

Notes from School of Community with Father Julián Carrón
Milan, May 25, 2016

Reference text: L. Giussani, “The Three Constituent Factors,” in Why the Church? McGill-Queen’s, 2001, pp. 87-95; J. Carrón, “Introduction,” in “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have had pity on your nothingness.” CL US website: http://english.clonline.org/default.asp?id=559&id_n=21371, pp. 1-12.

- *Non son sincera*
- *Haja o que houver*

Glory Be

We began the Fraternity Exercises recognizing that we have a great need, that we are sinners. However, we are often unaware of this. We think that ultimately the nature of our need is not so radical as this and that we could almost manage on our own if we tried our best. Sooner or later, though, it becomes clear to us that this is really not true, like we saw in the disciples: years of sharing their life with Him were not enough to answer their needs, their fears, their sadness and their tears. For this reason, it is crucial we realize that not even recognizing our need is enough, because we often reduce it to what we can’t understand. On the contrary, we become truly aware of the nature of our need only in front of a Presence. This is why I will start with a question I received via email from a person who lives far away: “I would like to understand and look more deeply into the connection between “*God’s style*” [point 1] and “*Sign of the times*” [point 2] of the Introduction on Friday evening. In particular, I was struck by your description of epochal change. I am a high-school teacher, and I constantly notice in students and colleagues that attitude of the man who says it is God who needs to justify Himself. I consider it a sort of arrogance—I hope my words are not too strong. What saddens me most is that this distances me from people, making the relationships arid and cold. As I read the second point I was struck by Pope Francis’ description. The Pope has a profound sensitivity toward contemporary man, an understanding of his condition, a heartfelt compassion for his restlessness and for his wounds; and the answer to man’s wounded soul is the concrete experience of mercy. My question is: How do we get from the description of man to the experience of mercy, to say that mercy is the answer to everything that has to do with our humanity? I am interested in looking at this more in-depth, because the gaze the Pope has on man is the gaze I would like to have on the people I meet daily, people toward whom, instead, I often feel indifferent. In the end, that is the gaze I experience on myself in the encounter with Christ.” Why is it so crucial to connect the two points, that is, God’s gentle style and the change of our epoch? Because today no one can think that, given all of the self-awareness modern man has, God can somehow be imposed on man. This is why Pope Benedict’s description is fundamental, as we can see in ourselves. It is only this gentle style of God, this “tenderness of God”—as Pope Francis said to the Mexican Bishops—that can really win over today’s man. This is especially crucial, as we can see in our relationships: at school, in daily life, etc. It is not a matter of arrogance, but the fact that—as Fr. Giussani always told us by quoting the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—if one doesn’t understand the connection between God’s style and human need, it is unreasonable to acknowledge Him: “Nothing is so incredible as the answer to a question that is not asked” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, II, London/NY,

1943 (1964), pp. 6-7). This is why the first attempt of the Exercises is to identify clearly, thanks to the exceptional companionship of Benedict XVI (who in turn quotes John Paul II and Francis), what is the crack through which today's man can recognize his own need, and perceive the answer to this need in the way in which God acts toward him. Without this—which is precisely God's "justification"—we can only live in a defensive position. In fact, on the one hand we see this need, and on the other we would like to have this kind of gaze on reality, a gaze not often immediate. This is the way in which Fr. Giussani always communicated Christianity to us. He started the Movement with a purpose: to show how faith is relevant to life's needs; to show that Christianity is the answer to these needs. Therefore, only if the Christian announcement answers life's needs today will man be able to recognize it, to perceive it as relevant. How does this happen? What is the journey we are making? What experience did we have? How does this approach that Benedict XVI and Francis have given to us begin to have an impact?

When at the Exercises you quoted the point you are revisiting now, that is, that God has to rise to the challenge, it was very important to me, because it turned around the way in which I went back to the classroom. Somehow, I always thought that it is up to the students to rise to the challenge, to my definition of it. In the end, since I create my own image of how they should be, this leads me—along with most of my colleagues—to be disappointed or to complain because the students are not up to the challenge. Instead, when you said that God has to show that He is...

It isn't that the teachers don't have a great desire to respond to this. However, if one starts from a wrong approach, the whole attempt will hit a wall. One can do it with the students or with one's children or coworkers. One can do it with everyone!

True. In fact, afterwards, on the Monday after the Exercises, I went back to the classroom and was asking myself how God's gentle style can become my own as I teach, so that I can stay in front of the students as they are and not as I would like them to be. A particular situation presented itself. During this time at the end of the school year the kids are all anxious because they have tests...

Especially with teachers like you!

*Clearly. So, what did I do? I challenged them, saying, "We have to break this routine. We have to stop it, because it is not human." I did it prompted by a correct idea of what is human. A girl came to me and said, "Listen, we have to have the tests, and I want to do the best I can, but what do you want? Why do you want something different? And what is it? I want to do well the work requested for this month, and this work is to study." She is shy and I didn't expect her to respond like this, so I was taken aback. In the meantime, I remembered what Fr. Giussani had told us in Viterbo: "The very characteristic of a presence is to judge what happens instead of creating an alternative project, because this is added to or reduces the presence itself." ("Viterbo 1977," in L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, SEI, Turin 1995, p. 79). Then, I started to try and understand what this student wanted. Instead of bringing her to me, I tried to turn my approach around. In the conversation with her I discovered that I was the one who had to justify himself instead of her rising to the challenge! What is the purpose of doing something different when they need to study? Little by little I discovered that need, that is, I discovered how she studies, how she is studying. I started to compare myself with her difficulties, with what she finds hard, and through her with what the class finds difficult. Right there it became clear to me that the point is not studying like I can study, but how they do it. I was called to share their need, otherwise I impose on them what I would like studying to be. This turning things around became more interesting for me, I felt more true as a teacher, because little by little it made me understand that there was a freedom, a*

humanity that needed to be shared. In fact, her smile and her gladness were evident when she told me, “Finally an adult who treats me starting from my need instead of telling me what I have to do.” I was very struck by this, because right there I understood that the gentle style is not a technique, but the way to really embrace what is human. I had a correct idea of what is human, but I had gotten rid of her.

“I had a correct idea of what is human, but I had gotten rid of her.” Why?

Because I had my teacher’s idea of what their need and mine was supposed to be. I wasn’t letting myself being embraced first.

I think that this tells us what a long journey is still ahead of us. You described it: you thought that you had understood the girl’s problem, but instead you had created an abstract image of that girl. The real, historical, concrete girl that you had before you was the one who started to have a conversation with you. She threw you off balance and then you started to try to understand. Without realizing it, you are using Benedict XVI’s word, “Slowly”—because one doesn’t recognize it right away. This turning around happens, and I am the one who has to try to understand what is happening in her so that my action, my answer, may be perceived as relevant to her need. Therefore, I am the one who has to justify himself, to show that the answer I give to this girl is taking into account all of the factors: not only the correct idea of studying, but the person who has to study, the historical subject I have before me. We usually would say: “Once someone has the right idea, then everything is fine,” thinking that we had grasped reality in all of its complexity. On the contrary, we start to see that our idea of “right” is at times rather limited, and eliminates an enormous amount of factors that reveal our gaze is not completely right, actually quite the contrary. I see this because I start to become aware of the difficulties. I start to recognize certain aspects of reality that were right there, but that until that moment I was not seeing with sufficient clarity. You had not started from their need. This—you say—was a moment that turned things around, first of all for you. How much do we have to learn this! It makes you more true as a teacher, or makes a judge more true as a judge, or a father with his son, or a coworker with his coworker, or the inmate with the guard who is undressing him, as we saw in the amazing example I quoted in Rimini (“*I loved you with an everlasting love. I have had pity on your nothingness.*” Lesson 2, p. 65). It isn’t that our friend in jail gave the wrong judgment, he doesn’t say that being treated like that is right. No. It is wrong, it is unpleasant. Yet, how could the prison guard do anything different if no one ever looked at him differently? “I understood that it is not their fault. Why should one be blamed if he hasn’t had the encounter, if he didn’t meet someone who loves him gratuitously and consequently taught him to love; how can one do it without such a guide?! Why should one be blamed if he doesn’t have a witness to follow [...]? I looked at them with a great tenderness, not because I was happy to undress [the judgment is clear] or to be treated like that, no. I looked at them with a great tenderness, because if one has been treated like this in his life, consequently he treats those whom he meets in the same manner. He was given dignity first, thus he behaves accordingly with those that he meets!” (Lesson 2, p. 66). One needs to open wide his gaze and become aware of all of the factors, without stopping only at the level of “right and wrong,” precisely because this “right or wrong” has to do with the whole history of the student, with the whole history of the prison guard. Otherwise, it will be difficult to make steps forward. Because, in the end, what happens? In facing reality we realize that we didn’t understand the magnitude of our need. Therefore, since we didn’t understand the magnitude of our need, we are not able to grasp the need of the other. When one begins to realize this and turns things around, one starts to see what one wasn’t seeing before. We are not visionaries. It doesn’t mean that at a certain point

you become a visionary. You simply started to see what you didn't see before. The need of that girl was right in front of you, but you didn't see it due to an idea—even though correct—that you had.

At the Exercises I was deeply struck by the description of God's being revealed slowly, little by little. However, in my experience, I notice that this gentle method annoys me. I would like everything to reveal itself clearly, and I identify with those who, in front of the description of God's mercy, say that in real life, true life, things don't work out like that.

This is what we suspect, more or less openly...

Despite having been deeply moved at the Exercises, despite the embrace I personally experienced, the true help in making all of the need one experiences emerge, I realize that ultimately in daily life this statement—that in real life mercy doesn't work—still rules. Therefore, when I live the aridity of my workday, or when I realize that I find it difficult to be true in my relationships, one needs a great simplicity to look honestly at one's friends and the people in the community. Or, when painful things happen, I realize that in spite of the fact that the questions are there, in this dialogue with the Presence something new is missing. We were saying: the mercy of God reaches us to the extent that one asks. I often find myself asking, but with a great underlying skepticism. So, my question to you is: Why does this skepticism linger, and what is the road to begin to get rid of it?

Why do you think that this underlying skepticism remains?

Perhaps because in the end one is not really loyal to his need.

Let's leave this point open, because we have to look it in the face. Why does this skepticism remain? When Mary Magdalene is there weeping, is it just skepticism, or is it that in the end the magnitude of the problem is greater than her ability to solve it? We call it skepticism, but in the end it is a powerlessness: what we would like doesn't work, or we aren't able to make it work according to our images. Jesus' words often come back to mind, "Without me you can do nothing." Yet, in the end we think that Jesus is exaggerating a little, because "nothing" is too much. This is why, when we are facing certain overwhelming situations—where does the skepticism come from? It doesn't come from Christ: it comes from having reduced the nature of the problem, from having thought that, in the end, it is in our own hands. And, after many attempts, we become skeptical of our attempts. We agree perfectly: it is clear that we are not able. The question is whether there is any other possibility! This is why we should not fight this skepticism in an abstract way; rather, we must see, we must look at the facts that allow us to challenge this skepticism.

About a year ago at work I was asked to change my job completely, and I had to learn everything anew. From the beginning, I identified among those who worked with me a young woman who could help me, one who is very good and whom I trust deeply. However, before giving her a certain position, I observed her; and this year, due to personal problems, she worked very poorly, really poorly, to the point of almost having to fire her. Therefore, I had to ask another person to take that position. Yet, I was really sad, because I care for her and I was seeing that she was throwing herself away. Not due to her actions—we are all poor wretches—but because in those actions she was detaching herself from all ties, she was thinking of herself as alone. One day I had to tell her about the internal changes at work and let her know that, in fact, another person had gotten a promotion that could have been hers. I was feeling terrible, and I was wondering how I could break the news to her. I thought that in telling her I had to affirm a good for her, then she could

have reacted the way she wanted. I took her to lunch and asked her, “How did you work this year?” She admitted that she had worked very poorly, that she knew it, that her mind was elsewhere. I answered her that the situation was exactly as she had described it and that she had missed a great job opportunity, but that in the end what made me feel worse was how she wasn’t taking herself seriously. I told her, “What saved and saves me is to always have a place where there is a You who embraces and forgives me, and I don’t want to lose that embrace. I go away, I do the worst things, but I always return because I know that it exists. Only in looking at Him and being with Him do I know what is right.” She said that she strongly desired something like that, but that she hadn’t found it yet. It was Thursday. The next day she came with me to the Exercises for Young Workers. She is a Buddhist, but only by tradition; actually, she is an atheist, with many personal problems, health and family issues—in short, many things. She didn’t know where we were going and asked whether she should bring light or warm clothes. But I asked her to come and she did. I asked a friend of mine to stay with her and we were all together. She spent her entire time at the Exercises silent, with arms folded. However, in the evening, I heard her singing in the shower. Then we went home. On Monday, we worked together for the entire day and she didn’t say anything. I left work and the next minute I got a text in which she asked if I could give her my notes, because she wanted to go over some things. One thing surprised me the most: after she came back she started to work very well again, as she hadn’t done in a year. A coworker of ours who is a Muslim told me, “Will you take me as well next year? Because she has a face...” Then she said, “No, they are Catholic Exercises, we will go to the hot springs!” Yet, she noticed that her face was different. It is really a changed face that moves things.

It is a changed face, that is, a fact and not my attempt that can respond to skepticism. It is recognizing something. Because this person had worked very poorly and no attempt had been enough. Instead, at a certain point something happens, a presence that is different from our own attempt intervenes, and this person begins again. This is how it works in reality, isn’t it? Or do we just imagine it? We can’t continue to repeat certain things without lying, because we hear facts like these every day when we get together: facts that exceed any measure we may have. Then, when we find ourselves before something that exceeds our measure, the question is not, “Since it exceeds our measure it is impossible and I am skeptical.” The question is whether we return to those facts that challenge and overcome our skepticism! This is why ideas, explanations, or other kinds of reasoning are not enough to respond to our skepticism: only facts can challenge it. So that in front of skepticism one can say, like the man born blind, “Look, all of your skepticism doesn’t affect me, because before I was blind and now I can see.” There is no other way of breaking through even our most skeptical thoughts. The only thing that can really challenge them are the facts. Therefore, if one doesn’t let himself be touched by the facts, doesn’t open his gaze to another possibility because of what happens in reality—not in our imagination, *in reality*—then when he has this skeptical reaction he remains blocked. This in itself doesn’t solve the problem, but the facts open a crack in the wall of our skepticism. All the rest still needs to be done, because only when I open myself to this possibility do I start to see, and can start to see that something else is possible.

I will recount an experience I had in the past week that helped me to enter into what you told us on Friday evening. I have a coworker who is really goodhearted and generous but can’t stand the presence of the refugees and, like others in her family, often says that she would shoot them all, that they should not come in, that we should build walls, etc. This is made worse by the fact that

her husband has been laid off, a difficult situation. At work we don't talk much, but I often tried to say to her, "It is a fact, we will have to face it more and more," or, "It could be a resource also for us," obviously not making her change one iota. Until a family member who lives with them was hospitalized for a very serious and sudden illness affecting one of his lungs. He found himself in the hospital, and in the bed next to him was a Pakistani refugee in very precarious health who had just arrived in Italy.

The Mystery really strikes home!

After the initial sense of annoyance, a relationship began between them. The Pakistani, who is really not well, got out of bed and replaced the oxygen tube of this elderly man when it got unhooked. Little by little, small things like that started to happen, small gestures of humanity. The man who was prejudiced, who had this huge hatred, asked his relatives to take all of his old clothes, the objects he no longer used, and give them to the Pakistani. My coworker even came to me and, full of compassion, told me, "His story is dramatic, he left behind his wife and children...it is a very hard situation." In short, the entire family became attached to this man, to the point of going to say good-bye when he was transferred to another ward. On Friday evening you quoted Fr. Giussani: "The Church does not cheat" ...because "everything she says and does is totally open to anyone's verification. Her formula is: test me, test me! She totally abandons her proposal to the content of your experience: you are the one to judge." And he adds, "You can't get any more open than this! [...] The Church does not cheat, in the sense that she does not impose anything that you, even if not convinced, can't help but recognize." ("I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have had pity on your nothingness," p. 5). Then, considering these small facts that happen in reality, I am grateful to learn the method from these poor people: to be open. Open to God, the Mystery (who remains a mystery) provokes my freedom, loved and loves my freedom in front of everything.

It is striking. In front of a person with this attitude (that can be our own) before a stranger, a Pakistani refugee can be used by the Mystery with this gentle method precisely to turn that attitude around. What imagination the Mystery has in using the most pertinent thing, seemingly in complete contrast with what we desire. "You don't like them? You are not open to embrace another who is different? Then I put him next to you. I put him next to you to widen your reason, to widen your gaze, to open your heart wider, to show you that your heart is more than what you reduce it to." It is impressive, because then we can really understand how God's method is totally appropriate, so much so that it renders us open wide: "Tell me whether this affection corresponds to you more or less compared to the measure you had before." No type of discourse could have ever made a dent in such deeply-rooted conviction. It was a fact, a presence that revealed itself in all of its complexity that made his entire attitude change. Only if we are open to this, everything is possible to God: even overcoming, time after time, all of our skepticism.

I have a question. I think that we often mistake our heart, with all of its needs that are so true and deep, with self-love or with our own interests. What is the difference between one's heart and self-love, or between one's heart and one's interests?

Thank you. This question is crucial for everyone, because it is true that often we mistake the heart with self-love. What is the difference? If we read carefully what the Pope says, we start to understand: "At the root of the oblivion of mercy there is always *self-love*. In the world, this [self-love] takes the form of exclusively seeking one's own interests, pleasures and honors joined with the desire to accumulate wealth, whereas in the life of a Christian it is often disguised in hypocrisy

and worldliness. All of these things are contrary to mercy” (*General Audience*, December 9, 2015). What is the difference between the heart and self-love? The heart, by its own nature, is need of totality. Self-love reduces this need, because ultimately it makes us be content with the crumbs of our interests or of our worldliness; nothing in comparison with the need of the heart, and therefore unable to fulfill it. As the Pope says, what prevails is the desire to accumulate or to fill the void with things that ultimately, due to their very nature, are not able to fully correspond to us. Our friends in Uganda were telling me that a friend who works for an airline company went to visit them. He had met the Movement sometime before, had participated for a while and then was no longer very involved. By chance someone gave him the DVD *La strada bella [The Beautiful Road]*, and he found again the faces of those he had met and who had made the Movement so captivating for him. Thus, since he works for an airline company, he got the idea of asking to be assigned to a flight that could let him visit the friends he had seen in the DVD. After several attempts he was successful. He flew to Uganda, but he arrived at a very beautiful resort and had such a great time that he forgot why he had gone there! He reduced his desire to that. One can see this because, as soon as he was taking off to get back, he became very sad for having missed the opportunity he had created. The heart doesn’t make allowances. One can suppress it for any other interest, but it isn’t enough. Then, by chance, in the plane he met some of our people who were coming back from Uganda. He said, “Usually I don’t speak with Italians, because then they swindle me. Yet, this time, I don’t know why, I felt the repercussion of your gazes.” In the end, after various questions that the others were answering evasively, because they didn’t want their conversation to end, he said, “But, you belong to CL!” “Yes, how do you know it?” Then he told them his story. He was amazed by how the Mystery was able to save him at 40 thousand feet. In listening to these things one realizes what the difference is between the true interest the Pope is talking about and worldliness (to use the other word). To spend a weekend in a resort is great, but it doesn’t correspond to all the expectant awaiting of his heart, so much so that afterward he was disappointed, then lit up again when he was struck by those faces, to the point that he recognized them as belonging to CL. We think that we can cheat with our heart. No! We cannot cheat and no attempt to answer that doesn’t correspond to the need of the heart can be enough. We often confuse whatever pleases us with correspondence. But whatever pleases us must be judged based on whether we have or don’t have the experience of correspondence. If one, after having spent the weekend in a resort, as soon as he leaves feels all of the sadness re-emerge, the judgement is right there. He can try to hide it, to avoid it, or he can try to acknowledge it—but the difference is clear. Thus, it is crucial that one begins to recognize the difference, because even if one had been able to turn the page, he wouldn’t have found an answer that truly corresponds to the needs of the heart.

On this topic I was accompanied by the third point, particularly when you provoked us, saying, “When did you seriously think of Him, with your heart, during the last month?” When you asked it, I immediately thought, Always! I think of Him all the time. When I wake up, the first desire I have is: stay with me. However, you continued, “We haven’t thought of Him like John and Andrew thought of Him while they watched Him speak. If we asked a lot of questions about Him, it was out of curiosity, analysis, for research, for clarification. [...] But thinking of Him like one who is really in love thinks about his beloved? [...] Solely in a way that is absolutely, totally detached—a sole desire for good.” How rarely do we think of Him as a present Presence whom we love!” (“I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have had pity on your nothingness,” p. 10). I thought I knew this position of the heart, this expectant awaiting for Him, but during these days I discovered that

even what I have experienced of my relationship with Jesus cannot be something that I know. Every day, this very question re-proposes itself to me: To whom are you answering? To whom do you belong? I am saying this because in the past few days I had to make a decision about work. I had to decide whether to stay where I am, a place that I like, or follow the desire that exploded in my heart in the past few months and is present within me. In facing this decision, I was asking myself precisely this: let me know where You want me, I want to be where You want me to be. However, I was asking this question as a need for something clear and definitive, not like someone asking a question to one's beloved. It happened that, instead, little by little, I saw how the Lord was accompanying me and was making certain things happen, so that I was seeing the problem wasn't to hastily choose between black and white, but to follow a path on which He was setting me, on which He places me. Thus, I realize that the problem is precisely to abandon myself to His embrace, so much so that in the moment in which I did it, everything dissolved. It was a liberation! This position is new for me, because I often find myself blocked by fear, especially before important choices, as if there was a basic distrust. I discover that I am resistant to His love. However, as I realize this, I see the possibility that these moments of liberation I am starting to see can extend to my whole life. Christ places these questions, these tangled situations, into my life to make me understand that it isn't enough to think of Him, but that it is really necessary that I love Him. And in loving Him, I understand that I know Him. My opportunity to know Jesus lay precisely in loving Him, not just in thinking of Him.

In front of our self-love, this reduction of awaiting to our own interests, there is this whole possibility that Fr. Giussani summed up: looking for Him day and night as the only thing that corresponds to the total need of the heart. Yet, this is possible only if we surrender to that Presence like Mary Magdalene, if we surrender before Jesus who bends over our wounds to respond to all of our expectant waiting. If we don't abandon ourselves like this to a Presence, and we don't see how He is able to fulfill us, we will succumb while looking for our reduced interests. This is the question that remains open in our life: What does correspond to us? Because this is how God justifies Himself before us: "Look at what corresponds to you: the resort, your interests, your projects—or to abandon yourself to My Presence." Nobody will be able to convince us about this, except our own experience. This is why, as we said at the Exercises quoting Fr. Giussani, God entrusts this whole proposal to the verification of our experience, because only in experience will His justification be able to emerge, that is, His relevance to the needs of our heart. This is the possibility we always face in our days: not just to spend them more or less brilliantly, but being able to see that everything presented before us is the possibility to discover Him and verify whether this proposal corresponds or not. This is how certainty, instead of skepticism, will grow in us. As always, the ball is in our court, because this proposal that Christ is making before us is offered only to our freedom.

The next School of Community will be on June 22, at 9:00 p.m. We will continue to work on the Introduction of the Fraternity Exercises. There is still a lot that needs to be understood.

Vacations. Please pay particular attention to the community vacations. They are the privileged place to discover and live what we hold most dear: "He who is among us." As we said many times: fewer explanations and more "immersions" in a place where one can have an experience. Let's live them with an attention for the other and let's build them together, witnessing to each other a lively participation in all of the moments that are proposed: the *Angelus*, Morning Prayer, the hike,

the witnesses, the presentation of a book, the shows, a conversation on something that interests us, the games, the Mass... Let everything become a place that is built to “immerse ourselves in mercy,” as the Pope says. Not only to *speak* about mercy, but to *experience it*. As we saw today, participating in the Exercises changed—and changes—the most immovable people: we see it in ourselves. Therefore, let us share the richness of this gesture by inviting also friends and coworkers.

CL flyer for the administrative elections. In front of the total indifference we also notice about politics, with this flyer—entitled “Politics are a good”—we want to offer a tool for a dialogue that helps us stay in front of the question: Why is it worthwhile to vote? For us it is another opportunity to verify whether Christianity also has something to say in this specific situation. Because, if the gaze we were talking about earlier doesn’t win, what prevails is skepticism, also in politics. Therefore, let’s use the flyer to offer a good contribution to public life as Christian community, based on a judgement and the different way in which we face things. I wish you the best in your work!

Veni Sancte Spiritus