

# AT THE BEGINNING IT WAS NOT SO!

Notes from the talks by Davide Prospero and Julián Carrón  
at the Beginning Day for adults and university students of CL.  
Mediolanum Forum, Assago (Milan), September 30, 2017.

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**JULIÁN CARRÓN**

Let's ask for the poverty that we desired many times this year as we reflected on Manzoni's "Unnamed," because without it we lack the disposition of heart for beginning, and everything becomes useless. Let's ask for it by singing the hymn to the Holy Spirit.

*Come Holy Spirit*

*The Things that I See  
Negra Sombra*

**DAVIDE PROSPERI**

Welcome. First of all we would like to greet everyone present and those following us in other cities in Italy and abroad for this moment with which we want to begin the year. I would like to begin by asking again the question from the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity that was our focus this summer: "Has salvation remained interesting for me?" This word, *salvation*, so often forgotten in the face of the difficulties, inconsistencies, and burdens of living, has suddenly become familiar to us again. The word salvation conveys all the sense of our own limit, our own evil, let's even say our own nothingness, and this notwithstanding the aspiration for a realization of goodness and greatness that our hearts feel we are made for. However, salvation seems unreachable for us because we feel undeserving (at least those who have a minimum of self-awareness must have thought this at some point) and it seems that all our efforts are insufficient to earn it. Instead, the hypothesis of Jesus in front of Zacchaeus, as Carrón said at the Spiritual Exercises, completely overturns the question. Luke's gospel says, "Today salvation has come to this house" (cf. *Lk.* 19:1-10). Salvation is Christ, His person, and we have been caught by His gaze, which changed us. It did not necessarily change our interests immediately, nor did it immediately give us the ability to never make mistakes again, or even just to correct ourselves. What changes first of all is that we are aware of His presence, through an attraction that erupted into our life and magnetized us to Him. The *gratuitous generosity* of the

young people who spent hours under the beating sun directing traffic in the Meeting parking lots, or that of those who kept the halls and exhibit areas clean (and paid for the privilege!) which struck everyone, cannot be understood if you think it is merely the fruit of an effort to be generous. This gratuitousness is possible only if you are already satisfied because of what you have received. *Gratefulness* is what I saw shining in the eyes of those young people, just as you see in many adults already engaged in society. You see it shining because it is the expression of a present event, which maybe is happening now for the first time in the life of a person or that has happened anew after many years. I've seen it travelling to the many vacations and gestures we have done this summer.

**The usefulness  
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loves you.**

I want to tell you about a personal episode that happened to me some time ago. It was one of those days (I think this must have happened to everyone) when you get to the end of the day and say, "Today I didn't get anything good done." But unlike other times, I found myself on my knees saying, "Lord, today I don't have anything to give you, but here I am." And this changed everything in me. "Lord, You are here, and for this reason I am here. For this reason, tomorrow I can still hope, even if today I have nothing to give you."

I believe that our stature as human beings makes us desire a useful life. When Fr. Giussani was 23 years old, he wrote, "I don't want to live uselessly: it is my obsession" (L. Giussani, *Lettere di fede e di amicizia ad Angelo Majo* [*Letters of Faith and Friendship to Angelo Majo*], San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo-Mi 2007, p. 33). It is pettiness and small-mindedness to think that the value of life lies exclusively in what life can give me. The breadth of my heart (the breadth of the heart of every person) desires that what I am can be useful to the totality and thus to the world. Instead, we are often led to equate the usefulness of our life with what we ourselves can have or do. Thus we think, "Today I didn't accomplish anything good, and so everything was useless." But, as happened to me, you can realize that there is a greater utility: the utility of living your dependence on God. You can realize that the usefulness of life lies in corresponding to Him who





loves you, in doing something that is useful for Him who loves you. This might simply mean accepting existence, depending on Him-who-makes-you now, as happened this summer with the dramatic situation of Charlie Gard, which moved us deeply. For me, the usefulness of life is determined by what Another-who-makes-you sees in you, not by what you want of yourself. Thus life becomes useful when it becomes obedience: ultimately it is an openness to the presence of Christ, a yielding to the greatness that an Other wants to achieve in you and for you, for the world, in a way that is perhaps different from how you would have it. We live so that Christ may be acknowledged everywhere. We live for the human glory of Christ.

So I want to ask you: how can we help each other to live the awareness of this dependence?

### CARRÓN

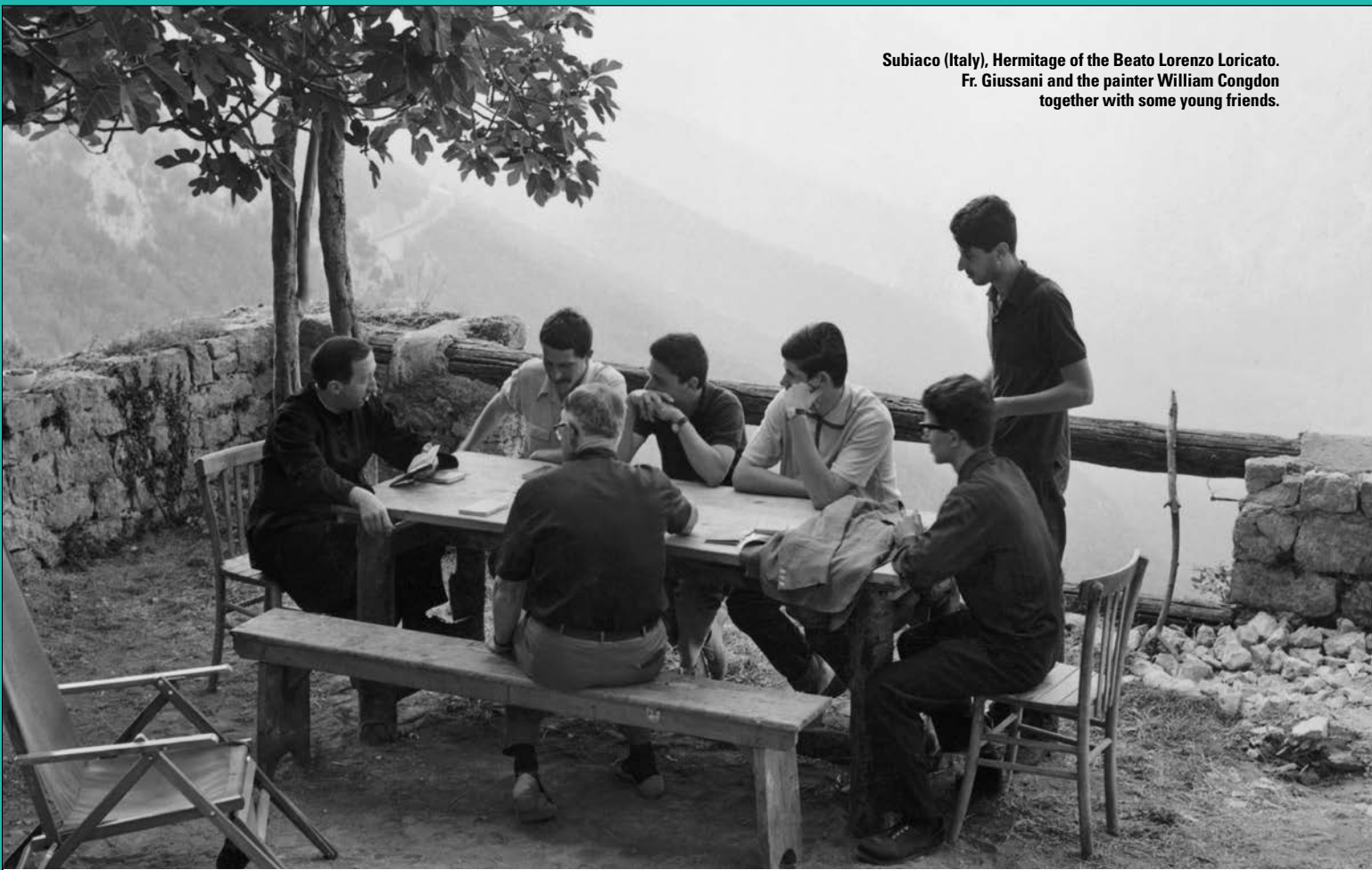
Who would not like to be surprised by something that makes everything sing, as in the words of *Negra Sombra*? When such an event happens, it is easy to recognize it, because it corresponds so much to the expectations of the heart. We sense it right away, be-

cause it makes everything in life sing. “If they sing, you are the one who sings, if they cry, you are the one who cries, [...] [you] are night and dawn. You are in everything and you are everything for me, you dwell [...] in me” (R. de Castro-J. Montes Capón, *Negra Sombra*, in *Canti [Songs]*, Soc. Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, p. 292). We depend entirely on that “You.”

We discover what we truly are waiting for when we recognize Him in the events through which He comes to us, through His capacity to make everything we live and touch vibrate. No special “equipment” is needed; all that is needed is that He happen, proposing Himself to our heart. Just seeing the things that God does moves us to tears, as in the lyrics of *The Things That I See* (in *Canti [Songs]*, p. 344).

When you live this elementary experience, you cannot help but desire that this “You” will never leave: *Negra Sombra* closed with the line, “Never leave me, shadow that always surprises me.” The desire to depend on that presence already makes everything different. How we would like to be constantly surprised by an event that makes everything new! Then we would discover more and more fully that if something sings, it is because You make it sing. If it vibrates, >>

Subiaco (Italy), Hermitage of the Beato Lorenzo Loricato.  
Fr. Giussani and the painter William Congdon  
together with some young friends.



» it is because You make it vibrate, because You are in everything, because You dwell in me.

When the surprise of this event does not dominate, what takes over?

### 1. FORMALISM

As we have just said, it is easy to identify an event as correspondent to life when it happens, and it is just as easy to realize when it does not happen, because there is no more music in our days: everything becomes flat and formal, and gladness disappears. It is so clear that we cannot help perceiving it.

“I feel I’ve reached an essential junction in my life, one of those crucial passages that cannot be postponed.” These are the words of a friend that I read at School of Community last June and that have accompanied me throughout the summer, because they identify where the snag is. The letter continued (I’ll just read a few passages): “My faith is formal. My living is essentially moralistic (how many things there are that ‘one does not do’ or vice-versa, that ‘one must unavoidably do,’ even the big gestures, like the Food Drive, the Medicine Drive, the Christmas Tents, charitable work, the common fund, the Spiritual Exercises, School of Community, etc.) [So it is not that you do not participate in the gestures and initiatives.] But the test (always the same fierce test), that of glad-

ness, slays me. There is no gladness! At best, I have a wearisome, pretentious, egotistical way of relating to others, and I can’t stand it anymore. I want to be glad, and instead I soon find myself back in the routine.” At this point, our friend understands how he has drifted away from the dependence that generates all of us: “Christ is truly isolated from my heart. Salvation must of course interest me, but I think of it according to my own model. And after so many years within the story of the Movement, I can’t believe I’m so ‘reduced.’ Gladness is always elsewhere!”

This letter helps us understand what Fr. Giussani told us (we talked about it at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity): “No expression of a Movement like ours is of worth if it does not invoke the memory of the presence of Christ [if it does not increase our awareness of our dependence on Him] in the heart of the concrete vicissitudes we live. Rather, this worsens the situation of the human, because it promotes formalism and moralism. It would make the event among us—the event that we should keep with trembling in our eyes and hearts as the criterion of our behavior with each other—deteriorate into a sociological refuge, a social position.” (L. Giussani, “Appendice” [Appendix], in *Alla ricerca del volto umano* [*In Search of the Human Face*], Jaca Book, Milan, 1984, p. 90). If we do not live everything that is given to us as a cry



that reminds us of the memory of Christ, nothing we do will be able to satisfy us and give us the gladness we desire. The event of life that shook us will deteriorate into “things to do” that will be like the dues to pay for membership in our companionship.

It was no coincidence that Fr. Giussani warned us about the formalism with which we participate in the gestures that are proposed to us, capturing it with these words: “You are not all set because you do School of Community [...] [or] because you participate in Holy Mass [...]. You are not all set because you hand out flyers or hang up posters. This can be the formality with which you pay your dues for belonging to this social reality. But when does all this become experience? When it says something to you and moves something in you” (L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria [People Without a Homeland]* (1982-1983), Bur, Milan, 2008, p. 194).

“So how do I get out of this situation?” our friend wonders. His experience offered some suggestions through the symptoms that appeared (formalism, routine, his “I can’t stand it anymore”), but he already has his model for reaching salvation—he is unwilling to change. “Don’t try telling me that the restlessness I feel is a ‘good’ because I really don’t understand it. Don’t try telling me that my (possible) cry [...] ‘is useful,’ and that Christ is there, waiting for me, and that everything I’m going through is exclusively for my good! I understand all this formally, but not existentially. After all these years, I’m back to where I started from.”

But how can our friend understand something on the existential level if he refuses to take the only road that could lead him to understanding?

What is this road?

## 2. THE ROAD OF EXPERIENCE AND HISTORY

To understand something existentially, we have to pay attention to the experience we have, to the “symptoms” that it continually offers us. The way the Mystery makes us understand things is always through history. Fr. Giussani untiringly reminded us of this. “For me, history is everything; I have learned from history” (quoted in A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani [Life of Fr. Giussani]*, Bur, Milan, 2014, p. VIII).

But we can harbor fierce resistance to the provocation of reality, as if we cannot understand what these symptoms indicate, as if we cannot grasp the reason for them. But they are like the cry that God, full of tenderness for us, causes to well from our innermost depths, as if He said to us, “Don’t you realize the need you have for Me through the symptoms you perceive in yourself? You don’t realize because someone else tells you, or because I send you an angel, but because of those symptoms!” If you are not open to recognizing what emerges from your own experience, if you do not pay attention to the symptoms and follow where they lead, “you won’t be persuaded even if someone should rise from the dead,” as Jesus said in a certain context (Cf. *Lk.* 16:19-31).

Instead, when you are open to recognizing a symptom as something positive, that is, as a call of the Mystery, look at what happens. A friend, Mireille, told us she came to a point in the life of her family when she no longer loved her husband the way she had in the beginning; the origin of her love was no longer so strong. This became a challenge to her: something happened that the Mystery used to provoke her, to make her aware of what had dwindled. There was no huge marital crisis, and they continued doing the same things as before, but the origin had been lost along the way. In fact, she said, “We’re together, doing thing together. We take care of the kids and our

home. We’re called upon to help our two families. Every weekend we open our home to home certain street kids who we’re accompanying. Each of us does his own work well. We help each other in our work, but [here is the point] we’re detached, distant from each other. The desire expressed by someone I met [who was interested in her life] made me understand that [the issue] is not so much the fact that an unease, a distance has come between me and my husband, but that Christ is no longer the point of departure for our daily life. [This is how things are understood existentially.] What burned in us, and made us go against the stream of the dominant understanding of marriage in our culture, was the fire that came from Christ. This fire fueled such a beautiful married life that we felt we were unique in all the world, but today we are **»»**

**⌈**  
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**⌋**

» left with embers that risk becoming ashes. What we feel now is the weight of our daily life.” It is easy to recognize when the fire that comes from Christ no longer burns: the weight of daily life makes it evident, and life ceases to sing.

At this point, you see whether a person is truly willing to learn from what happens, that is, to grasp a symptom, recognizing it as an opportunity. Someone else in Mireille’s situation might have complained, saying, “What, am I still here? Am I still in this condition after so many years?” She did not. She writes that she was happy “to discover how the Lord in His brilliance used a simple encounter to restore us to ourselves,” that is, He came once again to take care of her and her husband. In response to his wife’s words, her husband acknowledged that he felt the same way, and told her, “Our love has grown like a tree where the birds come to rest in its branches and people find shade [their home is constantly open]... you are right! If we stop feeding the fire, we will dry out. Nothing of what we see will be possible anymore!”

Who would not want to have friends like this? “In their humility there is the seed of a new world,” the Pope said recently, concluding with an invitation: “Associate with people who have kept their heart like that of a child” (Francis, *General Audience*, September 20, 2017).

Therefore, the issue is whether we are open to the way God, through reality, “breaks down our doors.” It can be the emergence of a problem of the heart, as we have seen, or something else. We do not know what method the Mystery will use to call us, how He will decide to break down our doors, to bring us back, keeping us from going ahead and doing things without them meaning anything to us. It is impressive! We think we already know how things should go, we do them, and nothing happens, everything becomes arid. So then the Lord has to take audacious initiative to make us leave behind the formalism in which we are suffocating.

“For me, history is everything; I learned from history.” Now we understand better why Fr. Giussani never tired of telling us this.

So then, what is the purpose of taking the symptoms seriously?

### **3. RECOVERING THE BEGINNING**

What happens to us, the “symptoms” that we sense in ourselves, happens to help us regain *the beginning*, the origin, the original purity of an experience, that which won us over and attracted us. Mireille showed us in a brilliant way how these symptoms enabled her to realize that Christ was no longer the point of departure for her daily life.

In the light of what happened to her, we can better understand what Fr. Giussani recounted during the 1982 Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity (and that we are still able to read, thanks to the publication of the book *Una strana compagnia* [*A Strange Companionship*]). What he said seems tailor-made for the situation we are describing, helping us understand the experience we are living now, touching the deepest fibers of our being. The particular experiences of each person offer us help in understanding the most crucial things for everyone.

Therefore, let’s listen to Fr. Giussani: “The other night, at a gathering in Milan, I observed that, in these years, some fifteen years or so, [he said this in 1982] in all the years of our journey, it is as though [...] the Movement had built on the values that Christ brought us. Thus, all our efforts at associative, operative, charity, cultural, social, and political activity have certainly had as their aim that of mobiliz-

ing ourselves and things in accordance with the ideals, the starting points which Christ has made known to us. But at the beginning [...] it was not so.” (L. Giussani, *The Work of the Movement: The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*, Società Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2005, p. 102.)

Fr. Giussani said this speaking about the situation of the Movement, but Mireille and the friend of the letter could say it too: “At the beginning it was not so!”

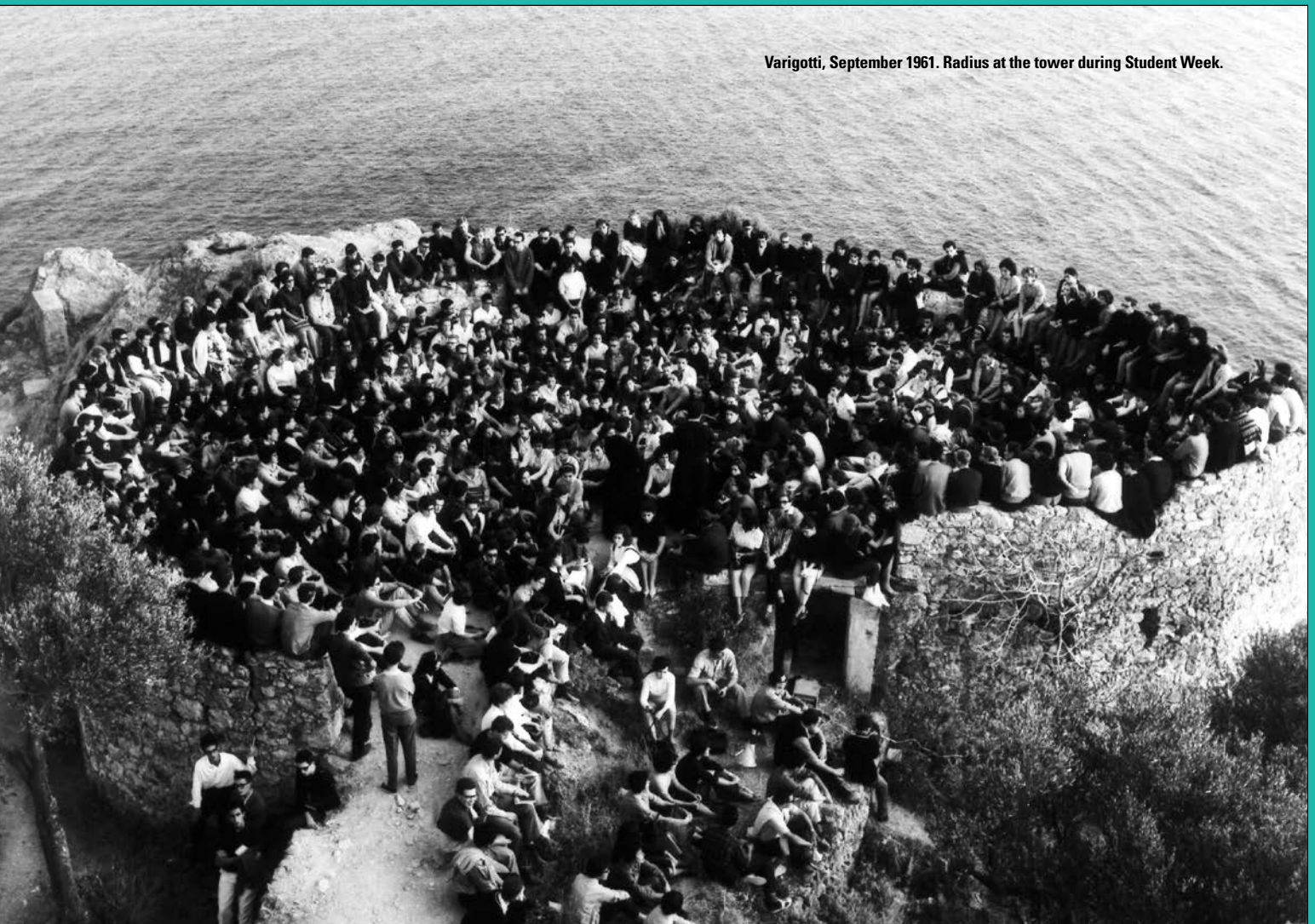
And how was it at the beginning?

“At the beginning of the Movement, in the early years, we did not build on the values that Christ had brought us [that was not the primary interest], but we built [it is not that they did not build] on Christ, naively if you will, but the theme of the heart, the persuasive motive was the fact of Christ [...]. In the



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beginning we built, we tried to build on something that was happening [like when two people start to be together: what is happening between them is what makes them do everything], not on values brought to us and thus on our inevitable interpretation of them. We tried to build on something that was happening and that had bowled us over. No matter how naive and shamelessly out of proportion it may have been, this was a pure position. This is why, because we have in a sense abandoned it, since we have settled on a position that was first and foremost, I want to say, a ‘cultural translation’ rather than the enthusiasm for a Presence, we do not know—in the Biblical sense of the term—Christ, we do not know the mystery of God, because He is not familiar to us.” (*ibid.*, pp. 102-03).

Here you see clearly what Fr. Giussani identified as the shift that happened: from the enthusiasm for a presence to a position defined by a “cultural translation” or a series of activities, honorable as they may be—pay attention here!—Mireille and the friend of the letter were doing very good and honorable things. But this is not enough. Our poverty, our thirst, is infinitely greater than what we do. What we need cannot find adequate response in a culture or a system of ethics.

This shift can happen on a personal level, in the relationship of love between husband and wife, among friends; it can happen in the life of each of us or in the life of the Movement, and the terrible consequence, indicated by Fr. Giussani, is that “we do not know Christ” and thus gladness does not appear on our faces. We do all these things, but we are not moved by enthusiasm for the presence of Christ, as in the beginning. “At the beginning [...] it was not so.”

But how was it in the beginning? Giussani was categorical: “Christ the reason for existence, Christ the cause of our creativity [there is in no way any lack of creativity, therefore], not through the mediation of interpretation, but in a sudden burst: no position but this one can be Christian.” He continues, “All the rest—the mobilization of existence and creativity—will come later, but Christ as the reason for existence and the cause of creativity: this is what we must recover. It is like a passionate desire to recover the original purity of the life of our Movement, which many people do not know” (*ibid.*, p. 103). My wish for each of you is that you perceive all of Christ’s passion for our life in this cry of Giussani’s: this original purity is to be recovered. Friends, this must be regained today, >>





Milano 1963. Fr. Giussani during a GS meeting at the headquarters on Statuto Street.

» too, if we do not want to end up, as we saw before, in a situation that becomes suffocating because none of the things you do fills you with gladness.

I am struck by how even in our younger friends the same urgent need to recover this original purity emerges from the inner depths of living. A young man in Student Youth wrote: “I had an almost perfect CL holiday, with the community vacation, trips, evenings, and the Meeting. I practically never stopped. But then, the return back home. I think it was one of the worst homecomings of all my vacations. It wasn’t longing, or a lack, or an emptiness. It was a huge void, a wound that was so big, a cry that was so strong that I couldn’t suffocate it. All those feelings of emptiness that had accumulated over the summer were assailing me and I realized something: it had been a very long time since I had said a prayer. Not a Hail Mary or an Our Father [recited formally], no. A true prayer, a dialogue with the Lord, a moment when I was face to face with Him [in front of Him], in order to understand who I am. Maybe in this period I did ‘everything,’ but I lost myself. This ‘everything’ without Christ is emptiness. In fact, just as He gives everything to me, so He asks everything of me. I realized that I was living Christianity without Christ. The first thing that I found was His presence, but as time passed I

found so many other things that I forgot Him. How can I live the Movement without forgetting Him? How can I keep His presence alive in me?”

This is the shift: forgetting Christ while I do “everything,” living the Movement but forgetting Him. At the same time, here is the new thing: we begin to realize it when we miss Him.

So to begin to answer the question, we would do well to understand Fr. Giussani’s call, because life will not cut us any slack. “This change [from enthusiasm for a presence to a “cultural translation” as the motivation of life; he said this in 1982!] is the reason why it has become so easy to identify our experience as an activist, organizational, or cultural commitment, sometimes very exclusive and defined and carried out in an authoritarian manner” (*The Work of the Movement*, p. 103).

In order to recover the pure position of the origin, and thus that dependence that makes everything sing, you need to understand what Giussani meant by the “cultural translation” that over time had taken precedence over enthusiasm for a presence. He said this in 1991, and it is striking to realize how he has always accompanied us: “The most insidious attack on the strength of our Movement comes from those who put the word culture before everything else. It is



the inverse: culture flows [from the event], from the decision for existence. The primary culture—as John Paul II calls it—is the ‘I’ that belongs to the event. It is a waste of time when you do not hit the target, which is the event. Regaining the event, focusing on the target again, means responding to the rest as well. This is the point: not any dislike of culture, but a counterattack on the origin of culture” (“Corresponsabilità” [Co-responsibility], *Litterae Comunione CL*, n. 11/1991, p. 34).

**4. CHRISTIANITY AS IDEOLOGY AND CHRISTIANITY AS TRADITION**

In 1998 Fr. Giussani returned in other terms to the same issue: “This year the distinction we have discovered between ideology and Tradition has become clear” (L. Giussani, “Avvenimento e responsabilità” [Event and Responsibility], *Tracce*, n. 4/1998, p. III). He goes on to add another distinction, between ideology and event. He says, “The point of departure of Christianity is an Event. The point of departure of the others is a certain impression of things” (*ibid.*), which becomes preconception and develops into a discourse, that is, into an ideology. When someone hurts us, we can see how our whole attitude is determined by the impression that this fact leaves on us, upon which we then build a preconception and a vision of things.

Instead, the Christian’s point of departure in every relationship is an event. What does this mean? We see it in the episode known to all of us of the prisoner whose reaction against an unjust body search was not determined by the impression he had about the way he was searched, ugly as it was, but by an Event that had entered into his life and awakened in him a different position in front of the injustice to which he was subjected. “How could the guard behave differently, if he hadn’t had the same experience I’d had, that is, if the fact of Christ hadn’t crashed into him as happened for me?” This example explains things that at times we find difficult to understand. It is simple: it is immediately evident that his point of departure in the relationship with that guard was not the impression that he had, but an event that had seized him and was active in him also in that moment, changing

his reaction. Without that event, in fact, everything would be exclusively determined by the tangle of circumstances.

But in order for it to become the point of departure, the event has to be happening now, says Giussani: “If [...] the origin, the foundation, the founding principle of all human experience is an Event,” it is only because it is happening now. “You understand this Event because it is happening now” (*ibid.*). You understand it, you perceive its impact, you experience the power of change, because it happens, is happening now, not because “I already know.” The event is precisely what I do not already know.

Why does the example of the prisoner strike me so much? Because it shows that the event is understood because it changes us, not because I have the right conception. We all know well what the event is, and yet we often react in a totally different way from that prisoner. Why is that? Because it is not enough to know, just as our own impression of things is not enough. The test is whether the event is happening now—the test, that is, that it is not a matter of theory, of abstract knowledge, but of a real fact that happens now, to me, and that I recognize and embrace it, and that it becomes the point of departure of every move I make—is how I relate to people and things. The test is the newness I discover in myself, in the way I react. For this reason, I cannot speak about this prisoner

**The test of whether the Event is happening now is how I relate to people and things.**

friend of ours without thinking of Jesus. This friend’s way of reacting makes Jesus contemporary to us. Because of the relationship Jesus lived with His Father, He could say of those who put Him on the cross and insulted Him: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” (*Lk. 23:34*). He could look at His tormentors in this way only because of that dependence, because of that unique familiarity with the Father. The attitude to which Christ bore witness expresses all the cultural newness that He brought into the world. In order to understand this you must recognize what was happening in the depths of Jesus’s being.

This introduces us to another question: “How does an event pass on to those who are living now? How is it given to them?” Fr. Giussani responds, “If it is an Event that repeats itself, it repeats itself every **»»**



» day.” An event communicates itself by happening. Christianity is an event and it passes from person to person as an event. It is not communicated as a set of teachings or precepts; it is not reducible to a conception or a culture. This is the key point for everything, otherwise Christianity is reduced to an ideology, a reduction that can even dominate “our way of conceiving of much of Christian catechesis,” even our way of doing School of Community, even “our way of perceiving Christianity and the Church” (Giussani, “Avvenimento e responsabilità” [Event and Responsibility], p. III). How can you recognize a reduced Christianity?

By the fact that it does not change us.

This is the contribution that Fr. Giussani gave the life of the Church, as Cardinal Ratzinger said at his funeral: “Only Christ gives meaning to the whole of our life. Fr. Giussani always kept the eyes of his life and of his heart fixed on Christ. In this way, he understood that Christianity is not an intellectual system, a packet of dogmas, a moralism, Christianity is rather an encounter, a love story; it is an event.” (J. Ratzinger, *Homily at the Funeral of Fr. Giussani*, February 24, 2005, in *The Work of the Movement*, p. 297). But before Ratzinger, John Paul II had written this in 2002, in his letter for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fraternity: “Christianity, even before being a sum of doctrines or

a rule for salvation, is thus the ‘event’ of an encounter. This is the insight and experience that you have transmitted in these years to so many persons who have adhered to the Movement” (John Paul II, *Letter to Fr. Giussani*, February 11, 2002, in *ibid.*, p. 6).

This intuition and this experience must be recovered if we do not want to end up suffocated because we have reduced what we have in our hands. When this happens, the Movement no longer exists according to its original nature, even if we continue doing and saying many things.

Fr. Giussani invites us to take a step in the direction of this recovery. “This ‘passage’ of an Event as the ‘all’ of life, as the total explanation of life and history, is called Tradition.” Let’s pay attention to how he describes it, so we do not reduce it to something already known: “Tradition is a memory that continues [and he immediately corrects himself], or better, it is an event that continues as memory, in memory. It is not so much an event that continues in order to be described by a memory: it is the memory through which something greater and more powerful crashes [striking!], so that it becomes the sign of a continuity throughout history [so that it does not crystallize into doctrine].” We see it in the disciples of Emmaus: they knew Jesus well, and recounted the facts of His life to their new unknown companion. But only when the



memory of His life was “crashed through” by the happening of the Risen Christ did the two disciples understand and change. Fr. Giussani continues, “Either memory is understood reductively in the natural sense [...]—[as] a recollection of the past, a devout, nice, sympathetic, good, lovely recollection that makes the heart more human as you think on it—or memory can be everything!”—*is* everything. In other words, memory is this event that happens again constantly. We are not the ones to produce it, nor does it depend on our initiative or power. “The first position [that equates memory with a recollection] consists in reducing to a principle the way the human person conceives of the world, feels and deals with life (preconception)” (Giussani, “Avvenimento e responsabilità” [Event and Responsibility], pp. III-IV).

But—pay attention to what follows—“If Christianity becomes this, if it is passed on as a conception, as a doctrine, as a way of conceiving and dealing with life, Christianity too will become an ideology. This was our objection to the situation of the Church in modern times: the way of conceiving of morality was not born of Christ, of the event of Christ, but was efficiently produced by an interpretation of life that the heart felt with fondness, critically documented (tentatively, at least), such that the ontology was forgotten; it was practically ‘devitalized,’ as when you remove the nerve from a tooth” (*ibid.*, p. IV).

What was “devitalized”? The new ontology, that is, the fact that Christianity is an event (“The ontology is the announcement that God became man and that this event, in the historic sense of the term, continues in history because that Man rose from the dead: ‘I will be with you until the end of times’” (*L’uomo e il suo destino. In cammino* [Man and His Destiny: On the Road], Marietti 1820, Genova, 1999, p. 71). This ontology—as we saw in the testimonies I quoted in the beginning—is not “rejected,” but it is forgotten, taken for granted, or in other words, it is no longer the point of departure in our relationship with all of reality, as Mireille said, and so this relationship is emptied, because it is incapable of sustaining itself on its own. Saying that the ontology is devitalized means that the way we conceive of and deal with things is no longer grounded in the Event. Fr. Giussani continues: “Do

you understand what I meant when I spoke about the ten years after 1968, when the dominant idea of culture among us did not derive from Christ, but from being recognized in the world because of a culture we had?” (Giussani, “Avvenimento e responsabilità” [Event and Responsibility], p. VII).

If we do not understand this, if we do not recover the origin, no effort will succeed in restoring the fullness that only His presence can give us, or in making us protagonists of a new culture, because only the event of Jesus present can generate a true conception of things. This conception must be continually reborn from the source that generated it, and documented through the re-happening of a living testimony. It must become visible in someone’s concrete experience. Only in this way can it be transmitted, passing from one person to another. I was told about

the wedding of two of our friends. The bride’s colleagues were amazed that she was getting married so young, “And for the rest of your life?” Then they attended the wedding and were blown away, so much so that when the bride returned from her honeymoon, they were still talking about the beauty of the wedding day. A new conception is constantly generated by a present event and “passes” by happening.

Tradition, von Balthasar said during the Spiritual Exercises preached with Fr. Giussani in Switzerland in early 1971, “*Traditio*,” that which God has transmitted to women and men, is “the Son giving Himself through the Father for the salvation of the world” (H.U. von Balthasar and L. Giussani, *L’impegno del cristiano nel mondo* [The Engagement of the Christian in the World], Jaca Book, Milan, 2017, p. 89). This is *Traditio*: Christ giving Himself to the world through the Father, according to the Father’s design. And this giving of Himself—Tradition—cannot be reduced to a conception or a doctrine. “The presence of the original Event, the actuation today of the original Event, that has made itself present every day since the beginning of time and up until now, is called Tradition: thus it constitutes the daily repetition of the primitive Event, of the original Event” (L. Giussani, *L’uomo e il suo destino. In cammino* [Man and His Destiny: On the Road], p. 66).

Christianity reduced to ideology “does with- ➤➤

**Memory is an event that does not depend on our initiative or power.**

» out” the Event: at the center there is no longer the Event, but a system of thoughts—derived from that Event, yes—but disconnected from the source. There remain the cultural and ethical consequences, proposals for oneself, in a sort of self-sufficiency, but which, however, inevitably begin to degenerate. This is something we need to understand well.

##### 5. “OUR” ENLIGHTENMENT-INSPIRED TEMPTATION

At this point, we can understand what Fr. Giussani was grappling with when he said these things: it was the mentality that reduces everything to a doctrine. This was the temptation of the Enlightenment, as Pope Benedict XVI told us, which sought to save the great truths of Christianity, Christian values, all that Christianity brought, but untying it from the event that made and constantly makes it alive. We see it in Kant when he stated: “In fact, one may quite easily believe that if the Gospel had not taught the universal ethical laws [values] in their whole purity first, reason would not have known them in their fullness. Though now, *given that they already exist*, each person can be convinced of their rightness and validity through reason alone.” (I. Kant, *Lettera a F. H. Jacobi* [Letter to F.H. Jacobi], August 30, 1789, in *Questioni di confine* [Questions of Limits], Marietti 1820, Genova, 1990, p. 105). During the Enlightenment it was thought (as Kant confirmed) that all this would endure because reason was by now capable of recognizing it, but over time that attempt has proven to be a failure. Now we can understand it, because it happens in and among us: if we separate from the event of Christ, from the living event of the charism, our light grows hazy and dim, and all the things we do serve no purpose.

We will end up just like the Enlightenment, notwithstanding ourselves, if we do not understand how Christianity is transmitted, how the charism endures. Even with all the writings of Fr. Giussani at our fingertips, we can fail. This is what is at stake. Our discussions and the whole avalanche of words we sometimes dump on each other will not solve the problem. As we have seen, everything is collapsing around us, in the same way we may see ourselves collapse.

How can we avoid the risk of succumbing to the

temptation (of the Enlightenment) of thinking that the texts of the Gospel or the texts of Giussani suffice? How can we avoid everything crystallizing into devitalized doctrine? Let’s listen directly to Giussani, because he communicated to us everything we need for our journey: “The event is not just something that happened and that started everything; it is what awakens the present, defines the present, gives content to the present, makes the present possible. What you know or what you have becomes experience if what you know or have is something that is given to us now: there is a hand that offers it to us now, there is a face that comes forward now, there is the blood that flows now, there is a resurrection that happens now. Outside of this ‘now’ there is nothing! Our ‘I’ cannot be moved, that is, changed, if not by something contemporaneous: an event. Christ is something that is happening to me now” (Historical Archive of the Ecclesiastical Association Memores Domini (ASAE-MD), mimeographed document entitled, “Dedication 1992 Rimini, October 2-4, 1992”), quoted in A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani* [Life of Fr. Giussani], p. 851).

For this reason, all the way back in 1998, Giussani said: “It is a question of conversion.” But conversion to what, to whom? To eliminate ambiguity, he immediately clarified the sense of his invitation: “If there is no conversion of

you [of each of us], not toward me [Giussani said it referring to himself], but toward Jesus who seizes you through my hand; if the consciousness of our discourse does not generate conversion in you, there is no responsibility,” there is no response. “In order to communicate a life in the charism that has been given to us, you have to live conversion: not to me [he repeats] but to what was told [and given] to me” (Giussani, “Avvenimento e responsabilità” [Event and Responsibility], pp. VII-VIII).

Here we see all of Giussani’s charity toward us, because in order to make us understand the things he tells us, he does not insist on an explanation, but proposes a journey for us: “I would like to have you make the journey through which all the things I tell you emerged, were born in me” (*ibid.*, p. VIII). Therefore, in order to avoid reducing what he tells us to what

**Everything is collapsing around us, in the same way we may see ourselves collapse.**



Subiaco (Italy), in the Sixties. Fr. Giussani and some young people on the path toward the hermitage of Beato Lorenzo Loricato.



we have in our heads, to our interpretation, we have to learn to immerse ourselves in how these things were born in Fr. Giussani, so that they can be born in us today as well, as the Student Youth fellow wrote. Only when the things he told us happen again can we understand them without reducing them. Therefore, how can they happen today? Where do they come from? Today, how can we make again the journey through which those things emerged in him? Where do the things he told us about happen today?

#### **6. THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF CHRIST, PERMANENT ORIGIN OF THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**

A “new awareness involves [unlike what Kant thought] being in contemporaneity with the event that generates it and continually sustains it.” To use Davide’s words, it involves total dependence, because everything is given. The road for living what we are talking about is not “I already know it and now I’ll manage it with my intelligence or with my effort.” We cannot say that Giussani did not warn us. The new awareness establishes itself only in “being contemporary with the event that generates it and continually sustains it.” And “since this origin is not an idea, but a place, a living reality, the new judgment is possible only in an on-going relationship with this [living] re-

ality; in other words with the human companionship that prolongs the initial Event in time” (L. Giussani, S. Alberto, and J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2010, p. 54).

Fr. Giussani never stopped showing us the road: “In fact, we understand things not because we sit down and design a program of studies to understand them; we do not understand them as the outcome of a meditative project [“now I have the texts, I’ll take care of working it out”]. We understand them if we adhere like children to the story of God in our life, to the story through which He wants to totally break through our doors, because we are made of Him” (L. Giussani, *Una strana compagnia [A Strange Companionship]*, Bur-Rizzoli, 2017, p. 140). The journey is simple, as this friend writes: “I realize that the more I take seriously the working hypothesis that the Movement proposes to me, the more I see things around me differently, more deeply, in a truer way.”

Either the God of our thoughts or the God of history: this is the alternative in front of each of us. It is not a matter of being good or not so good, because at this level of the question, how good you are or your capacity for performance are not enough. It is an issue of outlook and method. We have spoken of >>

» this many times this year, referring to the Unnamed. More recently we have spoken about it in Fr. Giussani's precious formula about the "particular story" that I never tire of repeating: a "particular story [...] is the keystone of the Christian conception of man, of his morality, in his relationship with God, with life, and with the world" (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, p. 59).

This is the great challenge in front of each of us. A friend who left the Movement for thirty years writes about it in a letter. After recounting the vicissitudes of his life, he writes, "A lot is falling down around our heads. Getting up in the morning is becoming harder, and not even the miraculous little anti-depressant pills seem to have any effect. You are under the weight of things passing. You begin to think that the beautiful things in life are already behind you and that [now] not much remains. Now my strength and performance are no longer enough [...]. At this point, life becomes simple: either Christ is lowercase, that is, my God whom I bend to my will and intelligence, and then we are only kidding ourselves, or, God is the God of history [...]. We have not returned [he is talking about his wife and himself] [...] because we are good. We have returned because Someone wanted us back home." They returned because the beginning happened again, through the encounter with one of us, in the place, in the living reality of our people. We see it all the time.

This is why I always return to the figure of the Unnamed, because his new awareness of himself, of Lucia, of his life, and of all of reality that invaded him were born through the event of his relationship with Cardinal Federigo. If this event had not happened and made him poor, none of the rest would have sufficed. It is not that he lacked the clear judgment that he was doing evil and that he felt no remorse. He knew it, even if not deep down, but it was not enough to be able to emerge from his situation.

In short, the Unnamed reminds us of the position of purity that is given back to us in the encounter with Christ, and he also reminds us that the method of the origin, of the beginning, is the same as that of the continuation. It is not that Christianity happens once and for all, after which "I know it" and there-

fore its development is in my hands. No, it is something that is given to me, ever anew. It is a gaze that is given to me again now.

Here is how Fr. Giussani describes the step to take: "The way in which the criterion for judging is born can be summed up in the word *gaze*. It is a matter of facing the event you have encountered, without at some point compromising the sincerity of your eyes [because when we stop looking at Him, we start sinking, as happened to Peter] [...]. It is sincerity in looking at the event that gives us the new criterion of judgment, and saves us from yielding to the criteria of the 'world'" (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, pp. 54-55). Otherwise we will think we are creating a new culture, but actually we will only repeat what the world says. What shows us that the Event is present in our lives? The fact that we are

made poorer, if today we leave poorer, more desirous—like the Unnamed—of being there, obstinately, at the door of the Mystery, of the Mystery made flesh, contemporaneous, Who is happening now through the faces of our companionship that for him passes through the face of Cardinal Federigo. This is the maturity that enables us not to lose the origin: the ever-clearer awareness that we are saved by an Other, that is, the awareness of our dependence, the rekindling in us of that purity, of that ultimate poverty that the event of Christ generates in us and to

which the Pope calls us in the letter he wrote us at the end of the Jubilee of Mercy (we focused on it at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity). The poverty of spirit that makes us open to Him is the sign of His "coming," the sign that the event is happening to me now. We see this in what someone wrote me: "Since yesterday I have had in my hands the pass to participate in the Beginning Day... What a provocation there is, just in the title: 'In the beginning it was not so!' Right away, I asked myself what place Christ has in my days, not starting tomorrow, but now, with another day offering itself to me as an opportunity for acknowledgment and testimony."

"My friends—I have never used the word 'friends' so consciously as I do now [and I, too, repeat it to you in an equally conscious way: "My friends"]—we must stay on this road. All of you who are here, are here

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Varigotti (Italy), 1961. Radius at the tower during Student Week.

because you have been called to this road. You will love your wife better, you will love your friends better, you will love your children better, you will know what it means to be merciful, you will know what it means to forgive, you will know what it means to sacrifice yourself to build so that others can be better off, you will know what it means to be human, you will be more human. ‘Those who follow Me will have eternal life,’ which is Him, the relationship with Him” (L. Giussani, *In cammino [On the Road] 1992-1998*, Bur, Milan, 2014, pp. 226-27). Fr. Giussani never changes a jot! Eternal life is Christ. Salvation is Him. Only by remaining bound to Him on this road can we see our relationships blossom, can we build, can we be open to the needy, can we be ever more human.

It is in the relationship with Him that we can experience the hundredfold. “One hundred times the humanity that you have inside will blossom, will blossom one hundred times more than in others, and nothing will make you fall apart or upset you, nothing will perturb you to the point of frightening you, you will fear nothing” (*ibid.*, p. 227), while instead, everything falls apart and upsets us as soon as we separate ourselves from Him.

The event of Christ endures throughout history,

and makes itself visible today according to the method He chose. “Our companionship is the place where this presence ‘exists’ and is more easily recognized and loved, where this presence forgives everything. In force of this forgiveness we can no longer remain inactive; we want to do something good, to do good, good for us and for others” (*ibid.*, p. 228). The dimensions of the Christian experience (culture, charity, and mission) thus flow from the origin that is faith. They are not detached (as Kant would have it) but united all the way to the origin, and are an expression of the origin. This is why I am curious to see what creativity will flow from this recovery of the beginning, if we accept Fr. Giussani’s invitation, and how we will respond to the need we find in our various spheres of activity, for the good of all. Who knows what newness of life we will discover, as happened this summer at many vacations (as Davide said) or as is happening among some university students.

What is the form of this “being for”? Testimony. “The task of [our] life is to testify to this presence, to recognize it and testify to it” (*ibid.*). We have no greater treasure in our hands than this presence, not formally, not like something already known, devitalized, but as the most pertinent answer to the >>

» needs of life. The Movement was born to make this answer something that can be experienced, and the most striking sign of this experience is gladness.

I will conclude with the invitation Fr. Giussani extends to us: “The Event of Christ has to do with the present, so much so that it effectively changes the present, more effectively than all the social resources imaginable, because ‘joy’ or ‘gladness’ [that often is lacking in us] cannot be the aim of any social resource, however newly conceived [it is not the outcome of something that we do]. The supreme duty of one who has faith, of the protagonist of history in this new people, is precisely that of demonstrating, of witnessing the truth of the Christ event through a gladness that endures, even in the worst circumstances of life, since gladness is the exceptional, dizzying epitome of a change that has taken place, a change that reveals a new ontology.” (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, p. 132).

There is no greater challenge than this, no more fascinating adventure than this, especially in this moment in history. So then, nothing is more precious and desirable than the fact that the gaze of a free person happens in us, to use Péguy’s expression. Today there is no idea or custom that can sustain the journey. Everything depends on freedom. Let us ask the Lord for this gaze as free women and men who want to belong to Christ for the one reason you can decide to belong to Him today: because He is the only One who responds to the expectant awaiting of the human heart.

Therefore, let’s wish each other faithfulness to this awareness of the Mystery present that Fr. Giussani testified to us up to his final days, and that today Pope Francis constantly calls us to with his invitation to return to the essential. It will not be our energies or capacity that cause something truly new, true and fulfilled, to flow forth, but only the Lord can be its author, if He still wants to use our small and daily “yes” to continue to generate this people as a sign of hope for everyone.

I would like to take the opportunity of the Beginning Day to underline the importance of giving special attention in our communities to some gestures

and instruments that are fundamental for the education and life of the Movement. Today I will mention two, among others.

**Prayer:** it is necessary to recognize (as that Student Youth fellow wrote) what enables us to start anew, what the Lord can do, if we give time to this unique relationship that constantly regenerates us, starting from the things that happen in life. Christian prayer is nothing other than memory, beginning with the Eucharist, the most powerful gesture of memory, in the true sense of that word as event that is happening in the moment in which it is celebrated. In order for this to happen, it is necessary for silence to become increasingly habitual among us, to give us the time to return to certain things,

otherwise the common mentality takes over. Without silence, there is no possibility for Him to penetrate into our lives. Our Lady cherished everything in her heart, but so often our hearts are full of everything but Him, as we see, and thus our enthusiasm for His presence does not grow. If we do not have time for this, all the rest will suffer the consequences. We will suffocate. We can do everything, but no gladness will appear on our faces, because He is missing. It is not what we do that makes us happy, but rather our relationship

with Christ, which permeates our entire day. It is not an alternative to action. The important thing is for this relationship to penetrate into everything we do. Otherwise all our busy activity will be to no avail; it will not make life full and glad.

**Singing:** A growing passion for singing and the desire to sing better, and better together, is something we must never lose. We all see what a help it is to sing well together. Fr. Giussani fascinated us with a way of singing together, and when someone goes his own just for his own self-glory, this feels absolutely unbearable. If we lose this striving to sing well together, we lose something essential. Therefore, we must make the time to prepare and practice songs in our communities in order to be able to transmit a certain way of singing.

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