we see when we look at things. But two people, looking at the same thing, can see two different things. And, therefore, the value of a judgment, on the one hand, is to favor a positive opposition, a reasonable proposal compared to what is *mainstream*. On the other hand, it is also to give support to the many who intimately feel discomfort in the face of what is *mainstream*, but are unable to give themselves reasons, and, therefore, they need a friendship to attach to in order to be able to adequately live their relationship with the truth. There is, therefore, a fundamental educational value in the communal judgment: however approximate it may be, it triggers a work, a movement, and thus a presence.

I believe that your expressiveness, as cultural centers, can be generated by this judgment if you yourselves live a faithful belonging to the movement. For this reason, let me conclude with a quote by Giussani taken from *Certi di alcune grandi cose* [*Certain of a few great things*], which, in addition to what has already been said, can further inspire us for the assembly that we will have now: "The source of culture is [...] the experience of a lived companionship, it is the experience of lived life. I simply wanted to observe that passion for the truth, which we all understand to be the driving force for cultural development, for the adventure of culture, is nothing other than passion for the fact of Christ. It is, therefore, passion for our companionship, for the event of our companionship, for the event of the companionship of our movement, which is our way of experiencing the great event of the great companionship of the Church of Christ. Otherwise, there will also be culture, but not Christian culture."²⁸

28 L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose (1979–1981)*, BUR, Milan 2007, p. 260. (Our translation).