

Notes from School of Community with Fr. Julian Carron
Milan, 1/13/10

Text of reference: L.Giussani, "Is it possible to live this way?", vol. 2, Hope", p. 123-153

Song: "Como busca"

Song: "Give me Jesus"

I was struck by Giussani's sentence on the Christmas Poster that says that we cannot sustain love for ourselves unless Christ is a presence now – now! - as a mother is a presence for her child. I was struck by this because during the past month some difficult circumstances happened to me, and I found that I was facing them in a different way, not any longer – I was telling a friend of mine – holding my breath as in a state of apnea, so that one enters in the morning holding his nose shut and hopes to get out as soon as possible. It was as if it was just not possible to avoid recognizing that this Presence was there, and because of this at night I was going to bed at peace. I understand that for me this recognition is decisive, because it was as if each time a feast had begun, and each time my heart wished for this feast to continue. After the Holidays I picked up again the article you wrote for Christmas, and I was struck by the passage that says: "Christianity needs to find the humanity that pulsates in each of us in order to show all the greatness of its claim". This struck me because it made me become aware that if I hadn't been like that, all that had happened couldn't have been a feast.

Christ needs to find our humanity. How did you see this happening in yourself?

First of all for the peace with which I was going to bed, as I said before, and also because I recognized that the circumstances were inexorably changing, and I only had to acknowledge it.

I wanted to tell you a simple fact that I think relates to the Christmas article. Very briefly, one evening I had a fierce argument with my wife because she had really made me angry. However, that evening – and I underline this detail – I was right, and the more I was thinking about it the more I was saying: "This time I am really the one who is right! And this time I am not going to give up, absolutely I am not going to give up!" I went to bed saying: "I am not giving up, tomorrow morning I am not even going to say Hi to her, because I am right!" The next morning I had been invited by some friends to go out for a walk. Already getting up one wonders about what is going to await for him – and so in a certain way a novelty had already been introduced -, but when I arrived at the village where they were waiting for me, seeing their face, the way they looked at me, I don't know what reflection they saw, but it ricocheted to me and in that moment I said "You!" (I cannot explain it in another way). But what struck me was that because of this something that entered I had to resist only for a few seconds, then I sent a message to my wife apologizing for the previous evening (because our argument had been pretty strong), and wishing her a good day. The problem per se was not solved, in the sense that we are still talking about it and we will face it, but this novelty that entered "melted" me in ten seconds.

This tells very well what is the situation we find ourselves in when we get stuck: it can be with your wife, on the job, it can be that I get mad with life (each of us can witness to this with many examples); and many times we think that we may solve the problem with our attempt, our project of perfection. Instead, what your witness describes is another thing: what changed you is to let in something else, to let in a Presence that undid your measure. This is important, because inevitably – each of us can recognize

it in his/her life – one faces these two possibility in any moment of the day. And this is Fr. Giussani's challenge: to enter the real with a different mentality. As the Lord teaches us, what is this different mentality, this different outlook? Not teaching a lesson, but making it happen. The content and the method of Christianity coincide. Making something happen, a Presence brings resolution, it "melts" us. For this reason the real problem is not so much if I can, or if I can't: I can't! Maybe I can partially, but it is different: one thing is to send a text-message reluctantly, another to send it being freed, and glad. The actions can almost be the same, but the human experience one lives is totally different. One is truly freed: it isn't that he has to give in saying to his wife that she is right, but he has to surrender to that Presence! The issue of true morality is to surrender or not to surrender to this Presence. So, when we find ourselves stuck – which is inevitable, for one reason or another we are not spared living life - what kind of dynamic occurs in us? Do we make our own attempt (and then we get angry because it doesn't work), or do we let a Presence enter? In the relationship with God there is no measure, otherwise it would be moralism; what we need it is not a measure, but a loving gaze. It is this loving gaze that finds my I, so angry, so stuck, so that the Mystery may "melt" me and say: "Look at who I am!" (because you cannot do it by yourself). But, to look Christ in the face it totally different from a project of perfection. This is a clear evidence of the difference of Christianity, which is an event, is something that happens.

When the Christmas article came out I considered it as something we already knew. Until, the other day a friend asks me: "But, did you read it?" The way he was saying it to me made me curious, and so I went and re-read it. But I stopped at the third line, when the question "Can an educated man, a European of our times, believe -truly believe- in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ?" hit me. I told myself: "I say 'Jesus' every single day. But, who are You truly for me? What do I experience when I point out with my finger and say You during my day? What happens to me, how can I be certain that it is You, and not an illusion?" Without spending too much time thinking about it, two things came to my mind. First, that something passes through Him that doesn't pass through anything else, that is, something almost impossible. Second, in these days I went to Kazakhstan with some friends to visit other friends, and seeing their face I told myself: "I cannot re-create a gladness such as this, a gladness that takes hold of them in these difficulties, in a hundred thousand situations so different than mine, I cannot re-create it, I don't have the means to re-create it". So, I ask: can I say: "You" because it takes hold of me in a way that is impossible to others?

What do you answer to this?

I answer yes: what did the Apostles see that I haven't seen yet?

The way in which He makes Himself present is something impossible for man. In fact, when people saw some of His miracles and faced that unique gaze, immediately had to think of God. Because what they were seeing was not possible based on the experience of life they had, it was impossible for them to generate it by themselves. In the same way, some exceptional facts or certain witnesses are so beyond our measure that we are the first to be surprised at being in front of the Mystery present. Last week I was in Dublin and I talked to a friend who had visited a prison for his job, and, knowing that someone he knew was an inmate there, had asked to see this person. When they met the other could not look at him in the face for the great shame he felt for the situation that had caused his imprisonment. My friend, instead, was surprised that he had been able to look at this person. I wish all of you could have been there to listen to him as he was talking about this, because he couldn't take in what had happened, so much was he surprised by it: it wasn't something he could attribute to some training of his, or to moralism, or to ethics ("We have to look at others like this"). And looking at him talking, I was in turn amazed, moved by his attempt to find an explanation: in that gaze there was something greater. The

most persuasive sign that Christ is God, the greatest miracle that struck everybody, even greater than the straitened legs or the recovered eye-sight, was a gaze without comparison; and the sign that Christ is not a theory or a set of rules is that gaze that I cannot create (trying to be consistent with the rules). The Gospel is full of His way to treat the human, to enter into relationship with those He met on His way. But not only this: what amazes me is that we wouldn't have been able to notice even this attraction of His gaze described in the Gospel if Fr. Giussani had not educated us, witnessing it. My friends, this is the sign of the divine in the charism! Because it is impossible that something like this may be generated by man, and I'm not even talking about us, but Giussani (with all his greatness and human stature). Then, how can I – an educated European of our time, believe this? Not as the result of a discourse, not as the result of logics, but because – educated by a father – I see these facts in all their depth:” Be aware that the ultimate reason for this difference is that I am God”. This is the only adequate explanation to this experience. Then, regarding Dostoevskij's question, the problem is that in the cultural climate we live in we cannot sustain faith in an adequate manner, with awareness and depth, without that full use of reason that an educated European of our time has when he is faithful to the great tradition that precedes him. This is why we should not eliminate either an entire education or an entire culture, but instead use each according to its true nature. This is the only adequate way for faith today, otherwise the wind robs us of everything, as we well see. And this is the work we are forced to do in front of the question our friend asked earlier: is it an illusion or is it something that I am forced to recognize? As we read on p. 104, “.....reason cannot perceive ‘the presence of Jesus among us’, ‘Christ is here now’, the way it perceives that you are here, do you understand?! Yet, it cannot *not* admit that He is here. Why? Because there is a factor within [...] a factor so surprising that if I don't affirm something else I don't give reasons for the experience, because reason is to affirm experiential reality according to all the factors that make it up, all of the factors”. That is: in order to believe today it is not enough that it happens, it is necessary that I use reason according to its true nature to grasp that ultimate factor without which I cannot give reasons for the experience I have. And we have the grace to see these things, we see facts like these all the time; the issue is if we stop at the emotional impact these facts provoke in us, and afterwards everything vanishes, or if we continue to the point of recognizing, giving the total reason for the experience we are having.

I have two examples and a question. Since October, when School of Community resumed, I was following what you were saying and something was bringing me to say: “The method he tells us about is correct, it makes me give reasons for the experience I am having, but it seems artificial; however, I apply it because I know that following Carron in my life in the end I did have the experience”. But, these two facts that happened to me made me realize that the method is not artificial at all. The first fact is this: thirteen years ago on December 4th my mother died, and this year, as every year, on that day I went to Mass. I was alone, because who remembers any more that my mother is dead? I don't have brothers or sisters, my father is dead, so I was alone and really sad, even if I was at Mass in front of Christ I was really sad, I felt desolate thinking: “Who cares for my mother's life, for my mother's destiny, for what she has been, for this promise of eternity? I am here, but what happened to her? Ashes” And I was at Mass full of skepticism (you can imagine how I feel about life!).

Where was the mistake there?

That I was not in front of Christ.

The problem is not that others forget, it's not a mystery that weakness is weak, isn't it? The problem is that our hope is not that others remember, but that One remembers. If you forget me, but Christ remembers me, it is enough for me.

The problem is, I repeat, that even if I was at Mass I was not in front of Christ.

This forces us to go to the bottom of this, otherwise we always continue to rest on something very fragile.

But, Christ's tenderness was so overabundant that at the time of the Sign of Peace I turned and saw a person that had given a witness few days before at this School of Community, and to see him and to think of what School of Community had been here with you, surprised and moved me, because in that instant it was as if I understood that there is a good destiny for myself and for my mother. I don't know how, but it was not a thought of mine or an artificial reasoning, it was a surprise of the fact that I was there kneeling in front of Him. And right there an entire history of moments passed in front of my eyes, all the people who accompanied my mother, who are.....

And who continue to be present.

Exactly.

Sometimes we let the impression of being alone take hold of us, but when you are at Mass you are ontologically together with the entire Christian community. Sometimes this method puzzles us, it seems artificial to us: "And what am I going to do now that I don't see anybody here with me?" But if you don't go to the bottom of this, if you don't use the weapon you have – reason – to become aware of everything that is happening in that moment, you become stuck; instead, if you don't let that measure – sorrow - take hold and you go to the bottom, in the end this will allow you to recover everything.

The other example is that this year my daughter started first grade and I thought of becoming classroom parent because it is a duty: I am closer to the other mothers, I am more involved with school (a whole set of good intentions). Then, exactly all the things you said in the past months provoked me, because in the end all the good intentions, all this good reasoning, were not enough for me, so much so that after the third meeting you are bored, after the third fund-raising you are bored; then, I forced myself to recognize why I took on this responsibility, and the only adequate answer is 'since I love my daughter, somehow I want to be of service to this experience she is having'. And what happened? That when school ended I saw a mother from Africa who doesn't know Italian well, yet, and the night before I had gone to School of Community and for the first time I looked at her differently, I looked at the face of this woman without my own project in mind, just listening to her talking about totally trivial things of daily life, but I had this perception: "I wonder, Lord, where are you leading me through this face?" so much so that now I have a preference for the face of this mother, even over those who are more my friends; when I see her at the end of school, maybe we don't even talk, but she reminds me of my need to beg Christ, and also this has been a surprise, because what you tell us is not artificial.

For me this is essential: being part of a place that introduces to a new knowledge, she (having been to School of Community) caught in herself a different gaze on reality. This newness of our gaze is the cognitive value of the encounter: Christ is the One who widens my reason, who introduces me to a way of looking at people, at reality, taking in all the mystery that lies within it. At the bottom of p. 126 it says: "Our life belongs to Another – we'll put it that way to abbreviate the understanding – strange in itself, enigmatic, mysterious; we are used to calling it God, but we can't even call it God, we don't have the right to call it God [because we think that God is 'something we already know'] if we don't perceive it in its elusive mystery". Then, further down it continues: "For this reason man's life is dramatic, [...]"

is made of humanity, in which the I recognizes that everything that is belongs to You, even if this You veils itself in something enigmatic, mysterious”. We know that the Mystery is present because He introduces this element of mystery in life, widens reason, increases the capacity of perceiving in all its depth the reality we have in front of us when we look at each other. I was in London during the weekend and a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer told me he perceives his illness as a sign of the preference the Mystery has for him, however not in banal terms, taking it for granted, but as a fact that makes him discover truly that life doesn't belong to him, that he cannot possess his own life, that he cannot control it, that his life is not in his own hands. In this sense it is a preference – since we are all condemned to die, cancer or not cancer -, because it introduces a depth of awareness of myself that makes me more true, makes me more aware of what constitutes me, of who is the Mystery to whom I belong. When speaking of time, Fr. Giussani affirms two things: that time doesn't belong to us (that is, that life doesn't belong to us) and that this Mystery to whom our life belongs has gifted us with a place that makes us more aware of Him. “And instead we are embraced. A companionship fastens around our waists, a companionship that continually recalls us to destiny, to the Mystery who makes things for our good, for our destiny of happiness. This Mystery is good, this enigmatic You is good”. He gives us a place like this so that we can look in this way at the other, at a disease, at circumstances, at our wife, at our friends, at everything, with this enigmatic, mysterious density. It is the difference between something flat and something three-dimensional! This is what Christ introduces, this depth in our look at daily life, at what happens in life. And He makes this happen in us at specific moments, so that afterwards this way of entering into relationship with reality may become ever more familiar, affecting us daily. Then, everything speaks to us with an intensity we never dreamed before. Now, your question.

After all these things I have seen, that once again I have experienced, I am reading the CLU Exercises. And when they speak about the flyer on the issue of the Crucifixes I felt truly ashamed, because I would defend the Cross for the cultural reason as well. Instead, you introduce the question of asking ourselves who the man hanging on the Cross is for me. There I was really petrified, because I thought that I put in action all of.....

The cultural aspect is not wrong. It is an aspect, but it is not what saves us! In fact, it doesn't give the reason for your experience.

In fact, in those two things that happened to me..... the nostalgia I feel talking to you about that African mother, which is how I would like to look at my husband everyday, - that is, not knowing him -.... I cannot eliminate this nostalgia saying: “It is a matter of culture or a racial issue”.

The flyer insists exactly on this point.

However, it is incredible how one wants to follow you, and then it is always another thing.

And, how does School of Community correct you? Here it speaks of shame, but immediately he brings it back to sorrow, because shame is still all centered on your inability, and this is what provokes your shame. But, the true issue is not the shame, what do you care about your shame? Shame is useless. The issue here is, my dearest friend, that there is a place that always takes hold of you again: at a certain point something else takes over, and the fact that there is a place that is always taking hold of you again makes you happier and sweeps you away more than the shame provoked by your inability. It is the shift of your affectivity. If this doesn't prevail we are like everybody else, in the end we expect the solution from our ability of performing: we are poor people. This is why it is impossible that at a certain moment we can possess the discourse or that we can possess Christianity: we do not possess it, we always need

this contemporaneousness of Christ present, than opens us wide constantly, that – we were saying earlier – constantly breaks through our measure, because what prevails is that He is, He is and continues to be present for you today. And slowly, one is ever more moved by this enormous affection for us, and our whole affection is magnetized by Him. Not at all like: “I already know it”! No, one is ever more amazed of not becoming bored (because with the others we become bored very quickly.....). And we start to perceive with regularity this diversity, whose only explanation is the divine: it is a You that dominates, and so make us ever more His.

Recently I have become aware of the difficulty of the period I am going through. In fact, in the past two months I have suddenly become unable to handle the day to day routine of my life as before. I am married with five children, and more and more often I was getting to the end of the day without having been able to finish my daily tasks, I was not able to keep up with the needs of a normal family life (children, school, visits to the doctor), I was starting to forget one thing after the other, I was starting to lose it. I thought that all this might have been the natural consequence to the death of my father, which happened last August, and in particular the result of the psychological and physical stress of the six months of illness that preceded his death, made even more demanding by the fact that my last daughter was a newborn at the time. It was as if suddenly I had found myself depleted of all the energy I had used in that period. After my father's death I had even decided to go back to work, I had thought of a new kind of job (I am a Doctor) that seemed compatible with my responsibilities as a mother, and I even liked it, but I haven't received any offer yet. For the first time in my life I found myself in a situation of great weakness, strongly in contrast with the kind of person I had always been, certainly not a perfect model of domestic organization, but always independent, self-assured. The natural reasons for this setback and the thought that time would have improved the situation were not enough for me, I couldn't recognize myself, so incapable, so ineffectual, and I did not like to see myself like that. Then, I saw the article published on the Corriere della Sera, and reading it and re-reading it I started to have a growing tenderness for myself: my limit, my inability and the resulting dissatisfaction were the most evident sign of my true nature; God was giving me this “depression” so that I could ask, with the same insistence I had asked with in other moments, that He could happen again in my day and that I could recognize Him, certain of this experience, and certain of having seen Him witnessed abundantly also around me, which is the only thing that truly fulfills the desire of my heart. It is true that I was more distressed, but in a certain sense I was more sincere and more honest in seeing myself so full of need than unfailingly organized. Then, I stopped placing my expectation for a possible change in my awkward attempts, such as: since I cannot get things done, I will get up early in the morning so I will get out having already accomplished something. Or: nobody gets out of this house without having made their bed, cleaned up after breakfast, put their room in order. Or: I will join a gym, because after five kids I have to get back in shape, I don't like myself anymore like this, my self-esteem will grow. It's not that each of these things is wrong per se – because, it is better if the kids go out after having made their bed, and it is better to exercise than not to exercise -, but because I was looking at these things as if they were the remedy to a wound that instead is better to be left open; I carry within me the certainty that what is important is not what happens to me, especially when it does not correspond to what I would like or even seems unjust, but how I use these circumstances: if they become the occasion that spurs me into asking with more sincerity and more insistence that the Mystery makes Himself present. Even this is welcome, because when I see the Mystery face to face, Jesus will not ask me how capable I was or how well I kept myself in shape; He will ask me: “But you, how much did you love me?”

Look, in all these human, very human stories what we were talking about at the beginning re-occurs: in order to show the full extent of its claim Christianity needs to find the humanity that vibrates in each one of us. Many times we are tempted – I state in the article – to think about our humanity not as a help but

as an obstacle, a complication, a hindering factor, and we try to “fix it”. In doing so, though, we already show a judgment on the origin of the unease that we feel; so much so that our attempts (good intentions, going to the gym, self-esteem, etc...) imply a gaze on that unease. In short: we often think about all this as the symptom of a disease or of something wrong that we have to fix (according to the solutions we can think up,) instead of as the signs of our own greatness, of the mystery that is in us. Furthermore, this judgment we give determines the way we try to answer, because in reducing the needs we also reduce the answer. As you very well said, you shifted your search for an answer to your wound somewhere else, to a relationship with Him. When were you able to do this? When, reading the article, you felt tenderness for yourself: this is a need that is not reduced, humanity that is not reduced. It then becomes clear that these difficulties are symptoms of something else, of a greater need. The problem is that, for us, this is often the last resort: we first try exercising, good intentions, check ups, and only then, if something is still unresolved – thanks god that’s always the case – we think about Christ...We then discover that we had indeed given a judgment, but an incomplete one. When do we realize that our judgment was incomplete? When we start to perceive a tenderness that answers our needs even more than all our thoughts put together: we then understand the nature of our uneasiness. If this does not occur, Christ cannot show who He is, and therefore we don’t have reasons for our faith. On the contrary, when you see Him at work you understand: “If I were not Yours, my Christ, I would feel like a finished creature.” What wins is the fact that He is, and that He comes to meet you in a surprising way, even in the midst of all of your reductions, responding to your uneasiness in a more adequate way. We need to understand very well that one of the most usual ways in which we are affected by the common mentality is this reduction of the I to the preceding factors.

I was struck by a very simple sentence on page 144 (vol.2 Hope): “John and Andrew had faith, because they had certainty in a perceptible Presence”, because the day after Christmas we got the news that my father had been diagnosed with lung cancer, and I didn’t know how to keep him company. Later on I realized that the problem wasn’t keeping company to my father; I need company. I immediately talked to a couple of my closer friends who, lovingly, tried to make me keep my head up. I usually have no difficulties approaching reality, and I have always been determined to become passionate about what I need to face. In this circumstance though I understood that I needed to go down on my knees and ask for everything. I then sent an e-mail to my friends, saying; “Look, I am not hiding behind a finger. I don’t understand anything about this situation; we need to kneel down and ask for everything.” In a very loving way all these friends of my Fraternity started inviting me over for dinner, or calling me in the morning. They also did something very beautiful: they asked their sons and daughters – about thirty children in all – to pray for my father. You see, this was a certain good: their friendship was giving voice to the prayer that I wasn’t able to say. I then called my children, I explained what was happening to grandpa, and I asked them to go every now and then to visit him and to ask after him. The next morning I opened the door of my father’s room and then I started to visit him every day to check on him. I am learning that I need to have an experience of the face of Christ and that I need somebody who can carry my desire, my need, when I am not even able to ask. I need someone to remind me that that “yes” is possible.

Thank you, because what you said introduces the main point of the next chapter of School of Community. Many times, as he said, what first comes to mind is to answer somebody else’s problem (his dad’s), but then we realize that we in the first place are needy, and that only if we find an answer others can take advantage of the superabundance of what overflows from us - so much so that you became able to look at your father and to talk to your children. This speaks volumes about the true nature of our need: in order to speak about charity we have to be aware of this need. The example you gave make us all understand that things will not work out if you just say: “I get it all now. I have to be

charitable toward my father and accompany him through his illness.” Because we can never forget, wherever we are in our journey, the needy nature of our “I”. It is for this reason that the Pope in *Deus caritas est* affirms that charity (God’s own love) “ is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are. ” What your contribution clearly shows is that you, in that situation, became aware of who you are, that is to say, you can’t answer your father’s need directly. In order to answer to your father you have first to take a step; to be able to answer you need something else, you need somebody to answer your own need. This helps us understand that we can’t go about it the way we usually do, i.e. talking about charity while immediately taking care of what we have to do for others. This is what came naturally to you (the first image that comes to mind is this): you forgot about yourself and tried to take care of your father. We can keep somebody else company, if first and foremost there is Someone who keeps us company. This is what Father Giussani very effectively points out in the first section of this chapter on charity: the true charity is that God had pity on our nothingness. This precedence of Christ’s action toward us helps us not to reduce Christianity, once again, to ethics. The first charity is the boundless charity of the Mystery toward us. For this reason the Bible always talk about this “first”: God loved us first; we are the ones who have known God’s love first, and then have believed because of this love. This is what makes us able to understand the second question that the Pope suggests: who is God? This is yet something else that we take for granted; we are so used to talking about God, to hearing about God’s love, that we take it for granted. We have to understand the full extent of the newness that Christ introduces. We have to be aware that according to ancient religions God was unable to love, because ancient peoples only understood love as desire, *eros*, love that lacks something; therefore recognizing that the gods had desires would have contradicted the very concept of divinity. Christianity - which had a thoroughly different experience of God- needed to insist not on *eros*, but on *agape*. It used another Greek word to underline the new nature of this love, which is indeed born not from a lack, but from the superabundance of the Trinity; from the superabundance of what the Trinity lives within Itself, and that wants to share with human beings. The nature of the Mystery is thus revealed. It is for this reason that Father Giussani tells us that the journey that we have followed through faith and hope leads us, with charity, to the intimacy of that Presence; and it makes us understand why John and Andrew were fascinated with that Man, whose heart was boundless charity, and tenderness answering their true need. The poet Mario Luzi asks himself: “What is this lack a lack of?” Only if we are aware of this lack we can truly understand God’s nature; and God’s nature, in turn, makes us aware of what this lack is a lack of. This is the exciting prospect with which we begin this new part of School of Community. Next time we will get together having worked on pages 3-19 of the new book (Vol. 3, Charity). In the meantime I also suggest you read the booklet of the recent Clu Exercises, which is enclosed in Traces’ January issue. There you will find an in-depth development of the content of my Christmas article, published by *Corriere della Sera* and *El Mundo*. I think it will be a useful tool to accompany our work on School of Community. *Glory be*