

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, March 23, 2011

Reference text: The Religious Sense by Luigi Giussani (McGill-Queen's), pages 23-33.

Song: "Il giovane ricco"

Song: "Give me Jesus"

Let's start our work by reading an email that one of you sent me, because as we start this School of Community I want to feel for myself the urgency that pulsates in this friend. "I am experiencing first-hand that in this issue of morality it is my life that is at stake. Nothing we worked on in these past months provoked me as much as this, because I recognize that this is what I get stuck on more often, particularly when it says, "This may seem banal, but it is easier said than done. We are inclined to remain bound to the opinions we already have about the *meaning* of things and to attempt to justify our attachment to them."

When I read this chapter I thought of that young man who spoke last time and I said, "How beautiful it would be to be able to live what Father Giussani describes – but it is impossible." Because I started to read the entire piece on knowledge, that knowledge is not possible unless a person has an interest, and my problem is that I am not interested in things. When facing things (I was also thinking these past few days that I am tired) I often act on instinct; I'm not present. However, I was a little relieved afterwards, because at the end it says that a work is needed. So, I said to myself, "If a work is needed, I can make it." However, then it says, "To love the truth more than oneself ... a work is needed," and this is the classic definition of morality. Again, I was saying, "But I can't even love myself; how can I love the truth if I only see my limitations, my reliance on instinct?"

Repeat the sentence you just said.

How can I love the truth if I don't even understand what it means to love myself? Julián, I can't tell you if I love myself that much: I don't know. The question is, how can you get unstuck from a lack of interest?

I could give all the examples of every moment of life when we have a feeling – that is, always, from the second you get up in the morning. What happens immediately afterwards is that I choose a stance in facing my feeling, that is, in facing my reaction. The desire for happiness immediately surfaces, this desire that judges all the feelings and moods that we can't avoid having. When I leave room for this work, for this judgment that is not artificial, but something spontaneous that I find in myself, then I become certain, and knowledge is possible. Thank goodness there are feelings, so that I am forced to ask myself what I want, what I desire.

But, going back to the first question, if you are judging as you said, isn't this the first sign of the interest you have? That you don't settle for just anything?

The sadness over not being interested is the judgment on what I find myself with.

In our ward we have a woman who has a metastasis in her brain. One day her daughter, whom I don't know, came in completely out of breath and very distressed, and said, "I am looking for my mom. I want to talk to her doctor." I was struck by the fact that I had to go and check on the board to find out who her mother was, because I didn't even remember that she was there. I was horrified because I realized that, for me, this woman did not exist, while for her daughter she was everything. We got in the doctors' office and this distraught daughter asked, "How much time does she have?" The doctor answered, "Weeks." The daughter started to talk about all things she was going through with her mother, and I was shocked by the thought I had in that moment, namely, "Who is this woman that she means everything to her daughter?" It was at that moment that this sick woman started to exist for me. Starting from the reaction I had when faced with the daughter, I started to get interested in the mother. What do I take home from this incident? That the feeling I experienced there, that surfaced in me in that moment, is the spark that is the beginning of knowledge, because, as I left that room, I wanted to go and understand who that woman was. As Father Giussani says, a feeling, whether of attraction or repulsion, is a spark. I am not made for running after fake things in life. That is, what remains in the end is not a feeling, but the object I know, which is much more than the feeling I have toward the object. I was struck by the fact that I need something that lasts through time, and that a feeling, even toward something I love, is something that comes and goes. On the contrary, I need something that lasts, and what lasts is what I know, which is much more than what I feel.

So it's clear that what made her become interested in that woman is the feeling that was prompted by the presence of the daughter. So, without the feeling prompted by the interest that the daughter had for her mom, that woman would have continued to be a stranger to her. This shows how a feeling is not an obstacle, but a crucial factor of the process of knowing. The issue is whether or not we follow the spark that prompts our interest.

Last week I got invited to dinner by a group of college students to discuss the specific situation of their college and try to write a flier together. My day had been full, I was very tired, and I had absolutely no interest in attending that dinner. So I arrived expecting to get nothing out of it, and hoping to get done with it as soon as possible and to rush out. What happened? I got there, and there were already about ten students, friends of mine, who were waiting for me and who had gotten everything ready. You could see how full of expectation they were, and how much they desired not to miss out on that dinner and to make the most of the time that they had to spend together without ignoring anything. Supper started and I kept answering, fending off questions and trying to get it over with. However, they kept pressing me, until I found myself at a crossroads: I could either go on being disengaged, or I could let myself be provoked and then follow what was happening right there with them. And so everything changed. I started to get really involved in that dinner, in the discussion, in the debate. It was one of the best dinners I've

had recently, so much so that we ended up writing the flier as if it were the first flier we had ever written.

So, to answer the first question: how did you get unstuck from your lack of interest?

I think there were two factors. First, I kept facing what was happening there, because I don't think I would have been able to become unstuck if I had ignored what I had in front of me.

If we don't face what is in front of us, all that's left is a Herculean effort that we are very often incapable of maintaining. However, if a person lets himself be struck, be drawn in by what's happening, it starts to become simple.

Second, what I already knew didn't prevail; there was an element of simplicity that became a growing openness.

But when reality gets tough, how can you keep on facing it?

The other day I had the night shift at the neonatal intensive care unit. When I got there they told me right away that one of the newborns, a baby who's been in an incubator for the past three months, was dying because his brain was getting no oxygen because his lungs had never developed properly. Through the whole evening, I tried to avoid looking at that baby, because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep it together in front of him, as Father Giussani says somewhere: "Something happens, something penetrates and, inevitably, mechanically, it produces a certain reaction, that is, an emotional state... Something happens that touches or 'moves' the person, an emotion that moves the person." The pain of that baby, who suddenly came into my horizon, gave me that emotion, that feeling right away. I realized that I was using reason in a reduced way. That feeling of sorrow and all the questions that were springing up in me as I faced him were keeping me from getting close to the incubator where he was sleeping. The pain was too upsetting. Subconsciously, I kept saying no to a piece of reality that was provoking me. But around 4:00 am, his crying began to draw me like a magnet. The insistence of his being there would not let me remain indifferent. He was in his crib with his eyes blue and swollen as if somebody had punched him, and he was trying to open them. I stood there looking at him, and a piercing sorrow exploded in my heart, an enormous demand for meaning. Nevertheless, as I was looking at him, I had to come to terms with the truth about myself and about that baby, as Father Giussani again says: "Morality is the sincere desire to know the object in question in a true way, beyond our attachment to our own opinions or those inculcated upon us." Then it was as if I had focused the lens. Right there, as I was looking at him, I had to come to terms with the true experience of reasonableness that ultimately forms me, that frees me every single time, that makes me be myself down to the core, that gives meaning to my life, namely, that I am a poor wretch but am eternally loved. This is why, as I was looking at this baby and eliminating nothing, I was able to affirm with certainty, "In this very moment Christ is bending down to my nothingness and to your nothingness, to our littleness, because we exist, because we're alive." We consist of this constant embrace that never leaves us, that never abandons us, that gives us life. I consist of the continuous, tireless love He has for me, and that baby, in silence and with the utmost discretion, is carrying Christ's cross for me. But why am I

able to stay in front of him in this way? Why am I able even to face all the questions that are exploding in my heart and not run away? Why am I able not to dismiss or forget myself, to not grow cynical? Because Christ has happened and keeps on happening to me, Christ who loves me in a way that I am not able to love myself, and who makes me able not to censor or forget the deepest questions of my heart. As Father Giussani says, "Man is, in fact, moved solely by love and affection. It is primarily the love of ourselves as destiny, the affection for our own destiny that can convince us to undertake this work... This love is the ultimate inner movement, the supreme emotion that persuades us to seek true virtue." It is this love for myself that makes it clear and transparent to me that that baby is not the end, neither his death nor his sickness, just as I am not the annoyance I often feel for myself, for my limitations or my pettiness, but that now we both are relationship with One who loves us. It's really only He, present here and now, who allows me to look at myself and at those babies with truth, exactly as you said at the meeting on January 26: "Nobody can, by his own ability, stay in the right position, which the encounter with Christ has opened him up to." So, the only answer to our fragility is His Presence that truly remains. For several days now the memory of that baby has kept coming back to me every single second. Now, instead of wanting to stop thinking about him, I am moved, because this is the possibility of reliving the memory that Christ is bending over my nothingness and doesn't forget His sons and daughters.

It isn't only when we have to face pleasant things; it may be something that someone is not even able to look at. When this happens, reason is being used as measure and I cannot see the entire reality of what's in front of me, not even of myself. A Presence is needed (and we cannot give it to ourselves in front of certain circumstances), a presence who is dear and loved, that I cannot get rid of when I am facing these things, and that prevents us from using reason as measure. Here I always think of a sentence of Father Giussani: "The heart ... is the condition in which reason comes true in a healthy way. The condition necessary for reason to be reason [to remain open to the totality of the reality I am facing without censoring anything] is that affectivity strike it and so move the whole man." And what can overwhelm our entire life with this affection that allows a person to look at everything? It isn't a mechanism, but only a Presence that is able to draw my entire life like a magnet, so that, accompanied by His Presence, I can look at everything. As she said, I cannot do this all by myself. I need to be constantly reopened to this totality. Nobody can keep himself in this position on his own, but only if Christ happens again and is present here and now and allows us to stay in front of reality. This is what we saw again on January 26. If the Event doesn't happen again here and now, without a reality that educates us, without a Presence who saves us constantly from this reduction, we do not look or we are not interested. This is why the only possibility for saving reason in this way, for saving our affectivity in this way, is that we are constantly attracted as by a magnet by a Presence who becomes so familiar that nothing can block us.

On Sunday at Mass I was very struck by the reading on the Samaritan woman, and this is the reason I am here tonight. I really felt like the Samaritan woman who drops the water jug and

runs to tell what happened to her. What is happening to me is what you said, that is, that it is only an exceptional Presence who throws our reason and our affectivity wide open. I can say that I saw this in two circumstances that were total opposites of one another, one of drama and one of joy, but they had the same common denominator. I had my own tsunami in the form of a sickness that ravaged my body (and more besides) for five months. I had to sort of give in to what was happening to me in this drama. But then I had an experience of joy at work. (I'll explain the meaning of both experiences afterwards.) I experienced what we are always telling each other, that is, that the method is adhering to reality as it is. It was the twofold, surprising experience of Another who happens and makes you relook at the same things with a new gaze. This is a time of great grace for me, because I really feel embraced by this Presence who completely surrounds me. I understood this in both experiences. For sure my sickness was the stronger of the two, because there it became obvious in a much more dramatic way, if you will, that I don't make myself. However, this is even clearer now, because although a new adventure is taking off at work, this is not mine either, but is really the gift of Another who makes Himself present. I was very struck by something else. Here it says, "It is the love of ourselves as destiny ... [because, as we were saying, we truly need to break through the crust of our opinions] that can convince us to undertake this work." I was thinking of this and I was saying, "The love of myself as destiny is the love of me as desire for constantly responding to what Another is asking me; it is vocation, nothing less." As an example of the issue of "breaking through the crust," I'll say one last thing, because this is also an enormous gift for me now. I had the most meaningful encounters through people who totally corresponded to me. In this I have been extremely fortunate. So what has been happening recently? I started to clearly see the correspondence in a relationship that was not so immediate. Nevertheless, paradoxically, this is making me get through that crust. Why? Since I see that this person is truly in love with Christ, it forces me to make a decision again and again: should I stop here or go further? But if I go further it is not because of my ability, but because I see in that person what I desire for myself.

And what makes it possible for a person not to stop, but to go further? Or what allows a person to affirm something without possessing it? Here we go back to what we were saying earlier, that without this Presence here and now it is inevitable that I either affirm something as possession or that I stop. The point is what frees us from this way of possessing. What needs to enter my life so that I can relate to reality, freed from this desire to possess? Or so that I don't fixate on the other person's limitations? This is what each of us needs to try to recognize as it is happening: what keeps me from getting stuck?

I think that our work on the three premises can be summed up in this quote from Saint Paul: "Reality, instead, is Christ," "everything works out for good for those who love God," "and dying is gain." In fact, I believe that realism is actually recognizing that reality, that is, the object, is Christ, and that this opens reason up; all factors of reality work out for the good of those who love God; and then we get to today's chapter: dying is a gain, that is, loving reality

more than oneself is a gain. On page 31 Father Giussani says, "The moral rule [is to] love the truth about an object more than attachment to the opinions you have already formed about it." Then he talks about detachment from oneself and about love for oneself as destiny, a condition for persuading us to do this work. It is a premise to answer: when have I ever seen myself recognizing the impact of morality on knowledge? I would like to start from my experience, which more than anything else in my life shows the work of asceticism, namely, my marriage relationship. Because of this vocational experience, I have never been able – luckily – to read *School of Community* and learn it by heart, and even less to borrow the method from others, as he says on page 5: "The method ... is imposed by the object." In the experience I am going to talk about, the object is actually my husband, his background, his culture, his country, his tastes: he is a Belgian, a child of Northern European rationalist culture, and I am deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition of Southern Italy (and, to make it "worse," I live according to the method I have learned in the encounter with the charism of *Communion and Liberation*). How can these two worlds live together? To explain this thing, I am going to use one of your passages, Father Carrón, if I may, from the book *Allargare la ragione* [Broadening Reason], on page 23. Let's start by explaining a few facts, namely, that my husband and I belong to two different worlds, that we met and became friends, and that our encounter was the beginning of a journey that led to mutual knowledge thanks to his and my willingness to broaden our reason. This "is not simply a private fact, however edifying. Its importance is bigger than the perimeter of the relationship between the two," even more so with ours, that is a friendship between two spouses. Our experience "is something really new in a cultural context that fluctuates between clashing and being indifferent... What makes a friendship possible even though two people are historically determined by different traditions and cultures? It's the presence in each one of us ... of the same elementary experience, [namely,] the heart." Practically, what happened in our relationship is what Father Giussani says on page 31: "...the sincere desire to know the object in question in a true way beyond our attachment to our own opinions or those inculcated upon us." In this context, I will tell you about something that results from this work, which, in my opinion, may answer this question even better. Last Wednesday we had *School of Community*, and my husband sent me a message: "A friend of mine is coming too. Let's meet and then go together." I had never seen him before, even though my husband had talked to me about meeting him for work reasons. During supper together, I grew more and more amazed because this friend said that my husband had been talking about the movement for some time and had even given him a copy of *The Religious Sense*. Among other things, this friend was there that evening because he actually asked to come to the *School of Community*... I am not going to go into other important details because of the lack of time. I was very amazed by this event because my husband witnessed to me what it means to love the truth more than oneself. This fact, like many others, speaks of a broadened reason and a great loyalty to one's own desire. However, as I look at this exact experience, I want to understand a question that we two have, because he keeps saying, "I can't see this Christ who is present; I don't know what Christ here and now means." And yet, what does he do? He invites a friend of his to *School of Community*. There

seems to be an apparent contradiction. This has made me think above all about myself. How many times does Christ happen to work through me as well, and I don't realize it, that is, I don't take the step of recognizing Him? I'd like to ask you, isn't it perhaps a question of method? Isn't it maybe that instead of applying the method of moral certainty, we apply the rational method, the method of the demonstrable? If you can, would you please go back to the question of moral certainty?

I think that you and your husband are well aware of what moral certainty is. So, then, the point is not to repeat a definition. You can find the definition in the book. The problem is that the broadening of reason in the two of you is a challenge for you: "I can't see Christ present." Your husband will have to make his journey and you will have to make yours. What suggestion, what indication, what hint can you give him so he can make the journey, so that he can find in the experience that he is living something that can make it easier for him to recognize Him? It's not a question of explaining the method again, since you already know it, but to start using it. This is a plan of action for anyone to stay in front of reality, and to recognize Christ in experience, in the reality that we live in. This is why we need to work, to pay attention to reality, to embrace every aspect, any glimmer that can help lead to what one is looking for.

A married friend of mine who has been separated for some time now came to my house and said, "I have realized, after the journey that I have made, that my wife and I can't live together. We have tried everything; we even love each other – a lot – but humanly speaking it's impossible." Then he stopped (and it seemed like that's where it was going to end) and he said, "Humanly speaking, it's impossible. However, the journey we are making, the work we are doing has provoked me so much that I wonder what it means, since I have felt the repercussion of that correspondence in me, and it has changed my life. I can't drop it." This fact has made me want to know the object that we are talking about. I couldn't stop, and for the first time I was incapable of saying, "It's ok, it's not ok, you could do this, or you couldn't do that." I was facing something totally new. Putting this event aside for a moment, I'll tell about another one that happened at school, and then tell you what I understood. At school (I work in an elementary school) a week and a half ago, some parents had a conflict with a teaching assistant, who has had to work for several different schools in the last few years, and asked for him to be transferred. Actually, he has a lot of difficulties and this work is probably not suited for him. We were in the teachers' lounge, about five or six of us, with him present, whom I had judged just as I explained, and while we were talking about him, he said, "Look, I could also go to work in the library. I am fifty-two years old, I'm alone, I don't have any family, my mom calls me every night from Sicily and says to me, 'What, has it happened to you again?' And I don't have a job. I don't know how to support myself." In that moment I wondered, am I, who judged him exactly in this way, and up to that moment absolutely certain of the judgment that I had made, truly interested in the other person? What do I think about these things that he said? What I understood, Carrón, is that if I were not given the repercussion of a correspondence that is here in the

present, I wouldn't be able to overcome my personal opinion, which is always not only inexact, but at times inadequate and totally off. That's how it is. I would never be free of it.

That's how it is. This leads us in to the contents of this year's Easter poster, because it is the exact answer to what you just said. And we understand it even more in view of what happened in Japan. In front of those images, we truly realize what we are, and the importance of what has happened to us. When we see everything washed away in an instant, what do our shaky images and our small worries mean? How can we stay in front of something like this? I would like to reread the passage in the introduction to *The Risk of Education* that answers our need more and more: "I was deeply convinced that a faith that could not be found in present experience, confirmed by it [a faith confirmed by experience itself], useful to answer its needs, could not withstand in a world where everything, *everything*, was saying and says the opposite." I am thinking about this because, as we have said before, if we don't have this kind of experience, if we don't find the evidence of its reasons in experience, when facing illness, pain, bad circumstances, facing what we don't like, we cannot keep all our affection and our reason open; we need something present to draw us like a magnet and to convince us of this. And as you were saying, it can only be in a present experience that we find the confirmation of its reasonableness, of the fact that it matters for my life, otherwise any tsunami wipes everything away. For this reason, as I was saying, it's not enough to have an experience that someone else needs to confirm for us. This is why I went back to look at the first premise, where Giussani says, "If I did not begin with this existential inquiry [from experience], it would be like asking someone else to define a phenomenon that I experience [and this would be simply fragile in front of life's tsunamis]. In this way ... I would be substituting the opinion of others for a task that belongs to me." In this regard, we are often lazy, and we ask someone else to take our place in a task that belongs to us, because I am the one who needs to do it and I can't be spared it. If you are a mother or a father, sometimes you can't avoid the temptation to spare your child. However, your child needs the evidence of the experience he or she has to be able to stay in reality; without this experience, anything can wipe him or her away. You need to think hard about what it means to love the other person. Many times we try to find someone else to take our place in this task that belongs to us, and then we are really alienated. But how can I experience this in the present? This is the great quote from the Pope that you will find in the poster, from his latest book: "And if Christ has not been risen, then empty is our preaching; empty too your faith" (*1 Cor 15:14*). Christian faith stands or falls on the truth of witnessing that Christ is risen from the dead. If we ignore this, we can certainly still derive from Christian tradition a series of noteworthy ideas about God and man, about man's being and about how he must be – a kind of religious concept of the world – but Christian faith would then be dead. In that way, Jesus is no longer the criterion of judgment; our criterion is then only our personal evaluation that chooses from our own legacy what seems to be useful. [Christianity would only consist of ideas about man and about the world, from which each individual could pick what he likes, is interested in, or prefers.] This means that we are abandoned to ourselves. [Utterly alone, we can continue to discuss the legacy of Christianity, evaluations, values, different interpretations of Christianity, yet we would be left

to ourselves.] Our personal evaluation is the last instance. Only if Christ is risen [that is, if a fact has happened], something really new has happened that changes the world and man's condition. Then, He, Jesus, becomes the criterion that we can trust, since, then, God has really become manifest." See, this is where everything is at stake, and what happened in Japan makes it even clearer to us: if Christ is not risen, what is left of our more or less brilliant ideas, of our attempts? We are abandoned to ourselves. But how can this become an experience for us? As you were saying, through an encounter in the present. But we are still tempted to reduce Christianity to a legacy. Even the charism can run the same risk if it is only a legacy from which each of us can take his favorite topic – one can talk about the interpretations of this legacy, but we are again abandoned to ourselves: we are more than capable of losing our way... Then the question is whether what happened to us, whether what has fascinated us, can remain present, not just as something that I have learned as my legacy, because on many occasions it's not that we don't know what Giussani says. The other week in an assembly there was someone who talked who (and I am absolutely certain of this) knew that the apex of reason is the category of possibility. He may have repeated it thousands of times! But he said, "It was only two years ago that I started to really believe that it's possible for me to truly be fulfilled." It's not enough to insist on a particular expression; you can speak about the category of possibility and still be rationalistically convinced that it cannot happen. As a matter of fact, the passage from Father Giussani on the Easter poster is the answer to a question someone had asked him at a meeting of the Gruppo adulto. At that time, Father Giussani, inspired by the thinker Finkelkraut, had particularly stressed that knowledge is always an event. So this friend asked, "So, then, if one knows only through an event, is everything I have tried to learn from what you have been telling us for the last few years, and that I have committed myself to studying more deeply, just a cage of the 'already known' that prevents me from knowing?" Giussani answered that he was perfectly right, unless what is written on the poster happens: "The event does not only identify something that has happened and that everything has started from, but what awakens the present, defines the present, gives content to the present, makes the present possible. What one knows or what one has becomes an experience if what one knows or has is something that is given to us now: there is a hand that hands it to us now, there is a face that comes forward now, there is blood that is flowing now, there is a resurrection that happens now. Outside of this 'now' there is nothing! Our 'I' cannot be moved, that is, changed, except by something here and now: an event. Christ is something that is happening to me [now]. So, in order for what we know – Christ, everything about Christ [you can include anything you want] – to be an experience, there needs to be something present that provokes and shakes us: it's something present [pay attention!] just as it was something present for Andrew and John. Christianity, Christ, is exactly the same as He was for Andrew and John when they were following Him. Imagine when he turned around and how they were struck! And when they went to His house... It has always been like this up until now, up until this moment!" If it's not like this even now, Christianity has already started to become a legacy that leaves us abandoned to ourselves and that cannot change us. This is why morality happens entirely in the present, as I face the way He attracts me, He draws me to Himself, He

provokes me. So then everything is simple, and simplicity of heart is enough, that is, really being oneself (rather than starting from the image one has of oneself).

This is the next point of School of Community. If we want to understand the religious sense, and the religious sense is an experience that happens in us, we need to start from ourselves. Again, not from ourselves as an introspection, as something “already known,” but rather from ourselves in action, to discover the factors that emerge from experience. It’s only by starting from here that we will really be able to see the true reality of our “I,” what are the factors that make up our “I.” This will happen only if we engage ourselves. Father Giussani says that one can perceive the factors that make up humanity only where they are engaged in action; otherwise they cannot be found. And he adds, “The prerequisite for us to be able [here is that word again] to discover in ourselves the existence and the nature of a factor as decisive as the religious sense is our engagement with the whole of life.” Not with what we decide: with the whole of life! So, then, if this is so, then one understands why the fourth chapter begins by saying that the real problem is not about a particular level of intelligence, but a problem of attention, discovering in action the factors that make up the “I.”

This is why what we need to do for next time is to live this attention so that we can discover ourselves in action. Try to answer this question: what have I discovered about myself by discovering myself in action? In this way, we will find our true need which will place us in front of His presence with poverty of spirit and we will be able to easily recognize Him.

Our next School of Community will be on Wednesday, April 6, at 9:30 p.m., on the fourth chapter of *The Religious Sense*, “The Starting Point.” Please have your questions and contributions to the School of Community ready by the Sunday before, so that we can use them.

The Easter poster will be out soon, and it will be available within the next few days. I think that we have already used it to introduce the work that can make a difference for us in these next few months. Nothing seems more fitting to the moment of history that we are going through now. What it says is not something for only us to look at; it is both a judgment about us and about the world. When we consider the tsunami, what else do we have to offer that would not seem absolutely meaningless, besides saying that Christ is risen? What could hold up in front of such a situation? We have nothing more adequate to say, to offer to ourselves and to our friends, other than our poster and its contents.

- *Glory Be*
- *Veni Sancte Spiritus*