

# One Who Can Truly Fill Your Heart

*Notes from Fr. Julián Carrón's presentation of the book by Luigi Giussani, Is It Possible to Live This Way? Rome, Parco della Musica Auditorium, May 15, 2008 (TRACES Vol. 10 No. 7, 2008, page 1)*

Thank you for this invitation that gives us the opportunity to look together at a book that is more than just a book, because it contains the experience of a life, and a proposal that is directed to all of us.

"Everyone confusedly conceives of a good in which the mind may be at rest, and desires it; wherefore everyone strives to attain it."<sup>1</sup> The genius of Dante expressed better than anyone else the expectant awaiting that constitutes the heart of each of us. I can say without fear of erring that everyone, even if at times we're afraid to admit it, secretly awaits this good in which our heart finds rest. But in the search for this good, before the fleeting nature of things, their "fallenness," we find ourselves at a fork in the road: either everything that pushed us to want this good is nothingness, because everything ends and therefore everything disappoints, or even in this fleetingness, reality exists, and points us beyond. We are always before this choice: nothingness or being, that is, reality as a sign of Something else. For those who chose nothingness, life is over—the only thing left is to fill the void, seeking to entertain ourselves with something else, because nothing truly interests us. Those, instead, who accept the challenge of reality find themselves before the possibility of an adventure. But another difficulty arises, one well described by Kafka. This good can't *not* exist. (Since I desire it so much, it can't *not* exist.) "The goal exists, but there's no road."<sup>2</sup> And this inability to reach it can't help but have consequences for the "I," for each of us. In fact, the "I" is awakened in the relationship with reality (things, the encounter with people, and the reality we have before us awaken an interest), but if the reality of the Mystery is far, if it isn't able to grasp me, to interest me, this provokes a blockage of the "I," a disinterest for everything, that paralyzes the center of the "I;" the "I" hasn't an adequate reason to move, to truly get interested in things, and this can't help but lead to an emptying of the personality, as Fr. Giussani describes it elsewhere, to its progressive decline.

This is happening before our eyes. Hannah Arendt described it in unforgettable terms: "Modern man at any rate did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself." She concludes, "it is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever seen."<sup>3</sup> The disinterest we see in so many young people and that everyone acknowledges, from all quarters, this mortal boredom which Citati spoke of years ago, and that Scalfari himself admitted, is the inexorable consequence that happens in the "I" when man, because of his estrangement from the Mystery, no longer has any interest in moving.

But, even in that moment, the dynamism of our humanity, that which we confusedly desire, does not fail, and, as the great geniuses have intuited, we can't *not* desire that this Mystery surrounding us would reveal, as Plato said, a word that would enable us to travel the road, to cross the stormy sea with a safe means. This is expressed in a different and very beautiful way by a Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, "Is my heart sleeping? When it says this, when it desires this, is my heart sleeping? No, my heart isn't sleeping, it's awake, it's

awake, it isn't sleeping, nor is it dreaming: it's looking with clear open eyes at far away signs, and listens at the shore to the great silence." Even in this situation, we can't help but desire a sign that starts out from the great silence, because without this—as Dostoyevsky acknowledged<sup>4</sup>—life is unbearable.

We'd all be condemned inevitably to this passivity, this mortal boredom, filled with many things that, deep down, don't interest us, can't grasp us, can't truly attract and move us (work, affections, distractions), to which we dedicate ourselves in order to be able to bear the boredom of a life that deep down is never magnetized; we would also be condemned to this, if something new, unforeseen, hadn't happened to us. This is what Fr. Giussani speaks of in this book in particular, which, as he affirmed, is "the literal transcript of the dialogues held every Saturday for a year between me and about a hundred young people who were taking seriously the hypothesis of dedicating their lives to God."<sup>5</sup>

What use is a book like this to us? What interest can it hold for many of those present here, who perhaps have already chosen another road, have chosen another road in life or are simply skeptics?

Fr. Giussani has a concern for those young people: that they "understand," because otherwise they will not be able to stay on that road. To help them to understand, he journeys alongside them on a human itinerary, proposing a human itinerary in which they can see the reasonableness of that choice. And here it starts getting interesting for us. In Fr. Giussani's attempt to show those young people the reasonableness of their choice, a proposal comes forth that can interest all of us, so closely does it coincide with the human. The point of departure of the whole itinerary is the fact that something unforeseen happened in history that enables everyone to take up the journey again, to start out anew on the road, to begin again an adventure that otherwise would be inexorably blocked. I often ask, how many adult people do you know who aren't skeptics? We, too, would inevitably be destined for skepticism, if something hadn't happened, and if something doesn't happen in life now that reawakens all that interest and puts it into motion. This fact happened. It is the Christian fact. The newness of the world is the possibility of an encounter in which man perceives, as Fr. Giussani says in the book, that there is an answer to the heart, to the needs of his heart, to that desire for a good. The encounter with this fact, the encounter with the person of Christ, with an absolutely exceptional Presence, makes us take up the road again, introduces such a curiosity that the first men who met Him couldn't avoid seeking Him the next day. Christianity began in this way: though they didn't yet know who He was, those who met Him for the first time perceived in Him something so interesting for life that they couldn't resist the desire to go find Him the next day.

It would seem normal, but we can all understand to what point this is exceptional, if you think how many times in life you have found someone whom you wanted to seek out the next day, and the next day, and the next day again. The adventure of life starts out again in this way. And the more they stayed with Him, not only did their interest not diminish, but they found themselves asking ever more often, "Who is this man?"

God crashed through the distance and entered history as a man, "so that man's thought, his capacity for imagination and affection and his dreams were 'blocked,' magnetized."<sup>6</sup> In this way, the game started again, because of the curiosity He had aroused. Before that question ("Who is He?") that they were unable to answer, but that they couldn't help asking, they were forced to acknowledge in that Man something greater, that no definition (prophet, king, etc.) could contain: they had to accept what He said of Himself, so much did it correspond with what their eyes saw.

*Faith*, which is the first point in the itinerary of the text, is precisely the acknowledgment of the Mystery present in that absolutely unique and fascinating human reality, that leads them to say continually, "We've never seen anything of the kind!" If "there is something in

our experience that comes from beyond it: unforeseeable, mysterious, but within our experience" (p. 271), then for a person to censure that something inside, he has to deny his own experience. For this reason, if they hadn't accepted what He said of Himself, they would've been forced to deny what their eyes saw, the most evident thing there was. What they had before their eyes wasn't the Mystery as unknown, but the Mystery so present that it overflowed in that human being. How many times the Gospel recounts this amazement, not in reaction to something nonexistent, not before something missing—it isn't an unknown and far-off Mystery, but a present Mystery!

The verification that they aren't just words, the verification of the faith of those who've been reached by that unparalleled Presence and who can't cheat before it, the verification of faith is *freedom*. What is freedom? Fr. Giussani, in answering, makes the road easier for us: think of when each of us feels free. We start from the adjective, from the experience of feeling free. A person feels free when a desire of his is satisfied, when what he desires happens. So much so that if we find someone who counters this desire, who blocks our fulfilling it, we say that he's a "superior" who doesn't let us be ourselves, doesn't allow the fulfillment of our desire. But what is the thing we desire? What does man desire? What does the "I" desire? What does each of us desire? The further along we get in life, the more we manage to obtain what we desire, and the more we realize that our desire is ever greater. Pavese said this also: "What man seeks in pleasures is an infinite, and nobody would ever give up on the hope to attain this infinity."<sup>7</sup> So, freedom is the relationship with this Infinite that is able to satisfy all the desire of the "I."

How is this desire reawakened? How does the Mystery draw close and reawaken this desire? Through creatures, through things. The closer we come to the fulfillment of this desire, to this infinite, the more we are free. The Christian fact, the presence of Christ, is what is able to fulfill us ever more completely; it doesn't exhaust the desire, but reawakens it anew, in continuation. So then, we understand that without faith, if faith isn't real, the acknowledgment of something real, there's no chance of freedom. You can't play with the words, slipping along with pure nominalism. Christianity has ceased to interest people because it has become nominalism. If you don't experience every word you say (as Fr. Giussani taught us who have known him, thanks be to God, thanks be to God through our life), faith becomes less and less interesting. Instead, when you experience ever more deeply the fulfillment of desire, this is the clearest evidence of the truth of the faith. And for this reason, we follow Him (third point of the first part of the book on faith). It's *obedience*. Cursed word: inexorably, unless you obey the most interesting thing of life, you experience it as something that rips life away from you, like something that takes away your life. But Fr. Giussani says, "Thus, before the exceptional fact of that man who always speaks [and acts and looks at me and embraces me and has this tenderness for me] in a way that corresponds to the heart as no one else ever had, the most immediate and logical consequence is to follow. As St. Peter said, 'If we go away from you, where shall we go?'" (p. 125). Nobody forced them to obey. Jesus challenged them to the very end. Everyone had left. "Do you also want to go?" He didn't spare them anything. What an experience of fullness they must have had with that Man, for Peter to say, "If we leave You, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words that explain life!"<sup>8</sup> So you understand what obedience truly is. When you have this experience, bit by bit, as what you are told becomes one with you, as happened to Peter, then what is it to obey? Obedience is "following the discovery of yourself" (p. 135), brought about by an Other. It's like when a person falls in love: he doesn't do it to be liked by the other; he's following the discovery of himself brought about by the encounter with the other. This is anything but losing your life! Anything but yielding your life to another! It's the fullness of the "I." Obedience is this: "following yourself" struck, moved by the presence of an Other who makes you ever more yourself.

From this faith—the verification of which is freedom, satisfaction, and obedience—immediately the flower of *hope* comes forth like a fruit. "Hope," says Fr. Giussani, "is

nothing other than the extension of the certainty of faith to the future" (p. 255). We know this well. Who of us, if we've had a normal family situation in which we reach certainty about our mother, can think that there will be a moment in life when she won't love us? Now, what is this certainty in the future based on? It is the expansion to the future of the sureness of the present. No matter what I do, it's inconceivable that my mother will stop loving me. I'd have to eliminate all the years of my experience with her. For this reason, "If faith is to recognize a Presence" that corresponds so fully, "a Presence that is certain, if faith is to recognize a Presence with certainty, hope is to recognize a certainty for the future that is born of this Presence." (p. 180). Therefore, Péguy, in his genius, said, "To hope... one must have obtained, received great grace"<sup>9</sup> What is this grace that we—who have received the grace of meeting Christ—have received? Faith. This grace is faith in Jesus Christ. "The great grace from which hope is born is the certainty of faith: the certainty of faith is the seed of the certainty of hope" (p. 184). Hope is founded on a present, "but a present is truly present insofar as you possess it; therefore, hope is the certainty in the future that is based on a possession already given" (p. 186), on a great grace.

How is this hope born of faith? It is born because the encounter with the Presence that faith acknowledges awakens all the desire of the "I;" the certainty of the faith is what guarantees me that these desires will be satisfied. "These desires will be satisfied, right or wrong? This is the point. These desires, made according to the needs of your heart, can surely be actuated, [...] [this is the great challenge] only to the degree that [...] one trusts the content of faith [...] and abandons oneself to the Presence that faith has indicated." (pp. 190–191). I have hope because I have full certainty about the power of the great Presence acknowledged in faith. "The need for the happiness of man's heart will be realized according to the form that the mystery of the great Presence establishes." This form is not, as we may often think, according to an image of ours; we identify this fullness with a product of our imagination. "And this form is none other than the great Presence Himself " (p.195). We can understand it well among ourselves: the fullness of that exigency of happiness isn't found in the house or the car that the person gives me! What makes me happy is the person himself, not the gifts he gives. His presence makes me so full that he makes me free. This certainty is the origin of *poverty*, in that I'm so full of the Presence that truly satisfies the heart that I don't need a lot of things to live. "On what [...] does poverty find its value? On the certainty that it is God who fulfills [...] if Christ gives you the certainty of fulfilling what He makes you desire, then you are extremely free from things." (pp. 258–259). Therefore, every word we say is like a chance for seeing to what point we're talking of Christ when we're talking, what kind of experience of Christ we have. Because if one says, "Christ," and then is unsatisfied, depends on each thing, isn't free, we're not talking about Christ. It's as if someone told me that he's in love with a girl and has no desire to see her—it's a contradiction. Be careful now, because it's not a matter of being coherent. The reduction we so often make isn't a problem of coherence. Someone can be absolutely happy, full, and at times be fragile, but this doesn't for one minute take away from him the certainty of what fulfills his life. "[In this way,] the image of freedom is born—most of all, freedom from things. You are a slave of nothing, you are bound to nothing, you are enchained to nothing, you depend on nothing: you are free" (p. 259). Who doesn't desire this? "From this freedom from things, which is born from the certainty that God Himself fulfills everything, another characteristic of a person who is poor arises, which is gladness" (p. 260): you're happy and free because you lack nothing. "Not only does freedom cause you gladness, but you lack nothing, you lack nothing [...] because everything is yours." Fr. Giussani asks, "How is it that everything is yours? Because you have what you need, you have everything that is necessary for you" (p. 264) for living, and this makes you *trusting*, because He who makes possible this experience is One in whom you can trust; you can put yourself in His hands.

The final passage is *charity*. "Charity [...] indicates the deepest and most intimate content of that supreme reality that faith allows us to recognize" (p. 322). Why is this so? Why did this Presence strike me so powerfully? Why does it give me this certainty and reawaken in me this hope? Why can I find satisfaction there, and be able to entrust myself entirely and be free? Because that Presence is charity. Charity is "the supreme form of the loving expression. Gratuitousness [...] implicates the total absence of 'reasons' that reason understands, that reason explains. Charity implicates the absence of reasons, that is, expectation of reciprocal benefit, the calculation of self-interest" (p. 324). Fr. Giussani uses a succinct line from the prophet Jeremiah (this is all you need for living): "With age-old love I have loved you [therefore I have attracted you to Myself; I have made you participant in My nature] so I have kept my mercy on your nothingness."<sup>10</sup> This is charity, the profoundly moved gift of Self the Mystery makes. It's what Our Lady perceived from the first moment, as she says in the *Magnificat*. She's entirely filled with joy, gladness, because "He has looked upon [with that gift of Self] His handmaid's lowliness."<sup>11</sup> This is mercy, and it's always before any other thing: before our coherence or incoherence, before our evil, before our mistakes. There's always this "first," this unique initiative of the Mystery toward us, the source of all things.

It is this judgment—it isn't a sentiment; it's a judgment ("I have kept my mercy on your nothingness")—that makes it possible to embrace everything, all my own "I" with all that has happened, with all my evil. This newness is what the Pope reminded us of in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. "The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ Himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts"<sup>12</sup> and generates in the "I" the same dynamism in the relationship with everything: charity with everything. This superabundance of charity that each of us can receive becomes law, becomes the approach before everything: deep down, we give what overflows—full of gratitude—of what we have received.

This is why one can *sacrifice*. "When," Fr. Giussani asks, "did sacrifice," which appears contrary to nature, "become interesting?" (p.384). It became interesting "from the time that God became a man" (p. 386), ever since, in this nearness of the Mystery, the "I" encountered that Man, because then affirming Him, acknowledging Him, makes the "I" live. "It is no longer I who live, but an Other who lives in me." But in the affirmation of this Other lies the life of the "I."

Fr. Giussani concludes this proposal to those who want to give their life to Jesus, speaking about *virginity* as the ultimate test of the truth of everything said—which isn't just words, but flesh and blood, that is, possible experience. Precisely because God has eliminated the distance at which man would have held Him, because He has drawn near and placed before us His winning attraction, the most reasonable thing can be to give all your life to Him. We're not idiots—should someone think so—we who've given our life to Him! But in order for this to be true in history, everything we've said (about faith, freedom, obedience, hope, poverty, trust, charity, and sacrifice) has to be true, but "true," not "formally true." We can use a less equivocal word: "real." Because if it isn't real, it's not possible to give your life. For this reason, I'd like to end with Saint Thomas' words: "Man's life consists in the affection which sustains him most, for there he finds his greatest satisfaction."<sup>13</sup>

Life can have a consistence if we find something that enables us to bear everything. Virginity is possible only because that Presence exists, able to introduce into life such great satisfaction that everything can be borne. And this is possible for everyone. The Guild of Dyers in Italy had this sentence written in the Cathedral of Piacenza (the Guild of Dyers, not the Monastery of Saint Benedict!): "If we want to give a new meaning to reality, if we want a new life, we have to return to virginity,"<sup>14</sup> not because they shouldn't marry, but because only accepting, acknowledging His presence, in affection for it, can a newness be introduced, a gratuitousness in the way of dealing with everything, that frees us from everything. Otherwise, as always, we'll depend on everything: on everything, even the

crumbs that fall from the table of whoever's in power at the moment. The problem is that we're made for everything and desire everything, and nobody can give us this. Only if something greater attracts and directs our gaze can we be placed in the right attitude for dealing with reality.

Therefore, virginity is the truth of the content of faith—not a dream, but reality, people struck by One who can truly fill the heart. This is the challenge. The fact that there are people who give their life to Christ cries out, even in the midst of the fragility with which they may live it, cries out before everyone that the content of faith exists, that it's true, that it's real. For this reason, it's a journey, a proposal that isn't addressed only to those who give their life to Christ. In the attempt to respond to their questions, to make them understand the reasonableness of their journey, Fr. Giussani outlines an absolutely fascinating proposal for anyone interested in living.

#### **Notes**

1 Dante, *Purgatory*, XVII, vv. 127–129.

2 Cf. F. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, in *Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings*. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, Schocken Books, 1954.

3 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 320–322

4 Cf. F.M. Dostoyevsky, *Demons*. Trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1994, pp. 708–709.

5 L. Giussani, "It Is Possible to Live This Way," in *Traces-Litterae Communionis*, No. 1, January 2008; insert, p. 2.

6 L. Giussani, "He Is if He Changes," supplement to *30DAYS*, No. 7/8, 1994, p. 70.

7 C. Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere [The Trade of Living]*, Einaudi, Torino 1973, p. 190.

8 Cf. Jn 6:67–68.9.

9 Cf. C. Péguy, *The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*. Dorothy Brown Aspinwall, trans. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press 1970, p. 12.

10 Cf. Jer 31:3.

11 Cf. Lk 1:48.

12 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, I:12.

13 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa, IIae, q. 179, art. 1.

14 Quoted in L. Giussani, "Presentazione" ["Presentation"], in E. Manfredini, *La conoscenza di Gesù [Knowledge of Jesus]*, Marietti, Genova-Milano 2004, p. 24.