

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

Reference text: “The explicit declaration” in At the Origin of the Christian Claim, McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 70-79.

Song *Negras ombras*

Song *Noi non sappiamo chi era*

Glory Be

The work we had assigned for School of Community was the beginning of chapter seven of At the Origin of the Christian Claim, in light of what happened this month which allowed us to see in action a few of the things of which the chapter speaks. I will start by reading a question I received: “Lately, all the witnesses I heard speak of repercussion in a thousand ways: to express amazement, reaction, or a judgment on reality. We discussed it also in our small School of Community, but I think that the meaning wasn’t very clear. What do you mean exactly with this word?” Last time we used it to introduce what Fr. Giussani calls ‘the problems of life’, referring to the fact that in challenging us life raises ‘problems’. I would like you to listen to this episode, because I think it can help us answer this question.

At the last School of Community I was very provoked when you, anticipating the theme of the problems raised by reality, challenged us with these words, “Everything is played out in the first repercussion in front of reality, be it the elections, the Pope, the person you have in front of you, your work, your expectation, that is, in front of life. If each of us doesn’t take reality seriously and if this doesn’t become the starting point, we are already ‘modern’; in truth, we are already giving in to ideology.” You ended by saying that we need to “move from the initial repercussion to the commitment that this implies.” This is the fact I want to tell you about. A university student of the movement called me and asked if we could get together with a kid he had just met. I met with them and I was struck by this young man who is twenty-three years old and comes from Romania. I asked the university student where he had met him and he answered, “In the subway. He was carrying a sign that read, ‘I am looking for work.’ When I saw him, I went right passed him. However, the more I walked away, the more I felt uneasy and a sense of urgency welled up in me. I took ten steps and then I stopped and I had to go back.” What did I see in this fact? That everything is truly played out in this initial impact, in this repercussion. Clearly this repercussion challenges you (it isn’t a call to stop with every person you meet!), because you don’t know where it is going to take you. I understood that this is exactly the dynamics of all of reality, as you had already reminded us in the booklet of the CLU Exercises. What does the Mystery do through reality? He reawakens all of our desire, and in reawakening it, He puts us ever more in the condition for verifying Who it is that truly fulfills it.

I think that what he just told us is useful to recognize the factors of reality. In many circumstances we can’t help being provoked by reality. We see something that provokes us. Then we can let it go, but it’s not as if nothing happened: one feels a sense of unease; he recognizes within himself a sense of urgency to which he can answer or which he can dismiss, but it’s not as if nothing happened. This means that the repercussion is not just a sentimental

thing, but it is the beginning (the beginning!) that introduces in life what Fr. Giussani told us – we quoted it in the last School of Community – when he explained what life is: “Life is a web of events and encounters which provoke the conscience, producing all different kinds of problems. But a problem is nothing other than the dynamic expression of a reaction in the face of these encounters. [...] Discovering the meaning of life - or of the most pertinent and important things in life [...] - is a goal which is possible only for the individual who is involved with life seriously.” Do you see? Fr. Giussani doesn’t say that the goal is possible for the individual who feels the repercussion. We all feel that, because the repercussion isn’t asking for our permission, it happens. What we decide is whether we want to be involved with that repercussion, with that beginning, with that attraction, with that amazement (for example, meeting someone who is looking for work, as we just heard), an involvement that allows us to discover the meaning of reality, of life. “Involved” and “seriously” are two crucial words: “Involved with life seriously.” Be careful, though, because we often reduce this involvement to some kind of effort on our part, some kind of voluntaristic endeavor. Obviously, a component of this involvement is our participation, but Fr. Giussani helps us to understand the nature of this involvement, which is not moralistic: “When a problem arises, then, it implies that an interest has been sparked. Intellectual curiosity is thus aroused.” On the contrary, we reduce the reaction in front of reality to a moralistic problem (to get involved or not). Actually, it means to follow an intellectual curiosity. It’s not a moralistic problem. It is a problem of knowledge. Think of your children when they are trying to understand how something works: they are enthusiastic, curious and eager to know. It’s not that they are not making an effort, but this effort doesn’t take precedence. What prevails is curiosity, all the curiosity (which even sustains their effort, to the point that they are not even aware of making it). If it doesn’t happen like this it is as if everything became burdensome. We know it well: when in our work or in what we study we are driven by curiosity, we become more involved, not less! Curiosity and the desire to know, to discover the meaning, to solve the mystery, to discover how the toy works, prevail over the burden of the effort. However, this decision depends on us: whether we want to follow this curiosity or dismiss it. This is why the beginning – the beginning – of the disarticulation, that is, of the dualism, taking one road or another, is right here: “The origin of this weakening of an organic mentality [that is, of a total involvement in front of reality] [...] finds its source in an option permanently open to the human soul. It occurs when there is a sad lack of authentic involvement [again, not to reduce it to moralism], interest and curiosity towards all reality.” The repercussion is that beginning that arouses our interest, that sparks our curiosity: we can follow it or not. This is why we cannot look at the initial repercussion and work as opposites. We saw it clearly in the past days in front of a fact we all witnessed. Each of us needs only to stop and think of what we felt at the news of the ‘white smoke’ from the Vatican and what happened between 7:00 and 8:00 pm last Wednesday: we were all full of curiosity. Did anybody leave because it was taking a while for the new Pope to come to the balcony? No, we were all sustained in our effort by our curiosity. An objection: is this effort something added on to the repercussion? No! It’s not something added to the repercussion. It is the normal result of the repercussion. It would have been harder to get away from the expectation the ‘white smoke’ had provoked, than to stay in front of the TV and wait. We didn’t know who the new Pope was, but this wasn’t the crucial thing, because everything was already present in the *Habemus Papam*. We were curious because everything was already present in the beginning, in that fact: we just needed to wait for the developments. It was enough to let ourselves be provoked, to be loyal to the repercussion. Nobody thought about

the effort, we were all involved. Did you hear anybody complaining about how much time it was taking? Just by looking at what was happening in the Square, we had a clear example of what the repercussion means and that to follow the repercussion is not something added on for the moralists, it's not something added on for the people who are good and have heroic energy and abilities. No, that night nobody felt like a hero because he stayed and waited for one hour; it was simply the most natural thing one could do in front of that imposing event. When we recognize this, we start to understand what Fr. Giussani is telling us when he speaks of being involved with reality: if we give up, the meaning of what happened is not revealed. This is why seeing the repercussion as being opposed to this curiosity and to the loyalty to this curiosity is an artifice, because we all had the unforgettable experience of that moment. For this reason one person wrote to me, "I was struck by the spontaneity with which Pope Francis introduced himself. However, this event reopened a question and I am asking you for some help: how does the simplicity of faith witnessed to us by the new Pontiff relate to the work and the journey to which you continue to recall us?" We just saw it: just for the simplicity of what happens we have the need to give in and follow the initial curiosity, as School of Community tells us. And the more one shares life and gestures, the more he reaches the certainty of knowing the other, a certainty about the person he is facing. We were all eager to know, waiting expectantly for the news that kept coming. Why? Because of the irrepressible curiosity we had. If we had left, missing Pope Francis speak for the first time, if we had not seen his gestures, if we had not begun that 'sharing' School of Community talks about, we wouldn't have been able to reach a certainty of knowledge like the one we have now. It is what School of Community says today: true attention is needed. True attention: "The more one shares another's life [therefore one needs to give himself all the time that is needed], the more the clues are multiplied, the more capable one is of moral certainty about that person." Therefore, we cannot see or consider the very beginning as being opposed to the continuation that is simply being consistent with the initial position. The problem is that often, an instant after the repercussion, for various reasons we become weaker and don't remain in the original position. But a position is true if it keeps the original attitude. Therefore, the text continues: "At last, Christ presents himself as God [...] only when the consciences around him have already formulated decisive opinions about him." Regarding this another person writes me, "When I read this sentence in chapter seven, "For God tends to give value to the position our freedom has already assumed. The way God treats us seconds a decision our freedom has already made," I got stuck for two days. I think it is an unjust and mean statement, because it leaves you with no way out. I remembered the rich young man who goes to Jesus with his own idea of conversion and Jesus proposes to him something different that he doesn't accept, and he goes away sad. He had his chance and he blew it. This is how I had understood it: one makes a mistake and he is done. Then I thought of my experience, when this is not how it is, and that the verb 'to treat' is in the present tense and expresses an ongoing action, not something done once and for all. Our freedom is relative to what happens in that moment, not to what happened fifty years ago. To give an example: I arranged everything to go to Rome for Pope Benedict's last audience. For me the issue ended there, how to go and come back, as if I weren't expecting anything. Instead, this game is played out continuously in front of whatever the Lord makes happen. The relationship between God who makes things happen, and you who are called to answer, occurs in every instant. And to think that our companionship, since it challenges us continuously, should be the condition and the place where our freedom is educated to be open and not to close up!" It is precisely like this. Often we think of the fact that

God seconds a decision our freedom has already made as a condemnation, like he says: you had your chance and you blew it. No. Because, even if you missed your chance, tomorrow morning in front of a beautiful day you can say again ‘yes’ or ‘no’; in front of the rain you can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’; facing the beauty of a gratuitous gesture or the gaze full of tenderness of a friend you can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. No refusal to be open on our part can stop this; no position of ours can prevent certain things from happening, and the fact that we experience it. Even if we were distracted when we heard the announcement, “white smoke!” nobody could avoid raising his head for an instant, no matter the situation he found himself in. Nobody can stop this, because it isn’t up to us to decide what happens. This is why the game is always beginning again. Therefore, it is not true that we are already condemned because we made a mistake. No, the question continues to be reopened, otherwise the dialogue between us and the Mystery would come to an end. Instead, it never stops, because as we said before, life is this constant web of events that provoke us. Life is this constant dialogue with the Mystery who provokes us, who calls us through the things that happen. As we said, everything that happens is for our maturity. Therefore He continues to call, He continues to knock on our door, and all of my previous refusals to be open don’t necessarily make me close up also now. I have to decide once again. Who, for example, isn’t struck once again in front of a beautiful day, even when he is really angry at life? You have to decide again. Or in front of a gratuitous gesture: one can be as angry as he wants, but he cannot avoid the repercussion in front of its beauty. We all know it very well, we have to decide again each time, because this is the fundamental affirmation of the concept of the ‘I’ we defend each time we speak: otherwise we would get stuck, defined only by antecedent factors, whichever ones, censoring that there is an ‘I’ that is constantly challenged. This is why each time (this is the drama) we have to decide if our answer will be an acceptance, or a denial and a refusal. For this reason, says the Letter to the Romans, we are not guilty just once, because we constantly have to renew our decision of rejecting every initiative of the Mystery, one after the other. This is why the game is open until the last instant, as we see in the episode of the good thief: he may have said ‘no’ his entire life, but then be open at the last minute. This is freedom; this is the ‘I’. This constant possibility to be open is part of the concept of the ‘I’. This is why chapter seven continues, “When freedom adopts a closed attitude [because it is freedom that decides!], everything that happens encourages it to close itself even more.” It is shocking to see it happen dramatically in life. This is why Jesus says that to everyone who has, more will be given, because this individual lives constantly open to receive, while to the one who has a closed attitude, even what he thinks he had will be taken away. This is not because the Mystery is not available, or He is angry with us and wants to make us pay for it...No. It is because we have to decide constantly; the question is always open.

The question I wanted to ask you is all about the theme of freedom, because I worked very hard on the statement that freedom is very discrete. It upset me, because I had just had a discussion with a colleague: some things were happening and I was telling him about them. In the end we became entrenched in our positions and he ended up making this judgment, “You are crushing my freedom, you don’t respect my freedom.” So, I kept thinking about that sentence that freedom is discrete: probably the point is this, so I am crushing...Another person told me, “No, you cannot tell me these things because I am not in the right position, you must respect my freedom.” However, this discrete freedom in the end looked like a sort of mortification for me, so I went and reread the chapter on freedom in Is it Possible to Live this Way? There it says that it is a

decision, that the facts are there and in every instant you have to decide whether or not you want to accept to let the Mystery enter, like it says here.

Well, yes.

Why, then, does it conclude by saying that most of the time freedom is not played out in front of startling choices? It seems to me, instead, that surrendering to Him in every instant is the biggest choice.

Because, what comes to the surface in front of the big choices, as you say, is the attitude we have in front of the small choices, the normal choices. This is why you heard me quote many times the Gospel passage I love so much, “To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ ” With this example, without giving any explanation (this is what I find striking) Jesus literally says what Fr. Giussani is saying. “Then John the Baptist came and you said he was possessed by a demon because of how he lived, because of his strange clothes: you ignored him as a problem and a provocation. The Son of Man came, that is, I, which is the opposite and lives a normal life: He eats and drinks, they invite him to eat with them and He accepts. And you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ ” The sound of the flute and the Son of Man: the attitude is not different, because it is a position in front of reality. This reveals how the Mystery made us. Since we are made so needy, we don’t know from where the answer to our need may come. You didn’t know the face of your beloved, you didn’t know through what face the Mystery had decided to save us. John and Andrew didn’t know it in advance, nobody knew it. The only possibility not to miss the way with which the Mystery reaches us is this openness in front of reality. This is why the real decision is how to be in front of reality, in front of whatever way reality provokes us. We don’t have a certain attitude when we participate in this gesture and another in front of the sun or the mountains. It is the same. So much so that when we get stuck we get angry at the witness and at the mountains in the same way; we get angry at the husband we love and at the rain because it bothers us. The attitude is the same, because it is a position in front of reality.

Going back to the question of freedom that this time struck me as the underlying theme of the entire chapter, that lump in the throat and that blow to the heart keep coming back. If the Mystery always seconds the option of our heart’s original freedom, and if everything opens up because it is originally open, while everything darkens for the person who as a first response chooses to be closed, has everything already been decided? In my life I see that freedom is not a done deal, but it is engaged every day, almost every instant, if I live with self-awareness. But, if the original position is almost from the beginning turned on myself and not on the Mystery, can reason – intervening an instant after – convert it? Does reason have the necessary strength to convert, in time, this original choice of freedom, or is it pure grace? Is it at this level that finally the Mystery waits for me to make me adhere in truth to His Love that is making me? If instead it were pure grace, could I ever love Him truly, freely? It happens to me that precisely here I experience my ‘yes’, and from here is born the impetus that afterwards would like to permeate every action. However, the repeated occurrence of my instinctive selfishness weakens me, reawakening almost daily the doubt that in the end the true interpretation of what Fr. Giussani says is that everything has already been decided in that spurt of instinctive selfishness, that would seem to be so predominant. It is a daily struggle, imploring the grace and companionship

of the Mystery, Who uses my friends to put me back in front of Him within this daily, dizzying choice of freedom. How envious I am for the clarity of Mary's 'yes', re-proposed to me today by the 'yes' of so many witnesses! What a deep nostalgia for a relationship with the Mystery so present in self-awareness, so real and simple like in these witnesses! At my last confession I was told, "Don't give up. Fight. Live always telling Him again, "Your grace is enough for me," and I happily embrace this exhortation. However, is it right to ask for a deeper step of freedom to reach the prodigal son's peace at his father's feet? How can the choice of freedom, for us an unimaginable gift due to the relationship with the Mystery, arrive to be an innate habit (habitus) of our self-awareness? Is it presumptuous? But, if it is presumptuous, why then this making us desire, this making us thirst with such clear examples?

It depends on what meaning you give to the word *habitus* that we could translate with familiarity with a certain attitude. It is a very human desire we all have: that this freedom may become ever more familiar. But the problem is that often we think that having this familiarity means the absence of freedom, the absence of making constant decisions. In my opinion, this misunderstanding is crucial, because, as we said in some other occasion, would you like it if this familiarity were so mechanically habitual to keep you from telling your children, "I love you?" Obviously not! Because, to say, "I love you" will always be something totally new, totally unique, that is not the fruit of any antecedent, of any mechanism. Otherwise, in this moment it would be no longer yours, as you said earlier. This is born now of your freedom towards the other or towards Christ. Our Lady's 'yes', as you say, originates constantly from this. Clearly we can educate ourselves to make this ever more familiar, but without necessarily thinking that this 'habit' coincides with eliminating freedom. In fact, we want for our adhesion to become more stable, not to be eliminated! In short, we can say that it becomes more stable not by abolishing freedom, but by exalting it. When Our Lady says 'yes,' it's not because she reduces her freedom, but because she exalts it. She doesn't eliminate it substituting it with habit, but she exalts it more and more. One is happier in saying to the beloved how much he loves him or her; it is exalting freedom, not giving it up to avoid making a mistake. It is a concept of my freedom according to which my freedom fulfills itself in this 'yes'. This is why Fr. Giussani always told us that saying 'yes' is not a matter of courage or energy, but of amazement, of letting ourselves be totally filled by this tenderness of the Mystery: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I had pity on your nothingness." The 'yes' always originates as gratitude from this awareness, like the 'yes' of Peter in front of Christ's gaze full of mercy, as Pope Francis reminded us in these days: a 'yes' full of all the awareness of freedom.

In the company where I work there's a group of Christians with different ecclesial affiliations and we meet every Friday for a moment of help and judgment on our presence as Christians. On the occasion of the elections it obviously turned out that people had very different views of the situation, and therefore different political inclinations. For me this has always been a bit of a problem. But this time there was something new: how we helped each other live the elections this year was for me truly a great source of education. At one point our secular colleagues made this objection, "You are all Christians, but in the end you are divided." Without making any particular argument I said, "If you think that because we have the freedom of discussing our views with each other we are divided, you miss the only thing that gives us unity, which is Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Also, if you continue to interpret what happens in the Church disregarding this, you essentially lose the correct criteria to judge our presence." When I saw

the look on the face of a colleague who belongs to another movement – he was never told something like this – I rediscovered a huge unity with him, a completely new joy in recognizing that this unity exists and that Christ continuously renews it. I cannot say why I said this, but I can say that if the movement hadn't encouraged me to judge the political situation, I would have never thought of it. I can say that the result is a huge joy that persuades you that to 'risk' Christ in the things we live is ever more convincing, ever more attractive. I can add that the next time, the impetus is born in an even more natural, let's say, simpler way. It is as if freedom were educated each time you risk it and exercise it.

Thank you.

I would like to express as I am capable all the gratitude for what is maturing in me in these months, thanks to a constant personal work on all that you are pointing out to us through written texts, articles and interviews. After the last meeting of our Fraternity group I felt the need to discuss some issues with some friends. In fact, I was often going home with a sense of dissatisfaction and sometimes irritation that I was expressing only to my husband, but really just letting it pass without doing much. The feeling was that often we are directed to work on a text that then doesn't relate much to what people say when we meet. In short, I wasn't doubting that people were reading what we were asked to, but I felt that in telling their experiences they were not really starting from it. The same witnesses could have been given even if we had not read the text. Therefore, I feel that many of us, including me, have difficulty to compare the text with experience, like you have actually been asking us to do for months, and Fr. Giussani always indicated as the method to follow. I found a text from Litterae Communionis, 1992 in which he said, "How does School of Community become a point of comparison? First of all, it must be read by clarifying the meaning of the words together—not an interpretation of the words, but the literal sequence[...] Secondly, space must be given to the exemplification of a comparison between what one lives and what one has read. One must ask himself how what he read and tried to understand literally judges life." Therefore, after our last meeting, instead of keeping these observations to myself, I wrote them to some people asking for a judgment and, if needed, for a correction. I was really struck by what my e-mail generated: some people agreed with what I said, some emphasized the need and the desire to help each other more to make a judgment, for a greater work and a greater friendship, and some also highlighted the risk of falling into a conceited way of judging. In any case, the interesting thing I experienced, perhaps for the first time, was to see that if you get to the bottom of a desire born from a sense that something is missing, a sense of void – which constantly accompanies me since I began to use reason - it sets people in motion, and in doing so it generates things. Therefore, with some we had dinner together, with others we talked on the phone. With three friends, long standing friends (we have known each other since we were kids), we felt the need to help each other, finding a moment to concretely read together what is assigned each time. One last thing: it is another experience I had, thanks especially to the work you proposed regarding the elections. First I felt that my value as a person and as a critical person was enhanced, instead of receiving some prepackaged directives on how to vote. After an initial moment of feeling lost, it forced me to verify personally the political scene, so I simply read the newspapers with more attention, I read the parties' agendas, I spoke with colleagues and friends, and eventually I gained a greater awareness about the decision of whom to vote for. In short, I tried to follow that path you suggested to us, and I have to admit that it was very interesting. It forced me to use reason according to that method on

which there has been so much insistence and which I discover to be valid every day in every circumstance (because every day we are called to make choices, whether big or small). To conclude, nothing really changed in my everyday life: I go to work, I take the kids to school and I pick them up, I make them do their homework. However, the way in which I live every circumstance is changing completely. This has given new life to long standing relationships and friendships, it strengthens daily the relationship with my husband, with a depth I always desired, but that I thought would actually come from somebody else's initiative instead of mine.

I think that how you ended is significant, and I will use it to conclude myself, “Nothing really changed in my everyday life. [...] However, the way in which I live every circumstance is changing completely.” This is the verification of faith: one sees that in following a certain path he learns to live. One recognizes that living life like this is more reasonable. One has the concrete experience of what we said to each other lately, that is, he recognizes that faith is relevant to life's needs. When we take seriously the proposal we make to each other, a way of staying in reality that is much truer, much more intense and adequate is constantly born in us. You said that long standing relationships and friendships are revived -everything becomes new!- with a depth you always desired “but that I thought would actually come from somebody else's initiative instead of mine.” The promise Jesus makes, that “hundredfold given by Christ to those who welcome him into their lives,” as Pope Francis said during the Audience with the Cardinals two days after his election, is this: to experience that in living the faith everything one touches is multiplied, not because things change on the outside (challenges are challenges, everyday life is the usual everyday life), but because – in looking at every circumstance as educative, in accepting the problems posed by reality, in following with curiosity what happens – a new subject is generated, a different ‘I’. One sees it in the way he or she stays in reality. This change, this difference we discover in ourselves is the contribution we give to others, witnessing what faith is in everyday life, what its relevance is to life's needs.

In April the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises will take place, so the next School of Community with audio-video connection will be on Wednesday, May 29th at 9:30 pm. We will go over the first part of the Fraternity Exercises.

During **Holy Week** the Church proposes to us some gestures to place in front of our eyes what Jesus lived. I think that the rest of chapter seven has a lot to do with what we are going to celebrate. The conflict that breaks out in front of Jesus' claim, the more His claim emerges and comes to the surface, doesn't happen only to others, but also within us and it makes us constantly aware of what is the passion of Christ for our sins and our rejection. It makes us aware of the possibility He opened by giving His life and with His Resurrection. For this reason, continuing to work on this chapter with what we will celebrate during Holy Week present in our eyes shows us that it isn't something that belongs to the past. It shows us that we can understand, that we can enter into the Mystery precisely by seeing the drama in which we live today, the drama that brought Jesus to give His life for us. Therefore, we want to celebrate these days with gratitude, with our whole selves, to thank Christ for His faithfulness and to ask Him to eliminate all of our stubbornness.

Let's pray for our new Pope Francis.

Veni Sancte Spiritus

Happy Easter to everybody!