

**“EVERYONE WHO FOLLOWS ME
WILL HAVE A HUNDREDFOLD HERE ON EARTH”
WEEKEND FOR THE EUROPEAN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES**

Notes from the Assembly with Julián Carrón via video connection

1st Assembly – Friday 8 January, 2021

- *Sammy*
- *The Things that I See*

Ettore Pezzuto. Good evening everyone. Welcome to the weekend for the European English-speaking communities. We have been organising this gesture for more than 10 years now and I am very pleased that, this year too, we can spend two evenings together with the different English-speaking communities, although in a different way. We are very grateful to Fr. Julián, who accompanies us as he has always done, and we thank him for his paternity. Hello Julián, welcome back with us again.

Julián Carrón. Hello everybody, good evening and Happy New Year!

Ettore Pezzuto. There are almost 500 of us connected at this moment. The title we propose this year is: “Everyone who follows Me will have a hundredfold here on earth” – whatever the given circumstances may be, including the Covid pandemic and its dramatic consequences that we are all living now.

“*Who follows Me*” – this *Me*, of course, is Christ. He came into our lives and continues to knock at our door. *Follows*, meanwhile, is the key word, the word we want to keep in mind during these days. Following is a decision we must take every day, as Julián Carrón has said this year during School of Community: “Being children is a decision that one must take”. Thus we want to verify together if it is possible today, in the dramatic new context that the whole world is facing, to live faith, to experience the hundredfold. We have received many contributions, as always, and we have chosen some of you to intervene tonight.

Hello Julián.

The past year has been dramatic, primarily due to the Covid crisis, with all its consequences for each of our daily lives. But this big crisis has helped me, in a way, to look at life a bit better in all its difficulty. During this year, I have also noticed something about nihilism. This is a topic we often speak about and it usually does not enter our lives as total meaninglessness, or as a suspicion that reality is entirely inconsistent. Rather, nihilism enters almost imperceptibly, but inexorably, whenever I let even just a small part of my daily life be useless, or meaningless. Nothingness enters through small parts of my life, parts I do not care about, “pieces” that I do not judge as they do not seem interesting, or important. Letting these “pieces” be meaningless is what allows nothingness to enter and spread.

What attempts have I made to face this “life that cripples a man” (Pavese)? Basically, either “doing things” or “resting”. What have these attempts yielded? As we know from experience, doing things in order to fill our emptiness only makes us tired, unsatisfied – the opposite of the “tirelessness” promised by the Christmas poster. And what about resting? I made (once again) the discovery of what Fr. Lepori once said, namely that “one rests not by resting, but by following Christ”. To rest, to have “time for yourself”, in itself does not restore you at all.

I was very struck by something you said to the university students during their Spiritual Exercises in December: “The problem is not the illness one has – there are many people who are not sick and who are tired of living. The problem is, rather, to find someone who makes life life”. Whatever I have understood in my life, whatever my circumstances are, only when I let someone enter (again) –

someone who is able to make my life life – can I get up again, now, with the “magnificent consequences” of “respect for what you do, precision in what you do, loyalty to your concrete work and tenacity in persevering to the end”.

I have already found this Someone. I have already experienced what letting Him enter yields. Today, for me, the question is about learning to be so loyal to my experience – to every little part of it, not allowing even the tiniest part to be meaningless – as to be almost forced (by experience itself) to give Him the opportunity, the space, to speak to me; to let Him enter every day, every moment my heart is aroused, however it may happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to see that more clearly and desire it more, and for this new year that is given to us.

Carrón. The most important thing for us is to recognise the utility of what happens in our life. Even what we may consider a mistake, something useless, a piece of reality through which I cannot experience fulfilment, may become helpful. What we are trying to learn, as you underlined, is not just how to avoid mistakes or failures. It is, rather, how to live a full life. If we look at our life with this gaze, we can experience that everything that reminds us of the goal of life, everything that helps us learn something, is ultimately a grace, an opportunity.

To put it another way, instead of blaming ourselves for all the mistakes we make and for our nothingness, we can recognise a lack. If during the day I come across something that does not correspond to me and I recognise that something is lacking, then that is the best contribution to memory. Thus we need to learn to look at everything that is happening in our life as a path to our maturity. As Giussani reminds us in the *Religious Sense*, “if somebody has never experienced...” that person will not be able to recognise their real nature, the nature of their “I”. Therefore, everything that happens is for us. Since we have already recognised His presence, as you said, everything that happens, despite our mistakes, is to understand the relevance of Christ in our life. Even the different attempts that we make to overcome this nothingness can be seen as helpful to recognise the nature of our “I”. Unlike a flask that can be filled up to the top, our desire is infinite. It is not possible to fulfil it. We can recognise the underlying value of this condition simply by looking at the fact that whatever we do is never enough. The same concept is also applicable to the notion of resting. If resting does not coincide with making room for Christ in our life, there is no actual rest, as simply meeting our material needs is not enough. Resting, true resting – like freedom – is only possible when something fulfils my life. Only if I make room for Christ in my rest, can I really rest. My only suggestion is to identify, in our daily life, whether all our attempts are able to answer this need for rest. Among all our attempts, can we recognise the Mystery asking us “don’t you miss me?” Every instant, if it is not lived to increase the awareness of what we are lacking in life, even if we manage to achieve our goals, remains useless. The story of the ten lepers can help us. They all received the “solution” to their illness, but only one recognised that being cured was not enough. As I mentioned at the CLU spiritual exercises, there are many people who do not suffer from any illnesses and yet struggle for meaning. Hence, the question is not so much about how to live a healthy life, whatever form that may take. The problem is, rather, that that is not enough; the real issue is whether everything we have to face is a possibility for us to undertake a journey. This is the only way for us to verify who Christ is for our life. Otherwise, we may risk to confuse Christ with other things and not recognise His exceptionality. For this reason, we must learn who Christ is from within our experience, from within the challenges and difficulties in our daily life, rather than in a parallel religious life. We have only been given this one life and everything in this life is given for that purpose, which is to understand more who Christ is. Otherwise, He will remain a decoration on a wall: something that is no longer enough to live Christianity nowadays.

Dear Julián,

I would like to share a question regarding a difficulty I have. I have been experiencing what I would call a partiality in my life.

The 7th point of the second chapter of Generating Traces in the History of the World, entitled "Responsibility and Decision", begins with the following statement: "We have been loved and we are loved." During the last School of Community held in Italy in December, you, Fr. Carrón, said that it is not through reasoning that we become certain, but rather through "certain signs".

My difficulty is the following: I seem to only recognise signs in certain – as opposed to every – aspects of my life, as sometimes dissatisfaction predominates over faith in Him and gratitude for what I receive.

Over the past year, my wife and I have received tons of signs. We have begun the journey to become adoptive parents and some dear friends from the movement in Sweden, Italy and from Famiglie per l'Accoglienza [families for hospitality], as well as some dear friends from our parish in Sweden, have helped us a lot in concrete ways, such as prayers and paperwork – one of them even attended the preparation course with us. Even the social workers and psychologists were struck by such an exceptional presence – which I could document with countless examples. What have we learnt along this path?

That the presence of our friends generates a certainty in us that, first of all, surprises both me and my wife. Even if the pandemic has made the adoption process less predictable, we have no doubt that this path is given to us because we have learnt, through the difficulties, that we have the opportunity to become more familiar with Him. The awareness that we are in His good hands also gives us peace, at least with respect to our wish of becoming parents.

The presence of Christ is undeniable in the companionship of my wife and the friends I have mentioned. At the same time, there are other circumstances in which, instead, I find myself pretty dissatisfied. Sometimes I complain about a lack of depth in certain relationships and I demand for every relationship to grow in the same way as it did, over time, with my dearest friends – whose friendship and familiarity set the bar.

At times I perceive such a partiality even within our community, that is the place where my conversion originally started and the terminal through which I (expect to) experience the companionship of Christ in the most powerful way. Therefore, I wanted to ask for your help, to understand how to avoid blaming others and what wins over the partiality I have described.

Forgetting yourself and blaming others. This attitude is useless, first of all because you will not be able to fix the problem by yourself. What liberation when we begin to become aware of this! In fact, it is precisely when we begin to blame others that we realise that something is missing. Our problem is that we normally deal with the consequences, whereas the crucial point is to focus upon the origin of this *malaise*; that is, only if we are full of joy and happiness is there no need to blame others. Therefore, the point is that you only avoid wasting time blaming others if Christ fills your life, only if you are overwhelmed by His presence. But why do we normally blame others? As you said, even though we receive a deluge of signs that make the presence of Christ undeniable, we think that those signs are partial, that they represent only a partial answer to our needs. Instead, the question we need to ask ourselves is: "What is the meaning of that presence?" It is not just about something we can feel and touch: a presence is significant for the simple fact that He is this presence. Thus, the key is to understand what the meaning of the presence of Christ is in our life. For a child, whose parents may not be able to answer all their questions and can only provide partial explanations, what remains significant is their presence. Similarly, we can look at this dynamic in regards to the presence of Christ in our life. It is not a matter of answering all our partial needs. On the contrary, the presence of Christ is so overwhelming, so crucial for our life, that He becomes the most important thing. Christ is the answer to my real needs. It is different from what we would normally expect, that is, a presence that corresponds to our parameters and our ideas. We can appreciate the importance of what we have just said if we try to imagine what the absence of Christ would mean for our life. What would it be the meaning of waking up in the morning, of looking at your children or at your spouse, if Christ were to disappear from your life? What would the absence of their parents mean for two children? It is not partial, it would mean everything to the children! If we removed Christ from our life, what would even be the meaning of our life? The purpose of Christ's presence is not to fulfil all our dreams, as

that would be useless. This is the reason why I insist upon the story of the ten lepers from the Gospel. They did receive the answer to their desire – which was the cure to their illness – but was that enough? The only one who recognised the true value of Christ was the tenth leper. He realised that only His presence was adequate to embrace his needs. We can deduce that the story of the Gospel is a paradigm of our own condition: our lives will also be unfulfilled until we recognise what the presence of Christ means to us, like the tenth leper. Even in front of tons of signs, we may remain fixated upon our own projects and solutions to the problems of life. What we have just described is part of our journey. It is a journey because we often do not judge what happens to us and we do not recognise His presence. There are many people who are Christians today just because of these partial answers they have received. Unfortunately, this is not enough, as it does not satisfy the need of our heart. The presence of Christ is a grace that, for those who recognise it, enables them to enjoy the gift of faith. Thus, the key point is to understand who Christ is for you.

The recent school closure announcement has been the final blow after a year that has been incredibly hard due to never-ending months of lockdown, topped by the Christmas lockdown, and now schools have closed again. I feel that faith has no impact upon my daily struggles, especially as I am living under lockdown with four young children. In theory, if I stop and think about it, I understand how faith can change my gaze, I can offer my struggles, and respond to my reality. I understand that faith can calm anxiety, suggesting that "everything will be fine", but in practice, in the hardest moments of my daily life, faith just seems like something distant that has nothing to do with my daily challenges and does not change my gaze. Instinct and fatigue – especially mental fatigue – take the lead. What does it mean to have faith when even just the thought of another lockdown paralyses you, making you anxious and extremely sad, as you remember how hard it has been and still is every day, and how "ugly" you can become in your reactions? I tend to see faith as a moment of reflection that kicks in at the end of the day, rather than as real, concrete help during the day in moments in which I just want to shout and pull my hair.

What does it mean to have faith? I do not mean to blame you, but this is a point we really need to understand. Perceiving faith as distant from the ordinary reality we face in our daily life is the origin of our disaffection for Christ. If Christ's presence becomes irrelevant for your everyday life, as you said, then is He no longer a companion. Hence, you struggle within all the challenges life presents you, only to realise, at the end of the day, that you have forgotten about Him and then you blame yourself. Christ, instead, came into our life to overcome the distance between men and God. Giussani started the movement with this very question in mind: "What is the relevance of Christ for man's life?" Therefore, the only reason to belong to the Movement is to learn what the relevance of Christ is for our life, which is precisely to overcome that distance. Otherwise, sooner or later, faith will become a burden. Yet, the problem we often face is that we think we already know what faith is about. Instead, we need to discover it again. As I have mentioned a few times already referring to my experience, what saved my life was accepting to learn again what I thought I already knew in regards to faith. The real challenge for us, then, is this acceptance. I do not blame you for struggling in front of this challenge, but – trust me! – learning again what faith is has been a liberating experience for me. I am not here to criticise you as I have been through a similar situation, despite all the time I spent in the seminary, becoming a priest and working on a dissertation on this subject. It was only when I decided to learn again what faith was that I was able to have an experience of liberation. If you remain within this companionship and decide to follow, you will be able to recognise, in every moment, that this same experience is also possible for you. This is the promise and I can assure you that it is within your reach, even in front of the nihilism we are facing these days. Let us listen to a contribution which I think can be helpful to understand what I am trying to say to you.

Hi Julián,

What a strange year this has been! The lockdown imposed because of Covid has pushed me to the limit and led me into a situation I would really have never imagined. The first reaction I had was

pure anger against everything, like a wild dog when it is caught and put in a cage. Little by little, through my anger and sadness I realised, once again, that what makes life full is not just a consequence of my effort, of doing things in the best way possible, and that doing so, or being here or there, does not even necessarily make me more free. However, this hidden superpower that the world around me has made me believe in, this independence, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, is just a sweet illusion. It might give me comfort and a nice sense of tranquillity and, at times, even overcome the fear of life passing by, but it ultimately leaves me alone, bored, scared and angry at myself. It is the ultimate solitude because it cannot fully fill the deepest need of my heart. I cannot save myself. It tries to pull me away from the original state of being, that of a baby or a child who is loved and embraced by its mother, in whom it finds peace. When my children do something wrong and I shout at them, they cry until they come back to me, looking for that embrace that frees them from their sense of being bad.

“Lasciati fare da chi ti conosce, lasciati fare da chi ama te.” (Let yourself be made by the one who knows you, let yourself be made by the one who loves you). Exactly like my children, I have found myself kneeling down like a beggar in need of love, happiness, justice, and in need to be saved. I have also found myself in front of a human divine companionship that has brought me that embrace. The sadness I felt for not being able to see many people, or invite friends to our house, has now been blown away by simple facts that are happening, with great surprise, in front of my eyes. The burning question I had regarding what it means to be friends in the companionship of CL – given that we cannot meet in person as we used to – has unexpectedly turned into a friendship with some women through a weekly zoom call. It is the same group of friends with whom I say the rosary every Tuesday and have School of Community on a Wednesday.

One day I received a message on the WhatsApp group of my son’s class: “Hi, I have a question: is there anyone who is Catholic and goes to St. John Fisher Catholic Church in Harrow? Our daughter keeps asking us to go there but we are not Catholic. She wants to attend Sunday Mass there but because of Covid we do not know if it is open or whether there are any requirements. Does she need to be baptised? Are there any rules? How does it work? Thanks for your help.” When I read this message, I was moved to tears. How is it possible that a six-year-old girl is somehow being so deeply taken by God in school that she is stressing her mum so much to the point of making her write a message in the WhatsApp chat? What happened to that little girl?

I wanted to reply and so I started thinking about what I could say to her. The harder I tried to find the perfect words, the more I was getting lost, until I stopped and simply asked myself: what was it that made me fall in love with Christ? It then became easy to realise that my experience had been similar: I met a group of friends and began following them, until they told me they were Catholic. I got curious and went on to see what that Beauty I had noticed in them was all about. It was easy! It is easy! Therefore, I replied by telling her this: that it had been the same for me, and I invited her to meet up, perhaps to go to Mass together if she wanted, when Covid allowed us to do so.

At the same time, the dad of my son’s best friend was revealed as Catholic – we did not know and we had never thought of them as a Catholic family. Thus, from that day, we started to share more when we met outside the school. One Saturday morning, during our children’s football training, he was telling my husband about his life and how he had become Catholic back in India. His wife once called me “friend” in one of her messages and a new friendship is now growing with this family and others from the school. This is bringing a real gusto within the simplicity of my life, within these apparently strict rules and unwanted circumstances. Let us see what is going to happen next.

Overcoming moralism is often hard because, as our friend has just said, only when you are pushed to the limit do you see the failure of all your efforts. Only then do you begin to realise that there may be something you need to change. Instead of focusing on her efforts that were ultimately leaving here alone, our friend began to look at her children. She did exactly the same thing as the little girl who is not worried about her performance, but who instead is looking for a presence. As our friend asked earlier: “What does it mean to have faith when even just the thought of another lockdown paralyses you, making you anxious and extremely sad?” You have a list of objectives you think you have to

meet in order to be a Catholic. Forget it! The only thing you really need in life is to return to Him as a child, again and again and again. Instead, we constantly tend to change the nature of Christianity. What we celebrate every year at Christmas is the birth of a baby, rather than a set of rules we must be faithful to. This is the only possibility for us to be attracted by Him, as happened for the little girl: not even the presence of her mother was enough. She wanted to go to church as she was looking for something else. Being faithful to a set of rules can only come as a consequence.

Changing our mind is difficult, as the common mentality invites us to just adhere to a set of rules, such as not being anxious, sad or paralysed. This is what everybody desires, but there is no medicine for it. Only a presence can make that possible, which is precisely what Christmas reminds us. If you get to understand this better, this very year – which many consider a year that should just be cancelled out – it might actually become a real gift for your life. Understanding this paradigm shift and converting your mind to a new conception of Christianity would be the most beautiful gift you could ever imagine. Along the way, in your life, you will have the opportunity to appreciate what sort of gift this novel conception of Christianity is. What we often call Christianity is actually just a Kantian set of rules. That is why it is very important when someone, like our friend, begins to become aware of a paradigm shift: instead of blaming herself or focusing upon her effort, she recognised that she needs to abandon herself to a presence. This, surprisingly, makes you different and allows you not to be sad, bored or ugly. However, it can only happen as a consequence, since Christ only allows you to change if you recognise the origin, which is to enter more and more into a relationship with Him.

Hi Julián,

I have realised that I am a very good friend of Kant. I would like to ask your help to understand and live what The radiance in your eyes says about the hundredfold: “Christ did not come to say, ‘Those who follow Me will find satisfaction for all their whims and in their thoughts and interests.’ No! He said, ‘Those who follow Me must change their criteria, begin to transform their criteria for evaluation, valuing, and the judgment of value.’ And, if you do this, you will have the hundredfold even of what it seemed you lost.”

My immediate understanding of this “changing criteria” is that I must learn a gaze, some kind of Christian wisdom and then apply it – in a sense a Christian mix of the first two insufficient attempts you describe in the first part of the book, reasoning and rule-following.

It is an attempt with a true beginning because that wisdom is fascinating; it is true, according to the evidences and needs of my heart, so much so that during these months I have found myself increasingly in need to start the day by reading School of Community or writings by Fr. Giussani, or by saying Morning Prayer, where one can see that gaze become life and so can breathe. My gratitude for this possibility of breathing has grown proportionally to the realisation that my life longs for a meaning – not just for things to go a certain way – which life during Covid has brought about.

However, there must be something wrong in my approach because my attempt does not pass the test of experience, it does not give me the hundredfold, “the true peace, the one that matters and that is the big certainty of the conscience that tries to do the will of God”, as Fr. Giussani said in a homily about St. Stephen that I happened to read recently (where, talking about changing criteria, he says “We must be able to affirm that in life we would judge or act in a completely different way, if our Lord Jesus Christ did not exist”). There are three signs that I think suggest there is something wrong in my approach: 1) The desire to be generated that drives me to seek the Christian gaze in the morning easily gives way to the fear of the change Jesus might ask of me, or to the belief that I hate to give up my desires in order to follow. This is the opposite of perceiving God as a caring father and generates repugnance towards sacrifice. Rather, in his homily, Fr. Giussani says “The difference between Christ and the Antichrist, between the Christian and the non-Christian is just in this evaluation of the sacrifice and of the life”. 2) The feeling of being inadequate prevails over the awareness and the gratitude of being loved – along with the hopeless sadness that derives from it. 3) Discussions about that gaze and on how to apply it quickly become boring.

I realise that what is missing in my failing attempts is the “Me” of “those who follow Me”. Fear, inadequateness, and boredom occur when I detach this changing criteria from His Presence. At the same time, I see within myself the risk of diluting the proposal of that Presence – which is so evident in my life – and so of wasting it. As the Pope said in March, commenting upon the Gospel of the man born blind, “There is a phrase of Saint Augustine that has always struck me: ‘I fear Christ when He passes’ – ‘Timeo Dominum Transeuntem’. ‘I am afraid that Jesus will pass’. ‘But why are you afraid of the Lord?’ – ‘I am afraid of not being aware that it is Christ, and letting Him pass by’ [...] The doctors of the Law knew all the laws, all of them, all of them. But they were fixed there. They did not understand when God was passing by. They were rigid, attached to their habits. Jesus Himself says so, in the Gospel: attached to habits. And if in order to conserve these habits, they had to commit an injustice, it was not a problem, because the habits said that was not justice; and that rigidity led them to commit injustices. That narrow-mindedness came out in front of Christ.”

During the Christmas holidays, one of the most striking conversations I had the grace to have was with a friend whose husband left the family a few years ago and to whom she has never closed the door. He can thus always go to visit her and their children. Speaking of the joy she recently felt when one day she saw her children laughing with their father in a way in which they do not with her, she said “I thank God that I did not let my pride dominate”. I want to be like her, not like a doctor of the Law.

Thus, I would be very grateful if you could help me to understand what this “changing criteria” is, how it happens and what it requires from me.

Many thanks!

The point is to learn this gaze, as we said during School of Community, a change of gaze. The concept that we are learning is that the only possibility for this to happen is for us to be defined by a Presence. Christ’s contemporaneity is the only thing that makes this change possible. It is the same for a child, if there is no attraction, we are left with our own devices. The point is whether there is something so overwhelming, so desirable that the only thing we can do is to be with Him. The problem of Christianity, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is a problem of affection (“Life of the human being consists in the affection which principally sustains a person”), because that is what can satisfy our life. Thus, the only possibility for us is to recognise if there is a presence, an affection that can sustain all our life. Otherwise, we will always be looking at our struggles according to our capacity. But the question remains of who is able to attract us in order to liberate us from the confusion. It is not a strategy! On the contrary, it is a problem of beauty, of attraction, of a person I cannot live without, as St. Thomas reminds us. As we do not recognise this beauty, we remain stuck in our daily challenges. And we cannot overcome this simply with our own abilities. We need to learn this gaze. To learn this gaze means going back time and time again to this Presence. Only if this Presence defines your gaze can you understand how He looks at reality. It is not something we can introduce via an effort or a strategy, but only through a lived relationship with Him. Think about your children for a moment. For them, life changes by looking only at you. Yet, for us, this seems impossible and we do not end up accepting God’s method because we value it as insufficient to change our life. We do not believe that making room for Christ might change our life. But as the title of the meeting tonight reminds us, the crucial point is to open your heart unto Him, making room for His presence again, to open our door to Him to rediscover what Christianity is. Only in a companionship like ours are we able not to reduce Christianity to a set of rules, to a performance we have to achieve. For Giussani, instead, Christianity is an event, a presence. If it is not so for us, what remains in the end is only moralism. That is why Giussani’s charism is a challenge for us. You cannot read his books without being “displaced”. I challenge you to read three lines from Giussani’s books without being displaced. This is a grace for us and for the whole Church today because without this attraction, Christianity would be over. We can realise this within our life and in the world. Instead it is a surprise to look at what Christ’s presence meant for a six-year-old girl who was lacking something in her life. She was so fulfilled by Christ to the point of asking someone to accompany her to Mass. Our effort to follow the rules is not enough to be Christian today. For precisely this reason, let me return once again to the

story of the lepers. Many received tons of signs but only one recognised what the relevance of Christ was for his life. Any other options are useless to change our life, to change our mood, to make it possible to enjoy life. Only a Presence, a real presence can. And so, if our gestures and our companionship are not for this purpose, they are useless or just a distraction at best. There is nothing more important than this returning to Him. This is the only possible contribution to overcome nihilism, else we will live Christianity like any other cultural or religious experience. But Christianity is something else.

Dear Julián,

I wanted to write to you about something that has happened to me and in my family in the last year. In order to do so, I have to tell you a little bit about my past life to give you a clearer understanding of my story. I was born in Italy into a family where both of my parents struggled with drug addiction. At the age of 3, I spent a year in an orphanage, then a few more years in different foster homes. Finally, at the age of 7, I was adopted by a family who got to know about my situation because of a priest from CL. To be honest, I was a kid who was full of anger because I naturally missed my biological parents and I could not understand what was happening. Because of this, the family who adopted me found it very challenging to care for me. I even refused to be confirmed because I could not understand God. But they never gave up on me. Two things have always struck me. One of them was a picture of you, Julián, and Giussani hugging, and there was a sentence underneath that spoke of how that hug and encounter represented something so strong that it could never be broken. The other thing was a summer holiday spent in the South of Italy with family friends from CL. I remember the games and songs played together; the prayers said at night; the laughter and the joy brought by the companionship with everyone there. When I was 18-years-old, I decided that I would go to Ireland to learn English and find a job. In reality, I was searching for who I really was. I changed many jobs, I found myself in relationships that I did not really like and I could not give a proper meaning to whatever I was doing. Finally, I met Paul and then we had Michael. The birth of my first child brought up a lot of worries and all my fears of not being able to be a good mother came out. I began to have panic attacks so my mom came over to Ireland and stayed with me for a while. Before she left, she gave me a prayer to say. From then on, I started to feel the need to pray because nothing was enough for me anymore. I decided to be confirmed, and then Paul and I finally got married and had our second child Daire. When things seemed to get better, they actually got worse. Paul's brother had problems with drug addiction and we decided to help him out by having him in care with us, as nothing seemed to have helped him. Unfortunately, things went from bad to worse until Paul's brother suddenly died. It was a shock for everyone and, for me, it was an open wound that was bleeding again. This time that pain pushed me forward and this time I did not fall into despair. Something inside of me pushed me to contact the CL. I was very surprised in doing so because it was something I had never thought of doing, not even when my parents had suggested it. However, I got a contact in Dublin and I did not think twice about going to one of their School of Community meetings. It took a two-hour bus journey, at night time, with the rain. I remember I was so nervous when I went into the room. It was there that I met Mauro who welcomed me with a big smile, and asked me why I had come all the way down. I answered that I had the same question. I attended another meeting which was the Easter retreat; I was so surprised when Fr. Paul began the retreat with the same prayer that my mom had given me, which I say every morning. For me, that was a sign from God, and my heart filled with joy. I kept being surprised by how something so painful could open my heart to something so beautiful. This time I was looking for something more, my heart was longing for something more. The pandemic and the lockdown took over straight afterwards so I was able to follow the School of Community meetings on Zoom. I felt so connected to all the people and to what they were talking about, even if they were strangers to me. There is a sentence that struck me from Generating Traces in the History of the World that we have been reading lately: "In the home, in the family, amongst those friends, we continually meet the Event of the Presence which, when it is acknowledged, changes the way we look at and feel ourselves and all things. In the house, you see the Mystery of Christ

present as a face". This is what is happening to me and in my family. I feel different, I feel that I have been "born again", and I look at everything and at everyone around me in a different way, in a different light, with deeper meaning. Unfortunately, after the death of his brother, my husband is no longer able to believe in God anymore. Nevertheless, he bought me a Bible a while ago. My five-year-old son, at dinner a while back, asked me if God is still creating nowadays. I see things changing within me and in people around me. And this keeps surprising me every day, especially during this difficult time. At times I feel overwhelmed by all of this and fear gets in the way. Then, at Christmas time, I was talking to Mauro and he reminded me that we are like children, we just do whatever we have to do without any worry or fear because we know that our mother and father are always there with us. That reminded me that, like children, all we need to do is to tend our arms towards Christ because he is always there waiting for us and He is the only one that can give us that "something more" which our heart so longs for.

Thank you very much. The last person always reminds us of what is important. When she met the movement for the first time, as was said before, it was partial things – games, songs, prayers. But through these concrete things, through these partial things, our friend discovered the Presence that was in the diversity of these people. As a result, when things were difficult for her when she was in Ireland, she looked for CL because it was within this history that she encountered something so diverse for her life. This is the Presence. Many times we forget, but at the beginning it was like this, as our friend has testified to us with her simplicity. For this we always need to be grateful for friends that come into our movement; they give back to us what is crucial, the fact that we are together. There is nothing else. In these relationships, little by little, we begin to feel that life is different, and to have a gaze for the other and for life that is completely new. Only in this particular history can we be shaped according to Another. Not because we are alone with our efforts but because we are fully immersed into a new reality in which, little by little, our life is built – if we are patient enough to accept God's method, because it is a challenge for us. No one would have imagined that the world would be changed by a little child. This challenges our presumption, for our way of thinking. Only if we accept it by following, can we see that the hundredfold we are talking about is real. Only in a place where Christ is alive can the kind of change that our friend has testified to us happen.

For this reason, let us end here with this in our eyes. Because this is part of the journey. We need to learn this paradigm shift that Christianity has introduced into the way of living religion, into the way of living life. This is a complete change. And this means that we need to be open to follow. Only those who follow can understand. It is impossible to understand before following. Only when our friend accepted to look at her needs and to call somebody from the movement in Ireland, did she begin to recognize the change. This is our friend's gift to us during this Christmas time; she has allowed us to see, in the form of a real person today, what Christianity is about.

Thank you very much.

**“EVERYONE WHO FOLLOWS ME WILL HAVE A HUNDREDFOLD HERE ON
EARTH”**
WEEKEND FOR THE EUROPEAN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

Notes from the Assembly with Julián Carrón via video connection
2nd Assembly – Saturday 9 January, 2021

- *Marta, Marta*
- *Give me Jesus*

Ettore Pezzuto. Good evening everyone. We are meeting again for the second assembly of the Weekend for the European English-speaking communities. Yesterday we had a great assembly and now, this evening, we would like to engage in a dialogue with Fr. Julián on the subject of the current situation: Covid, the economic and social crisis, education. How is it possible to live the hundredfold down here on earth? We will begin with some brief testimonies.

Both me and my wife came to the UK independently, following our desire to study Economics and Sociology, respectively, and because of an intuition that this could be best achieved through research in university. Unfortunately, things did not work out smoothly for both of us because of wrong choices we made right at the start of our respective career paths. This made us conclude – at least until now – that success in life depends upon making the right choices. But we did not want to surrender to the idea that our initial dreams, for which we left our parents, friends, countries, did not materialise as we had imagined. We did not want to forget our desire, because it was what made us move in the first place. So, we thought that the only remedy to fix this was to work harder, to compensate for the wrong start. As a consequence, our recent years in the UK have been sad, because our professional desire is still unfulfilled, and full of sacrifices, working twice as hard to try to make sense of the reason why we came here, but at the expense of our family life. This situation made me feel constantly under siege and be defensive in front of reality, because making sense of the choices I have made has become the most important thing, but the outcome is very slow to come and aridity is growing. In a recent meeting with some friends and Fr. Luca, we discussed the need and passion to communicate our faith. Of course, as you can imagine, this was not at the top of my priority list! However, the discussion with them has generated the following questions in me:

1) Is there a criterion to judge whether my life is on the right track or not? (Because according to the criterion of the "successful career", the balance is not very positive so far)

2) Is it right to insist upon pursuing our desires at all cost?

3) How can all the sacrifices made so far in my life, and in my wife's, make sense and be saved?

Julián Carrón. Thank you very much for your questions. You have posed them in a way that is helpful for everyone to look at their experience with these questions in mind. According to you, what is the criterion to judge your experience? If we begin from the third question, after your experience, what do you say? What gives meaning to all your efforts? What is the criterion to understand if all this effort that you, your wife and your family have made is meaningful? In the beginning, you try to identify the criterion, but after the journey you have made, something has arisen in your awareness. Was all this effort, for you, your wife, your family, worthwhile as an answer to your desire? This is the question. We came into the world only with this tool. The Mystery has thrown us into the circumstances of the world with only one criterion to identify what is right and what is wrong. This is what I recognise fascinated me from the beginning with the movement; Giussani made me aware that I had, in my nature, the criterion to judge everything. Even those who have not listened to Giussani, those who have not encountered the movement, have a criterion inside them that allows them to judge their experience. For this reason, I asked you to start from the last question. After the journey you have made, “all the sacrifices made so far in my life, and in my wife's”, do they make

sense to you? At the end of the journey, this is the question, whatever the attempt we have made. Is the question clear? This is the challenge that emerges in our experience.

I think that I have a great desire for peace in my life, because it has really been a struggle, as I have described.

It is impossible, it is impossible to begin to speak without expressing a desire for peace. It is impossible. Because if your “I”, this “I” that you are, emerges from your awareness in front of reality, at the end of the journey, have you received this peace, the fulfilment of your desire for peace? Has it been fulfilled now?

No.

No. This is the experience. You can try to change your mind, to apply the criterion you have, the image you have, all the discussion you can, but ultimately you have to say “no”. Ultimately, you have a criterion.

I have spotted another thing that I do. I have to say no, I am not at peace now. But what I think is, “Ok, maybe not now, but if I work a bit more, I will have it tomorrow.”

This is the attempt you have made for years. All these years you have tried because of failure, your incapacity to fulfil this desire. You thought that the problem was perhaps that you had not made made enough effort to fulfil it, and you tried again and again and again and again, like an adolescent kid. It is not enough to leave the party at midnight, because I wanted to stay out until 2 a.m, until 4 a.m, until morning, because it was not enough. It is never enough to be filled with peace. This is the dynamic you have described, and for this I am very grateful to you. You have described very, very accurately the dynamic created every day to answer this. As if desire, the fulfilment of desire, is the result of effort. This is what you have verified: whether your effort, the production of your energy, has been able to answer your desire. You have the answer within your experience. It is not a problem of interpretation; it is not a problem of discussion. You understand in your experience whether you are at peace or not. There is no possibility of misunderstanding if we are loyal with our own experience. This is what is amazing about experience; that is, if we are loyal, experience cannot make a mistake, because everything in our life is in front of us, in front of our eyes. We can say yes or no, but this is a problem of loyalty. You have been loyal, because faced with my question, your answer was clear: “no”. This is your morality, your loyalty, because this is the most important tool (loyalty) to subdue our way of thinking about our experience, according to Fr. Giussani’s quotation from his philosopher friend Jean Guitton; it is the tool that you have in order to undertake the journey. This means that the criterion is inside you, because you have used it: you answered “no” because you have the possibility of judging. You did not ask me my opinion; my opinion does not count. You do not need my opinion to judge whether you are at peace or not. You have your experience that cries out that there is no peace. You do not need confirmation outside of your experience. This is crucial! It is a problem of loyalty, of morality, of sincerity. This is what made me crazy when I encountered the movement, because the movement makes me aware that I have this tool to judge. It makes me certain of the path I am following, the journey I am making, certain that there is no possibility of making a mistake. Little by little, in a moment, the judgement appears in front of my eyes: at peace or not at peace. This is simple! Even a baby can recognise this. There is no particular intelligence, level of intelligence, particular skills needed. This is immediately clear and this is crucial, because you are asking “is there a criterion to judge”? Only this can be understood – whether it is meaningful to make this kind of effort. You have the answer to this; you have the criterion and with this criterion you can understand whether all this effort is meaningful to reach your desired goal, but it does not mean that you do not need to pursue your desire. The question is: “What is your desire”? Is your desire only this, the image you spoke about at the beginning, the image of success that you have in mind? The Mystery has created you with an enormous desire – the desire for peace, the desire for fulfilment – but not according to some kind of image. We may reduce our desire to our image. And if, for a thousand reasons, you have not had the possibility of reaching the goal of success, does that mean you are a failed man? A failed man? No! You need to pursue the desire. The point is to understand, through this journey, what the nature of your desire is. Not even all your effort offered you the peace

that you seek. Maybe you need to pursue it with greater awareness of your own desire, with greater clarity about what desire you are looking for. Is this clear? Because, to clarify, this is part of the journey.

Yes, it is clear. But then yesterday, when you talked about our partial attempts and Christ being the answer to all our desire, I was thinking in regards to my experience, about this "all my desire". I struggle to face "all my desire". I constantly focus on this partial desire, so I am never really in front of my desire in daily life in order to be able to say: "Oh, it's bigger!". Thus, I was thinking, if I could see if even for just a moment in the day that my desire is much more than this, and ask what can answer it, I would shift, as we were saying yesterday. How can this happen?

I would like to be able to face my desire in my daily life in its entirety, and to recognise that these partial things are not the answer, but that Someone else is the answer. However, I need to face the totality of my desire in order to recognise the difference. How can this happen?

Perfect! This is what I was trying to say to you, but I do not want to discourage you from pursuing your desire. You need, you have to, you must pursue your desire! Otherwise, you are not yourself! You cannot renounce your desire. The question is: what is the nature of your desire, what are you looking for? This is part of the clarity of the journey. If you can find a truly adequate answer to your desire, to the nature of your real desire, maybe you can keep looking for the fulfilment of another kind of desire, but with peace! Because you have received what you are looking for, which has made you free from success. I might wish you to fulfil your desire in a partial way, with partial desire, but Christ has come to reality, to the world, to fulfil your desire and to allow you to fight for the fulfilment of your desire for peace. Peace is the origin of your engagement to fulfil your partial desire. Otherwise, you become sceptical, since all your efforts are useless to fulfil your desire for peace. This point is crucial. It does not mean that we surrender in front of this. No! The only way for us not to surrender is that we begin to see our real desire be fulfilled. Only this can encourage you to keep fighting, but with peace, because you are free. Is this clear?

Yes!

Thank you! A very, very interesting question, because it means that you are not wasting your time. This is not a waste of time; this is part of the journey. Only somebody who engages themselves in the verification of an attempt, even if it is wrong, can learn from this attempt. It is better to make a mistake than not to do anything and complain again and again that I am a disgraced man. No: it is better to risk, because only those who take risks can understand something about life, not those who look at life from a balcony. Only someone who is engaged with their whole life. What is amazing is that it is useful if we can ultimately judge our attempt, because otherwise we become sceptical. We think that we have made all this effort for nothing. No, not for nothing! To understand better who we are, to understand better what the answer is, what the nature of our desire is and what might be the answer adequate to it. It is the possibility of understanding what the meaning of Christ is, He who has come down to earth to offer an answer to the nature of this desire, not to the image of desire we have in mind.

Thank you very much!

Hello to everybody.

Let me start from the current crisis, because for me, as for many, the pandemic has had a devastating impact. I manage an English Language school that we set up 35 years ago. Due to Covid-19, we had to close the school in March. From that moment on, a whirlwind of problems followed, with many decisions to which I was ultimately called to respond. To give you an idea, without going into too many details, we went from more than 7000 students in 2019 to 1000 in 2020 (most of them arrived before closure). In March, there were 100 full-time people working in the school, and we normally have more than 250 staff members during the summer. Now we only have 20. Others receive help from the government. A myriad of head-spinning situations. Our whole sector is in crisis and our school, like others, is fighting for survival. I have never worked so hard. Every morning I get up and try to find solutions, not knowing if, or how, the work of a lifetime can survive.

At the beginning of this period of crisis, I listened to the Gospel episode about the man born blind. The disciples asked: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus answered: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him." Since then, this has been the common thread that has bound my days: where can I see His presence in this situation? Hence a position not of complaint, but of desire and curiosity, to see how the Glory of Christ manifests itself within each challenge, each decision to take and whether or not solutions can be found.

The first concrete instance in which I have seen the work of Christ manifesting itself is the continuing awareness of my desire in the midst of all this chaos. My ultimate desire remains irreducible in the face of any possible reduction; it is like a lighthouse in the middle of a storm. This awareness generates an approach, a way of looking at the crisis. It is not a special expertise or the arrogance of knowing all the answers. It means having my gaze fixed on the goal: the fulfilment of my person, instead of looking at what the Power wants me to look at. For me, this is a constant challenge and has become more pronounced through the pandemic.

*I am struck by the way Giussani describes this dynamic in his book, *The 'I', Power, Works*, together with what you, Julián, have been telling us recently about nihilism. The situation of confusion and uncertainty in which "there are no facts but only interpretations" constitutes the ideal playing field, the natural habitat of power as Fr. Giussani describes it. Power feeds on a reality where "facts" no longer exist. I have found that if I do not understand the true nature of the power and the challenge I face, I run the risk of fighting the wrong war. As I try to resist challenges, power pervades me and corrodes me from within. Giussani says: "Power seeks its victory in everyday life; it is in everyday life that the alternative is played out for us." Instead of fixing my gaze on an Other, looking and recognizing a "fullness", the temptation is to think that by solving the problem I face or answering a particular need, I can be happy.*

The pandemic is a real test: we could live it as a time to hide and wait for the storm to pass, or as a time in which to take sides (for example, pro-vaccine or against vaccine) or we could live it as a stoic resistance in the face of all the challenges, but ultimately without reason and without joy. Faced with these epochal challenges, what I often see around me is a risk of locking ourselves in our "bubble", or of making our own in some way "the new humanitarianism" of which Fr. Giussani also speaks. For example, see the motto "we are in this together" or the Irish Government's national campaign for the well-being of the person that is to: "Keep active; Keep in contact; Keep creative; Eat well; Mind your mood".

However, whether there are attempts like this to "answer needs" or to keep social discomfort at bay, or the promise of the vaccine as the solution to everything, what is disturbing is the fact that it systematically passes a "reduction of the person's desire" to this or that need, absolutising it. I quote from Giussani: "This is the exact point at which power plays all. Because, through a particular and systematic work, it highlights certain needs and censors others. Certain aspects of the needs are made sensational and others are hidden, so that the answer is determined by this propaganda. That is to say, that the answer already lies within the terms of what power means". No longer an ideological power but a power that appears to be humanitarian, compassionate, but that is in fact emptying us of meaning by inflicting the ultimate violence.

In the last few months, I have realised that I am not immune to the risk of reductions, but equally that none of these solutions are enough for me to deal with the problems I face at work or to give me energy knowing that the results are completely out of my control. This applies to any situation. A friend of mine told me that in her company, that is not suffering any consequence of the pandemic, everyone is depressed, despite having financial security. Thus, is it possible to face this very challenging time with my fragility and with a sense of joy and fulfilment now? What sustains the effort and gives energy to the work I am called to do, whatever circumstance I am in? What is my responsibility and therefore my contribution as a Christian?

With simplicity and the full awareness that it is a continuous journey, the experience of the last months has been the verification that it is possible. At the beginning of the crisis, a colleague asked me, "How can you wake up in the morning and come to work if we do not know if it will end well?" I was

surprised to answer that the problem is not to find a valid reason for an uncertain future, but to perceive what has sustained us so far, and to understand if it is enough to face the present challenges. It becomes clear that my responsibility, as the School of Community says, is first and foremost a recognition and an abandonment. Only this corresponds to my deepest need and desire.

Last June, my wife and I followed the Macerata-Loreto Pilgrimage online. We had done it once together in 1984 – a lifetime ago. We were not yet married; I was in the army in Ancona and she was studying in Rome. We did not know what would become of us: where we would live, what job we would do, what our life would be like. After the end of the Pilgrimage, we found ourselves in Ancona without a place to stay and we slept on a bench in front of the Cathedral. Yet we were not frightened, we fell asleep peacefully; all we needed was the consciousness of having abandoned ourselves into Jesus' arms, through Our Lady, and that we were in a place, the Movement, where we could continuously learn this abandonment. Today, although uncertain about the future, we find ourselves in the same situation, but with many more responsibilities. Yet, in these years, we have seen that this abandonment and belonging pays off. The energy to live through difficulties does not come from the certainty of a positive result, but from rediscovering that position of abandonment. The fear may still be there, but I am surprised to experience courage in front of these difficulties.

The most evident sign of this position is that I can come home in the evening after a hard day, and even if I am afraid and tired, I can ultimately be serene, rather than disoriented and suffocated by uncertainty. I am almost 63 years old; the energy to fight is starting to run out. Is it time to hang up my boots? I do not know what awaits me. However, I am certain of one thing: what is not reduced is this fear, as somebody mentioned last night, that Christ will pass by and I will not notice Him. Even if everything were to be taken away from me, I know that Christ passes through my life. I get up in the morning and go to work with open eyes. That is why I can ask others to do the same: because only Christ can fill my life.

Going back to the Gospel episode about the man born blind, I can certainly say that I saw the works of God in action in a moment, like for the blind man, of deepest stress and limitation. I will give you an example. As part of the attempt to save our company, we have to give up one of the two buildings we use for our school. We had rented this building two years ago, in Dublin's most beautiful square. My wife and I spent a lot of energy and resources refurbishing and redecorating the building. The result was really beautiful. You would expect, therefore, a sense of failure, sadness, frustration, when we had to give the building back to the landlord – not to speak of the legal and financial issues still to deal with. Instead, that Saturday evening, after emptying the building we had filled with passion and attention, my wife and I unexpectedly experienced a lightness, a freedom, a sense of detachment, which can only be explained with the words “to possess without possessing”. The most evident example of this was when I saw my wife on her knees trying to clean a coffee stain from the floor. For a building that we were leaving!

On the face of it, we were losing an investment; in reality, we were gaining the hundredfold!

Thank you very much!

The question that we share with everybody is the question that your colleague asked you: “How can you wake up in the morning and come to work when we do not know if it will end well?” This is the question that our friend asked earlier, the answer to his question. We are in the middle of the journey now, in the middle of the crisis, but is it worthwhile to keep fighting when you cannot be sure of the result? Thus, what we need to understand is what this situation means for our own life. It is in this situation in which we each find ourselves that we can understand what the crucial role of desire is. To answer this question in a positive way - yes, I can wake up in the morning and go to work even though I do not know what could be the result. How can my desire be so alive and strong so as to define whatever circumstance? Otherwise, as our friend said earlier, desire can diminish because there is no reason to keep going, to pursue it. Only those who have the answer to real desire can keep pursuing it. And what is the answer to real desire? That my desire is not answered first of all by my success. Because at that moment I have no possibility of being certain of this. I am certain that my desire is fulfilled because of an encounter. Maybe this crisis can be helpful for us to understand what

the nature of our desire really is, what the nature of our human existence is, and what the nature of Christ is. Only if Christ is able to reawaken my desire again and again and again because of my relationship with Him can I make a contribution to the world in this unique moment in which everybody finds themselves in the middle of nowhere, trying to fight circumstances in which results are not assured. For this reason, the question, as our friend said earlier, is: “What is the origin of the energy that allows me to restart again and again, every morning?” “Not in the certainty of a positive result”, he says, “but from the rediscovery of that position of abandonment.” This means the certainty that Christ is the answer, that the result lies in the very moment in which I open my eyes each morning, because I have found the answer to this. If there is no answer when I wake up every morning, there is no answer at the end of the day after all my effort, because all my efforts are insufficient and are useless to fulfil my desire. Can we really be free and keep fighting if we are certain now, in the present, because of the encounter we have had? Otherwise, we are like everybody else, dependent upon the result. For this reason, many become sceptical and surrender in front of crisis. This is, first of all, the possibility that Christ has offered our life, but not only in this specific moment of crisis. This crisis is unique because it is a particularly challenging situation, but the same applies to the relationship within a marriage, to the relationship with children, to our relationship with the world, with politics, with everything. Where is our hope? Is our hope in the result of our effort, or is it in the encounter we have had? This is a challenge, not only for the awareness we have of ourselves, but it is a challenge for faith. We are in a particular circumstance in which many might choose to abandon faith, because it is useless to change circumstances, because faith cannot assure me success. The goal of faith is not to assure you success; this is not Christ’s goal. It is too little for our desire! Even though Christ could answer all our images, it would be useless for the awakening of peace, to allow us to experience peace. For this reason, I keep talking about the tenth leper: all the lepers received the partial desire of being liberated from their illness, but that does not mean that this was the answer to their desire for peace. The desire for peace can be fulfilled only by a presence; not any presence, only one presence which can be defined in whatever circumstances we are in. For this reason, this is a unique, fascinating moment to verify what the real difference about Christ is. He is not one among others in the Pantheon of the gods. He is unique, because He is real and He became man to accompany us; in the midst of this reality, we can attain this fulfilment not because our images have been fulfilled, but because He became a baby and remains among us. This is not a result of our effort; it is a grace, it is a gift, it is something given. The answer to our trouble is not an effort. It is a gift, and we have received that gift from friends. If we do not understand, that is too bad! But the answer cannot be any kind of success, whatever the image we have in mind. The only adequate answer to the nature of my desire is a presence. If we make space for this presence every day, we can begin to see and to touch in our experience what it means to be Christian. This is more crucial than solving an economic crisis. The problem of life is that we are made forever, and we must verify if we have a strong foundation for our hope, because life passes away after years. The point is if we have hope for the present and for the future, and if our certainty for the future is that we can see, in the present, what it means to recognise Christ. This is the convenience of faith, even though you might not believe it. It would be useful for you to verify this, because it is impossible for anybody to escape from this situation through any kind of attempt. We are ultimately entrapped in this chaotic Covid, economic situation...school, kids and so on. It is impossible to escape. Perhaps it is not useless at all; it allows us to give Christ a chance! Perhaps it is convenient to allow us to offer this chance, only this! I cannot stress this more – it is an opportunity to offer Christ the chance to show us who He is in our lives. This is perhaps the best thing that we can do to begin to face and to deal with this situation in another way, as our friend has testified to us.

*Good evening everybody! Thank you for inviting me.
Since I began a big journey trying to find a deeper way to live my life, where "deeper" means meaningful and fulfilled, it has become increasingly clear to me that there are only two ways to live any sort of situation, either beautiful or tragic: alone or with God.*

This is the choice: alone or with God! This is the real choice: alone or with God. Son or orphan. There is no other choice. Wonderful!

I can try to do my best to achieve that result or face that difficult unexpected situation, forcing my willpower to exhaustion and acknowledging that I cannot do much with my fragile human limits, or I can be smart enough to take the heavy load off from my shoulders and ask a big good giant to carry it for me, jumping as light as a butterfly, focusing upon the things that really matter. I am a very precise person and prone to taking control. I feel lost and freak out when something gets out of my control and there, usually, I experience that I still have these two choices. It is always up to me. To make it all a little bit more concrete, I would like to give you a recent example. I began working in the UK last year, as a carer in a care home for eight months. I am a doctor and I had never done anything similar in the past. They were all patients with severe dementia and most of them liked to constantly punch or bite me when I was trying to clean them in the toilet. Yes, they were still the same patients – because I am a geriatrician – but it was a totally different point of view...such a challenge! My alarm was set at 5:30 am, a 12-hour shift, often two or three in a row. This did exhaust me initially, to the point that I started saying Morning prayer on the bus every day, asking the Lord to help me understand the deeper sense of it and, above all, His willingness. I can swear to you that every time I yell at God (I really need to yell at him because the people of Israel took four hundred years to be freed, only when they began yelling!), I start hearing His voice that, as opposed to my cry, is nothing but a whisper deep into my heart; it tries to show me another version of reality, the most colourful and tasty one, where I am no longer the centre of the universe, with my victimisation, my limits and my need for justice. The centre is another, with their needs and screams. Ultimately, the body of Christ is masked behind the other, asking me to take care of Him, trying to reach me through that person. Thus, I began waking up with this query; no longer "why?" but "for whom?" should I have faced that day. I acknowledged that I was a tool in the Lord's hands, a tube of light, and He wanted to use my hands, my words, my smile and my time to reach those people. Through this Obedience, this Humbleness and this Service, He wanted to save me. This is what happens every time. Through every challenge, which might initially seem to disturb my plans and threaten my freedom (that most of the time is nothing but slavery), He wants to transform me, to "give me back to myself", to give meaning to pain and sorrow, teaching me that moaning is not the way to happiness, but Unconditional Love is. That love that compromises your time, your physical power and your comfort zone, but actually frees you from every idol and slavery. I began experiencing a "gusto" for my job and for my patients, spending more time sitting and speaking to them, even if most of them could only mumble, playing with them during my breaks, without staring anymore at the clock waiting for the time to go home. I felt light, true, peaceful, happy and fulfilled. I was nourished by the best Love ever and, therefore, I could nourish others. I was seeking the Justice of God, which is based only upon my relationship as a daughter, and has nothing to do with human rewards. I thus felt even less tired and found more energy to study hard for my English exam, which I eventually passed to become an NHS doctor...a new job, new patients, a new challenge. Yet there is still the same question in the morning, the same curiosity, and, therefore, that same "gusto" and the same promises from the Master of love. Thank you!

Beautiful! Thank you very much!

This is what I was trying to say earlier: [...] the decision is not at the end, it is at the beginning. If I try to live whatever circumstance, whatever moment – such as when I wake up in the morning alone – from the very beginning, it becomes the possibility of a relationship with Him. Only somebody open to this verification can be convinced because, for many people, what you are saying seems like a dream. Nobody can convince them, only a priest. For this reason, the theme of our meeting this weekend is: “Everyone who follows Me will have the hundredfold here on earth”. Jesus did not stop to explain the consequences. He challenged everybody who met Him: “Everyone who follows Me”. The only condition is to follow. What does “following” mean? To be with Him, to open life to Him, in the way you are describing; that is, simply. Only such a person can verify whether the promise is

fulfilled, whether they already receive the hundredfold here, rather than in a future eternal life, because eternal life begins here. Thus, only those who are open can touch, and there is no trust without reason. I can trust Christ again and again only if I see what you have described. Ultimately, if you recognise that Christ is what “gives me back to myself” – as you have said – this becomes the reason to risk the day after, when you wake up and when you meet your patients. And what is the surprise? That you no longer stare at the clock, waiting for the time to go home. These are details that are impossible to make up, because it is a surprise even for yourself. Christian fruits are always a surprise. They are not what we expect. However, when these things happen, we can speak to them and be grateful. What is the greatness that I have received? This is what makes us truly free; free from every evil, idol and from slavery. Thus, here is a proposal and a question for everyone: who can say that, in the specific circumstance he or she is currently living during this period, they cannot do what our friend has testified to us? Everybody can decide, [...] can verify [...] if what our friend has said is a dream.

Thank you!

Hello!

During these difficult months, I have started to be faithful in doing School of Community and trying to pay greater attention to what surrounds me. Almost a year has passed, and I acknowledge with wonder that I have changed. I start to truly recognise the deep value of this companionship and experience certainty in a way that was not there before. I believe that, as a consequence of what I just said, I received anew three main things, almost as a gift. Firstly, a new love and openness towards my friends – in the past, I used to focus on all their flaws. Next, a very clear notion of the persecution of the Catholic Church in Ireland – I work for a church but, until about two months ago, my eyes were full of scandal, whereas now I can forgive and not be scandalised; and finally a clear understanding of the educational crisis. A twelve-year-old boy that my children knew from a very wealthy area in Dublin committed suicide just last month. Our friend was probably the only person among the parents from this boy’s school to actually engage with his mum and say, “we are praying for you”, despite her not being religious. Nobody else, apparently, said anything. As far as I understand, education or the educational system, at least here, cannot be approached anymore in terms of which school has the best curriculum, whether international schools are more vibrant than bigoted Catholic schools, or which schools do not offer sexual education by showing the kids a male body, a feminine body, a neutral one. We are facing an all-pervading mentality that would have our children believe that their existential questions and their need are a problem, so they should not be asked. They have loads and loads of distractions in primary school, where the aim is basically to “chill out”. My sons meditate in school, to try to help them cope with the stress resulting from very demanding performances. The more demanding, the less meaningful. I think this is a new challenge and no slogan can solve this. This companionship is home to me; it is vital as it is rooted in the mystery of Christ present, and I am sure that all our children see if our home is rooted in us and if fear, which is sometimes there, does not define us. I would like to ask you what contribution this new subject, which is this human-divine companionship, weak but rooted in eternity, can offer to this lost society, especially to education.

The most important contribution is what we were talking about earlier. You can try the best school – it is normal that you try – but one school or another, the point is that we cannot place our hope only in school. Not even school can reawaken desire. This is the problem of the system, because many schools can distract, as you have said, with many activities. If you find another more adequate it is obvious that you choose that one, but the issue is that we cannot unload our responsibility onto an institution, because this institution belongs to this system in which the common mentality is, as our friend said earlier, according to Giussani, “the reduction of desire”. Thus, it is useless to place our hope only on the outside. This is the goal of the Christian community. Not just any Christian community, but a community in which desire is alive. Not every Christian lives an experience of life which you can recognise as alive when you look at his or her face. It is a matter of whether Christianity

keeps being an experience in the present; not every kind of experience, every way of living Christianity, is so alive and fascinating so as to attract us or attract your children. This is the goal of the Christian community. For this reason, we need to understand - and according to me this is a good opportunity to understand - the difference that Christ has introduced in life. Not only salvation after death, but for living daily life today, for educating your children, for the relationship between husband and wife in marriage, for the relationship with friends. What kind of intensity or density does He bring in the relationship with another? Either everything can be fulfilled in life, or everything becomes flat. It does not matter if I am Christian or whatever, if I go to Mass on Sunday or if I take the dog for a walk. It is a matter of life; it is not a problem of being right, it is not a problem of habits, it is a problem of the kind of experience you are living so as to define your children, your colleagues, or your friends, with the radiance of your eyes. There is no other hope. For this reason, Giussani said, "I can find no other sign of hope if not the multiplication of these people who constitute a presence. The multiplication of these people and an inevitable new sympathy among these people." They are the beginning of Christianity, one after another. Like the girl we were talking about yesterday: she is somebody who cannot be satisfied by life, who sees with the experience of life she is having, and who is looking for something else, and thus asks her parents to accompany her to church. She had an intuition of what could be discovered there. Yet, ultimately, there is something in this girl that is impossible to reduce, to be reduced. Only if we can reawaken this desire in our kids, among us, can Christianity be interesting for life. Otherwise, it is useless and will remain yet another moral law or habit which makes life heavier. For this reason, faith today is either something that can fascinate life, or nobody will have an interest in it. The only way for this to happen is if we meet someone whose face is shaped by their life; otherwise, Christianity is like a set of rules or habits.

These months of the pandemic have been a great time for me to rediscover that "I am" because I am in dialogue with Someone. I would like to try to describe how this dialogue has given me that "gusto for life" through a few simple facts that happened to me in relation to my work.

Months ago, when the pandemic had just started, struck by the witness of many friends in the front line and not, and the impressive solidarity of many, I felt a deep desire to contribute as well. After a few days, my university was recruiting scientists to run tests at Milton Keynes, one of the laboratories where PCR samples were being sent. I immediately talked to all my colleagues and I managed to convince most of them to come with me. There was only one person missing, probably the most important person: my boss. So I called him to ask for his permission to go, certain that he would have let me. What better way to make use of our time?

His words were clear, indisputable and in a way enlightening: "No, if you want to help, you have to do it starting from what you already know. You should try to use your skills and what you have learnt so far, and leave the testing to people who know how to do it." I initially tried to rebel saying something like "our job is not more noble than a technical job." But there was no way to change his mind. To be honest, thinking about it now, I think his realism without any sentimentalism was right in the end.

But what struck me the most was that I again began asking myself what my contribution to the world was. Moved, I realised it had been ages since I last confronted this question. It was a true question and I was not just trying to pretend to be the saviour of the planet. It was evident. I was not able to save myself even for an instant; I was dealing with challenging circumstances like everyone else: isolation, uncertainty, the sacrifice of not being able to see friends in order to comply with the government guidelines. I do not know whether my boss actually meant what he said. There is a big chance he just wanted me not to be "distracted". Immediately after that call, I began a path, a personal path, rediscovering all my humanity and that question about my contribution, sometimes shouting at God but strangely at peace. I also began a path related to jobs, beginning to look for a job to study Covid-19. I do not think this particularly pleased my boss, since he was the reason I began this whole process.

After a few weeks, in June, I came across a job advert at a different university that focused on Covid-19 and its mutations. I decided to apply, and all I could say was “God, if you want me to contribute, even if it is a small contribution, I am available, may your will be done.” Imagine my gratitude when I found out I had got the job. I was over the moon. The job has been nothing like I had imagined. This virus is really unlike anything we have ever studied before. The job has been overwhelming, with long hours, but I can say that what has dominated in me is the joy of learning. Every single day I am reminded that it was Someone else who wanted me there, who is giving me an incredible gusto for what I am doing.

After two months of hard work, my group discovered the "English variant" and we immediately knew that it was something very important, with huge public health implications – for example, the immediate suspension of all flights to Italy that forced me to remain isolated for Christmas. At that exact moment, my only thought was back to that “God, if you want me to contribute, even if it is a small contribution, I am available, may your will be done.” I think that “His will” is the most interesting thing. God is capable of anything.

I know that my willingness is not perfect, and I often only make myself available when something corresponds to what I already have in mind. I know that my awareness of my contribution to the world sits on a fine line and could easily become the tip of the iceberg of my selfishness. But how different it is when I start from Someone else instead of from myself. I recently re-read Brand by Henrik Ibsen, and I have always been struck by the pastor’s final cry, “Answer me, O God, in the hour in which death is swallowing me up: is the whole of man’s will not enough to achieve even a part of salvation?” Fr. Giussani says that that cry is answered by the humble positivity of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus who writes, “When I am charitable it is only Jesus who is acting in me.” I am miles away from that. To be honest, I think we can say the same thing for the gusto of life. I cannot generate it for myself. I can look for it, I can desire it, I can beg for it, but it depends on Him, not my effort.

This is the point. We must understand this. Otherwise, we go crazy because we consider ourselves the saviours of the planet. The Saviour is only He who has fulfilled the will of the Father, and we must understand that this is our contribution. Even if you can change jobs, the question is whether we, from this experience that we are having, can recognise the real contribution that the world needs today. This is the need that everybody has in front of a lack of hope, or the lack of a foundation for life, and the way to face reality and challenges with consistency. This is our contribution as Christians. We can do something within our job, but our main contribution, like Christ’s contribution, is to fulfil the will of the Father. Who would have imagined that St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus would have become the Patroness of Mission, even though she did not leave the convent, or the monastery. This is our contribution; this is a part of the journey that we need to understand now.

Thank you very much!