

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, November 20, 2013

Reference text: J. Carrón, “How is a presence born?” Traces no. 9, October 2013, pp. VIII-XII; online text: <http://it.clonline.org/detail.asp?c=1&p=0&id=1037>

Song *You*

Song *Liberazione no. 2*

Glory Be

The work that we had given ourselves was the second part of the Beginning Day. I will start by reading one of the questions that emerged during the last School of Community, and that allows us to move forward. “At the last School of Community, I was struck by many things, but at one point I was surprised by one thing, and it was when you asked, ‘How does it happen, how does it happen again, also for those who may find it difficult at times, and who, despite participating in the same gesture, don’t experience the vibration?’ I was already thinking all of the possible negative things: it is true, it doesn’t happen again because one is in the wrong position, closed off and therefore unable to see things. However, you surprised me by saying, ‘This is God’s plan [...] who [...] gives the grace to someone so that it continues to happen before our eyes, so that through this person, through his witness, the same echo of the beginning may also reach the others.’ This surprised me, but it didn’t diminish the problem, perhaps due to my personality or to circumstances, some of which I brought on myself. The fact that it happens to others is almost never a grace or a gift for me, but it almost seems like proof that the others get to a point that I cannot reach. It is as if the fact of seeing this in others is not able to rid me of two strong objections. First, the doubt that, in the end, the change and the happiness that I see in others aren’t truly what I desire. Second, the doubt that, even if it is what I desire, I will never reach it and I will never understand it. I wanted to ask you how this position can change. It seems to me that, ultimately, if something doesn’t happen to me, then it is not my name that is being called, but always the names of others – as if, even in the Movement, greatness was meant only for some and not for everyone. Instead, you were speaking of the change one sees in others as a possibility for all.” Another person writes me the same thing: “The fact that something happens to another person is a sign of hope for me, too. In theory, this holds up, to a point, but in practice it doesn’t make sense, because in order to live I need to have the experience personally.” How do I have an experience, if not through another? How did you grow in experience in your life, if not through another person in front of you? Who was Father Giussani? Was he an angel from Heaven? Or was he another person through whom – as we said in the last School of Community, quoting his own words – an “echo of that event” happened in the present? There isn’t another method! It happens through another, because this was God’s method, from Abraham down to today: to choose one so that it reaches others through this person. So it’s not a matter of happening to others and not happening to me. It happens to me through others, as it has always happened. Nobody would be here – nobody! – unless something had happened through another person. Therefore, the question is whether or not, when I see this happening in someone – whoever this person whom the Mystery has chosen to reach me may be – I continue to object that, since it isn’t happening according to my image of how it should

happen, it is not happening. It is happening! So much so that we keep saying that it happens to others. Therefore, each of us has to decide when faced with what is happening, because when the Lord makes something happen in front of me, then it is for me! We have all had this experience, and let's not think that we can get away with saying that we didn't see it, or that since it happened to other people it didn't happen to us. It did happen to me, because it was given to me through another – there is no other way. This is the meaning of Jesus' words: "If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Our entire position in front of reality is in play here: if we really let ourselves be moved by what happens. Jesus was the last thing that would have crossed the minds of those who lived in His time as the method chosen by God to reach everyone. Each of us has to pay attention to this method. There is also another thing that is even more amazing: the entire Christian event constantly reaches us through the totality of the life of the Church. Recently – but this happens to me often – a person told me that, when faced with friends who are going through really difficult times, she quotes a passage from the Bible or something she heard from the Pope to them. This would seem like the least personal, the least adequate response to the problem that the individual in front of us has. Why does she quote it? Because this objective answer – that is, the Christian announcement – is the only one that can answer the personal problem! A clear example is the greatest limit we have: when faced with death, there is nothing that brings more resolution than announcing that Christ is risen (similarly, when faced with our evil, there is nothing else to say besides, "Your sins are forgiven"). Tell me if there is something more personal, more adequate to my need than the Christian announcement! This is why I am surprised that many people reduced the "being called by name" to a feeling, to an emotional reaction that we are sick and tired of! And the worst of it is that this sentimentalism erases – from the face of the earth and from our life – the fact that we, all of us – as we said at the Beginning Day in Assago – have been chosen: "This is an objective choice that we can never rid ourselves of again; it is a penetration of our being that does not depend on us and that we can no longer erase [...]. There is nothing [...] more revolutionary than this" (p. VIII). This is what is most real and objective. And even if, in this moment, it seems to me that it is not making me vibrate as it did at other times, this isn't because it is less true, or less substantial, or because it is an answer less adequate to my problem or personal predicament. If I don't "experience the vibration," it is because I consider it to be "already known," and I do not face it with all of my need, with all that of which life truly consists, in order to experience all (but really all!) of that answer that the Christian announcement carries within itself. Therefore, my friends, if we don't recognize that we are all called by name – and we will come back to this point at the Fraternity Exercises – then the problem posed by the second letter I quoted emerges. Do you understand why Fr. Giussani thought that the personalization of faith was so important? Because, if the Christian announcement doesn't become mine, then I will always be stuck. A person writes to me, "I am writing to tell you about two small episodes that happened to me and that upset me deeply, because after 40 years in the Movement, one discovers that he is still at the beginning of the journey. After work, I took a walk down a street in my town. There were many people around. At one point, two young men stopped me (I think they were Evangelical Christians) and wanted to talk to me about their religion. As soon as I understood who they were – better, not who they were, but what they wanted – I reacted with great confidence: 'You say this, but I have encountered Jesus, and so you cannot sway me. Actually, if you want, I am going to tell you how it is.' It took a few minutes, and I went away pleased at how quickly I had put them in their place. However, right away I felt dissatisfied. What did I say about myself? Nothing! I opposed ideology with ideology. The second

episode happened a few days later. After work, I went back to the hotel where I was staying, and I stopped to chat with the doorman, asking him how he was doing. He told me that his back was hurting. ‘I know everything about back pain. I have been suffering from it for 40 years!’ And I told him everything that one has to do for back pain, and what I told him was so true that he was totally convinced of it, even more than of what the doctor had told him. I went away satisfied. However, from that moment on, I was no longer at peace. Because with regard to something as trivial as back pain, I correctly relied on experience, while when it is about Jesus or about the Movement, I resort to giving a speech. Why? I am certain of what I have encountered; I have no doubts. And yet, I give the speech. I have had plenty of experience, but instead of looking at it, I give the speech. I can’t believe it! This happened two weeks ago, but I can’t stop being upset [I can see why]. You are really right that we need to decide to follow Fr. Giussani, and follow him above all in his method. Why don’t I speak about experience, but instead make a speech?” Because the truth is that, many times, we don’t have an experience. This is why another person writes, “How can we make Mary Magdalene’s experience become a journey? Because for me, it is as if every morning, in order to be able to live, I have to start begging again for the same experience, and the next day I understand how I need to have this experience again; however, between the two experiences there is always a terrible, dark emptiness, and my only hope is to meet someone with those exceptional characteristics, because I need this in order to live. How has this become a journey for you?” My friends, here we find ourselves in front of a basic question of method, because if we don’t have an experience, then ultimately we have nothing to communicate to ourselves and to others, besides a discourse. When we talk about being called by name, have we had this experience or not? Or is this only a discourse about the other, and we are not part of it? Why is this crucial? Because without it, what I live doesn’t make my certainty grow, and therefore I am always at the mercy of everything else. On the contrary, Fr. Giussani always told us that experience is to live that which makes me grow; there is no experience if I don’t grow in self-awareness. I am sorry if I spend a lot of time on this. Last week, during a meeting of university students, a young woman told us about a friend of hers who spoke at the SoC that she holds in her department. The friend said that she had been doing some work with social services (medical and hygienic) for prostitutes, and that all of them were refusing the services. She continued, “I was fed up with people saying no, so I simply asked one of them, ‘How are you?’ And then we started to talk and I invited her to have coffee, and at least I was able to connect with her. In the end, she accepted what I was offering.” The young woman who was leading the School of Community asked her, “Didn’t you realize that you were a presence?” But the other continued, “Then, I had a conversation with another prostitute, who told me, ‘Life is always something to cry about.’ Faced with this, I didn’t know what to say, and I recognized that I had not been a presence.” At this point, I stopped the young woman who runs the School of Community and I told her, “You were wrong. Why was your friend perfectly right in saying that she had not been a presence? First, because she didn’t have an experience. If another has to tell you to recognize it, then that means that you didn’t judge what you lived. Therefore, it is not experience, says Fr. Giussani. What proved that she had not grown, which means that she had not had a true experience? The fact that when the prostitute told her that life is something to cry about, she didn’t have anything to say.” On many occasions we don’t know what to say! This is a question that we have to become aware of, because – and I quote Fr. Giussani – “therefore ‘experience’ implies the *awareness of growing*” (*The Risk of Education*, Crossroad, 2001). In order for this to happen, it is necessary that each person become aware of what is happening in his life by making a comparison with the heart’s needs. Otherwise,

we don't grow, and we can remain in the Movement for 20 or 40 years, but in a formal way. This is why Fr. Giussani says, "Either our companionship becomes experience, or it becomes truly dangerous, because those who belong to it live it as if they were part of a herd" (*Certi di alcune grandi cose* [Certain of Some Great Things]. 1979-1981, Bur, Milan 2007, p. 249). What does this mean? That it doesn't help us to grow. Therefore, since we don't grow in self-awareness, it cannot make us capable of facing reality with all of its challenges. In fact, what is the sign of this lack of self-awareness? As we said at the Fraternity Exercises, it is being bewildered in the face of life's problems. Instead, it isn't always like this, and indeed there are witnesses who show how it is possible to face the challenges of life when one has an experience.

A little more than a month ago, my fourth child, Giacomo, was born, and after living for 19 hours, he went to Heaven, because he had a serious birth defect. It was the same birth defect that had affected my first daughter, who was born and died 11 years ago. When I discovered this during my third month of pregnancy, I was truly desperate. I believed it was an enormous injustice, and I seriously thought that this time I would terminate the pregnancy, so angry was I with Jesus, and weak and unable to live through this additional trial. Nothing corresponded to me, neither terminating the pregnancy nor continuing it in a moralistic way. I felt trapped, and the question that you asked at the Exercises was thundering in my head and in my heart: "What remains of the fascination for Christ?" I had lost Him and I was looking for Him. I was utterly desperate, yet I entreated, though perhaps uncertainly and weakly, that nothing be lost, and that I could recognize in what was happening to me a Father who had a good plan for me. Fortunately, a very dear friend who is an OB/GYN told me that, given my almost-decision of having an abortion, I could ask my city's Archbishop for advice. I truly believe that Jesus called me the first time through this doctor – delicately, but a call all the same. I trusted my friend, and then I had the meeting with the Cardinal, an encounter that was so powerful, not only for his words, but for his embrace, his gaze, for the certainty that he conveyed to us. As we were leaving, both my husband and I knew that we had encountered Jesus and that, from that moment on, we wouldn't be alone anymore, and our limit and our struggle wouldn't be an objection to the truth. I was seen and I saw, as Saint Augustine said, and as you told us. I started to see reality, not through the wound it was inflicting on me, but for what I would be able to receive from Jesus if only I went forward. From then on, I lived a superabundance of presence, in the flesh, in the faces, in the words of friends and of the whole Church. It was never a sentimental embrace, but it healed me, it made me change the way in which I faced reality, making reality something I could love and not just something I had to bite my tongue and endure. However, during an ultrasound around the fifth month, I saw clearly that Giacomo was not getting better, but instead that his birth defects were becoming more numerous, and I suddenly lost it. In that moment, I realized that while I was wishing for a healthy son, Jesus was loving him the way he was, and I felt terrible, precisely like a child in front of her father, when she realizes that he has already made up his mind. Nevertheless, in the suffocating sorrow of those days, I no longer asked for the miracle of his healing. I only asked that Jesus not leave me, that He continue to grant me His strength. I needed only Jesus, more than a healthy son, because I understood that without Him I would have been lost in my wound. In the subsequent months, up to

the day of delivery, I continued to ask that He show me His power and His tenderness. I was saying precisely these words in my prayers. Now that Giacomo was born, I think that Jesus answered my prayer fully. In fact, during those 19 hours of life, Jesus dominated that hospital room, so much so that not only our friends, but also doctors, nurses, obstetricians, people who don't believe, all wanted to participate, filled with amazement for this life, and they continued to thank us. My husband and I were surprised at what Jesus, through a baby who was seriously wounded, was generating precisely there in the hospital, in an environment dominated by a "culture of waste." Giacomo was present, and he seemed to say, "I was born, and now I will be with you always." They also saw us, a mother and a father who, according to their mentality, should have been destroyed by despair. Instead, we were inexplicably but truly happy, because we were grateful and moved by this unexpected life. Deep down, I am sure that everyone who came into that room was taken hold of by Jesus. Whether they were aware of it or not, Jesus took hold of and dominated everyone. Without us doing anything, He transfigured reality. When you had an assembly in our town, my husband invited the head nurse, who is not in the Movement, because he wanted to show her the place that generates us and that allowed us to adhere to reality in such a way. She came and was moved, and now I am told that at the hospital she is no longer the same. She and some doctors have proposed a program to accompany children like Giacomo, something totally unthinkable before, because in the mainstream culture babies like Giacomo shouldn't even be born. Now, as I start the routine of daily life again, I am sure I will find myself trapped in reality once more, but fortunately I had the experience of this victory of Christ and of His presence in the flesh through the faces of my friends, to whom I have learned to give His name. This will always remain the point from which to restart. This certainty, which before was weak and easily blown away, is the greatest gift that Giacomo left me, and I will always be grateful for it. It is the Lord who transforms reality by generating a presence like this.

I will take the liberty of saying something with regard to what our friend just told us – I hope you will forgive me for doing so – in part also provoked by what you said at the beginning: when something true happens to another person, it happens to me. So, I would like to say what happened to me now in listening to our friend. I think that, at least for me, what she told us is the most meaningful example – I would say the most acute and representative – of the entire content of the Beginning Day's proposal. In a nutshell, it contains everything, especially the fact that, for me, this eliminates whatever residual suspicion I might have had that the presence is born, begins, with an initiative of ours; almost as if there were the gaze of Another – Christ who called me by name – and then it is up to me to "generate" a presence. What struck me was the fact that it is very clear that she and her husband didn't have the "problem" of witnessing to others, but that of living this situation. And to be able to live this situation, they looked for the only support that could help them, that is, what they belong to – the judgment of faith. What strikes me in all of this is that one truly becomes an instrument of something unfathomably greater because he is looking for it, not because he has to explain it to others; because he is looking for it, since it is indispensable for

being able to live. We are certain of something, and maybe initially this certainty is fragile, and God gives us the circumstances to make it grow, so that in following Him within the circumstance, I can learn to love Him. Then I learn to love Him, and in loving Him, in recognizing His face, which, little by little, becomes more manifest, I learn to love that baby, which means that I start to love that child for who he is and not for what he should be. I love him for his destiny. The others who see this begin to desire to be able to love in the same way (so one of them starts to make plans for a program for children like Giacomo). This means that this love is desirable, because what makes a gesture great is not the dramatic circumstance, but what she recounted: the fact that one learns – learns! – to love Christ, and in learning to love Christ, learns to love everything and everyone. Through all that is given to each of us, one loves Christ more, and therefore loves everything. I thought of what I read in the first pages of Vita di don Giussani [Life of Father Giussani]: what gives gusto to life, what makes us great, is becoming so much a part of Him that we take on His characteristics, which is what strikes others. We can try to show whatever we want, but what becomes striking is what is true to the core for us, what generates a certainty in us.

What our friend is telling us is an example of the fact that when life becomes challenging, we need to live the Christian announcement we have received in its fullness. It is by adhering to it that we can face circumstances, and our love for Christ grows by living the circumstances, because it verifies that Christ sustains us. He doesn't sustain us "before" the circumstances, but "within" the circumstances. If we don't have this experience, then we replace Christ with a discourse. What makes us go from discourse to presence is the fact that we see it happening right there, that He sustains us there in our difficulty. What consequence does this have (so that we can see how everything is connected in the Beginning Day lesson)? The result is a presence that enters and lives in reality, not outside reality. As one lives his life, he introduces – right there among the doctors, the head nurse, the other nurses, the people gathered there – a different way of living reality that is really disruptive, and not because it adds something to what already exists. No, it is because it simply places in front of everyone a different way of being that is very attractive. Then, some people from that hospital attended the assembly in that town, precisely in order to see the origin of what they had witnessed in her. One of them became almost angry, and at the end of the assembly told her, "Why didn't you tell me that we needed to pay the common fund?" And this person didn't even belong to the Movement! It was the first time they had ever heard about the common fund, during the announcements. By participating in something like this, even if it didn't happen directly to him, did he have a personal experience or not? Otherwise, how would it have been possible that they came to one of our assemblies, since these people have a different culture, a different mentality and way of thinking? So, how can one generate a presence? One can do it only because of faith. Nothing else works, nothing! Tell me if something else could have generated a presence in reality that was more challenging than this! Tell me of another strategy that can really move the heart, challenge reason, people who are poles apart, if not something like this! What is presence? When it happens, it is very easy to recognize. So, how does this witness correct the image that we have of presence? What do we have to learn about the origin that generates a

presence like this? The astounding thing is that it amazes the others in the same way that it amazes us; it's not that we need one thing and the others need something else – we have the same, identical desire.

We don't need anything else besides eating and drinking, living and dying. This is a Presence that "disrupts" the environment. Here we see that, without having to add anything, what everyone is waiting for is the simple witness of a way to face reality, to live the circumstances. In fact, a presence is not what we decide. A presence "is:" everyone can see it and recognize it, insiders and outsiders – there isn't a presence "for us" and one "for the others." When there is a presence, everybody recognizes it. Thus the question is: how can one live like this? What makes it possible for me – by living my life as it comes to me, with all of the challenges life throws at me – to introduce a difference into reality? Otherwise, nobody will be interested in our presence. Instead, when we live the challenges that everybody has to face, while carrying in our eyes what happened to us, we introduce into the world a presence that everybody desires. Then, each person will have to decide how to respond to the challenge of having seen this presence. This is a personal problem that everybody faces, ourselves as well as the others. However, this presence doesn't leave anybody indifferent. This happens without controversy, but simply by the fact that it is present. This is what Fr. Giussani is trying to make us understand when he speaks of the personalization of faith. Why is he interested in the personalization of faith? Because without it, we couldn't have experience. Where do we see this? Where do we see that the personalization of faith didn't happen in us, as we repeated at the Fraternity Exercises? We see it in the bewilderment of the adult in the face of life's problems. The question is this: do we want to learn to stay in reality like this – in any work situation, with our family, with our children, with our friends – or do we want to reduce everything simply to a sequence of striking events not connected by a history? I think this is a crucial question, and Pope Francis constantly invites us to this. What does he mean when he invites us to reawaken the life of faith in our contemporaries? He means to raise questions, just as it happened at the beginning of the Church's journey. Why do they live like this? Why can a mother live like this? That is, what motivates them to do that? These are questions that get to the core of evangelization, of mission: witnessing faith and charity. What we need, particularly today, says the Pope, are credible witnesses, not people who are first of all coherent. People who, in living life's challenges – with everybody's wretchedness, limping like everyone else, at times making mistakes – introduce a different way of staying in reality. And in doing so, they reawaken the attraction for Jesus Christ.

This introduces another question that comes up in many letters, like this one: "I want to understand what the word presence means, when you say that we need to 'explore and reach the core [...] because presence is in the person, only and exclusively in the person' [Fr. Giussani says this]. I don't understand what 'explore and reach the core' means, and I am interested particularly in the focus on the person, in the fact that the presence is in the person, only and exclusively in the person. I belong to the 'utopia' generation, and when I hear this emphasis on the person, I still feel strange, as if my person couldn't be enough. Perhaps here the emphasis on the person means, as it says

afterwards, the clarity of awareness that is called faith [indeed], the intelligence that identifies that of which everything consists. I realize that, in living, I am often full of answers, but not of questions, and that these answers don't bring me to a greater certainty, to a clarity of judgment. They don't bring me to consist of Him in every instant. However, life takes care of that by opening wounds through which Christ can pass [at times we think that circumstances are against us, but they are the possibility through which Christ can enter, can pass], and I realize that, through all of this, Christ is asking me, "Of what do you consist? What really interests you?" Another letter says, "As I was rereading the second part of the lesson, I found a repeated call to our unity, as if it were synonymous with the Mystery of Christ – not understood as a call to the substance and consistent behavior of an organization, but rather to the existential condition necessary to have the experience of a presence." What does it mean that a presence like this is in the person? Do we have to perhaps correct Fr. Giussani? What does it mean that the whole presence is in the person? Many times – as the letter says – this is understood as something totally individualistic. Instead, what does it mean that the person is built in the relationship with the Christian community, and that the community is the place where the person is generated?

In fact, one can be alone when he makes a gesture, but nobody thinks that he can do it on his own, so much so that many people ask, "Where did you learn this? How can you do this?" If one is honest, then he has to speak about the place that generates this attitude in him. This is why Fr. Giussani says that the companionship is in the "I." I cannot separate my identity from this place that generates me, because the "I" that constitutes each of us wouldn't be what it is now if it didn't belong to a place. In this sense, the community contributes to the building of our person. Afterwards, it can express itself in certain gestures in a personal or communal way. However, the personal way is not individualistic, because that person present in history, with that face and that way of staying in reality, wouldn't exist if he didn't belong to that place. Many times, if we are alone at work, we think, "Since I am alone, what can I do, how can I give witness?" No! You are never alone. We are never alone, because a single person can demonstrate a different way of living that provokes in others the question, "Why are you like this?" And in order to answer this question, one has to name the place that he belongs to. This means that the entire community is present in the "I." We can express it in different ways, but the origin is always this place.

This is so decisive that it happens even with people you didn't choose, even with people you may not like, but without whom you wouldn't be like this. The issue is not sentimental, about liking someone – liking less or liking more – but that there is an objective place that constantly generates you. Because your life is constantly nourished by the witnesses of many people – regardless of whether or not they are pleasant – by what they witness to you, by what they make you see, by what they introduce to you. And you are grateful to have people who accompany you toward destiny in such a way. The question is whether this unity that constitutes us ends up determining our life in an existential way. What determines life is whether there is something objectively present that shows you that, regardless of many shortcomings, belonging to this unity in fact builds your person, it is essential for you. If we don't get to the bottom of why this belonging is

worthwhile for building our life, then why would we ever stay in the Movement? If we don't come to understand the importance of this unity, then we will end up affirming it in a formal way, and the smallest problem will be enough to make us reject it, but only because we don't understand what is involved in this unity.

This is made clear by what was witnessed to us tonight. Even if she is the one living the drama, Giacomo's mom is not the origin of the presence; the origin of the presence is the constitutive place from which her "I" is constantly generated. That is why each of us has to look at our own experience and see if we can be generated on our own. The "we" is part of the definition of the "I." Nobody is here without having to acknowledge to what extent his historical "I" has been generated in a place that constitutes him. This makes us understand in a concrete, historical way what the connection is between the presence in the person, and the place where the person is built, the unity to which one belongs for the building of the person that each of us is. The community is neither an ornament nor a hat, but the decisive place where each of us is generated. To say "I," even if I am alone, is not meant in an individualistic sense, but it means, as Giacomo's mom witnessed, that when people see what they saw in her, they go and see the place where she was generated. Everything is in the person. They saw it in her, but it cannot be separated from the generative place. To say "I," even when one is alone, cannot happen unless the "I" contains the "we," the place that generated and constantly generates it. As Fr. Giussani says, the first companionship is in the "I." I cannot separate my identity from this place. For this reason, belonging to this unity is crucial, and is not in opposition to the "I." If, then, it happens that we can say it together, we will say it together; if it is necessary, as it was in this case, to say it personally, we will say it personally. Many times, one can be alone at work, but this doesn't mean that he is isolated, as long as he is defined by this belonging. Then, even there, stripped of everything, one can witness to a place that is constantly generating him. This is made visible in the different way in which that person is living. This is why, if we try to understand the connection instead of seeing things as opposites, then perhaps we will help ourselves to understand. In fact, if one is such a "presence," it is only because he belongs to a place that constantly generates and builds him. This is fundamental for the person, who then faces reality with his whole self.

I wanted to recount an episode in which I discovered that I was able to judge in a new way. A person who belongs to the Movement and was previously in another place, where she had a very beautiful experience, came to work with me. After this person arrived, she became increasingly upset, due to a total lack of correspondence between what she saw and her desire, but even in an exaggerated way: everything was ugly. At first, I limited myself to trying to smooth the edges, to soften things, by drawing her attention to the beautiful aspects that I am sure exist. As time went by, her criticism became stronger and stronger. It was a great provocation for this person, and as we talked about it, there was an implicit accusation toward me, because I was affirming something good in this place, as if things were fine for me. When this became clear in our conversation, I felt a great objection to the way in which she was judging, because I well knew that not wanting to

destroy things is not the same as approving them. As I thought back over my story in the place where I work – with all of the difficulties I have encountered, with all of the effort I have put into building something good – I realized that this was the reality entrusted to me, and that it had been given to me in order to safeguard it and to make it grow for Jesus’ glory. This is why one cannot help but love the reality that surrounds him. In reading Vita di don Giussani [Life of Father Giussani], at a certain point a passage really struck me: Monica della Volpe, who later became the Abbess of the Trappist Monastery in Valsereina, recounts her encounter with the Movement. She went to a meeting in Varigotti, she was struck, she relented after being hesitant, but when she went back home, she became involved with her environment again, and the doubt resurfaced. So, the friend who had invited her to Varigotti wanted to take her to Milan, which he did. She says, “I don’t know how, but he was able to sneak into a lunch that some ‘wannabe leaders’ were having with Fr. Giussani in a restaurant. ‘I see them all, small-minded, anxious to snatch a word or a look from the leader. I can’t stand them. Then I see Giussani, who has ordered a raw artichoke with a dipping sauce. He starts to peel the leaves off, one by one; he eats them and exclaims, “Ah, how good this artichoke is! How good this artichoke is!”’ How different he is from the priests she knows in Bologna. In the meantime, Giussani ‘looks at the others, jokes with them, bounces between the ironic and the affectionate, makes fun of them... and suddenly I understand: he loves them all! He knows them perfectly, he sees them clearly, as small-minded as I see them and more, but he loves them all, he loves each one of them passionately, like a father.’” As I read this I was struck, because I discovered this type of judgment in me, that is, a different way of looking at reality. I told myself, “Good, but what did this generate in me?” I realized that it was the desire, sincere and open, that Jesus’ presence could become manifest even where it wasn’t expressed in a way I liked, even where I was not expecting it. A desire that it could be real, and open...

Open to what?

Open to the fact that it could be different from what I had imagined.

That is, open to a plan....

...that was different from the one I had in my mind.

A plan that can develop through time, instead of entering like a bull in a china shop. Often, we become impatient with how things are happening in reality or within ourselves. With regard to this, I will read another letter: “I see that many times I don’t change, I don’t even put a nick in my instinctive way of looking at myself, and every morning I start again from my demands and a reduced image of who I am, and this new gaze always has to enter from the outside. How can I follow in a true way, reaching the point of change in the core of my heart and my gaze, so that I can really look at myself like this all of the time?” Whom do we hold responsible when this happens? Do we have to blame someone? We have to blame ourselves! Here, once again, Giussani enters with the gaze with which he looked at us, with which he looked at those young men during lunch, because time is part of God’s plan, and it will happen only if we have the patience to follow, like this friend tells us: “It is in the small things of our life that we see this way of conceiving of our person, which is such only because there is One who calls our name again, otherwise we would

still be there weeping about life. It isn't something abstract; it is an experience before being a concept to understand, and precisely from this originates a self-awareness like that born in Mary, who could no longer look at herself like before, but as completely defined by that 'Mary!' My life changed in the small things precisely like this. I always tried to avoid looking at what was happening to me. I didn't want to look at the circumstances that hurt me, and I pretended that what was annoying me most didn't exist [this is the point: ultimately, we can be here, yet constantly running away from what happens]. I kept going by shielding my face, trying to protect myself from the blows, trying to be struck as little as possible. Something changed when my husband began to change. He started to do School of Community with some coworkers, he started to look at me in a different way, I stopped feeling the need to constantly defend myself from him, and I started to change, too [this is God's method – he makes your husband change before you. Are we letting the Mystery have this prerogative, or not?] I started to go to Mass, too, as soon as I could – when work, the children, and my various commitments permitted – because I couldn't resist the need to thank Him for this gift. Then my husband introduced me to his friends, and I was amazed and fascinated by the way in which they looked at each other and at me. In the simplicity of an ordinary gesture, they were searching for Jesus, what He was saying to their life, how to face work, our children's school, our vacations, everything. Everything was embraced, looked at, judged, perhaps with preoccupation when making difficult decisions, but not censored. I started to go to Mass not only saying thanks, but asking that it be like this also for me, that I could see Him more and more. The greatest surprise came this summer, when my husband told me, 'How I would like there to be between us this same depth in looking at Christ.' I couldn't resist anymore. I couldn't look at myself anymore without feeling called by name [through what had happened to another!]. Now I have a great certainty: even when I fall, when everything seems to be against me, or when I am upset with everybody and everything, I have someone to look at in order to lift up my gaze again. I no longer have continuous doubts about the beauty I glimpsed, as I used to. I have been called by name, and I cannot tear this away from myself anymore. Increasingly often and powerfully, I have the need to kneel in front of the Lord and ask Him for everything. The awareness of how inadequate I am, of my mistakes, of my limit, is no longer the last word about me. What wins is the certainty of always being embraced and forgiven again by the One who wanted me and gives me every instant.”

The next School of Community will be on Wednesday, December 18th at 9:30 pm. We will start working again – we are in no hurry! – on the book *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* with the fantastic eighth chapter, “Christ's Conception of Life,” a chapter so rich and in continuity with what we have been saying in these last Schools of Community.

The **Christmas Poster** is available. It proposes an image of the Nativity by Federico Barocci (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana) and two passages – one by Pope Francis, and one by Father Giussani.

“Encountering Christ, letting themselves be caught up in and guided by His love, enlarges the horizons of existence, gives it a firm hope which will not disappoint. Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. Faith is not a light that scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey. To those who suffer, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, His response is that of an accompanying presence.” (Pope Francis)

“Christianity is the bond that Christ forms with you, not the bond you form with Him [you can replace “the bond that Christ forms with you” with the words “calling you by name” – is there any difference?!] [...]: you may not have looked at Him until a minute ago, and He forms a bond with you. You may not look at Him for another thirty years, and in thirty years He will form a bond with you. The decision crucial for your existence is the ‘yes’ that you say to the bond Christ has with you, as a man, as a wounded man, as a mortally wounded man. The ‘I’ becomes a protagonist when he knows what he lives for, when he recognizes his destiny, the destiny he was waiting for as he was stomping his feet on the threshold, caught between the freezing cold on the one side and the foretaste of the warmth emanating from the house on the other.” (Luigi Giussani)

The subscription drive to *Tracce* has started. It is not by chance that the chosen slogan is, “Give a gift to a friend.” To give a subscription as a gift is one of the simple ways to make our experience known to friends, coworkers, and so on. It is a way to communicate to people what we hold most dear. For this reason, I encourage you to think about the people to whom you want to make this known, and to give them a tool through which they may receive even a crumb of what we receive, like “touching the cloak.”

In embracing Pope Francis’ appeal, Communion and Liberation has promoted an **extraordinary collection of funds for the people of the Philippines** who were struck by Typhoon Haiyan. The money will be used to participate in Pope Francis’ special charity – which, through the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, supports projects to assist refugees and people affected by natural disasters – and to take care of possible needs of friends of the Movement affected by the typhoon. You will find the information for the collection on the CL website.

I remind you to pray daily for Pope Francis, as I wrote in the letter I sent after the audience I had with him.

Veni Sancte Spiritus