

**Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón  
Milan, June 19, 2013**

*Reference text: J. Carrón, "First Meditation" in "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Booklet in Traces no. 6, June 2013, pp. 14-39.*

Song *Fica mal con Deus*

Song *Il viaggio*

*Glory Be*

We all desire what we just sang: that "that world far away" we all long for may become "ever more true", that is, more real, defining how we live. It is the most urgent need we have, as we can see from the questions we receive: "Thank you for the work you are making us do. After a life spent belonging to the Movement (I am fifty eight years old and I was sixteen when I started this journey) I find myself taking my first steps like a child who is learning how to walk. I need your help with what I read on p. 17 of the Fraternity Exercises: "What gain there would be for our living, for our looking at ourselves, if we behaved like Fr. Giussani, trying to become one with Christ, so that our life too is full of that gaze, of that gaze that Christ turns upon Zacchaeus!" You explained this during the Assembly on Sunday, but could you help us again? It has happened to me that without this gaze I cannot manage, but as soon as something unexpected happens (almost all the time) my certainty about Him immediately crumbles." Do you understand that it is precisely for this reason that Fr. Giussani cares so much that faith may become a personal experience, and that the Pope insists on proposing a Year of Faith? Indeed, if this faith, this recognizing Christ, this certainty is not solid enough, – as we can see right away in the bewilderment of the adult in front of life's problems – everything crumbles. Another letter says, "I started to work on the Introduction to the Fraternity Exercises. Lately, I have been having a particularly hard time, for no special reason but for the fact that, no matter what I was doing, it was as if I were always absent. Everything turned into a routine, doing things because you have to do them. The protagonist wasn't me anymore, but my replacement. The dramatic moments of life are not what "cripples a man" as Pavese describes to us, but a struggle in keeping up with daily life, a malaise that not only makes me uneasy with myself, but also clouds everything else, making the time spent at home three times more difficult, creeping into the relationship with my friends and even making me doubt about my love for my boyfriend. In a moment of great weariness I went to talk to a friend who told me that in these moments of darkness God tests me, He makes me search, because reality almost never satisfies our expectation, there is a greater plan for each of us. However, even these words brought just a short-lived relief. There is always a 'but' that looms over. The question you ask us in the Introduction was like a slap in the face: "Where is our first love?" For me it isn't enough to say that the circumstances, no matter what they are, are made for me. I cannot make them become a path to help me mature, because I suffocate in them, and the awareness of having everything and that none of this everything is enough stifles me, it is a frantic search that always brings me to a dead end. I am sure of the event of Christ in my life, it is enough to look at the faces I have been given to accompany me, but when everything seems to fail [when what I expected doesn't happen, the previous letter said], when everything says the opposite, can I be satisfied with a mental effort

that makes me stick Christ's name on what is happening ("In any case I know He exists"), even if bewilderment reigns supreme?" Do you understand why almost each time we get together I repeat Fr. Giussani's words: if faith is not "a present experience, confirmed by it," where it is confirmed in experience that it is relevant to our human needs, it will not survive in a world in which everything says the opposite (*The Risk of Education*, The crossroad Publishing Company 2001, p. 11). What happens then? The affirmation of Christ is not lacking. She is sure of it – she says – but if it doesn't happen as an event, if it doesn't happen again as an event, she finds herself looking frantically for something, making a mental effort to stick Christ on it. Christ's name is already emptied, all sacrosanct Christian words, but the Event is not recognized anymore. This is why repeating with effort formulas we all know ("the Christian event", "Christ") is not enough for us, because in front of reality all of this is not enough! What does this imply, then? The desire to understand what we are talking about. Because when we repeat the phrase, "Where is our first love?", we immediately perceive it as a powerful slap in the face, as a rebuke, as if the problem were that we don't measure up to it (as we said last time). Instead, it recalls us to the memory of Christ, to the consoling fact that He exists, as Fr. Giussani points out when he talks about the paralytic, on p. 20 of the Exercises: we know that the Event is happening because it permeates our life, because "his relationship with God [he was talking about the paralytic after he was healed], the way he would pray that evening, the way he would then go to the temple every day, how he felt about life when he saw the sun set or rise [not only in the 'pious' moment], and when then he went to work every morning with his soul full of gratitude and with his soul overflowing with mysterious fear, fear and trembling toward this mystery of God who reached all the way to him [...]; in short, his sentiment towards Jesus [not at all an effort to say His name idly] [...], the way he went together with the others [...], the way he thought about his past [all the base things he had committed] [...], were all actions that started from a consciousness of himself, from a sense of his person, the physiognomy of which was shaped [...] by how Jesus had taken hold of him, by how Jesus had treated him, by how Jesus had 'known' him," by how Jesus was happening in him. If this doesn't happen in the present, and we don't recognize it, Christianity remains something that is no longer present. Then, what does everything become once again? An effort to say an empty name, using Christian words. On the contrary, we can live the same circumstances defined by this event. Listen to these two examples. "As you know, after about a month from my arrival in NYC I became gravely ill. For more than a month I couldn't move due to a very strong dizziness I was feeling. The first period was particularly hard, considering my temperament, since I had to lie still in bed in NYC, with all the things I should have done and wanted to do: it was a big trial. I was asking myself, why now? Why here? A battle on many fronts ensued. But the most difficult front was the last one, which God was asking me to enter. For a while I just endured what was happening, biting the bullet, waiting for the illness to pass and nothing else. Then, little by little, something started to change and my heart of stone started to open. The tireless companionship of my girlfriend, of some friends, of my family, with the help of the Exercises, slowly started my conversion; slowly. May 15<sup>th</sup> was the first day I left the house. It hadn't happened in quite a while. I went to the park across the street and trying to bear the dizziness I started to take the first steps: how wonderful! I would have never thought that becoming aware of being able to walk could provoke such a joy. That afternoon, looking around, I acknowledged the love God has for me. All of my life says clearly that my Lord knows me much better than I know myself. I couldn't deny this. It would have meant to erase my story. I could deny everything but this. I told myself, "who knows, maybe if the Lord gives me this illness – precisely to me, precisely now, right here – it is

a gift [the category of possibility: “Maybe it is a gift”]. And that ‘precisely to me’ made me burst with joy.” Second example: an inmate writes to a friend of ours, “I received your letter with great joy. Don’t worry if some letters are late. It is really true that it is never a reasoning that changes you, but an encounter. Our companionship exists precisely for this purpose: to remind us of the encounter we had, because it is a companionship guided to destiny. In this period we did a pretty good work on the CLU Exercises, and thanks to the commitment and the comparison with the heart and with ourselves, we got a lot out of it. I had very happy days and one day, as I got back inside, I told a friend, “God loves me. I am sure of it.” He looked at me a bit puzzled because he knows me well and knows my whole story and the daily struggle. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help to acknowledge what he is also living with me: gratuitous love. Yes, dear big brother, opened wide like this to everything and everyone I can avoid reducing what I have met, and instead I embrace my days for what they are, and I assure you that they are giving me really a lot [like two thousand years ago: the Event permeates daily life in jail, not in Hawaii!]. I had the possibility to meet unexpected people and share my journey with them, passing on to them some of my faith. It is true that gratuitousness is love for love’s sake; it is the virginity of a true relationship. I know, you will say, “How is it possible not to let yourself be influenced by what is convenient, especially there where you are?” In front of beauty the method changes, but then my heart, my detector, always warns me of the mistake, and I am free to acknowledge it and go back to the right method. God gave us the detector and our freedom that is always free until the end, no matter the condition we live in. Free, free, and this is very beautiful, a gift from God, as if at the moment of creation He had personally given us this thing that not even He can touch: our freedom. Then our living during the time of freedom, our time given to us to understand and mature, the time of God, is Christ’s charity. My being present has a very special reward: it makes me feel that I am in the right place at the right time. It is a beautiful feeling that makes you seize the instant, instant by instant, and the rest becomes all a consequence. Have you ever felt all this? For me it is a work, because I am surrounded by people who don’t live reality, but always reduce it, criticize it, and are continuously living either in the past, endlessly rehashed, or in a hypothetical future that crumbles at the first hint of wind. Truly, ‘My ways are not your ways’.” The sign that the Event is happening in us is the way in which we can live the instant. The fact that one is living in the past or in a hypothetical future is the sign that in the present there is nothing more interesting than a fantasy about either past or future. This is the nature of an event: it doesn’t depend on anything. I read these two letters to show that the circumstances we are living don’t matter, but only what is happening in the instant within the circumstances is important.

*Just a few days ago we started the exhibit by John Waters on the experience of listening to rock music. The kids became involved and some adults as well (also of my age). I took part in the starting phase of this initiative and I can fully consider myself one of the ‘promoters’. However, it is striking how in every instant, from the presentation in the past months to the exhibit of these days, it was and it is clear that there is an event definitely not promoted by me. Through those panels passes the newness of a new gaze on the rock singers that has somehow touched the lives of each of us. I was struck by the kids (almost all of them not belonging to the movement and quite distant from the cliché of ‘religious’ kids) who, in the role of guides who tell the story of these singers, recognize that those examples of need, of desire, of crying out, are not at all foolishness, but instead deserve an almost total engagement, to the point of spending as much time as possible at the exhibit, even outside the hours in which it is opened to the public. A group of them has even*

*decided to organize a “live corner” with pieces written by them, whose content and sonority will be explained precisely in the context of the human experiences recounted at the exhibit. I was impressed also by the new gaze of the adults (myself included) who became involved, able to look at everybody, to care for the details, to become involved with the kids with whom they didn’t have a previous relationship, to value moments of experience they recognized as useful also for their daily job, because most of these adults are also teachers. Therefore, I saw in these adults, who are old friends of mine, a gaze, a newness I had never noticed before. In short, I am witnessing freedoms that are provoked, touched, including those of people in the public who thank us, and chide us for not having publicized the exhibit enough. This is something to behold that I don’t want to lose, not even to organizational concerns that guarantee the good outcome of the initiative. Actually, I think I haven’t been particularly affected by organizational concerns and several accidents along the way unfortunately confirm this. But I also recognize that a gaze I discover today in me, so mindful of the freedom of the kids and adults who are involved, is born of a gaze I experienced on myself: it started several decades ago with the patient and persevering gaze of the then GS responsible, and continued up to the last witness twenty days ago (in which a discussion with a person on the approach to a particularly annoying job opportunity ended with a more serious question on the value of life) that influenced some meetings I had with clients who are particularly difficult. So, I understand what you were telling us at the Exercises, “We can see if the presence of that gaze prevails in us, if it permeates our life, by the way we enter into relationship with everything.”*

This is an example of what we were saying: the relationship with everything changes. Otherwise, what is it that prevails? The complaint, as another person writes to me, recalling the episode of Martha and Mary: “As I reread Saturday morning’s First Lesson I felt that what you said corresponded to me, that is, that the first instant cannot be controlled by man. It is so unexpected that it catches us defenseless, at least for an instant. In fact, this has been undeniable for me, so much so that I was moved; but it was like that also for Martha, who was just as moved as I am. However, the event of Christ can leave us transfigured or sad. In fact, I am no longer the person I was before, whereas Martha turned inwardly without truly looking at that instant, because without need and without a wound one closes any possibility and tries to fix things. Instead, for me it was crucial to have a companionship that helped me judge what had happened to me.” What is this companionship that helps me to judge? What allows us to judge Martha’s position and ours? It is the heart: if in our position what prevails is sadness, or the past, or the future, or if what prevails is being transfigured, that is, if what prevails is a Presence that defines life. Each of us recognizes this, as our inmate friend said, we do recognize it! Otherwise, defaulting on the complaint is already the first sign, as the Pope said two days ago, “Sad, anxious Christians, these Christians who make one wonder if they believe in Christ or in the ‘god complaint’; you never know. Every day they complain, they complain: on how the world is going, look, what a calamity, the calamities.” (Apostolic Exhortation to the participants to the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, June 17 2013). On the contrary, what shows that Christianity is happening as an event? This is the point we have to help each other more and more with in the work on the Exercises: not to repeat sentences, not to teach a lesson, but to see in experience what it means to discover that Christianity is happening in me as an event, what it means that something else prevails. We can verify this only in the present, in the present full of a Presence.

*I wanted to recount something that occurred to me to witness precisely the opposite of what you are saying now. As I was rereading this very piece – when you said as clearly as now that Christ is an event happening now – a position I often have, without being aware of it, was revealed. I work with a colleague with whom a true relationship has developed. A couple of months ago I invited her to go with me on a vacation of the movement to the mountains. She understood that I sincerely cared about it, I told her all the things we say to someone you want to invite to a vacation. She told me, “Yes, I will think about it.” Then, after two weeks she said, “Listen, I decided not to come.” When she told me this I was very upset and I told myself that in the end it always turns out like this, and that my colleagues never give in. This fact really hurt me. However, the point is what happened in the following days: I found myself completely detached, indifferent towards this colleague who – I repeat – is truly a friend in the place where I work. Therefore, I discovered a very recurrent position I have towards reality (both in small and big things). I face things taking one of two different positions: either possession or indifference. Either wanting to possess something to determine how it should go, or (since actually – thank God – things don’t always go according to what I have in mind) withdrawing into indifference, that is, not showing any emotion or affection. When I read this piece of the Exercises I asked myself, “but, what does the fact that Christ is an event mean in existential terms?” Because, in the following days I found myself exactly like this, detached and indifferent which is the first way to remove reality from myself... The fact that in existential terms Christ is an event: zero! It is as if I was concerned about recovering with her also an interest, that in those days I had obviously lost, but without a true resource at hand. Let’s try to understand well what this difference you are describing tells us about the Event and about how we are living the faith.*

*At work there are many things going on, also many really interesting opportunities, but with many question marks that sort of beset me every day, and make me wish that many things were clear while they aren’t, that many things were defined and yet they are not. Lately, this was bothering me, it was a big burden, and we all know the consequences: one cannot go on like this, and so he has either to find something that eliminates this feeling of being burdened, or he has to increase the frantic pace. However, a person I work with brought up the same issue -this uncertainty, or in any case the fact that some things we live are open ended - in a very different way from how I was living it. She was not defined by this, and not in a superficial way, having very clearly in mind all the elements that make it unusual, but being certain. When I heard her speaking like this, things I have lived that have this connotation, this unmistakable trait, came back to me in a flash: the presence of someone who is both aware of the factors, therefore not being superficial, and also certain, because she doesn’t depend on the factors (that are not exactly like we would want them to be). This overturned my position completely, I was really attracted, and I told myself, “Each time this happened it had to do with Christ.” And so, the following day one starts again, even if the factors haven’t changed and therefore the fear about some things lingers, but the interesting point is that after what happened I was no longer defined by the idea of myself (I think that this is very common among us, it is hard for us to escape the walls we build around us), but I was defined by something else which I know is what fulfills me. Therefore, in facing also the fear of certain things, I realized that before I depended on the outcome I was expecting, while now I depend only on this Presence who changes me in the instant.*

One realizes that while facing the same thing, another person lives it in a different way, not defined by the circumstances, with a completely different, unmistakable trait.

*You started Saturday morning's First Lesson saying that Christianity reveals its nature as a response to an existing need. I always identified this need with something I had to obtain (for example at work it is getting results), with a performance. Two weeks ago my company achieved the greatest success of the past years, beyond any expectation. The following week we had our assembly: instead of five hundred people a thousand came: a triumph! What I had worked for, what I thought to be the answer to my need, was not only attained, but even surpassed. However, I discovered right there that this left me still thirsty, and it didn't fulfill my need. What need? That evening I told my son, "Look, the gaze I experienced that day when we went to Rome to see the Pope is a totally different thing, incomparably greater, and it responds much more than this great success I had at work."*

Thank you.

*On Saturday we had a barbecue for our Fraternity group. We prepared everything very well: prime beef, vegetables and all the rest, we started cooking in the afternoon and so there were all the 'ingredients' for a beautiful evening. Then, it went by in an instant, without me being really present. On the drive back home I was sad. I was sad because it was clear that it was like the example you gave at the Saturday morning lesson, when Fr. Giussani heard a song at the Memores Domini's house, when you can have all the elements, but if He is taken for granted, nothing responds to the expectation, nothing satisfies the desire of the heart. What struck me is that for me to come home sad from an evening like that is not such a given, because due to my sociable nature, usually with a good sausage and a beer I have already enjoyed half of the evening.*

You are set!

*Yes, I am fine. So, it was clear that the acknowledgement of this nostalgia derives from the fact that this year's journey has instead - by grace - been marked by people and places where this fullness for me was present. This journey is changing my life, so much so that I can no longer ignore it. I can do it, but I immediately miss it.*

Why is coming home sad the sign of the journey you have made? What is the difference between before and after?

*The fact that in that moment the Event was present. In that instant, as you were saying earlier, that Presence was right there with me and was determining that sadness. It is truly like a relationship of love you recognize and that you realize was missing a moment before. It is interesting that I immediately wrote a text message to two or three friends of mine, and their answer was a sign that we are all making this journey. A few years ago none of us would have had this reaction.*

These are all examples to help us grasp what it means that Christianity is an event. Our friend whose colleague refused to go on the vacation was saying that when the event is not present what prevails is either indifference or the need to possess. When it is present, instead, the fact that one goes home sad – when usually he would be content – means that he has started to experience another way of living and the sausage is no longer enough! Something in the present is happening. This is what we should try to understand. Not what happens later, or the reflections we make later, or the remorse we have afterwards, no! What is happening in the present that shows whether Christianity is happening in us? Let go for the moment the issue of being consistent, because we will never be consistent if something that interests us more than anything else doesn't happen before. Someone tells me that his own inconsistency is a scandal to him, but I insist: to pursue

being consistent is a waste of time. The question is to understand what can fill our life in the present.

*This evening I understood better that what matters is not even the missionary outcome, the outcome of what we do, but it is the instant in which I live. What strikes me is the disastrous consequence that occurs when this doesn't happen: on p. 27 you say that there is an enormous emptiness, because we are made for fulfillment. If there isn't this satisfaction in the instant, an earthquake shakes us, and you speak of personal advantage, success and power. Since I like to read about history, I was thunderstruck by the fact that there were entire centuries in which many Christians lived for personal advantage, power and success. Even religious wars were waged to defend faith, people gave their lives, but this didn't have anything to do with experience. Ecclesiastical benefices were bestowed and the whole structure was set up for a theoretical defense of dogma. Why am I saying this? Because what we say to each other is sometimes faced as a topic for discussion: one can agree or not. Instead, it is crucial, because it changes history, history can become a power affair 'in the name' of faith. Therefore, it is impressive for us that there may be a moment in the history of our movement in which we are given this constant call back to Christianity as an event. This isn't something to be taken for granted, because we can have a Christian history that goes in the opposite direction. And this is shocking.*

What are the two signs that Christianity is no longer happening in the present? We theorize about an event of the past, that happened in the past, as the inmate was saying... The inmate is not an expert in theology, but he knows very well what he is talking about and what kind of newness he is living in the present, and he makes the comparison between that newness he is living in the present and what he sees around him, past or future, because the event has the ability of seizing the "I" in the present, it makes the "I" present to the present moment. Otherwise, we theorize about the Event, we talk about the Event as of something that happened, but no longer defines the present, as a witness was saying earlier. The other sign is that, since we are all made for fulfillment and not for emptiness, we seek substitutes on which to rely (as we were saying in the second point of the First Lesson) which are personal advantage, success and power. If we don't have another experience in the way we live, we will be in the world like everybody else. Listen to what the Pope said, "Baptism, this going from being 'under the Law' to being 'under grace' is a revolution. There are many revolutionaries in history, there have been many. However, no one was as powerful as the revolution Jesus brought to us: a revolution to transform history, [because it is] a revolution that changes man's heart." (June 17, 2013). We think we can change history without changing our heart, without being converted, that is, without having an experience of conversion to Christ that makes it possible to experience a way of living that allows us to be in the world free from everything else. Because, this is what amazes the inmate: that he can live the faith much more than us, and be freer in prison than outside, witnessing Christ right there. He doesn't have any position of power, but in prison – like the fruit vendor of Pavel's book – he can turn on a light. What is our role in the world? If we don't witness to this – says Pope Francis – we cannot offer the hope of what life can become. This is why what we spoke of at the Exercises is not the spiritual aspect of life. No! The point is that we cannot witness anything about this newness, about this revolution Christ introduced in life, if it doesn't pass through the way in which we live the circumstances in the present, free from any outcome.

**“How does one live?”** The **vacations** we have ahead of us are a precious opportunity to answer this question. We gave ourselves this theme so that nobody can confuse experience with his own images, or dreams, or comments, or complaints. In front of a question like this nobody can cheat. To answer it each of us can only recount some facts. This question helps us to understand the reason we are in the world, what is the use of faith.

We are not asking this to ourselves so that each person can test his performance, this doesn't interest us; we already know we don't measure up to it, we all get failing grades! Or we all pass, whatever you like, because it is the same. Because it is God, says Pope Francis, it is God who transforms the heart. He “changes your heart.” If we welcome His grace, He is the one who changes our heart. “We need only one thing to be saints: to welcome the grace that the Father gives us in Jesus Christ. This is it, this grace changes our heart.” (June 17, 2013). Therefore, it isn't a matter of performance, but a problem of being available, aware of our need, to welcome this grace that is happening now.

Concerning the **community vacations**, let's not take them for granted as a ritual that is repeated every year. Let's ask ourselves: why are we having the vacation? What do we want to communicate? What do we want to live together? If our plan is to do our own things for a few days every year we don't need the vacation of the movement! The question is if we take advantage of this moment to communicate something of the beauty we are living. What would we desire, what would we like to show to a new friend who is coming with us? That he may have an experience. Then, the hikes, a moment of witness, the presentation of a book, a conversation about something of interest, Mass, the Morning Prayers, the *Angelus*, become an opportunity in which one can see what a vacation is as a paradigm of living, as a model of what a day lived in Christ holds, of what is the life of a man who has met Christ (if at the vacation we don't see the beauty of a life lived according to faith now, faith will be reduced to something of the past, without interest). Therefore, may all the gestures we propose hold this promise: the possibility of verifying faith in experience. A food tasting, a particularly hard hike...do we expect the answer to the question ‘how does one live?’ from that, or from a method to live the Christian community? Otherwise, we will end up having a vacation according to everybody else's criteria, expecting the answer from yoga, from canoeing down the river, from the SPA or from the hobby we have in mind, but not from Christ (if then with Christ you also eat well, even better!). Then we can go home from the vacation with an adequate answer to the question: “How does one live?” Not with a theory, but with a lived experience.

During the summer break I invite you to work with this awareness on the First and Second Lesson of the Fraternity Exercises.

The books suggested for the summer are:

*Un evento reale nella vita dell'uomo (1990-1991)* [A real event in man's life]. It is Fr. Giussani's last book on the Equipes. It is impressive to see the companionship Fr. Giussani continues to offer us through these texts. In rereading them now (also for the many people who attended them) and letting what emerged then judge today's circumstances, we may be amazed at how relevant and

up to date the judgment Fr. Giussani witnesses to us is, and how it continues to accompany us today.

The Power of the Powerless, by Vaclav Havel. This text, recently proposed as book of the month, is suggested also for the summer, to give us all the time to read it and not miss it. If for a moment we take it out of Communism's historical context, we will see how useful it is also now to understand what the power of ideology or, to use another word, of the dominant mentality is. How can we be free today? This book helps us to understand the meaning of loving the truth more than anything else.

Papa Francesco. Il nuovo Papa si racconta. [Pope Francis. The new Pope tells his story.] We wanted to offer this book of conversations between Pope Francis (when he was still a Cardinal) and two journalists (Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti), because it helps us to understand better the personality and the caliber of this Pope.

Mia giovinezza. Poesie [My youth. Poems.], by Ada Negri. I suggest you to read this text starting from the comment Fr. Giussani made about it in the book Le mie letture [My readings], as a help to understand how the surprise of conversion happens in Ada Negri.

The title of this year's **Meeting** in Rimini, "**The human person: a state of emergency**", redirects us immediately to the many instances in which Pope Francis said that the crisis we are experiencing is not merely economic, but "it is a human crisis: it is the human person that is in a crisis! Man himself is in danger of being destroyed! But man is the image of God! This is why it is a profound crisis! At this time of crisis we cannot be concerned solely about ourselves, withdrawing into seclusion, discouragement, and a sense of powerlessness in the face of problems. Please, don't shut yourselves in." (Pentecost Vigil with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, May 18, 2013). The Meeting, with its proposals of exhibits and presentations wants to be a help offered to everybody to understand the Pope's concern, which is not to be taken for granted.

**Beginning Day** will be on Saturday, **September 28, 2013**.

*Veni Sancte Spiritus*

I wish everyone a good summer!