

*Notes from School of Community with Julián Carrón
Milan, October 21, 2009*

*Text: "Experience: the instrument for a human journey" by J. Carrón
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- Song "Le stoppie aride"
- Song "Il mio volto"

In order to allow this time together to fully come to fruition I ask you for brief and concise contributions. Many times, by multiplying the details we end up not understanding what we are talking about. I also invite you to end your contribution with a judgment, to help us stick to experience. Even Father Giussani, in *Here and Now*, at a certain point says that it would be better if we brought written contributions, because that helps to speak simply and clearly (which is something only few can do without a script.) This is a sacrifice we have to make in order to help each other.

During the past few days I accompanied Father Giorgio Pontiggia: from Saturday morning until Monday, when he died, he was unconscious, in a state even worse than Eluana's because he didn't even react to pain. I am making the comparison with Eluana because when we read your judgment on her case I agreed with you, even on an ideological standpoint, because I was bothered by a certain pro-life attitude, and I thought I had an experience. Yet, when I found myself in front of Father Giorgio in that state, I was strongly tempted to think that he was finished, that he was no longer a person. I said: "Let's hope he dies quickly, because he is no longer here." I then realized that my judgment was just like the one of Eluana's father! This time though, unlike with Eluana, this was one of my greatest friends, so I couldn't stop at that judgment; I had to walk the whole path all the way down to the elementary experience, and ask myself if that was really a finished being or my friend Father Giorgio. Then I truly had the experience of perceiving man as a living mystery, whatever his condition; which is precisely what you said in the flyer. This is the judgment I give now: I had not had an experience, even if I thought I had. You told us: "The flyer springs from the uneasiness I feel." But I had not become one with that uneasiness of yours. To conclude, the judgment I give is that we often think we are having an experience, but it isn't so. Furthermore we can't even be honest and say it.

Many times there is a distance between what we bump into and ourselves. Why is experience – Father Giussani says – so decisive? Because reality becomes transparent in experience, therefore if we keep that distance reality is not revealed to our eyes, so we can say things that are right, but we don't understand that ultimate judgment, the value of the ultimate judgment. Many felt that flyer was in the end unnecessary, because they imagined they could stay in front of that fact with no need for the Presence. If you do not delve into experience, you can think you are having an experience, but you are actually operating a reduction. For this reason at the AIR I said that "It's not enough for us to know what marriage is, for it to thrive; it isn't enough for us to know what work is, for it not to become a tomb." If you live experience you realize that this is not enough. We often use the word "experience," when it is not an experience after all.

I too want to try to give a judgment, with your help. Yesterday at the wake, in front of Father Giorgio's body, the problem of life powerfully resurfaced. When you are in front of a dead person, particularly if it is somebody you care for, one thing is evident: this can't be Father Giorgio; Father Giorgio is not only this. I then read what Father Giussani says about death. In the fourth chapter of the Religious Sense he says that when one observes himself in action, one perceives a double reality; a material one (that he defines "measurable and divisible") and a reality that is not the body. He adds a corollary on death: "The phenomenon of death – as it enters our experience – is often associated in the Bible with a very

effective expression: corruption. [...] On the other hand, if there exists in me a reality which is not divisible, not measurable, and not essentially mutable, the idea of death, as experience demonstrates, is not applicable to me. ” This is actually true, because standing in front of Father Giorgio I perfectly understood that that’s the way it is. “We must not fear this logic. We must have courage. The entire reality of the self as it appears from our experience is not completely reducible to the phenomenon of corruption. The self is not solely what one sees and what is bound to die. There is something else in the self that in the self that is non-mortal, which is immortal! I speak of courage because human beings possess a great and readily observable weakness for which they need much support and comfort: they have an endemic fear engendered by a temptation to reduce the total image of their lives to what can be visibly and materially experienced.” This is the human judgment that opened today’s liturgy: in front of death there is no remedy. Then, when we are confronted with a trial, what you told us at the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises about the flower of hope is, I believe, the position we have to keep in mind: “resurrectio Domini spes nostra” sums up the journey of a man, of a Christian; our own journey, the one that, because of our experience and Father Giussani, we embark on even in front of death. What’s interesting is your next passage.

What would this passage be?

“It is only because Christ is risen, because He exists, that we can now look this great question in the face.” This is the heart of the matter.

I would like to draw a comparison between what you said and what is written in one of the contributions that I received for tonight: “You said that experience does not coincide with reacting to reality but with judging it, and that the method that the Movement teaches us is therefore a tension toward judging everything. Yet the attempt to judge everything that happened has been something that in time turned out to be strange, an effort. How can we learn this method in a way that it doesn’t become an effort of our will?” After what you told us I ask you: When you did this work, was it because of an effort of your will? Was it something tacked on? Was it something foreign to your experience? Or did it spring from your depth? Getting to that point wasn’t an effort; it was liberating! We have to quit saying things that do not correspond to experience, because experience is what you have told us about: that a man, in front of a dead friend, can’t help searching for an answer; otherwise it means that he doesn’t care for what happens to his friend and he doesn’t care about himself and his own need for meaning. If experience is not this, I am not at all interested in it. But if experience is this, then it is part of the human journey that is awakened in me by an event like the one we lived today: you can not stop short, you have to get to the point of giving a judgment about whether or not that dead body is everything. The real effort is not to judge; the problem is how to manage to stay with all your humanity in front of something like this and not judge it. In fact, when people are desperate because they can’t stay in front of death they go through a much bigger struggle. But we don’t realize what happened in our lives. The real struggle is the opposite; it is having to face something like this without grasping its meaning, which is what makes you see how it contradicts and clashes with the human need for meaning that you have. This is the real struggle, not what we call struggle.

Recently a lot of very dramatic events occurred, and I was left in awe for what was set in motion because of them: the certainty and the change of those friends of mine who were more deeply involved, the questions that rose among people who do not belong to the Movement and the dialogue that was born as a consequence. I had to ask myself: “Who are You, who are doing all this?” This question of mine reached its ultimate implication: “Who are You, who are making me now?” So I discovered that what you were telling us was evident, though I had felt it as something far from our daily lives. This immediately changed the way I behaved towards people. Nevertheless – this is the reduction – I realized that in my work I was still as stuck as before. Therefore I said to myself: “If a change doesn’t happen here as well, then what you called experience wasn’t really an experience.” I realized that the image of my own change that I had, implied that I needed to do something different, or to be smarter at my job. On the contrary, what happened is something else, that is, that I had to drop the mask because what I saw

(that possibility for a greater, richer humanity) forced me to realize that I am made for something greater.

What did you learn from this? Judgment!

The judgment I gave is that I realized that, even if I had an experience – because that implication that became evident was indeed an experience – the following day I was already reducing everything to the image I had of the change that needed to take place as a consequence.

I want to talk about Father Giorgio too. I stayed with him through his agony, and even after he died I spent a lot of time with him. This is what happened: at a certain point I didn't have anything left to say, I even got tired – as you said at Beginning Day – to stay in front of him, and I felt an incredible pain. I said to myself: "This is my father: don't I have anything left to say?" I realized then and there that I was betraying him, I was betraying what he had been for me throughout my life, because he had always pointed me toward Christ. I was in front of Father Giorgio forgetting He who makes Father Giorgio as well as me in this very moment. I wasn't in front of Christ, therefore I wasn't following Him.

How did you know? What made you know that you were betraying? You said it yourself!

I knew I was betraying because I was getting tired of it, it wasn't enough.

It isn't that we don't have confirmations in our experience: he was getting tired of it! We find confirmations in our experience when we stop coming up with abstract ideas and we talk about experience; then all the signs that help us walk come to the fore, because it isn't that if I, at a certain point, distance myself from reality to follow my image nothing happens: I get bored, I get bored! We have to be loyal to our experience, because otherwise we get angry about God knows what, and then the warning lights start going off. One gets angry, while another is grateful because that's an indication of the path one has to travel.

May I tell you what I have learned? I understood what it means that we confuse the intention to follow with the real act of following. It seems to me that the difference lies all in the fact that the intention to follow coincides with me following an image of mine, while the real act of following coincides with following a presence.

How do you know the difference? Because you get bored. It isn't that now you have to start analyzing (thus creating yet another problem); no, it is that as soon as you make a mistake you get a sign of that mistake. Is this something that helps us live or is it a difficulty, a hurdle?

It is something helpful.

You talk about judgment as the repercussion of being. I want to tell you about something that happened, to make sure I understood correctly. Saturday during class I got the news of the death of the grandfather of one of my students – whom, by the way, was like a father to her – and, as you can imagine, it was a dramatic moment. Immediately the kids asked me: "Professor, where is the positive you talk about? Where is the hope you talk about?" I had reasons and witnesses to give (because it is true, there are lots of witnesses and reasons that you can come up with when confronted with such an event), then one of my students asked me: "Could we get together at the end of the school day to say a prayer?" Thirty five kids gathered to pray, not only the ones who usually come with me, but even kids who are openly atheists or hostile to our proposal.

Why do you think that happened?

When I saw them there I thought: "Where is the positive?" Those kids were set in motion – they are made, therefore there is a presence before there is a lack – because somebody wanted them and because all their pain and confusion, all my pain and confusion, could not erase that Presence. The sign of this – that is, the repercussion of being – was that when I left school I was happy.

Picture this: kids who do not have anything to do with faith, pray in front of something like this; which means that they immediately see the ultimate implication of the Mystery in what they live.

Do they add something tacked on? Or does this putting themselves in front of something greater spring from experience?

It sprung from experience.

Did they make an effort? Let's constantly compare ourselves with what we catch in action in others: we see a way of life, even in those whom we would not expect to see it, which goes all the way to that point, to the ultimate implication. Thank you.

This is what happened. At the end of July I took a pregnancy test and the result was positive; we celebrated and I had never been happier in my life.

Was your judgment an effort?

No. I read the test result.

You see? For your desire, was the test burdensome or freeing?

Freeing.

Was it an effort?

No effort.

Would you or wouldn't you call this "judging"?

I would, absolutely. As the day went on I felt that something wasn't going as I thought; to be very honest worries and anxiety entered my mind, indeed. The sonogram showed very serious problems and the doctor called me to the hospital, where I found three strangers. The atmosphere was icy, yet I understood that that circumstance was given to me: at a certain point you have the desire to use it, you want that experience to become yours, and, therefore, you want to delve deeply into it. I was struck because out of the initial distance, little by little, familiar features, which went well beyond those three people, came to the surface; when I left I couldn't avoid saying: "This corresponds to me far more, because it is like an inexorable presence that is within the relationship with my son." (Seriously, I say this in the drama of that moment.) The relationship with my child cannot be the result of the biological premises that they explained to me: "It is better this way; nature has already interrupted what..." No. It is this inexorable presence that ultimately determines the relationship with my son, and makes me say: "This corresponds, and when I am home alone You are with me."

A fact happened: on the evening of her feast day my daughter got mad at me because I had lingered on a pretty complicated family issue. She went to bed in tears. I was shaken, so I tried to patch up the situation and I spent five minutes in silence with her. While I was there though, a much deeper need than the one of patching things up rose from inside of me: I wanted to be totally present to me and to her as if what was at stake was life itself, which cannot be only a continual succession of provocations to be answered. This made my embrace fuller and more correspondent both to me and her. All this pushed me to go deeper into what you are insistently telling us. I repeatedly read the text of Beginning Day with the desire to become aware of the content of the words. It is amazing that I lingered on passages that I had never understood before. I am struck by the dynamic of this fact: engaging a detail, you become aware of a crack in your heart that compels you to go deeper, but this crack is born from and fed by an exceptional event -like last week's school of community, which left me totally overwhelmed (because I perceived something that was immensely greater than what I might have understood, and this is the unmistakable sign of the Mystery.) When I went back home I wasn't the same person, I was enriched by the desire to discover what that was all about, and to verify it in the following days. There were two reasons that made me realized I was changed. First: in the past a similar fact would either pass me by unnoticed, or I would take notice but it would remain up in the air, because I would ascribe it to a particular sensibility or to a sentimental outburst. Now, that fact that happened has coincided with the heart coming to the surface, and therefore with the exciting journey of re-discovery of the I. Second: I am starting to see the Mystery and His companionship more and more, through that crack of the heart that He creates and deepens through exceptional events, like this School of community. I sincerely want to start learning anew what I though I had already understood, because in order to live I have no use for what is already learned.

“An exciting journey that makes me see the Mystery more and more.”

A month ago my son was hospitalized for a battery of tests concerning his disease. I went to the hospital looking at that week as an occasion to verify my faith, with the desire to see how, during the following days, the Mystery would come meet me, and with the desire to experience my relationship with Him. Every day I prayed to the Virgin and to Father Giussani, and I faced whatever happened with my whole self, with my pain, with all my desires and my questions, and asking Christ to make me see that He always wins. Unexpectedly, I was able to look at everything and to love everything: my son as he was undergoing tests, the suffering flesh of the children who were with us, and their mothers' pain. Something almost paradoxical happened: I had a hard time, the diagnosis they gave us was worse than what we expected, and I saw innocent suffering everyday; yet I experienced an unimaginable fullness and happiness because I radically asked for the relationship with Christ in everything I did. I realized that I desire Christ more than the faces of my child and of the people I love, more than their health and mine, and that only in the relationship with Him I can find all the affective satisfaction I look for. This admission for me is always an act of great courage. I can say I had an experience because I am now even more certain that Christ alone can fill the heart like nothing else could, no human affection, no health, and that everything can be loved only if it is a sign of Him. When I went back home everything changed, reality was transfigured: the relationship with my husband changed, as well as the one with my other son and with people I met. Thank you.

*I'll tell you about a fact and I'll give a judgment that I believe has something to do with experience. This is the fact: a few friends and I organized a meeting for Saturday night to which we had invited Father Vergani and his friends, priests from Spain. At seven thirty Father Vergani called me and told me: “Father Giorgio's condition got worse; I can't come.” I was taken aback, because of the obvious expectations surrounding the event. Maybe because of my dissatisfaction, I wasn't able to stop there, and I immediately recognized the modality with which the Mystery was entering reality in that moment. That God, in those hours, was taking one of us was for me evidence of His Presence. Therefore, I thought that the most adequate way to stay in front of the Mystery...
...That is to say, in front of Father Giorgio's agony...
...was to say a prayer: “Let's pray the Rosary together.” I was struck – I ask for your judgment on this matter – because since Saturday I was confronted by two opposite reactions: the majority of our people thought the evening was a fiasco, while the “invitees” (among whom, people with strong prejudices against the movement) were very happy. I recalled a joke you told, that with the same ingredients one can make two different soups... The judgment I give is twofold: what's decisive isn't what happens but my loyalty toward what I desire; I can't let the image I have – even a right one – prevail over what happens. You see? The same exact reality lived in two absolutely different ways. Our people, who had an image of how the evening should have been, missed reality; the newcomers, who did not have any image since it was their first time, were struck. Maybe it would be better for us if we learned what we think we already know...*

Today, following Father Giorgio's casket, I was overwhelmed with waves of emotion, as I recalled images of him throughout the years. This thing struck me because it was a confirmation of what you were saying at Beginning Day: that judgment is truly something beautiful, because it has something to do with being moved. It is the possibility to say “thank you” to Jesus. It seems to me that we often confuse affection with sentimentality. This prevents us from having an experience.

Why? What do you think is the difference between affection and sentimentality?

Affection is an experience that makes you go back, like the Samaritan, to thank Jesus. There can be no judgment without this experience; if our depth doesn't resonate, you can't give a judgment. On the contrary, sentimentality is a personal impression that doesn't bump into a fact, into something that happens and moves you to the core.

What is affection? In a man affection can never be disconnected from reason, precisely because of the unity of the I. Sentimentality is the reduction to mere sentiment. What did Father Giussani say about judgment? It is love. What is love? It is a judgment that engages all of your affection - which doesn't have anything to do with sentimentality (that is merely the reduction of something to sentimental and emotional reverberation.) But in order to reduce affection to sentimentality you need to leave out reason. Reason and affection are two sides of the same repercussion, but if we separate them, we remain at a level of pure sentimental reverberation, and we miss the best part, because without judgment there is no real affection. As we said before, the problem is that faced with a friend's death it is unavoidable that all your affection asks for a judgment: does everything end in nothingness? You can't separate affection from judgment, the more you care for your friend, the more attached you are, the more you can't do without reason (sorry for the repetitiveness.)

At a certain point, toward the end of Beginning Day, you said that Jesus is the heart of the matter, which means that we have to go beyond the whole of the faces we care for in order to understand that Jesus is the issue. This is an open question for me, because I tend to get stuck on the people I love. This is true and it is very true if we are loyal toward our friends. That is to say: if all of your affection is at play, if those friends are really all you would give your life for, then I accept that the heart of the matter is Jesus, otherwise even this is just mere word.

No. Beside any other consideration, you have to start from this fact: can you explain our being here now only starting from the faces you see here? Because the problem is that we take everything for granted; really everything! If you start taking everything for granted... Tell me if you find a reason – one reason, just one! – to explain our presence here today, if it is not that reason. To help you understand: why are you here? Think about the journey you had to go on, think about what had to happen to you so that you could be here tonight. Now start looking at each person here trying to become one with the story that brought them here. Then, if you stop to these faces only, can you explain what we are living? No, you can't, as you can't explain your own presence here. So much so that you had to mention the person who introduced you to faith. Then, if we don't do this – Father Giussani warns us – these faces will fade in time and we will find ourselves bored. Do I make myself understood? Why is each one of us here tonight? We don't understand the reason, so we tack one on. We say: "Jesus," and almost nobody followed or follows this itinerary. We are friends, but if each one of us thought about his or her own history in order to give an adequate explanation for his or her presence here, then we couldn't stop at appearances.

I wanted to tell you about a change that I saw happening in me this year, most of all at school. While once I used to get mad at my colleagues ("How can they not understand!"), now – especially after spending some time on these pages and the passage of The risk of Education that reads: "The same gesture by which God makes his presence known to humanity in the Christian event also enhances a person's potential for knowledge, raising him up to the exceptional reality to which God attracts him. We call this the grace of faith." – I realize that everything that was given to me is a gift; therefore I can't expect other people to just "get it". Not only this, but if I don't yield to what the other can understand and I don't offer all the wealth that I have received...

You can help others only by becoming aware yourself. Because if you become aware, you will be able to treat them differently, and then they will wonder why you treat them that way. Instead of enabling others to have an experience, we give them a theory! Forget about that person for a minute and do the work yourself: what happened to you? How did the way you look at that person change? Because then, if he feels himself looked at this way – the way you have been looked at, which is what attracted you to Christ – he too will start doing this. It is an experience, before it is an explanation. Christianity is either an event that happens now or something I replace with an explanation.

I was going to visit my parents when my mother sent me a text message while I was driving: “Know that Father Giorgio is in a coma.” I had not seen him in more than ten years, and we had parted a little bit badly, angry. I went first to see my parents, I dropped off what I had to drop off, then I started going from hospital to hospital in Milan looking for Father Giorgio, but I didn’t find him. I finally got here, and there was a kid I didn’t know. I asked him: “Do you know if Father Giorgio is here?” He answered: “Yes, go upstairs.” I did so and I saw the nurse who told me: “Don’t worry, because even last week he talked about you.” I feel Father Giorgio’s presence now because he sees me, alas, he sees me quite well, and to me he has always been like...

A Father.

*These past days I felt created anew, because I experienced what Father Giussani talks about in the chapter of *The Religious Sense* that was quoted earlier: “Thus idea, judgment, and decision are immutable.”*

One who goes from hospital to hospital in Milan looking for a man who is about to die and whom he is angry at: what does this mean? It means that he is doing all that to get to a judgment. In fact, you calmed down when the nurse told you that judgment. What set you in motion wasn’t something tacked on, it was an urgent need: I can’t do without this. Is this true or not? This is the issue; forget about something difficult. Father Giussani tells us that judging isn’t burdensome; it is liberating. We have to come to terms with this, because if we say: “How burdensome!” and he says: “How Liberating!” well, maybe we should start asking ourselves a question or two, if nothing else out of curiosity...

I don’t want to end without reading a letter and giving an answer: “Dear Father Carrón: I am finally able to write to you because I found a way to express what, with some difficulty, I have felt and intuitively known for the past few weeks. I am a twenty-years-old guy, totally in love with the movement and with Christ. I am an immature lover, who will bring fruitful with time and Grace according to God’s plan; I am a fragile lover who staggers in front of the roughness of reality, in front of the scandal of evil. Precisely for this reason I feel the need for Christ to reveal Himself every day, to solve my life, my fears, to overcome my limit, and to answer my asking. At times that asking becomes desperate and urgent; and with that fragility and that asking I try to follow, to obey the movement and the signs that God sends me. Lately though, I felt tired of doing this work. All this talking about judging, experience, correspondence, ect... I kept asking myself: “Why does he insist on this point so much? Why does he keep correcting us to boredom, to the point of almost making of Christianity, which is the most exciting adventure, something boring? I said to myself: “Fine, we have to judge, we have to experience, but Christianity is an event, is an exceptional fact, and we need for it to happen. We judge and work, but what’s missing is wonder. What happened to enthusiasm? To gladness, beauty? What happen to the fervor of the journey? It almost looks like we have come to a standstill and we don’t even understand why anymore. Giussani writes: “We talk about how things should be or about what is wrong, and we don’t start from the affirmation that Christ has won.” Then I ask you: why do I keep feeling the burden, almost the boredom of what we say? Why, despite my commitment, my asking and judgment I fail to perceive Christ as a daily presence? Why, instead of on journey, I feel at a standstill? To make a long story short: often we lack the boldness that Enzo Piccinini awoke in my life. Our meetings appear like a discourse, dialectic rather than the communication of a present event; they taste like the nostalgic attempt to remember - which is so different from making memory. I beg you to help me understand, because your gaze full of gladness, Rose’s, Vicky’s, Father Eugenio’s gaze, and the gaze of so many other friends, still refutes or at least contradicts everything I just wrote.” Starting to become aware of this is not a small thing. I think this letter describes very well the difficulty we are facing right now, because it looks like with every step we take we forget everything else. In order to arrive to this “boring work” that our friend writes about, where did we start from? Did we start from this work or from the event and the wonder for a Presence recognized by faith? What was the starting point of faith if not this absolutely fascinating Presence? What did we do for the past two years? We talk about this Presence, about the witnesses, about the unmistakable features of that Presence, about absolutely exceptional facts. What was the problem that

later emerged? The problem was that, after a little while, everything vanished. Do you remember the passage in the Fraternity Exercises? Why, after the avalanche of witnesses, a moment later, everything vanishes? Do you remember? We didn't get to this point forgetting all that; we started from that and we came to the realization that often everything, one moment later, vanishes. So, what did we say at the Fraternity Exercises? Humanity is missing. If we have witnesses, we have exceptional facts, and we have the unmistakable features; if we have Him, who is missing in the encounter? We are missing, our humanity is missing. For this reason Father Giussani insisted: "Humanity is missing." The implication of experience to the point of judging is missing. At the Fraternity Exercises we proposed a definition of what is experience, and from this, working on this, we realized that we reduce experience, and we got to the point we are at now. Is our itinerary clear? We didn't get here by forgetting about the attractiveness of the Christian event: we are trying not to lose it along the way! Let's not get confused. When one tells me that life becomes boring is because for him that attractiveness had been missing for a long time; because for others – as our friend says at the end of his letter – that attractiveness was not lost along the way. When it is not lost? When humanity is not missing. This is the genius Father Giussani introduced us to: I know that the event is present, because it is able to re-awaken my whole humanity. As you see, what emerged from the experience that we talked about today wasn't some kind of boring burden. For example, in front of Father Giorgio's death we have not been able to stop short (as we so often do), before getting to that point, to the ultimate implication of experience, to His face. For a man to be able to search all the hospitals in Milan what is needed is an I, what is needed is the perception of an urgency; without it, we don't miss our urgency, we miss Him. We help each other for this reason; not to complicate our lives, but to avoid losing along the way the best part of what we say is happening to us. We use words that are devoid of content, emptied out; we are nominalists. This is part of our nihilism: we think that by saying the word "judgment" we judge, that by saying the word "commitment" we are committed. We have observed that, indeed, that's not the case. For this reason the greatest difficulty – as we said at Beginning Day – lies in understanding that which we are talking about, in understanding what is the problem. We have a lot of signs of this difficulty; either we keep following this path or, as we have seen, all the witnesses, all the avalanche of exceptional facts will vanish. But He is here. And I know that He is here if He changes me: He is if He changes. I know that I am judging when all my affection is engaged. As you could see, the notes of this School of community are regularly posted on the movement's website (you can relax: you don't need to immediately send around your own notes to the greatest number of people you can reach. It is better for all involved if we avoid the circulation of ugly and questionable things!) We decided to take care of it in an adequate way: we correct the transcripts and we make them available within the beginning of the week following the meeting, so as to offer a truly dignified and cohesive tool.

• *Glory be*