

THE CARESS OF THE MERCY

Address of **HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS**
to the Movement of Communion and Liberation
Saint Peter's Square, Saturday, 7 March 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

I welcome all of you and I thank you for your warm affection! I address a cordial greeting to the Cardinals and Bishops. I greet Fr. Julián Carrón, President of your Fraternity, and I thank him for the words he addressed to me on behalf of all; and I also thank you, Fr. Julián, for that beautiful letter that you wrote to everyone, inviting them to come. Thank you very much!

My first thought goes to your Founder, Msgr Luigi Giussani, remembering the 10th anniversary of his birth in Heaven. I am grateful to Fr. Giussani for different reasons. The first and more personal is the good that this man did for me and for my priestly life, through the reading of his books and articles. The other reason is that his thoughts are deeply human and reach the most intimate yearning of mankind. You know how important the experience of encounter was to Fr. Giussani: the encounter not with an idea, but with a Person, with Jesus Christ. Thus he educated in freedom, leading to the encounter with Christ, because Christ gives us true freedom. Speaking about the encounter brings to mind “The calling of St Matthew”, the Caravaggio in the Church of St Louis of the French, which I used to spend much time in front of every time I came to Rome. None of them who were there, including Matthew, greedy for money, could believe the message in that finger pointing at him, the message in those eyes that looked →

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→ at him with mercy and chose him for the *sequela*. He felt this astonishment of the encounter. The encounter with Christ who comes and invites us is like this.

Everything in our life, today as in the time of Jesus, begins with an encounter. An encounter with this Man, the carpenter from Nazareth, a man like all men and at the same time different. Let us consider the Gospel of John, there where it tells of the disciples' first encounter with Jesus (cf. 1:35-42). Andrew, John, Simon: they feel themselves being looked at to their very core, intimately known, and this generates surprise in them, an astonishment which immediately makes them feel bonded to Him.... Or when, after the Resurrection, Jesus asks Peter: "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15), and Peter responds: "Yes"; this yes was not the result of a power of will, it did not come only by decision of the man Simon: it came even before from Grace, it was that "*primarear*", that preceding of Grace. This was the decisive discovery for St Paul, for St Augustine, and so many other saints: Jesus Christ is always first, He *primareas* us, awaits us, Jesus Christ always precedes us; and when we arrive, He has already been waiting. He is like the almond blossom: the one that blooms first, and announces the arrival of spring.

One cannot understand this dynamic of the encounter if astonishment and adherence are inspired without mercy. Only one who has been caressed by the tenderness of mercy truly knows the Lord. The privileged place of encounter is the caress of Jesus' mercy regarding my sin. This is why you may have heard me say, several times, that the place for this, the privileged place of the encounter with Jesus Christ is my sin. The will to respond and to change, which can give rise to a different life, comes thanks to this merciful embrace. Christian morality is not a titanic, voluntary effort, of one who decides to be coherent and who manages to do so, a sort of isolated challenge before the world. No. This is not Christian morality, it is something else. Christian morality is a response, it is the heartfelt response before the surprising, unforeseeable—even "unfair" according to human criteria—mercy of One who knows me, knows my betrayals and loves me just the same, appreciates me, embraces me, calls me anew, hopes in me, has expectations of me. Christian morality is not a never falling down, but an always getting up, thanks to his hand which catches us. This too is the way of the Church: to let the great mercy

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of God become manifest. I said in recent days to the new Cardinals: “The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for eternity; [but] to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart. The way of the Church is precisely to leave her four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those essentially on the ‘outskirts’ of life. It is to adopt fully God’s own approach”, which is that of mercy (*Homily*, February 15, 2015). The Church, too, must feel the joyous impetus to become an almond blossom, *i.e.* spring, like Jesus, for all of humanity.

Today you are also commemorating the 60 years since the start of your Movement, “born in the Church”—as Benedict XVI said—“not by the will of an organized hierarchy but originating from a renewed encounter with Christ and thus, we can say, by an impulse derived ultimately from the Holy Spirit” (*Address to members of Communion and Liberation*, March 24, 2007; ORE edition, April 4, 2007, p. 5).

After 60 years, the original charism has not lost its youthfulness and vitality. However, remember that the center is not the charism, the center is one alone, it is Jesus, Jesus Christ! When I place at the center my spiritual method, my spiritual journey, my way of fulfilling it, I go off the itinerary. All spirituality, all charisms in the Church must be “decentralized”: at the center there is only the Lord! For this reason, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, when Paul speaks of charisms, of this most beautiful reality of the Church, of the Mystical Body, he ends by speaking of love, of that which comes from God, which is truly God’s, and which allows us to imitate Him. Never forget this, to be decentralized!

Thus the charism is not preserved in a bottle of distilled water! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean “to petrify it”—the devil is the one who “petrifies”, do not forget! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean to write it on a parchment and frame it. The reference to the legacy that Fr. Giussani left you cannot be reduced to a museum of records, of decisions taken, of the rules of conduct. It certainly entails faithfulness to tradition, but faithfulness to tradition, Mahler said, “is not to worship the ashes but to pass on the flame”. Fr. Giussani would never forgive you if you lost the liberty and transformed yourselves into museum guides or worshippers of ashes. Pass on the flame of the →

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→ memory of that first encounter and be free!

Like this, centered in Christ and in the Gospel, you can be the arms, hands, feet, mind and heart of a Church “which goes forth”. The way of the Church is to leave her walls behind and go in search of those who are distant, on the peripheries, to serve Jesus in every person who is marginalized, abandoned, without faith, disappointed by the Church, a prisoner of one’s own selfishness.

“To go forth” also means to reject self-referentiality, in all its forms. It means knowing how to listen to those who are not like us, learning from everyone, with sincere humility. When we are slaves to self-referentiality we end up cultivating a “labelled spirituality”: “I’m CL”. This is the label. Then we fall into the thousands of traps offered to us by the pleasure of self-referentiality; by that looking at ourselves in the mirror which leads us to confusion and transforms us into mere impresarios in an NGO.

Dear friends, I would like to conclude with two very meaningful quotations of Fr. Giussani, one from the early part and one from the end of his life.

The first: “Never in history is Christianity realized as a fixity of positions to defend, which relates to the new as pure antithesis; Christianity is the principle of redemption, which takes on the new, preserving it” (cf. *Porta la speranza. Primi scritti*, Genoa 1997, p. 119). This must have been around 1967.

The second is from 2004: “Not only did I have no intention ‘to found’ anything, but I believe the genius of the Movement that I saw born was feeling the urgency to proclaim the necessity for a return to the basics of Christianity, in other words, a passion for the fact of Christianity such as it was in its original elements, and nothing more” (cf. *Letter to John Paul II on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Communion and Liberation*, January 26, 2004).

May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady protect you. And, please, do not forget to pray for me! Thank you.

edited by Communion and Liberation

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