

Notes from the School of Community with Father Julián Carrón

Milan, January 12, 2011

Text being referred to:

Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* Vol. 3: Charity,
McGill-Queens, Montreal, 2009, pages 103-129.

Songs: “*Ballata dell’amore vero*”
“*The Fields of Athenry*”

Glory Be

With this chapter, we come to the end of the journey which began with faith and which finds its ultimate expression in virginity. In the course of our work, we have seen that later steps can't be understood without understanding earlier steps, since it's only in the origin which comes before that we can understand experience as it continues to unfold. While this is true in every chapter, it is critical in this last one, because if everything we've said up to now does not become experience, then it all sounds like Chinese. Father Giussani, on page 510 of *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così? [Is It (Really?!) Possible to Live This Way?]*, says something which is critical, which is the great law: “One understands what he has already begun to experience.” It is impossible to budge Father Giussani away from this, because he is totally convinced that reality becomes clear in experience, not in an explanation, so much so that he goes on to say, “However, if we are not told this, we don't even wish to start to experience it; and we especially do not start to desire to beg God that we would begin to experience. [The whole point of speaking is to lead us to experience, to spur the desire to experience – not to take the place of experience, but to encourage experience.] But one understands what he has at least begun to experience.” Experience is the starting point, which can be summed up in this question: When has each of us experienced virginity? We have to look at experience in order to understand it, because otherwise we start from the image we make up in our heads about what virginity is in our opinion; we begin from our prejudices. And rather than a help, this becomes an obstacle to understanding. This is why Father Giussani, on page 107, gives the example of Mary Magdalene: “Who possessed Mary Magdalene, the street walker, more? Was it Christ, who looked at her for an instant as He was passing by her, or all the men who had possessed her?” Here it is: when have we experienced this kind of possession? Later on, he says, “Whenever anyone came within twenty yards of Him, he was pierced by that Presence, and he went home with that image inside that he struggled to shake off for days.” People have the experience of that imposing Presence which they struggle for days to shake off, which they try hard to shake off. If we were to ask Mary Magdalene when she had an experience of virginity, she would have to tell us about that fact, or we would not understand. So, I'm asking each one of us: when did we have an experience of this caliber? When did we experience an imposing presence that we struggled to shake off, and that defined the experience of being possessed by something that let us have a unique, new experience?

I spent this month feeling somehow restless about what seems to be my inability to face these two chapters. I already said last time that I would have liked to have skipped them, but obviously, I had to deal with it, and this month it wasn't an easy thing to face them, and in fact, I couldn't.

Do you all see? The starting point is wrong. I had him come up here so that we could all understand the mistaken approach. We've all had it happen, that we say, "I can't live like this..." We know it! What kind of discovery is that? Are you amazed? We don't even make an effort: it's impossible! And so right away, we give up.

Thanks!

I am amazed that, instead of starting from experience, where we can learn what Christianity is, we start from where Christianity is absent, and then we claim that we don't have what it takes. It's obvious. If we start, in Christianity, from what isn't there, we always find it impossible for us to bring it to life, because it's already become something else. We've reduced it; we've changed its nature – because Christianity is what we said about John, about Andrew, about Zacchaeus, that is, something that first and foremost imposes itself. But very often we change the starting point: "We don't have what it takes." Do you all see how hard we try, after two years of following this journey, to change the hard drive? I'm not saying this to scold you, but so that we help each other to understand these things, because otherwise we keep on making mistakes, and then we say that Christianity is hard. But this is not what Christianity is: it's something else.

I went through this month a little like this, until these past two days when School of Community was coming up. First, I discovered a feeling of thankfulness for this work which never gives up on me, and second, I remembered that I was in back at the last School of Community, and when you read the letter from the girl from CLU, I got up and left because I couldn't sit still. Something explosive happened to me, something that had me jumping out of my skin, because I thought, "This is what I want for myself; this is what I want more than anything else." And that night, I could have done anything, anything they'd asked me.

This is the experience of virginity. But up until now, it was all overshadowed by the fact that you felt incapable. What was so imposing that last time when I read the letter?

It was the experience of an imposing Presence, which gave him such an overflow that he was jumping out of his skin. This is what it was! So much so that a month later he remembers it. He cannot beget it, but he can experience it as the gift of a Presence that imposes itself in so powerful a way that it makes you have an experience of such an overflow that you feel that you are willing to do anything. Because, how does a man who has been pierced like this treat another person? What kind of relationship does he have with the other person? Now, to help one another understand this chapter, we have to go back to the chapter on poverty, because that is where Father Giussani explains in greater length what makes it possible. What is poverty? It is detachment from a certain way of possessing things. What is virginity? It is detachment from a certain way of possessing people. Clear? There, on page 90, he says, "Poverty is revealed as

being free from things, since it is God who fulfills desires, not the *particular* thing that you admire.” You can be free, because God is the One who fulfills. You can be free, because you have this experience of overflow; and this freedom brings the seed of gladness along with it. Virginity is poverty at its utmost level, and so you can treat things with this freedom because you lack nothing. If this is critical for treating things with this freedom, imagine what kind of experience is needed to treat people with the same freedom, with the same selflessness, to be able to look at them for their destiny and not for something in return for the relationship! This is impossible without Him, because the One who introduced this freedom from things into the world is Jesus Christ, and the One who introduced this freedom in the relationship with people is Jesus Christ. This is why it is impossible to speak about these things without referring to the complete experience that Father Giussani described in the chapters on faith, hope, and charity. What does freedom in our relationships mean? It means that the relationship rests on something that lasts, that is, on the Divine, who lasts forever. Thus, poverty means affirming Someone else as the meaning of the self. (The same is true of charity: we can only have this charity for the other person through the experience of that overflow, of that passion that the Mystery has on our nothingness, because “I loved you and I had pity on your nothingness.”) We can love only when we overflow with what we receive. This is why he says that virginity requires one to recognize destiny as present, that is, Jesus present in history. The last chapter is the verification that we have travelled this journey as the path of our experience. Now, perhaps, there is someone who can tell me the logic of the entire text, but if it has not become flesh for him, he can dream on about his experience, since it is not the product of reasoning (even if reasoning is essential to it) but of an experience that only He permits. It is because of His imposing experience that I can relate to things with His Presence in my eyes, by virtue of being moved; only if I am taken over by His Presence can I have a true relationship with people and things. He alone makes it present; without Him we go back to our usual refrain: “I’m incapable; it’s impossible.” It is impossible for anyone who does not have a Christian experience. It is very possible as gift, as grace. On what basis? That a man live Christianity as an experience, as an experience – not as a speech or as ethics, or as a thought, or as a feeling. So what is the point? That we need to be very loyal to our “I,” to our heart; otherwise, it will always be impossible.

I found that the experience of virginity is the experience that makes me totally depend on my heart. Only this experience makes me discover who I am, so much so that it makes me depend on it. “A sacrifice is required, namely, the sacrifice of what is immediate. The immediate is not true, so much so that it dies: it causes death... What is immediate binds, enchains.” This is true. This is how it is: at first, the immediate forcibly attracts you, the immediate seems to be what promises you the world In that instant, it seems to be more fascinating than anything else. But the immediate makes you die, because, when I live for what is immediate, I feel like a caged animal; I feel enchained: I am not myself; I can’t breathe. I recognize what I am made for, because my heart has experienced the One who does not bind it in chains. I have lived this! So, if you have the experience of someone who gives strength to your heart...

The problem of virginity is not about moralism: it is a matter of this kind of loyalty to the heart.

I need to live what gives me life, and the experience of virginity wipes out my dualism, that is, it makes me be my true self. When I happen to have this experience I recognize that I am my true self. What I haven't lost in my vocation is my heart, because there is a Presence that exists and makes me discover it.

Virginity is the victory over dualism because it makes us be our true selves, and so it is not a problem that concerns only a certain kind of vocation. Who doesn't want to be himself? Who doesn't want to be his true self? Who doesn't desire not to lose his heart? This is why the possibility of facing an experience of life in which the heart is not lost will always be a challenge for whoever cares about his desire for happiness. If this concerned only a certain type of people, we wouldn't be interested. But the question is that the experience we are talking about is the experience that makes the "I" become truly "I," that makes it become itself. This is the promise. In this sense this chapter confirms that faith is true, that what faith recognizes is not something created by man. It is not created by my reason. We are not here to inflate something that does not exist. We are not here to invent what is not there, to beget faith, the fact, on our own. No! If that were the case, we couldn't talk about virginity, not to mention experiencing it. Virginity is the ultimate confirmation of the truth of the fact of faith, of the truth of that Presence in history. This is why Father Giussani places virginity at the end of the journey, and this is why virginity is the most obvious manifestation of the truth of Christianity, of the truth of that Presence recognized by faith: because without that experience, that presence recognized by faith would not exist as an experience. We would not have been able to talk about it, so much so that people did not talk about it until Christ arrived. From a historical point of view this is a fact. This is why in this chapter we find confirmation of the truth of faith, of that Presence that faith recognizes as such, a presence that cannot be invented, because something invented cannot make it possible for a person to have an experience like that of virginity.

Something that happened made me become aware of what you told us in the Christmas article, that is, that I am the one who needs the Christian proclamation, and to proclaim Christianity. I need to see how this wonder enters life and corresponds to it, and how other people respond to it too. While we were doing charitable work, we happened to meet a Peruvian woman who joined us and began participating in our charitable work; and for the past two months she has also been coming to School of Community. It is amazing to see how, glued to the screen, she keeps repeating, "It's true; it's true." Last time, as she was leaving, she said, "I want a personal copy of this book you have: I want to be able to re-read these things." The next day I went to say hi to her because she was leaving for Peru, and I was very struck, because she was still focused on what she had heard the night before.

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She had talked about it with her friends and, while meeting another woman at the hairdresser's, she had invited her to our meetings. (She didn't even know that they are called School of Community.) What is most surprising is that at one point she told me, "Now, tell me, what is the Fraternity? What is the common fund?" and to explain these things to her I had to start from way back. That evening I left trembling, because I was struck by how words reach people, how they beget life and by how I (facing what you said in the end about the Fraternity and the common fund) had not even paid attention, thinking that I already knew those things, and how it took her presence to make me understand. Last Sunday I met her, back from Peru, and it was an even greater surprise, because she had left, taking the Christmas poster and pictures of us along with her, and telling everybody what she had met, what we do. I had given her the notes from School of Community and she translated them for the people she saw there. Then she said, "Here, take my offering: I want to join the Fraternity, too."

What experience stands behind all of this? It is an imposing Presence who makes it possible for you to relate to reality in such a way, so much so that you can't help but communicate it to everybody. But what I found and still find most striking in what you are saying, is that you understand the importance of the witness of your Peruvian friend because of your need for this witness. For example, someone was saying, "What do I care about Cairo? What does this have to do with my life?" And I say, "How is it possible for us to have such a hard time understanding what happens – the difference, the exceptionality of what happens?" What happened in Cairo is so exceptional, so much beyond what we may have predicted or planned, that you can only say, "What does this have to do with me?" when you can't understand, because you reduce reality to appearances. Through this Peruvian woman, through what happened in Cairo, what becomes present? Christ's being here and now, which makes it possible for life to be different. But if we say, "We already know this," then we all end up in nothingness. Yet, look at the difference in this Peruvian woman. If we, who are on this journey in the movement, don't become more like, the things we know become a cage that keeps us from understanding. This is why we need an education toward the religious sense (and this is why we are going to begin the new School of Community) to have the simplicity of this woman who is immediately able to understand the meaning of what we do. Can you understand? She didn't even know what School of Community is. But she understood that it was defining her life more than anything else, so much so that she carried it along with her to Peru and told everyone, and translated ... everything.

I have a classmate in graduate school, with whom I prepared an article containing interviews with the Cometa school children who had experienced a change after going to that school. She still has many memories of what happened in that experience. This fact really struck me, because I was a little challenged when you were talking about facts and interpretation. I think that what happened with her and this new friendship may have helped me understand a little better, and I wanted you to correct me if I'm wrong. The fact: I think that staying with the fact means staying with it with all of one's humanity, and so, with all of one's needs. This means staying in front of

it in a virginal way: it is a metamorphosis. It is as if, at a certain point, one looked at the world and saw it in three dimensions instead of two. While talking with her all these considerations came to my mind – a total change of mentality. Interpretation is not negative in itself, but it is a secondary factor. One departs from his own story, from his own culture, from his own way of being. When you are in front of a fact, it's not that there is no interpretation. The point is that this other aspect of transformation, of the way you see the same things, is much more pregnant, more substantial. She certainly did not stop at appearances, because she has this thing in her heart, but it is as if, in the end, she couldn't really give it a name.

And why does this happen? Why do some understand something when faced with a fact and others stop at the appearances?

I believe, in this specific case, that it is really a question of freedom, because it is as if she wanted to stop at the fruit without looking at its origin.

The same facts always have an interpretation. If I see two people in the subway (I have often mentioned this example) exchanging a gift that I saw in a dollar store, I can say, "These people are worth only a dollar to each other," or, "These people tell each other how much they love each other through this gift." The fact is the same. In front of Jesus' miracles one would say, "He did it through God's power," and the other, "He did it through the devil's power." The fact, precisely because it is a sign, requires our freedom. This is why freedom expresses itself, as Father Giussani says, in the interpretation of the fact. The question is which of the two interpretations better explains all the factors of the fact, all the elements of the fact! If you were there giving a gift worth a dollar to someone you love, you don't stop at the monetary value of the gift. You say, "I love you" through a dollar, or through a million dollars. It's not a question of price. It is a sign through which I want to tell you how much I love you. This is why it is false to stop at the monetary value: because this interpretation of the fact is reductive. Not that an interpretation is not necessary. But your interpretation reduced my experience so I don't feel understood. The question is, what makes it possible for you not to reduce the fact to an interpretation that is at times so reductive? Only if you have the sort of simplicity that makes it possible to understand the whole importance of what is happening there. This is why it is necessary to distinguish the fact from an interpretation of the fact which cannot give an appropriate reason for all the factors of the fact. And this is where it is necessary to challenge her: can an interpretation like hers explain all the factors? And this is where the dialog begins. This is why it is not a closure, but rather the beginning of an adventure, of a dialog: "And this? How do you explain this? How do you explain it?" This helps the other person begin to understand all the factors, which opens her to a possible, more adequate interpretation of the fact. A bigger interpretation begotten of one's own experience can help the other person walk on this path: it's up to you.

In any case, I feel a preference for me, because He chose me. The other thing I wanted to say is on the question of the hundredfold. When one suffers a lot because he feels censored about to what we were saying... For example, I gave my family the leaflet about the present crisis and it

caused an uproar. So I wondered whether, even when these things happen (I've suffered a lot because of this, and I still do), one can say that this is the hundredfold, because it means affirming the desire for a true relationship in an eternal transparency.

Certainly. I would only like you to understand that this witness, at times, may not be understood by the other person. And this is different from the way Father Giussani speaks here about the hundredfold – this is something I don't want to bypass. We imagine the hundredfold in the question of virginity “as a broadening of instinctivity.” A hundred times what we have in mind, not a hundred times what is true. This is a big mistake, because we often say, “This does not correspond to me. It doesn't correspond to the promise of the hundredfold that He made me,” because it does not correspond to my image, in which I reduced the hundredfold to a wider instinctivity. But this means really being stuck in this situation, and this will never correspond to the needs of the heart. You may puff something up as much as you want, but it won't necessarily correspond. The hundredfold is something else. It is another thing, different, something new that enters human experience; it doesn't mean widening what we try to experience. It is something more, that corresponds much more than any other image.

Last Thursday my husband's father died suddenly – but I don't want to speak about something that's missing, but about a fullness. By reading the chapter on virginity I realized that this detachment has made me look at this person in the way I would like to look at all people: looking at their destiny. And so, even in this sorrowful situation, I also felt moved by the tenderness the Mystery had for us in these last few days, because He had us experience a fatherhood that is even bigger than this man's. Pain did not crush us. Instead, it put us face to face with the need for conversion, so we had to wonder: we had to ask ourselves questions about the reasonableness of faith. Saying that not everything is over with death, and that he is in the Lord's arms, is either just an idea, or it is because of the Presence that we have experienced ever since we encountered the movement. So, faced with something about which the whole world can only say, “I am sorry: I have no words,” the rosary, the funeral, and friends have been the sign of a Man Who has entered our life, and Who can say, “Woman, don't cry!” So the question about my father-in-law's destiny made me realize that this fatherhood dominates all my days, more so than my feelings (which otherwise would be low, due to the recent circumstances. Whatever happens, I am embraced. And for me, this is experiencing the hundredfold, because I see that in this way I won't lose anything or anyone.

That's exactly it. And if you want to have this experience, again, you don't need an idea, but a Presence, because without this Presence in front of you it's impossible. In this regard, I'm going to read one of the questions you sent me, because sometimes this detachment scares us. “I have three children who will be adults soon. They are twenty, eighteen and seventeen years old. My biggest desire is that they may discover and embrace the plan our Lord has for them to experience true happiness, and I wish to walk along with them on this journey. In the chapter

about virginity, Father Giussani reminds us that detachment is required for true love, so that any attempt to own the person we love may not prevail in us. I love my children, but I realize that I am afraid of their freedom, of the ‘noes’ that their freedom may say to God and to His will. I am asking you how I can love them seriously and not be afraid of their freedom. What does it mean to live a detachment in this thing which makes the relationship between us truer?” We need to face these questions. Who made us free? One who loves us or one who doesn’t love us? Was the Mystery afraid to make us free? We need to identify ourselves with our true Father, Who was not afraid to throw us into reality equipped only with a criterion, the heart, aware of what He was doing – because, with this criterion, He gave us the possibility to discover the truth in everything, and, above all, to discover Him, in the moment when one can encounter Him. He was not afraid of our freedom. So if we are afraid of our freedom, or we give in to this attempt to possess, it is because we don’t identify ourselves with the One Who begot us. We want to respond to our attempt instead of embracing the plan that the Mystery has for our children. We think we already know what the plan is, and what they have to do to fulfill it. Instead, we are the ones who need to bend to the way the Mystery leads them to their destiny, which we don’t know. I understand that we as fathers, as parents, are afraid. What might have led the Mystery to beget us in this way, and to run this risk? It’s only by identifying ourselves with that fatherhood that we can learn how to be fathers, because otherwise we create more problems than we solve. Does this mean that we can’t do anything? No, we can do a lot, just like He has done. To solve the problem, He did not take away freedom. He did not impose Himself; He became man (we just celebrated this at Christmas): He became a Presence in such a way that each one of us, by seeing, could recognize what he is made for, and could discover the path that fulfills freedom. What can we do to imitate Him? We can become a presence; we can become witnesses. This won’t take away freedom, but helps by placing in front of the other person a presence that can explain the journey: “Look, look: this is how life is fulfilled.” Because this is how we can become mothers and fathers, that is, witnesses, as Saint Paul says: “We are not masters of your faith, but coworkers in your joy” [cf. *2 Corinthians* 1:24]. This is being a father: we become a presence that attracts because it corresponds. We place a beauty made flesh (not a discourse) in front of our children, a life lived in such a superabundant way, that a child can see how the proposal that you are for him could become a reality. I understand that possession is more immediate than becoming witnesses, but possession is not interchangeable with the attraction of a witness of something that makes life clearer. Each one of us needs to decide. Let’s not get confused, though. Loving your child means this: nobody loves more than the one who gives one’s own life. And what does giving one’s own life mean? Witnessing to such a presence in front of the other person. With this, we end our course.

Next time we’ll present the new School of Community, which is *The Religious Sense*. It will be on Wednesday, January 26, at 9:30 p.m. This will be an opportunity for a public CL meeting to which you can invite anyone. CLU and GS groups will participate in this gesture, too.

The people in my School of Community meeting in this room, CLU and GS groups of Milan will take part in the meeting at the Palasharp of Milan. Please get the appropriate admission tickets from the office. In the city of Milan, all the other connection sites will remain active. The other cities of the diocese of Milan, of Lombardy and the other regions will be able to follow this meeting by video connection.

Subscriptions to *Traces*: the 2011 campaign for subscriptions to *Traces* has begun. I recommend subscribing to it, both to demonstrate your interest and desire to read it, and to support the magazine itself. In the January issue you will be able to find information with the various subscription options.

The last time I saw her in Rimini at the CLU Exercises, a woman who was amazed at what was happening in our midst, said something very interesting about *Traces*: “You have to read *Traces* on your knees” – because it’s like touching what the Mystery is doing with your hand. So it’s not a question of PR for a magazine, but of what the Mystery is doing in our midst. This is why it is important for our faith. We want to put our hands on the facts. Whoever is interested in this should subscribe.

Italian National Medicine Drive Day: Saturday, February 12, will be the National Medicine Drive Day organized by the Medicine Bank. The collected medicines will support 1,200 Italian associations that assist 400,000 needy people. This year there will also be a Medicine Drive in Spain and Portugal. It is a simple charitable gesture done in pharmacies, and anybody can participate. For more information, ask your communities or the Medicine Bank directly at 02-70104315.

• *Veni Sancte Spiritus*