

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, December 18, 2013

Reference text: “Christ’s Conception of Life” in *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 80-98.

Song *Dal profondo*

Song *Sou feliz, Senhor*

Glory Be

We begin our work on the eighth chapter of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*. Based on the questions I received, we need first to understand the general sense of this chapter in order to be able to grasp its true meaning. I will start by reading a question that addresses this problem: “Dear Carrón, I wanted to ask you why this book’s eighth chapter is ‘stunning,’ as you told us, because I am actually having a hard time understanding how it relates to what we have said up till now. I understand that I am asked to work more intensely, but I get lost easily. Each time I read it, I feel that I acknowledge that what is being said is true, but I don’t start from an experience I have [this is the point], and therefore what I read doesn’t affect my life. So, why is it stunning for you?”

A small group of us was rereading the School of Community, and since there were several new people who had joined us very recently, I felt the need to give an overview of the previous chapters, in order to help us understand the point where we were. Thus, I went back over the book: how the problem arose in history, a deepening of certainty over time, the pedagogy of Christ’s self-revelation, first the implicit and then the explicit declaration. Then I said, “At the end of this journey, Father Giussani writes this chapter on Jesus’ conception of life.” A new person said, “What does that have to do with all the rest?”

A newcomer and a “veteran” – as you can see – with the same question: “What does that have to do with all the rest?”

“What does this have to do with the rest, after Jesus said that He is God?” In discussions I had there and elsewhere, I have heard this answer: after Christ says that He is God, He then teaches us how to live – meaning that after a series of chapters that help us to understand who Christ is, this chapter is about morality. Since this didn’t make sense to me, I objected, but I would like your help in understanding, because I think that this chapter really outlines Fr. Giussani’s newness in the way in which we can understand and live faith.

I think that what that person asked is the question that we can all often have: what does this have to do with the journey that we have made, that is, with the whole trajectory of conviction, with all of Jesus’ pedagogy in the way He reveals Himself, up to the implicit and then the explicit declaration? How does this chapter fit in now, this chapter that sounds like a lecture – as some people say – on morality or anthropology (what is man for Jesus)? As if to say: now he is giving us a beautiful presentation on what Jesus thinks about life, but it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the journey. It would seem that a chapter like this would fit perfectly in an anthropology book, but not in one that describes the journey of faith. This is the first point we need to address, and it is our goal this evening.

At the last meeting of our small Fraternity group, I invited a friend who is not very familiar with the Movement, and at the end I asked her how it went. She told me that she had been struck by the witnesses, because there were many people with serious difficulties, with concrete problems at work and in their families. She said, "These people, unlike other people I know, are not despairing, and I was particularly struck by a couple whose daughter is sick and who are not living this situation with desperate anger, but instead are serene." She concluded, "This evening I saw Jesus a lot." In truth, I hadn't really noticed, because I had been absorbed in other things, and I felt like one who doesn't recognize the reality that is in front of him. This brought to mind what you said at the last School of Community, that Christ always happens through someone else who recalls us to what is essential. However, afterward you added that, if one is not aware of his own experience, he cannot have it just because another points it out to him (because something recounted is not personal). Thus, I wanted to ask you if what my friend pointed out to me can become an experience for me, or if perhaps it can be a sign, but of something that has to be more personal. I will give you an example: when she told me what she saw, I realized that my way of facing everyday problems wasn't originating from hope, but at times from anger.

How do you think that what you just said relates to this chapter?

It relates to the fact that the way in which Jesus perceived reality was also a bit like that of my friends, who weren't starting from despair. It is a different way...

In other words, they gave a very beautiful witness of what it means to live in a moral way. Was this the problem? Is the chapter talking about this?

Yes. Actually, when I wrote to you with the question I didn't remember the chapter very well.

True. This is the point. This is why I asked you to speak. Then I will answer your question, because you aren't getting off that easy...

I want to start from a fact and say how, in my opinion, it relates to the chapter. This is the fact: at Christmas, we have a dinner with the people whom we accompany in their job search, people we have met, and so on. Among them, a gentleman whom we met last April comes to mind, someone a friend met one morning in the subway, where he was playing the trumpet and displaying a sign that read "I am looking for work." She stopped and talked with him, and a few days later we met at 7:00 in the morning. We saw him only on that day, and then I forgot about him, my friend forgot about him, and we didn't hear from him again. Recently, as I was making the guest list, I recalled that meeting, which had been something to behold: his eyes, his curiosity, and all the rest. So I called my friend, and I got his cell phone number. "Do you still have his cell?" "Yes, I do." She gave it to me. I called this man, who was Ukrainian. "Hi, how are you?" He recognized me and answered, "I can't believe it! This is beautiful!" I said, "How can you remember me?" "How can I forget that day?" he answered. And we didn't even try to keep in touch with him; we had helped him to find a job, and he told me that he had some small jobs here and there. I asked him, "Will you come on Friday?" "Yes, I am coming, I can't wait." He was very happy. This fact made me think of the chapter of School of Community that says at one point, "It is in the conception of life which Christ proclaims, the image He gives of the human being's true stature, the realistic way He looks at human existence, it is here where the heart, in search of its destiny, perceives the truth in the voice of Christ as He speaks. It is here where the 'moral' heart discerns the sign of the Presence of his Lord." Also, at a recent meeting, you said something wonderful about the same passage, "This is why, when one faces the One who looks at Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman with that gaze, or who says, 'Mary!' he understands its importance, that it isn't a feeling, and that that gaze

is so impossible for man that when it happens, it is the sign of the divine, not at all a matter of feelings! That gaze is a judgment, and this is its value. It makes you feel it, it makes you experience it, it communicates that vibration to you, and only the divine can do this. It is from this gaze that one discovers the full value of his person, because I was never looked at like this, nobody ever made me become aware of myself like this, and thus nobody ever revealed himself as divine, as He did. This reveals who Jesus is more than anything else, more than the fact that He heals legs and restores sight.” I was struck, because that Ukrainian man didn’t say all of these things, but in his gaze, in how happy he was, the same traits were vibrating – the same thing had happened to him.

Instead, when you told me about this earlier, you weren’t even aware of what you were recounting! So what happens, my friends? We can relate amazing facts, like those we just heard, but when I ask, “What did you learn from this? What struck you?” there is silence! One is struck by the fact that the other was struck. “What about you? What affected you, based on what happened to him?” This is the importance of this chapter. This is why Giussani – I am starting to address the question – introduces the chapter with a decisive premise; decisive not only for the chapter, for understanding the chapter, for understanding its meaning – in order to avoid losing the connection with the rest of the book (like the question asked) – but above all, in order to avoid missing what happens right in front of us in life, decisive for our journey of faith. The whole question regarding this chapter is if it has to do with morality or with knowledge. Because if it has to do with morality, then what is amazing is that there are good people who, in facing a difficult situation, are not desperate, or that there are people who help others to find a job. God can also use us to reach others, but we don’t understand the meaning that this – what the Lord is making happen in front of our eyes – has for our journey of faith: this is why it is a matter of knowledge! This is why the first letter I quoted ends with this beautiful comparison: “I feel that I acknowledge that what is being said is true [we can say things that are true], but I don’t start from an experience I have [one recounts these facts that happen to others, but not “as an experience I have”], and therefore what I read doesn’t affect my life.” So, in answering the second to last person who spoke, I say that the experience of a friend becomes yours if you relive what you saw in your friend, who – by the way – was the last to join the group. As Fr. Giussani often witnessed to us, the last to arrive could be the one he followed, because following – as he always told us – is to relive the experience that I see another person having. This is the point: that you can relive the experience of the friend who impressed you. Actually, what does this show? That we are facing a problem of method: how can what happened to your friend become yours? This is the importance and the meaning of the premise. Because it isn’t that Fr. Giussani didn’t have anything better to do than to give us a premise on the various possibilities of knowing something that he was going to explain later. No. The problem is that without even realizing it – as you can see – we don’t recognize what happens, and we say things that, though true, are not an experience. Why? Because in order to recognize what the last comer did, we need “human genius,” according to the chapter. What does “human genius” mean? If we now make a comparison with what we heard, we will realize that this human genius is not a matter of reaching a certain level of sainthood (as it says on p. 81), it isn’t about becoming ethically faultless – this is not what we are talking about. In order to grasp what is happening, we need the original openness of the soul. In the Gospel, it all hinges on this. The Pharisees were infinitely more irreproachable than the publicans, but they didn’t grasp, nor were they open to grasping, what was happening in front of their eyes. The publicans could find fault in themselves for everything. They were ethically unacceptable, but they had this openness, so much so that they were going to Jesus and the others were criticizing them for it. So, the point is that, in

order to grasp what that friend grasped, one needs human genius: she saw Jesus there! She didn't just say that those people were good, but she also recognized that what she saw in them could not be reduced to their strength or their energy. In order to explain what her eyes were seeing, she said, "I saw Jesus there." Your friend saw what you also saw, but you didn't recognize any of the things she was seeing. The facts were right there in front of you, but you noticed what struck her, you were struck by her. So, you were having the experience your friend was having with the others, but you were not aware of it, and so you are asking me, "Can I have the same experience my friend has?" You are already having it, but you are not aware that you are having it! Otherwise you wouldn't even have spoken this evening, because you wouldn't have been struck by this woman, the last to join your group. Isn't this true? The fact that you recognized what you did in that woman already means that, through her, what had happened to her was reaching you. Is this clear? With regard to the last witness, I want to say: my friend, you didn't recognize that, through what was happening to the Ukrainian gentleman, the same identical experience was reaching you. You were all excited in describing how struck your friend had been, but you didn't realize that the Mystery had amazed your friend so that you could touch a living experience firsthand (anything but saying the right things, or making a discourse quoting something I said at some other meeting!). It is crucial that we don't let ourselves miss the opportunity to be engaged in the present, in an experience that makes us touch Christ firsthand. Some people, instead, do recognize it.

While I was reading Chapter 8, on which we are working, I asked myself: have I ever encountered a man like this, that is, with a morality from which an infinite love for the person flows? I can't help but look back at the CLU Exercises that just ended. In those days, I experienced the presence of such a man, identified with Christ. I was struck when, on Sunday morning, you told us, "This morning I thought of you all, and I felt a great tenderness for you, an infinite tenderness for your destiny." The question inevitably arises: who is this man who feels this tenderness for me? I find myself in front of a man like me, with a desire like mine, a flesh like mine, but who looks at me as if I had an infinite value. Today this experience happens...

Today one has the same experience that others had 2,000 years ago! It happens today! We are not talking about something we remember from long ago, and now we make some theological considerations regarding the memory of what happened. Are the importance and meaning of the chapter clear?

Today I have an experience that makes the path that you propose to us reasonable, and with this gratitude in my heart, I eagerly return from the Exercises to discover daily reality.

How did what you say help you in your journey of faith? This is the question: if what happened at the Exercises in Rimini this past weekend helped you.

It helped me to have the reasons to come here.

Which means?

To be able to say: this path corresponds to me and interests me.

One recognizes the importance that what is happening in front of his eyes has for him. At this point, I am not interested in with whom it happens – this is secondary (it can happen with someone for whom you found a job, it can happen with a friend you have invited, it can happen with the person who preaches the Exercises), it doesn't matter. The question is whether, in everything that happens, when it happens in front of our eyes, we can recognize Him. Do you understand? The problem of this chapter is not morality, because this chapter is another step in the journey of faith: only if we can recognize Him now, in the present, will we be able to live this chapter – as we said

earlier – not as the repetition of things, even true things, but as the possibility to experience today the things this chapter is describing. Keep another thing in mind, as well: that there are people – and this is something each of us desires – who recognize the presence of Christ in what happens. Why is Giussani doing this? He says, “We do not directly realize a person's true worth [...] [the Holy Trinity doesn't appear to you right here]. What is within a person can be understood to the degree in which it reveals itself [...] through ‘gestures’” (*At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, p. 80), through signs. They could be compared with symptoms that the doctor can recognize, to the degree in which he can recognize, in these symptoms, the meaning of the illness. Look at the words Giussani is using: “To understand and judge the value of a person [...], it is necessary to have [...] ‘human genius’”! “Understand” and “judge” – it has to do with knowledge. One needs a human sensibility that consists of “natural sensibility,” “educational completeness,” and “attentiveness.” Only in this way can we “interpret this person’s gestures as significant signs in that precise sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 80). Then, what Chapter 8 is talking about is the nature of human genius. It isn't a particular talent: we hear the word “genius,” and we think of some strange genius, and we say, “I am not a genius, therefore I cannot recognize this!” No. The human genius that he is talking about is not what we refer to in common language. Instead, it is that availability, that disposition, that original openness that allows one to understand, as it happened to the Ukrainian friend, or to the woman who went to the Fraternity meeting for the first time, or to the university student: everyone can recognize what is happening. The whole point, then, is to understand that it isn't an ethical faultlessness, but an original openness. This has to do with that sentiment proper to one who has been created, that is, with that awareness that one has of himself as a being totally dependent on reality, which brings him to let himself be struck by reality, to be touched by reality. Without this, he cannot understand. What often happens isn't that we don't recount the things that strike us, but that we don't understand them; or, better, we understand something, otherwise we wouldn't talk about it, but we miss the best part. What does it mean not to understand? It means not to perceive the value of what is happening. Why does this happen? Because we are not open to understanding. Why don't we have this openness to understanding? Not because one says, “I don't want to have it,” but because we often reduce this openness to mere spontaneity. “Since we are born as children, with this original openness that shows in the curiosity that children have about everything, it means that it has to stay like this for the rest of our life.” Nothing is more contrary to experience than this! If one doesn't work at keeping this original openness constantly wide open, then it doesn't endure, and then we no longer recognize what happens – to the point that the last become first, which means that they become the ones who still have the ability to let themselves be surprised. We have already seen it all, things don't seem to speak to us anymore, so at best we repeat a discourse, but we no longer have an experience. Is this clear? This is what is at stake in the entire eighth chapter. What happens without this? That while recounting very beautiful and stunning facts, we lose our faith along the way, because everything that happens doesn't increase our faith, doesn't cement it – as a friend said – “it doesn't cement the relationship with Him.” The point of the whole chapter is that each thing that happens may become something that cements, that increases our certainty. Therefore, this chapter is within the journey of faith. It isn't that now that Fr. Giussani has reached the divinity of Christ, he changes the subject and speaks to us about morality or anthropology. No. Everything, even the initial premise, is meant to help us recognize what has happened. In the last witness, I was struck by the fact that this also answers one of the questions that were raised at the beginning of the year, after we spoke of ‘being called by name:’ many times one thinks of it in a personalistic way – “If Jesus doesn't come to my home

like He did with Zacchaeus, I don't feel preferred." She was one among 5,000 at the CLU Exercises, and look at what happened to her!

I attended the CLU Exercises as well...

Another one among the 5,000.

...and I can only tell you that I went home more wounded than ever. I had a discussion with my mother about a rather delicate issue. My parents have been divorced for years, and since I've grown up a bit, I've realized that the situation creates a lot of tension for my mom. She suffered a lot, and she still suffers at the thought that my father started another family after abandoning us. As much as I understand her pain and her anger, I can't stop thinking that he is also my father. I cannot think of having been born of a man who doesn't love me; the thought distresses me deeply. When I was growing up, I often had to choose which side to take in their arguments. It was as if I had to choose which one of them I wanted to hurt less, and for me this is agony. I cannot separate what is good for me from seeing what is good for them. I usually try to wiggle my way through a thousand of their arguments, trying to make everything turn out ok, trying to compensate on the one side and on the other. However, this time I wasn't able to do it, I wasn't able to hold back once again, to suppress my heart, which no longer lets me make superficial judgments (like, how unlucky to have been given such a family!). Since the Exercises, this thought has been hounding me; I keep hearing your words, "Only the divine can save our human stature." Is it possible that you were teasing me when you said those words? Is it possible that you didn't include me in those words, me and my family, precisely as it is? No. Based on how I was moved in these days, on how my heart has vibrated in these days, on how everything seems more burning, all the things you said have to be for me, too – otherwise I would not have felt called like this. I don't know what the right choice is, if and how much I should see my father and his new family. I know, though, that in looking at my life with what I saw in Rimini fixed in my eyes, my "I" starts to emerge more, with its need for One who embraces my whole self and my entire life, One who embraces my parents more than they have been able to embrace each other. The thought that I have never looked at myself and at them in this way makes me cry. It is the gaze of another world in this world, a gaze that is slowly taking over all the parts of my life, and that I am gradually seeking more and more. I am restless, but I am starting a journey of verification right now, immediately; and this is a human journey.

Thank you. Did this friend have an experience, or did she repeat something true from the text? Only someone who has had an experience can understand the importance of what she quoted, "Only the divine can save our human stature," and can therefore face the present without being suffocated by a situation like the one she described. Even in a situation like that, she feels called so clearly – one among 5,000 – because of what she saw during those days. What did she see? She saw a gaze from another world present in this world: something real and present, not a lecture on ethics or anthropology – to the point that now she can face any reduction. Is this sentimental, or does this produce a change that allows her to face the challenge she described? Each of us can decide! Because the fact of whether something is sentimental or not depends on the ability that it has to change, to take hold of me and make me able to face reality, to stay in reality, facing life's challenges. If we don't recognize this, then the chapter becomes another opportunity to make our own reflections, our comments, on the text, but without something that happens in the present. Then we don't understand, and we can't even recognize that only the divine can save our human stature. We can repeat it, as we do many times, and we can repeat it again, as the first email said,

“saying things that are true, but I don’t start from an experience I have, and therefore what I read doesn’t affect my life.” Instead, does it affect our life when we understand it well? Certainly! It affects us more than any other strategy. However, in order to see the effect, we need to have the human genius that allows us to recognize what is happening. Then we see that one doesn’t stop there, that this is not the end point, but rather the renewal of the desire to verify. “I am restless. I am starting a journey of verification right now.” Immediately! One desires to see if this can last in life. Therefore, all of the importance of the chapter is precisely this: if we can have an experience in the present. Because Jesus didn’t change the method, and Giussani didn’t change the method he has always shown us, from the very beginning. This gets to what is crucial, because everything that he said in the premise – which we can never take for granted – is the condition that allows me to become aware of the most enlightening gesture, and therefore of the most significant sign that Jesus gives. We can say that this is the apex, the last step of the entire path of Jesus’ revelation. This shows us all of Fr. Giussani’s genius, because the fact that one can grasp in Jesus’ conception of life His whole newness, His divinity, is stunning. We need Giussani’s genius, because we can’t find something like this, a chapter like this, in any Christology book. This also speaks of the charism to which we belong. Anything but discourses on anthropology! This is why, in working on this chapter, we can be unfaithful to the charism, that is, we can ruin it, by not understanding what we are really talking about. We have received the same genius that Fr. Giussani had, to grasp it in everything that happens, because – as you can see – it happens in front of our eyes, not only in what we read in this chapter, but in what happens in life. Giussani describes it to us in order to help us realize that this is what is happening in front of our eyes. When one perceives it, he feels called by name, even if he is one among 5,000. He doesn’t need someone to come specifically to his home: he feels that he is being called by name. Why? Because of what we read before, because only the divine can have such a gaze toward our humanity, can save our humanity. It is in Christ’s conception of life, in the gaze with which He looks at man, that the person with this openness of heart recognizes the divine. Therefore, if our heart is only a concept related to our religious sense, that we then leave in the closet because “now we are talking about Christ,” then we don’t recognize what is happening, while those who arrive for the first time can recognize it – and how! – because for them it is an encounter. However, what happens to them, as well as what happened to us, doesn’t describe only the first encounter; it is the path of every encounter, it is the journey for which we constantly need Christ. Otherwise, we end up complaining, “Yes, at the beginning it was like that, but then it vanished.” Do we think we can live off of the first encounter? Try and see if you can do it! No, because Christ didn’t change the method. The problem is that we are the ones who changed it (!), and we think that we no longer need this to happen. We change the method, and instead of being attentive to what happens, we comment on it! This is very different. Then one obviously says that an experience like this doesn’t affect life: it cannot affect life. This is why, instead, “the heart in search of its destiny [which means with this openness] perceives the truth in the voice of Christ [...], discerns [grasps, identifies it as it happens] the sign of the Presence of his Lord” (*Ibid.*, p. 84). This is how we can live Christmas, recognizing the presence of the Lord. Otherwise, Christmas will be a devout memory for us, interesting as a cultural or religious aspect, but not as something present.

The next School of Community will be on Wednesday, January 29th, at 9:30 pm. For next time – and now you can see why this chapter is ‘stunning,’ so we are in no hurry – we will work on points 2 to 4, pp. 83-92.

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1). Therefore, this Christmas is an opportunity to reread the **apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis**, so that we can participate in this joy, the joy of the announcement that Christ is coming and becomes flesh for us.

With regard to this, I gave an interview to *Avvenire* that can introduce you to the text. [<http://it.clonline.org/detail.asp?c=1&p=0&id=1184>]

The **Fraternity Exercises** will be **April 4-6**. Whoever wishes to attend the Exercises, but is not yet enrolled in the Fraternity, needs to enroll by January 27th, because these Exercises are open only to the people who belong to the Fraternity.

Video for the 60th anniversary of the birth of Communion and Liberation. For the 60th anniversary of the Movement (next year), we would like to create a video that documents what richness and newness of life the encounter with the Movement brings to our daily reality. It is the desire to communicate who we are after all that has happened in recent years, when the newspapers attacked us in every possible way. This concerns all of us, and so it is a challenge to the creativity of each of us. If you had to say what it means to take a food package to a poor family, or what it means to help someone to find work, how would you say it in a short video that explains – not in a didactic way, not as a discourse – what the life we live means?

It is important for anyone who is able to contribute short videos. It isn't something for the experts. You can find the instructions on the website www.video60.clonline.org. I ask you to take this announcement seriously, in order to convey in a beautiful, striking, and interesting way, why we are in the Movement, what happened to us.

As you know, the **AVSI Tents** are one of the charitable gestures that the Movement wants to propose to everyone. What we met makes us take an interest in everything, and therefore we cannot avoid being amazed at the experiences of some of our friends who created projects where welcoming, work, and education – in situations of poverty like in Syria, Kenya, Peru, and the Ukraine – are faced in a more human way. This year, the Tents' title is “Stories of a New World.” The gesture of the Tents will offer us the possibility to look at the origin, and at what generates this kind of human attitude. It will be a further opportunity to verify our faith.

Merry Christmas to you, and to all of our friends who are connected via Internet.

Veni Sancte Spiritus