

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, November 17, 2010

Reference text: Luigi Giussani, Is It Possible to Live This Way? vol. 3, Charity, pp. 65-79.

Song: "Ballata dell'uomo vecchio"

Song: "Who Stood up for Stephen?"

Glory Be

Today we start the chapter on sacrifice. First of all, Father Giussani starts with a premise that helps answer some of the questions that came in. One of you asked me, "The most important thing for me now is to understand how to really take part in School of Community, how we have to prepare for that moment of assembly, and how we should live that gesture so that it may really become ours and we can propose it to everybody." Giussani's premise offers some suggestions, some directions for the journey. The first: "Things have to be repeated and, even in repeating them, it seems that they become more difficult to understand." One does not understand things right away and "repeating them [I am saying this so that nobody gets discouraged] it even seems that you understand less, which is a form of impatience... Yet if something is true and you keep at it and repeat it and fix your eyes on it, at a certain point it is as if ... the dawn breaks, and you begin to understand." Each of us has to decide if he wants to take Father Giussani's suggestion seriously or not, because we think we can understand right away without repeating, making things become ours right away. Then one inevitably gets discouraged. Instead, it is by repeating (this repetition consists of accepting and working on the hypothesis that School of Community offers for entering reality) that, at a certain moment, we start to glimpse the dawn and then "the triumph of truth lies at the heart's core." One understands because he becomes aware of it first hand, at the core of his own heart. Then on the next page he emphasizes, "One would like to make himself understood right away... he'd like the other not to have to make the effort he must make," like the father and the mother who, looking at their little child, would like him to walk down the road without struggling. Look, we should not disregard these things, because they reflect what we think for ourselves and for others. We saw it in the last few meetings of the School of Community. Because "they would like him not to have to go through all the steps they went through; it pains them to know that he has to go through them." But it will become theirs, their children's, only if they will make this journey; the parents' knowledge can become part of their children's only if the children have the very same experiences their parents had, because it is not mechanical. "Instead, one does what one can... hopefully, what God lets him do, taking into account the availability of his or her freedom [and the freedom of the other, because we can clash with the other who says no]." If this happens for everything, imagine how it will be when faced with sacrifice, which is something repulsive, that we perceive as an injustice! "A mother and a father, thinking about this [so repulsive], would say, 'How I would like to spit up blood for you!'" Look at what he says: "No, the part that is reserved to each individual, that is, what God wants for you, must be done by you." There is no excuse, because it is not up to us to choose the road through which the Mystery leads the other to his destiny. We are the ones who have to submit to the modality used by the Mystery to bring us and others to destiny: this is obedience. Instead, we think that love means trying to spare this from the other person, as if God didn't love him as much as we do, thinking that we are the ones who truly love him; we are so arrogant as to think that we are loving, because we want to spare the other person the journey, while the Mystery doesn't really love that person as much, since He is not sparing him the journey. This is our secret conclusion. This doesn't mean that we can't collaborate with what is asked; on the contrary, it is impossible not to collaborate, not to help the other, no matter the cost. But it means collaborating and helping the other person to follow the modality through which the Mystery leads him to destiny, which happens according to Another's plan.

I can't get away from the fact I saw happening at School of Community. What my eyes saw and my ears heard was a man who, struck by reality, remained, didn't pull back, didn't turn the other way, but stayed there with all of his reason and his affection in front of the other man's freedom. I saw who man is if he lets himself be taken

hold of by Christ. As I was going home with a friend that night, we were saying, "I wouldn't have been able to stay in front of that last witness like that." The next day, which like many others was spent working, grocery shopping, taking care of my children, and preparing dinner, I couldn't help going back to what had happened, especially every time reality hit me: problems at work, the children not paying attention. At the end of the day I realized it had been a day like many others, but totally different because I hadn't been able to erase that fact from my eyes. I had it in my eyes as an entreaty, a begging, as the possible paradigm of how to stay in front of my life. To be honest, I wasn't able to be kinder to my colleagues and I wasn't able to avoid shouting at my children, and nobody told me, "You have changed so much!" The strange thing, though, is that I feel different; for example, I can't complain any longer over whatever is not working out; it is as if the complaint can't exit my mouth; I can't even think of it. Every time during the day (and it actually happens a lot) when I experience even a very small difficulty, I face it with less anxiety than before, and somehow the fact that originated all this happens again. I think that I am starting to understand what you were saying about John and Andrew who, after spending time with Jesus, leave Him to go home and can't erase from their eyes that face and all the things that happened while they were with Him. I was surprised by two things: that everything happened the day you reminded us of the value of the fact from which everything originates; and second, as I was telling these things to my friends, I realized that none of them had perceived what happened like I did. I interpreted these two things as a sign of a personal dialogue between me and the Mystery, and, like the man born blind, I am compelled to say, "I don't know why it happened to me, and I don't know why it happened that evening, but I was blind and now I can see."

I asked her to read this, apart from the fact that provoked it which does not interest me in this very moment, because of what she said at the end. Because when we say that Christianity is an event, we are talking about this, a fact that makes us different, not necessarily more consistent. It doesn't necessarily happen that the next day I am able to scold my children less or I am able to be kinder to my colleagues, but, even if I am not able to, this can't take away from me the difference I see. A fact that impacted me: Christianity is this event, and not a consistency. It isn't moralism, so that magically the day after tomorrow I become able to do something; instead, it is a difference that introduces itself like it did for Zacchaeus before he came down from the tree. You start seeing the small signs: less anxiety, less complaining. They seem like nothing, but it is the sign of a change that is happening, not because I am better, but because of what happened. This is what we wanted to say to each other about the value of the fact. Notwithstanding this, there may be people, friends, who did not understand, but this doesn't take anything away. The Lord gives grace to each person when and how He wants, and according to how open we are. What reveals the power of the fact is that it impacts me so powerfully that, aside from the realization that I become better or not, I can't dismiss it even if I don't become better. From that moment on, everything changes: "I don't know why it happened to me, and I don't know why it happened that evening, but I was blind and now I can see." This witness is a good introduction to the chapter we are starting, because sacrifice, says Father Giussani, is like the point where everything meets, because neither faith, nor hope, nor love, nor beauty can exist without sacrifice. This is the point of convergence for everything that we need to understand, because, from the questions you ask me (I will read one among many), one can see that this is where we have the greatest difficulty: "I wish to understand, and I am asking you and the Lord to help me, the passage through which sacrifice becomes a value; I tried to repeat these words, but I realize that I sort of fear them as if they were exaggerated, and as if I were afraid to ask too much." Another says, "In my life, due to my illness, sacrifice is always present and it is incomprehensible, brutal, agonizing, truly gut-wrenching, in the flesh. When Father Giussani talks about 'being worth the trouble' I really feel it as my own, because recently, facing difficult choices, I have reached the point of asking myself exactly this, using the same words. I asked myself, 'What is enough for me in life?' And the answer is, 'Nothing.' Nothing is enough. The only times I felt fulfilled and glad even in painful situations was when I had the certainty that He was present, when I perceived Him present. So, the reason for making a choice is so that I may become able to see Him more. However, when I read the third point, it seemed inconceivable. I can't imagine living like this, but at the same time I can't ignore what Father Giussani is telling me, because everything he said to me before and everything that he always said is so true that I have to consider it. The first question that came to mind was, 'How can it become like this for me, too?' Immediately, though, another question arises: 'Why should I desire this? Why should I desire sacrifice as the essential

point of my life? Why should I want to “influence the people who live in Japan now” by spitting up blood?’ Because, in my life, I did find myself in the predicament of spitting up blood in the true sense of the word, and I don’t wish to keep on living like this; imagine to desire to be sick as the essential point of my life! Honestly, I am bad, and to save someone who I don’t even know exists, I have to spit up blood. I don’t see why I should do it.” We are facing the real difficulty, and we can’t answer it by “explaining” things, because it is not about convincing somebody about it. The first point is to rediscover inside us (to help us to enter these things according to what Father Giussani is telling us) when we experienced, even as a dawning (at the moment I am not interested in the level of this experience), that sacrifice has become interesting as a simple experience.

After the journey we have made in these past months, it is as if this chapter on sacrifice has put faith and the entire journey I had followed under discussion. I was very struck by Father Giussani’s introduction at the beginning of the chapter, his insistence that sacrifice is the thing that least corresponds, the most repulsive. I thought, “It is true!” Who spontaneously thinks of making a sacrifice? Nobody. At this point I thought of the end of the Assembly of Responsibles in La Thuile: “We shouldn’t be afraid of sacrifice, because if I value what I belong to, if I belong, it means that I have to relinquish myself in some way.” Here too, I said, “Very true; I completely agree.” Then it happened that one evening I was with some friends and we talked about this; we all agreed, no objections, until one thing came up: “Yes, in any case, sacrifice is worth it if it has a goal, if I know why it is worthwhile for me and I get something back.” I said, “True.” At that point I was forced to go back, as you said, and think of when in my life sacrifice became interesting for me. I could not deny that sacrifice became interesting for me every time I entered life being in love (I am using this word), in love with life, in love with the companionship, in love with my work, in love with my wife, in love with everything. This brings me to say that in the end we try to avoid sacrifice because it is as if we were not in love.

I am referring to the first witness. I wouldn’t have minded if the book had ended here, leaving this part out, but it is unavoidable and so I faced it.

We think that if we skip the chapter we can skip the sacrifice of life! This is our problem.

I had a similar question: today, when I make a true, big sacrifice, I can’t help already having the foretaste of a “something greater.” I make the sacrifice because I am already gaining something; I already understand that it is worthwhile, and I am already enjoying this “being worthwhile.” Otherwise, I’m not sure I would be able to do it; actually, today I’m not able to make a sacrifice if I don’t feel that I’m already enjoying something.

We start to realize, even as a first step, that sacrifice is interesting when we have a purpose, or when we love something. Sacrifice starts to interest us if we are in love, or if we do it for a “something more” that makes it interesting. Our entire life depends upon how much of a purpose sacrifice has, a reason that makes it useful, worthwhile. In this sense, this is where we get to the point where everything we said up to now converges, because in sacrifice what we said about faith is verified; that is, if we find a Presence that corresponds so much that it is worth more than life and that gives rise to hope, if the charity of One who bends over us and who under the pressure of His being moved for us makes us open, is real. In preparing the School of Community I thought of the phrase of Malraux that Father Giussani often quoted, “There is no ideal we can sacrifice for, because we know all their lies; we don’t know what the truth is.” Sacrifice has no reason to exist if we, when it comes down to it, think that everything is a lie. And if we are not open to any sacrifice, it’s because we haven’t met anything that is so true that it enables us to do it. This point is the summary of the truth of Christ: whether (or not) He introduces something in our lives that is so interesting that one is open and passionate, and that can make everything desirable, even what seems repulsive to our eyes. So, my friends, the question is how we witness to each other that this is how it is, to help each other not to be afraid of sacrifice and to be open to it.

When did sacrifice start to become interesting for you?

For several years, I was in such a state that, without God and with no more affection to center me, every morning I used to start the day, after my children left for school, shouting my desperate cry as I knelt on the floor, “It’s impossible to live like this! I don’t want to live like this anymore!” But at a certain point, when I had grown thin and had exhausted even the energy needed to cry and shout to the heavens, the Mystery took pity on my

weakness and on my repugnance for life, and started to give me the grace to open my eyes and my heart. I can't tell the entire story in all its details, because it is very long (yet very beautiful and incredible). What I want to say is that I received a book as a gift from a friend (with the invitation to attend the School of Community the following Wednesday). My heart skipped a beat at the title: "Is It Possible to Live This Way?" How is it possible, if I continue to cry out that it is not possible to live this way? I devoured it in two nights, closing my eyes at 5:00 a.m. I'll get to the point: every day I had to come to terms with a really cruel and unacceptable daily life, but from that moment on, it seemed that the Mystery made all of reality coincide and correspond to my humanity – everything, you see? Really everything, even the indescribable, every comma, every dot, every letter that the most blessed Father Giussani had written was for me personally; it was piercing my flesh. In the hardest moments I kept repeating to myself, and I repeated to my friends, "I am going through a watershed." At work, they thought I was crazy; many thought I was delusional, but fortunately, I wasn't at all. My life had started pulsating like this, all the time. It was my sacrifice, the toil of every instant that shed light and meaning, fullness and grace on every instant and on everything. Since then, by saying, "Yes, Jesus, it is really You," He is present always, He is alive, He is in the flesh. For example, I have embraced my son again (I hadn't done that for a long time) with a solid certainty about him, trying to look at him like He is looking at me. I guarantee you that for me "the more of the more of the more" happened. There is a tiny dot on the horizon that keeps getting bigger and closer.

Thank you, my friend. The Lord may make us pass through something that seems incomprehensible in order to let this happen, this change that each of us would love to feel as ours with this intensity as we go through every line of the book.

*I am a musician and I come from Umbria. Because of my job, my sacrifice is the fact that I am often away from my family. When I come home, my wife and I try to judge things together that happen after the School of Community. In practice: for us, understanding the sacrifice of staying apart consists in dealing with what it means to love, what it means that the other has a destiny. Sacrifice comes from *sacrum facere*, making all things sacred, therefore wishing to know each other more and more, without taking anything for granted. In the relationship with our children, sacrifice means looking at them in light of their destiny, as Father Giussani taught us. It also means accepting their freedom. I would also like to add something else. My experience is great because I play in a classical music orchestra, so I constantly have the experience of beauty. I also teach my instrument, the French horn. In my relationship with my students, my goal is not that they become the best in the world, but that they can find an answer, that they experience a satisfaction in their study and discover their humanity again through music. Then, two recent important facts: on October 15 I won an important audition, and on October 28 my brother had a motorcycle accident (he almost died and spent a week in the IC unit due to a serious lesion in the aorta). I was faced with two possibilities: were these two cases matters of luck (good or bad), or is reality a sign? For me, this means that every day I have to decide whether Christ is risen or not. For me, yes, He is risen – I say yes – also because October 15 is Father Giussani's birthday!*

You don't decide anything. Whether you recognize something or not, it's not up to you to decide, with your permission!

I won a competition in Milan on Father Giussani's birthday. And this is a fact. My brother converted after an accident – he was about to die. Although he doesn't really like Christianity, he sighed, "Lord, forgive my sins," and then he decided to go on a pilgrimage to thank Him. And this is another fact.

Good. Please give a good explanation of what sacrifice and beauty have to do with each other. This is what we are interested in, because this is where we can see the relationship, where sacrifice becomes really interesting. Playing in an orchestra, and keeping any of us from going off by himself, it's necessary to ...

...Follow someone.

Follow someone: a sacrifice is necessary. But that's where one can see how sacrifice becomes interesting, exactly for the sake of beauty, so much so that we can't go back, in view of this beauty. This is something none of us can shrug off. I'm thinking about when we sing together: people think we are making a sacrifice, but for us it is not something costly if we don't let one another go off on his own: on the contrary, it is a point of no return because of this beauty. Thank you.

Father Aldo, please tell us something about when sacrifice became interesting for you, because you are in direct contact with many people's challenges.

*I am watching the experience that you are living through, especially in these past few weeks. We have met with friends for the express purpose of talking about this. Sacrifice, which is the condition for life's beauty and zest, became interesting as we followed you, once we understood that this is how Christ enters our lives. We worked (I'm saying "we," because we are one body), and we understood that sacrifice is interesting because each one of us has a familiarity with Christ. You challenged us; you invited us to conversion. "I have loved you with an everlasting love": this becomes the reason for living, and this everlasting love is called Christ. Starting from the cross, sacrifice becomes not only interesting, but a requirement that is full of gladness. This is the first point. I left because I loved someone. This is not enough, though, because everything ends, and sadness is what remains. Also, faced with many challenges, we feel an even stronger urgency to meet and say, "Who are You, O Christ, for us?" The problem is not sacrifice, but who Christ is for me. Because if Christ is everything for me, then we find out something else which shocked me, literally shocked me: Giussani, in talking about *crux fidelis inter omnes* [faithful Cross, above all others], says that Jesus' sacrifice is the great good that saves the world in all its deathly misery; and consenting to sacrifice together with Him, in the way established by Him, is our good. And he even says that the Lord does this, for example, by allowing me to get sick! This shocked me! Because I have always thought that sickness is a punishment, sickness is bad luck. Here Giussani says that it is a gift from the Lord! I can see this in my clinic; I can see this in me because of what happens to me every day... So, if we can get this, our complaints disappear; not only this, but we understand that everything is a gift, because everything brings me to Christ. Because what I care about is not how long I live or how long my sick patients live: I care about Christ. During a three-day retreat we asked ourselves, "Is reality a source of worry or of provocation for us?" (because we could see the threat of a sadness, of a complaint). So we immediately felt the need to better understand what it means that reality is a provocation. Reality means everything: it means sickness, it means everything, the unfair treatment I receive, friends who take advantage of me, the fact that I have to sacrifice an affection and leave (and for me this is how it happened, in the midst of my certainty that my life would find its fulfillment along that path). Today, I see in my life that sacrifice is the necessary condition for completeness. If I love a girl, it's unavoidable that I love distance, too, because if I want to read a book, I won't hang it in front of my eyes, but will hold it at a distance: the same goes for everything. And this is an everyday battle between possessing something and affirming an event. But there is that "something more": that everything that happens is a gift; even cancer is a perfect gift (and my patients have plenty of experiences with this), even a mental breakdown can be an opportunity to recognize Christ's gesture of love. He says so. I have experienced this personally because not only did my life blossom from these things, but everything blossomed, even our Latin American continent.*

Thank you! I think that this can serve as an introduction to the mystery of sacrifice, to this thing that seems repugnant. "The problem is not sacrifice, but who Christ is for me," says Father Aldo. This is the problem of faith, as we were saying before. In this sense, the question of sacrifice is the synthesis of the whole path we have been working on: to what extent has this path been an experience in which Christ has entered our lives so powerfully as to draw us to Him, so that everything that comes from Him is an opportunity, a factor of a relationship? Everything brings me to Christ; everything is a provocation. It's time to verify. In order for his witness to become ours, each one of us must verify it, or it won't become ours. As we always say, our freedom is required. Since we certainly don't decide to get sick or disappointed, or to suffer an injustice, life offers us many opportunities that we do not choose, that happen to us, where we can verify this. We can verify whether, by entering the circumstances with what we have seen, with the experience of Christ that we have, they can become the opportunity to discover more deeply what fulfills our lives. We are free from every condition. This is why we can only verify in reality; it's one thing to see Christ win in our thoughts, and another to see Him winning in reality. Victory in reality begets faith, that is to say, it begets attachment to Christ, the certainty that Christ is everything, that Christ is the meaning, the turning point of everything. This is not just a bunch of words; it either becomes an experience, or we repeat these things but don't really believe in them. So in the end we keep trying to spare ourselves from everything we can, by avoiding things; then, when we can't do that, we rebel against the

circumstances. Let's use these next few weeks to see whether, by keeping all this in mind, when facing what the Lord puts in our lives (little or big – it's not always necessary to have exceptional events), anything changes in our lives; whether accepting this condition of sacrifice becomes a source of gladness, as Father Aldo was just saying.

School of Community. Let's continue with the second part of the chapter and the assembly, pages 76-102.

I am going to read to you the press release we prepared for Sunday, November 21:

CL: On Sunday, November 21, let us pray for the Christians of Iraq

Communion and Liberation follows the call of the Italian bishops to pray Sunday, November 21 for the Christians of Iraq, "who are suffering the tremendous trial of blood witness to the faith" (Final communiqué of the Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, November 11, 2010).

The Movement invites all its members to participate in Mass according to the intentions of Benedict XVI, who the day after the grave attack in the Syrian Catholic cathedral of Baghdad that left dozens dead and wounded, said, "I pray for the victims of this absurd violence, all the more savage because it struck defenseless people gathered in God's house, which is a house of love and reconciliation. I also express my affectionate closeness to the Christian community, struck once again, and encourage the pastors and faithful to be strong and steady in hope. In the face of the heinous episodes of violence that continue tearing the populations of the Middle East to pieces, I renew my grieved call for peace: it is the gift of God, but also the result of the efforts of people of good will, of national and international institutions. May everyone join their strengths to put an end to all violence!" (*Comments after the Angelus*, November 1, 2010).

Addressing all members of Communion and Liberation, Father Julián Carrón said that "participation in Sunday Mass according to the intentions of the Pope and the bishops is a gesture of real communion and charity because we feel that the Christians of Iraq are our friends, even if we do not know them directly."

As Father Giussani said, "If sacrifice is accepting the circumstances of life as they happen, because they make us correspondent, participants in the death of Christ, then sacrifice becomes the keystone of all life ... but also the keystone for understanding the history of man. The entire history of man depends on that man dead on the cross, and I can influence the history of man – I can influence the people who live in Japan now, the people in danger at sea now; I can intervene to help the pain of the women who lose their children now, in this moment – if I accept the sacrifice that this moment imposes" (Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way? vol. 3: Charity*, McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 74-75).

For this reason, added Carrón, "if a gesture of prayer can influence the change of people in Japan, it can also change something in Iraq. May the sacrifice we make for the Christians of Iraq and Sunday's prayer be a gesture with which we invoke, implore from God protection for them."

As we have always said, the criteria for judging politics are the common good and *libertas Ecclesiae* [the freedom of the Church]. So, in the current political situation in Italy we can do nothing but express all our sorrow, as Cardinal Bagnasco said in his inaugural address to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference on November 8: "We are distressed to see Italy stuck in its decision-making devices, while its people are dazed and disoriented." I think it would be hard to find a better explanation of the present situation. And for this reason, we also ask that all who are involved may cherish the destiny of Italy, that is to say, the common good for all, not only of the people of their own party, because if they don't, they won't even be able to save their own party; to think that it's possible to save one's own party at the cost of others is an absolute lack of realism. It is our individualistic mentality that brings us to these situations. For this reason, we accept the invitation of the president of the Bishop's Conference to "everyone to take a concrete and stable step toward solutions useful to this country and agreed upon by as many people as possible." We ask everybody to pray for this, and also that each one of us may do everything we can in this regard, in accord with individual responsibilities.

The Christmas poster has come out. Its image is William Congdon's *Nativity* (1960). This is the text:
"For us, God is not some abstract hypothesis; He is not some stranger who left the scene after the Big Bang. God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. In the face of Jesus Christ we see the face of God. In His words we hear God Himself speaking to us" (Benedict XVI).

"John and Andrew had faith, because they had certainty in a perceptible Presence. When they were there ... seated at His house, toward evening, looking at Him speak, there was a certainty in a perceptible Presence of something exceptional, of the divine in a perceptible Presence...

"Instead of Him with His hair in the wind, instead of watching Him speak with His mouth opening and shutting, He arrives through our presence, which is like ... fragile skin, the fragile masks of something powerful, which is He who lies within" (Luigi Giussani.)

I think that this is the biggest contribution we could possibly give to our friends.

With this poster, we would like to put into words the content of the path we are walking today. So read it, display it, look at it, repeat it, use it as an opportunity to become more aware of, and to communicate to everyone the experience that we have, that is, the judgment (without which there is no Christianity), and the gaze we bring to bear on reality. So, let it in your heart, show it to others, communicate it. May this gaze become, through our fragile skin, through our fragile masks, this gaze today. This is also the chance to verify whether the experience we are living makes us free enough to talk about it in reality, to bring it to the places where we live, so that this gaze that by the grace of God we have been able to recognize and receive may reach everybody, everyone who lives around us.

The Book of the Month for December and January is *Il cuore desidera cose grandi* [The Heart Desires Big Things] (BUR: Milan, 2010). This text gathers a selection of the main talks from this year's Meeting, so that we can take more time to read them and concentrate on what was said.

* *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*