

Education is hope
Notes from the speech by Davide Prospero
at the launch meeting of the 2024/25 AVSI Tents campaign

Milan, October 16, 2024

Good evening. First of all, I thank you very much for the invitation, though I admit that I am a little embarrassed to speak after the testimonies we have heard and in front of people like you, who live “on the front line” and from whom I know I have much to learn. However, I am pleased to speak because the theme you have chosen for this year's Tents campaign—hope—is the theme that the entire movement of Communion and Liberation has been working on, starting with the Fraternity Exercises last April. Moreover, the Jubilee that is about to begin is also dedicated to hope. So this is a valuable opportunity for me to explore more deeply what the word “hope” means today, in light of the concreteness of the projects you have shared with us.

The 2023 Censis Report uses the term “sleepwalking” to describe an Italy that is lost and resigned in the face of a declining population, the economic situation, and outbreaks of war: Italian society is described as devoted to “minor desires” and “consoling pleasures” in a “quiet pursuit,” lacking intensity. In the face of such a situation, we cannot simply say that “everything will be all right,” with that naive optimism that, after Covid, no longer persuades anyone. Pain or evil often seems to prevail, as seen in the tragic news stories that have marked these past few months, which the movement has addressed with a flyer of judgement.¹ But even on a less dramatic level, we all notice that in our relationships, work, or politics there is always a promise that initially gives certain impulse, but then seems not to be fulfilled, causing many to retreat into themselves. Difficulties and limitations eventually overwhelm, and so we become complacent: disappointment and sadness cut off our legs, leaving us without hope. The story would end the same way for us too, were it not for something humanly unforeseeable that happened. I, for one, could not be here with you today talking about hope if I had not met friends, a companionship that showed me that the answer to our deepest desire exists—not an idea to be realized or a goal to be achieved, but as a Presence. Take the case known to everyone here of the women from the Meeting Point in Kampala: why did these women start taking again the medicines that they had previously taken away, even though they were very expensive and the only possibility for them to continue living? Why? Because Rose affirmed the value of their

¹ “Evil and the love that saves”, english.clonline.org, September 18, 2024.

lives, not merely with words, but first and foremost with the gratuitous love she poured out upon them, standing by their side. Those women rediscovered the value of their lives because of a presence that testified to them the certainty that life is worth living, that there is a meaning, and that this meaning is good. The good meaning is that there is someone for whom it is clear that the fact that you are there, the mere fact that you exist, is good, is valuable. There is someone who is capable of loving you gratuitously. It is something from the other world that enters into this world, into the ordinary horizon of your life.

The encounter with this great horizon has the power to make you perceive that this greatness is for you. Not only is it possible, it is for you. And then you begin to desire this greatness that you do not possess for yourself. This greatness does not lie in what you can do, because it is the greatness of a gaze of love that you first of all *receive*. This is the power of a true encounter: it is capable of changing life. But, like all encounters that claim to broaden our horizon, this greatness demands a sacrifice from us: to shift our gaze away from ourselves, as we are used to, and toward another. As I mentioned in the introduction to the Fraternity Exercises, I have always understood Jesus' words to the rich young man ("Go, sell everything, leave everything, and follow me")² precisely as a call to hope, because often the greatest obstacle to experiencing true hope in life is when we place our hope in what we already possess, in our possessions.³

This is, in my opinion, the heart of the drama in the Gospel episode: "Jesus looked at him and loved him" and invited him to follow Him, but, when asked to give up his possessions—to 'bet everything' on friendship with Christ—the young man in the Gospel "the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."⁴

In this sense, the fundamental question that arises for us today is the same as that of the rich young man or the Jews before the destruction of Jerusalem in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, who trusted in their own strength and did not believe the prophet's words.⁵ They were called—to borrow words from a book by theologian Adrien Candiard (who spoke at this year's Rimini Meeting)—to the "radical purification of their hope." Similarly, Candiard continues, "our time has this difficult and exhilarating historical mission. Unlike so many before us, who might have been blinded by the successes of faith, we have no greater choice than choosing between despair

² Cfr. Mt 19:21; Mk 10:21.

³ Cfr. D. Prosperi, "Introductory Greetings," in "*What surprises me, says God, is hope*," english.clonline.org.

⁴ Mk 10:21-22.

⁵ Cfr. Jer 26; 37.

in the face of catastrophe or hope in God. Other hopes no longer make sense. The only promise God made to Jeremiah was not triumph or success. It was the promise of His presence.”⁶

The question can be summarized in these terms: what do you place your hope in? What sustains your existence? The radical alternative posed by Jeremiah to the Jewish people in one of the most challenging moments in their history is the same we face today: to trust or not trust in the promise of God, who made Himself present among them through the prophet. We must decide whether we are willing to bet everything on this Presence, which today makes itself known to us and calls us to embrace it within the Church.

Culturally, we are the children of a centuries-long history that has profoundly changed humanity’s mentality and its relationship with reality. This is what AVSI testified when, in front of the G7 representatives who gathered in the Royal Palace of Caserta on October 1 to discuss education⁷, you brought in Priscilla Achan, the principal of the Luigi Giussani Primary School in Kampala. The daughter of one of the women from the Meeting Point, Priscilla told everyone what the presence of her teachers meant to her after being orphaned by both parents: “The teachers at Luigi Giussani School were always present to help me whenever I was in need. They accompanied me to discover that even in front of challenges, life is still worth living. I never felt alone at any point because I was surrounded with faces of people who truly loved me and desired to see me happy.”⁸

We thus clearly understand why we need education so badly. As Giampaolo Silvestri said when he spoke at the G7 and then in *Corriere della Sera*, “only education is able to impact the [...] destiny” of young people, because “it involves the person in their totality. [...] This education, which is rooted in the certainty of the transformative power of human relationships, is the only one capable of generating lasting peace and sustainable development for all.”⁹

I conclude, then, by emphasizing the profound connection between education and hope, the two key words that you very appropriately chose as the title of this year's Tents Campaign. We are grateful for this because you force all of us to focus on what Monsignor Paccosi highlighted at the Fraternity Exercises, when he stressed the need for an “education to hope,” summarizing it in these few words: “Educating to hope means looking at Christ. There is no other road for

⁶ A. Candiard, *La speranza non è ottimismo. Note di fiducia per cristiani disorientati [Hope is not optimism: Notes of confidence for disoriented Christians]*, EMI, Verona 2021, pp. 60-61 (Our translation).

⁷ G7 events, *Investing in lifelong learning for job creation and resilience: a dialogue with Africa*, Reggia di Caserta, October 1, 2024.

⁸ M. Giacomazzi, “Priscilla, Fr. Giussani, and the G7”, english.clonline.org, October 12, 2024.

⁹ G. Silvestri, “Il potere trasformativo dell’educazione [The transformative power of education]”, *Corriere della Sera*, October 2, 2024 (Our translation).

growing in hope,” that is, “to live our belonging to Christ within this history that has reached us.”¹⁰

This is crucial for me—not only for my personal life, but for the life of the entire movement. Let me go further: this is precisely the contribution we are called to make in a historical moment of change and reflection on the nature and mission of the Church in the world. Let us think, for example, of the Synod currently under way in Rome.

Hope, the hope that everyone needs, cannot be based on our own strength or on calculated probabilities. That is not the meaning of Giussani’s expression “taking all factors into account,” which many of us know well¹¹. Instead, hope is founded *solely* on the presence of Christ, who comes to meet us and loves us—as he loved the rich young man, as he loved Peter even after his betrayal, as he loved Zacchaeus when He saw him climbing the sycamore tree, as he loved the widow of Nain seeing her in despair over the death of her only son, and as he loved that woman whom everyone wanted to stone after catching her in the act of adultery. Christ loves us today in the same way, coming to find us wherever we are, whether in Milan or Kampala or Lebanon, and He loves us as we are, with all our limitations. As we said at the Beginning of the Year Day, taking up the episode of the Samaritan woman: Christ reveals the face of the Father, who is a Father, who loves us. Until that moment, God was perceived as an ineffable, distant mystery, but the Incarnation began a new story: the loving face of God has been revealed, and Christ himself involves us in His mission to bear witness to it to everyone. “To hope, my child, you would have received a great grace,” Péguy writes.¹²

This is what we discussed at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises in April, and we must not stop reminding ourselves of it. That is why the title of this year’s Tents Campaign is so valuable, and I am truly grateful to you for choosing it. Indeed, if this is the case, our response to Christ’s call *coincides* with the contribution we can make to the world! This is evident in Fr. Giussani’s response to a *memor Domini* who, after participating in the Christmas Tents a few days earlier, was struck by how the people she met were moved by her because she communicated an “affection,” a “consciousness of dependence, even if perhaps she could not express it in words.” Giussani responded to her thus, “If one obliterates oneself, if one no longer remembers, if one does not keep in mind this constitutive dependence of our self, his ‘I’ is no longer constituted by anything; it is merely a force of will, a claim of will, a pride trying to impose itself, but it

¹⁰ G. Paccosi, “*What surprises me, says God, is hope*,” op. cit., pp. 85, 86.

¹¹ Cfr. L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In search of the human face]*, Bur, Milano, 2007, p. 15.

¹² C. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler Jr, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 12.

has no substance. [...] If you are aware of the connection with what makes you, then in speaking with others, you communicate this consciousness. Therefore, in talking to others, it is not you talking to others, it is ‘you and an Other’” talking to others. And others feel this greater density of your presence.”¹³

This is the “constitutive dependence” that gives “greater density” to our presence, making us a presence both for ourselves and for others, thereby establishing human relationships capable of generating the peace and development Giampaolo wrote about. Our unique originality—the *only, true* “originality,” in the proper sense of this word—is thus not the product of astute planning, but rather the fruit of our connection with a history. A history, however, that is not confined to the past, but continues and takes shape in the present in a friendship, a lived communion. All that is asked of us, after all, is to witness to all the communion that sustains our very lives, as Priscilla and Giampaolo did in Caserta. My wish is that the Tents will also be an occasion for this witness. Thank you.

¹³ L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora [Affection and dwelling place]*, BUR, Milano 2001, pp. 377-378 (Our translation).