



“FAITH, THE FULFILLMENT OF REASON”

*Notes from the words of Francesco Cassese and Davide Prospero at the Beginning Day
of the Adults of Communion and Liberation of the Lombardy Region*

Mediolanum Forum, Assago (Milan) and satellite linkup, September 23, 2023

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Davide Prospero

The words Jesus addresses to the Father in the hour in which the Son is glorified, in John’s Gospel, remind us of the deep reason we are here today to begin the year together: “Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. [...] Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.”¹

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit, who alone can make us continually hear the voice of Christ in our life.

Come Holy Spirit

Francesco Cassese

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for being here. I’d like to greet those of you here in Milan and also those following us by satellite link from many cities in the Lombardy Region.

We’d like to begin our day with two brief premises.

The first is that today’s content draws upon Davide’s Introduction and Summary at the International Leader’s Assembly in La Thuile, a month ago. Today’s lesson is the fruit of a long work we did with some leaders last year—for which we are grateful—the fulcrum of which was “Christian experience.” The dimension of experience in general and of Christian experience in particular is highly meaningful in Fr. Giussani’s original approach to life and faith, and he devoted great attention to it from the very beginning of our Movement.

The second thing I’d like to say is that today and in the coming days there will be other Beginning Days in the other Italian regions and countries where we are present. Some leaders will draw on what Davide will propose today, and will involve people in their respective communities for a moment of testimony.

¹ Jn. 17:11,17-23.

Prosperi

I'd like to add that this choice is a way to valorize the responsibility of those who help me in guiding the Movement, and to promote a concrete gesture of communion among all the people who will participate in the various locations. It is also a way to express the care and passion that I personally feel for each of you, which I've begun to realize more clearly through the task entrusted to me in this phase of our history. The paternity Fr. Giussani always talked to us about can be lived and exercised in many gradations, as it is asked of each of us. I remember his words at the close of the assembly of the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises of 1999: "So, this is why I wanted to come here to greet you. May you live the experience of a father; father and mother; this is my wish for all the leaders, for all those responsible for your communities, but for each one of you, too, because each one has to be father to the friends he has around him, has to be mother of the people around about; not giving himself airs, but with real charity. For no-one can be as fortunate and glad as a man and a woman who feel themselves made fathers and mothers by the Lord. Fathers and mothers of all those they meet."²

Before embarking on the content of the lessons, let's sing two songs together.

Se tu sapessi [If You Knew] (A. Anastasio)
The Things that I See (R. Veras–R. Maniscalco)

"Dear friends, take to heart the precious gift of your charism and the Fraternity that preserves it, because it can still make many vines 'flourish' [...]. The potential of your charism is still largely to be discovered, it is still largely to be discovered."³

This is the heartfelt invitation we received from the Holy Father less than a year ago. It was the reason we chose to do the itinerary of School of Community starting again from the beginning, with *The Religious Sense*. During this itinerary we realized we have taken for granted the content and meaning of some fundamental words, which are, let's put it this way, among the pillars of the educative proposal of our charism. For example, the theme of the infallibility of the heart and of the correspondence with the original needs and evidences that constitute it, but above all, going to the root, the question of experience.

After all, we dedicated the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity to the theme of faith. What is the relationship between experience, as Fr. Giussani intends it, and Christian faith? In the work of the coming months we want to help each other answer this question. So we said we need to return to the comparison with the teaching of Fr. Giussani, seriously and humbly, without thinking we already understand everything even before getting down to work. This does not mean moving through swampy terrain where preceding footsteps have already disappeared. Rather, it means returning to the sources of the experience we already are living, to understand its value and meaning more

² L. Giussani, *To Give One's Life for the Work of Another*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2022, p. 120.

³ Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of Communion and Liberation*, Saint Peter's Square, 15 October 2022.

and more, allowing ourselves to be provoked by the ever-new circumstances and, why not, by the difficulties we encounter on the journey.

The charism given to us is a form of teaching, and at the same time, a newness of life that expresses and vivifies this teaching. It is a renewal of the experience of Christian faith in space and time, a fascinating and persuasive accent, adequate to the present, through which the fact of Christ bowls into our life, knocks on our door.

Now I would like to focus on one of these factors, experience, which I believe is important to clarify in order to make the work of the coming months more fruitful and useful.

1. THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH FAITH

The concept of experience

First of all, it is necessary to broaden the concept of experience beyond the common understanding, in order to grasp fully its centrality in Fr. Giussani's educational proposal, in total immanence in the tradition of the Church. It is no coincidence that in *The Risk of Education* he says that the link with tradition is fundamental, indispensable for education, for without it we would inevitably be “at the mercy of the most unrestrained forces of instinct [of our reactivity]” and of those who are in power at the moment.⁴

Clearly, since the beginning (we are talking about the second half of the 1950's), Giussani recognized the fundamental role of experience. His insistence on Christianity as experience, encounter, Fact,⁵ and on experience as the place for verifying the Christian proposal⁶ is well known. In later years, experience is

clearly underlined as a necessary point of departure for authentic knowledge (“the human person cannot help but start from experience, which is the place where reality emerges,” “makes itself known”).

On the theme of experience, then-Cardinal Montini expressed some trepidation in a 1963 letter to Giussani: “I particularly allude to Christian experience as the source of Christian truth. As an educational method, it may even serve a good purpose, if a teacher guides such an idea and knows how to put an objective ladder of truth and values in the proper place in the minds of the young. But giving primacy of place to experience and positing it as absolute is not acceptable. People who are not experts in such a method may be doctrinally imprecise in their expressing by following it.”⁸ Montini formulated his concerns, reporting positions that some detractors claimed were Giussani's, though actually they were not.

A few months after the letter, Giussani responded to Montini's concern with a booklet entitled *Experience*, which received its *imprimatur* from Bishop Carlo Figini, the censor of the Ambrosian diocese. Part of these few, but very dense pages concerning Christian experience was republished in 1964 in *Appunti di metodo Cristiano [Notes About the Christian Method]*, while the entire text was republished with the title *The Structure of Experience in The Risk of Education* (1977). Giussani proposed his concept of experience and at the same time expressed a dual critique: he said no to the reduction of experience to feeling without judgement, and he said no to a reduction of experience to something intimist, interiorist, and subjective, that is, to a Protestant and modernist reduction.

In the first part of his dual critique, Giussani observed: “What characterizes experience is not so much doing, is

⁴ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2023, p.90.

⁵ Cf. L. Giussani, “Come educare al senso della Chiesa [How to Educate to the Sense of the Church]” (1960), in Id., *Porta la speranza. Primi scritti, [Bring Hope, Early Writings]*, Marietti1820, Genoa, 1997, pp. 7–8.

⁶ In addition to the writings collected in L. Giussani, *Porta la speranza [Bring Hope]*, op. cit., see for example: L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, Rizzoli, Milan, 2006, which contains the texts of 1959, 1960 and 1964; Id., *The Movement of Communion and Liberation, Conversations with Robi Ronza [The Movement of Communion and Liberation (1954-1986). Conversations with Robi Ronza]* (1987), Bur, Milan, 2014.

⁷ L. Giussani, *L'autocoscienza del cosmo [The Self-Awareness of the Cosmos]*, Bur, Milan, 2000, pp. 274, 287.

⁸ G.B. Montini quoted in A. Savorana, *Life of Luigi. Giussani*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2018, p. 305.

not so much establishing relationships with reality as a mechanical fact. This is the error inherent in the typical expression ‘to have an experience,’ where experience equates to trying things out. Rather, what characterizes experience is *understanding* something, discovering its *meaning*. Thus experience entails an intelligence concerning the meaning of things. And the meaning of something is discovered in its connection with the rest. Thus, experience means discovering the purpose of a particular thing in the context of the world.”⁹

Fr. Giussani developed a notion of experience in which experience does not have judgement outside itself (as if to say, there is experience and “then” there is the judgement), but it contains in itself the judgement: it implicates it, it is characterized by it. Judgement is an integral part of experience. In *The Religious Sense* he wrote “Experience certainly means ‘trying’ something, but primarily it also coincides with a judgement we make about what we try.”¹⁰ In other contexts he also said that experience is “trying things out, with judgement.”¹¹

Christian experience

The second part of his dual critique (saying no to a subjective reduction of experience) was developed in the second part of his 1963 booklet, focused on *Christian* experience. The passages dedicated to the theme are so concise and expressed so clearly that it is worth quoting them in their entirety.

“The experience of Christianity and the Church occurs as a single, vital act, and it is composed of three elements:

a) *An encounter* with an objective fact originally independent from the person having the experience. The existential reality of this fact is a tangible community, as with every wholly human reality. The human voice of authority in the judgments and directives of this community constitute its criterion and form. There is no version of Christian experience, no matter

how interior, that does not entail, at least in the ultimate sense, this encounter with the community and this reference to authority.

b) The power to adequately perceive the meaning of this encounter. We cannot sufficiently understand the value of the fact we come across in an encounter without a gesture of God. Indeed, the same gesture with which God makes himself present to humanity in the Christian event also enhances the mind’s cognitive capacities, tuning the penetration of the human gaze upon the exceptional reality that has provoked it. This is called the *grace of faith*.

c) *Awareness of the correspondence* between the meaning of the Fact we have come across and the meaning of our own existence, between the Christian and ecclesial reality and our own person, between the Encounter and our own destiny. It is our awareness of this correspondence that verifies the growth of self that is essential to the phenomenon of experience.”¹²

These three elements show us Giussani’s conception of Christian experience, which eschews the various reductions of experience.

In summary, without any one of these elements, the encounter with an objective fact (a community or authority), the perception of the meaning of the fact (the grace of faith), and the awareness of the correspondence between the Fact, the Christian and ecclesial reality and one’s own self (hence verification), you cannot speak of “Christian experience” because its wholeness and authenticity would be compromised.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXPERIENCE AND FAITH

The dynamic of faith

In Is It Possible to Live This Way?, and then in *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così? [Is It (Truly?!) Possible to Live*

⁹ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2019, p. 83.

¹⁰ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 6.

¹¹ L. Giussani, *L’attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, Bur, Milan, 1999, p. 316.

¹² L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, op. cit., pp. 86–87.

This Way?], speaking to young people who had begun a journey of total dedication to Christ in virginity, Giussani proposed a description of the dynamic of Christian faith, and said “Faith springs up and is attested to humanly and reasonably.”¹³

Before entering into the dynamic of Christian faith, Giussani dedicated a long premise to faith as a method by which reason obtains knowledge. In fact, reason has a way of knowing “things we don’t see directly and that can’t be seen directly.” It “can know them through the witness of others.” This is called “indirect knowledge through mediation”¹⁴ or knowledge by faith, and it is no less certain than directly acquired knowledge, as long as it is reached through the method of moral certainty, a judgement of the trustworthiness of the witness. “If you become certain that another person knows what he or she is saying and doesn’t want to deceive, then logically you should trust, because if you don’t trust you go against yourself.”¹⁵ Thus, even if I have never been to America I can affirm with certainty, through the testimony of others, that it exists. Culture, history and shared human living are founded on this type of knowledge.

Given this premise, turning to his listeners, Giussani observed: “Christ is the total object of our faith. How do we come to know Christ in such a way that the sacrifice of our entire lives can be upheld by Him?” It is evident “from our outline of the methods that reason uses, the one that has to be applied here must be faith. We don’t know Christ directly. We know Christ neither through evidence nor through the analysis of experience.”¹⁶ We know Him through faith.

So then, let’s enter into the dynamic of Christian faith.

a) In order to describe it, Giussani returned to the origins, to how the problem arose in history, there-

fore to the page in John’s Gospel¹⁷ that narrates Andrew and John’s *encounter* with Jesus of Nazareth. This is the first factor of the itinerary of Christian faith. “The first characteristic of Christian faith is that it comes from a fact, a fact that has the form of an encounter.”¹⁸ And like every other step of the journey we are describing, this holds for us today in exactly the same way.

b) The second element is *the exceptional nature of the fact*. The man in front of them was “*an exceptional Presence*.” Otherwise, after only a few hours with Him, how could they have made their own and repeat to others the words He said about Himself? “We’ve found the Messiah.” Now, for Giussani, “exceptional” means correspondent to the original needs of the human heart. “To find an exceptional person means to find a person who attains a correspondence with what you desire, with the needs for justice, truth, happiness, love ... It should be a natural thing, but it never happens, it’s impossible, unimaginable.” In this sense, Giussani stressed, “exceptional means divine. Divine because the answer to the heart is God. Something truly exceptional is something divine, there’s something divine within it.”¹⁹

c) The third element is wonder. “The fact from which faith in Christ begins, the encounter from which Andrew and John’s faith begins [...] awakened great wonder in them.” An unstoppable wonder was born in those two and in others who formed the first small group that accompanied Jesus in the places where He went, and then all the people who encountered Him: they had before them an incomparable man, because of what He said (“No one has ever spoken like this man”), and because of what He did (the miracles, His power over reality, His goodness, His gaze that revealed the

¹³ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 1: Faith*, p. 55. Giussani drew this content from his earlier text, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, in particular chapters 3 to 7.

¹⁴ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 1: Faith*, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Jn. 1:35-51.

¹⁸ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 1: Faith*, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

human heart...). “Wonder is always a question, at least a secret one.”²⁰ And at a certain point it explodes.

d) Fourth: a paradoxical question arises: “*Who is this man?*”. It is paradoxical, because “They, who knew everything, knew well who He was. But His way of doing things, His behaviour, was so exceptional, that” first of all, those who were “His friends couldn’t help saying, ‘Where does He come from?’” Giussani observed: “Faith begins precisely with this question: ‘Who is this man?’”²¹

e) Fifth: *His answer*.²² This is an inexorable question, one to which we have no answer. On our own, we cannot tell who He truly is: His identity (His divinity) eludes the grasp of reason. The Gospels report an episode that occurred near Caesarea Philippi. Jesus was there with a group of His disciples, and seized by a sudden thought, He asked, “Who do people say that I am?”²³ After their answers, which we know, He turned the question on them: “But who do you say that I am?”. And Peter impulsively answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”²⁴ On more than one occasion, Giussani commented: Peter “spoke out, probably repeating something he had heard Jesus Himself say, although he had not fully grasped its significance.”²⁵ And he is praised: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.”²⁶ In fact, it is an answer that exceeds the capacity of human reason. “Reason cannot demonstrate the divinity of Christ, because divinity personally

present in a human reality is not the proper object of reason. Reason can arrive at the fact that it is in front of something exceptional, but it cannot arrive at defining who Jesus Christ is, as the divine who is communicating Himself to the human.” Therefore, Peter could only say “We know that You are God because You said so.”²⁷ The answer to the question of who He is, is Jesus’ answer. Peter “believes” what Jesus says of Himself. How could he believe Him? For Peter and the others, day after day, starting from the first encounter, following Him, being with Him, one thing had become evident more than anything else: “That they had to trust Him: ‘If I don’t trust this man, I can’t even trust my own eyes.’”²⁸

f) Sixth point: our responsibility in front of the fact (“the courage to say yes”²⁹). “Before the question ‘Who is this man?’ and before the response Peter gives, one can say yes or no. One can adhere to what Peter says or go away like everyone else.”³⁰ Peter’s is the answer of faith. “Faith affirms a thing because He said it. Period.” And it is “reasonable for me to accept a thing because He said it, because an exceptional behavior and ability, the likes of which are to be found nowhere else, can be grasped and affirmed in history.”³¹ In fact, Giussani stressed, “the one rational answer is yes. Why?”. Because Christ “corresponds to the nature of our heart more than any image of our own, corresponds to the thirst for happiness we have and that constitutes the reason for living.”³² Instead, “the ‘no’ is always born

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

²² Returning to *Is Its (Truly?) Possible to Live This Way?* On the journey of faith that Giussani developed in the five points of *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*, he suggests a different division into six points, which I adopt here. In fact, he wrote: “I would make six points. The *fourth* is our question, ‘Who is this man?’ and the *fifth* is His answer, because we are not the ones who demonstrate that He is God (we get as far as the question, an inexorable, inevitable question. No philosopher, no mathematician, nothing can answer, but if I do not ask the question, I have to deny what has been evident for me to now: I have to go against the evidence). So then, the *sixth* point is the courage to say yes: our part as courage.” L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?) vivere così? [Is Its (Truly?) Possible to Live This Way?]*, Bur, Milan, 2020, p. 140.

²³ Mk. 8:27.

²⁴ Mt. 16:15-16.

²⁵ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, op. cit., p. 71.

²⁶ Mt. 16:17.

²⁷ L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?) vivere così? [Is Its (Truly?) Possible to Live This Way?]*, op. cit., pp. 94-95, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁰ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 1: Faith*, op. cit., p. 39.

³¹ L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?) vivere così? [Is Its (Truly?) Possible to Live This Way?]*, op. cit., p. 94.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

from a preconception, from the fact that Jesus becomes a scandal, an impediment to what you'd like.”³³

Two thousand years later, we find ourselves in exactly the same situation. Just as Peter and the others had to come to terms with the exceptional nature of Jesus of Nazareth, so we have to come to terms with the human reality of His witnesses, with the Church, through whom Christ becomes an event in the present. Running up against a certain person, a certain community, a certain way of living, we experience a correspondence to the original needs of the heart, and the wonder evoked leads us to ask, “How can they be this way?”. In virtue of our trust in the witnesses, which has grown through a journey of shared living that engages all our reason and freedom, an openness to acknowledge and embrace Peter's answer matures in us, conveyed by the reality of the Church herself, by the Christian companionship encountered.

So then, how does Peter's acknowledgement become mine? Now as then, the divine content of the human phenomenon we run up against cannot be known by reason, because the object of faith (the divine present in the human) is constitutively beyond the normal and proper object of reason. “A person recognizes Christ's presence because Christ wins the person over. In other words, faith can only happen in man and in the world if something that is grace, pure grace happens first: the Christ event, the encounter with Christ, in which man experiences something exceptional that cannot happen on its own.”³⁴

Faith, as Giussani stresses in *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, “is part of the Christian event because it is part of the grace that the event represents, part of what it is. [...] Just as Christ gives Himself to me in a present event, He brings to life within me the capacity for grasping it and recognizing it in its exceptionality.” However, in correlation, our freedom is called into action in entreating for it and then accepting to recognize it. We, too, are called into play.

Giussani continued: “Man's freedom is summed up in the entreaty, ‘Accepting that all is grace, I ask You for grace.’ This is how we completely take into account both the fact that all is grace and the fact that, for its effect, Christ's grace depends on my freedom, too.”³⁵

None of us can reach certainty about Christ, the divinity of Christ, His identity as the Son of God, only (and I stress here ‘only’) through something that is happening to us *now*, through the direct experience we have, even the most extraordinary miracle.

To summarize what we have said, let's reflect on the episode of the man born blind (which is the image we chose for this Beginning Day), narrated in John's gospel. His experience was that when Jesus spread mud on his eyes, they were healed. But not even his *direct experience* could have enabled the man born blind to formulate the judgement that Jesus was the Son of God. “So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner.’ He replied, ‘If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind [before] and now I see.’ Here we are: through direct experience he can come to say this. Further on, responding to the objections of the Pharisees, he is able to add, “This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.” Also this judgement, the consequence of the preceding observation, lies within the experience itself. But the itinerary does not end here. “They answered and said to him, ‘You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?’. Then they threw him out. When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, He found him and said, ‘Do you *believe* in the Son of Man?’” Pay attention here: this is the key passage. Up to this point the young man

³³ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 1: Faith*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.

³⁴ L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2010, p. 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23, 24.

grasped the exceptional nature of the fact and of the man in front of him, but could not yet give the appropriate name to the author of the fact, to Him who was standing in front of him (“the Son of Man”). “He answered and said, ‘Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘I *do believe*, Lord,’ and he worshiped Him.”³⁶ Here is faith, made possible by the initiative of Christ Himself, there in front of him. The man born blind adhered to Him, believed in Him. This is faith, made possible by the initiative of Christ Himself there in front of him, to whom the man born blind adhered. Without this final passage of recognition, it is still not faith, at least according to the *proprium* of our charism. Giussani told us over and over again that faith is the recognition of a Presence, the presence of Christ.

“And His disciples believed in Him”

We, too, must make the same journey as the first ones who encountered Him. As we have learned, from the Catholic outlook, the action of the Spirit uses the mediation of concrete witnesses, the mediation of the Church, of those seized by Christ before me. I encounter Christ by bumping up against His witnesses in the flesh, and through them experiencing the correspondence to my original needs. I come to a reasonable trust in them and thus openness to the announcement they transmit to me, and then I personally verify its pertinence to my life. Think of the wonder that seized the young seminarian Giussani as he listened to Fr. Gaetano Corti commenting on the prologue to Saint John’s gospel, a wonder that from then on changed his way of seeing and feeling every moment. He said (the line is also reported in *The Life of Luigi Giussani*): “from that moment on, the instant was no longer trivial for me.”³⁷ “The igniting of the light” in the heart and intelligence of the young Giussani was an event of

grace, but this grace passed through the words of the man speaking to him, in this case Fr. Corti.

For John and Andrew, what came first was not faith in Jesus’ words, but the fascination of His person (“They watched Him speaking,”³⁸ said Fr. Giussani). For the man born blind, first there was the wonder at the miracle done to him. Just so, for us what normally comes first is the wonder of an encounter, the fascination of a human presence that corresponds to the heart in an exceptional way. But as we have seen, the fascination is the beginning of a journey towards faith, otherwise the experience we can have of Christ, encountering the face He concretely presents for us, remains incomplete, poor, immature. So many people were fascinated by Christ, but failed to open up to recognizing who He truly was, and the new life, the true life He had come to bring! And in fact, they left.

Therefore, the correspondence experienced by the disciples in the impact with the man Jesus, like us with the Christian companionship (which, in fact, is the same type of experience), is crucial, because it evokes wonder and questioning, entreaty, and continues to do so (“Who is this man?”). But it is still not *the experience of faith in the full sense of the term*. In order to *truly* know who that Man was, the apostles had to make the journey that we spoke of, one that necessarily and continually had to pass through the decision to trust Him or not. And the same holds for us.

We all remember the line continually repeated in the Gospels, as Fr. Giussani remarked in *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*: “and His disciples believed in Him,” a line that recurs many times in different moments. One may wonder, didn’t they already believe? Yes, but faith is a journey that wends its way over time in shared living. It is a “road of knowing”³⁹ that needs many confirmations and a great deal of support and that always leads deeper, introducing us to an experience of an ever-richer truth, beauty and goodness.

³⁶ Jn. 9:24-25, 30, 34, 38; our italics.

³⁷ A. Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, op. cit., p. 48.

³⁸ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: Volume 3: Charity*, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁹ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, p. 50–51.

And at the same time, walking behind Jesus also leads me to an ever-deeper understanding of that for which my heart truly hungers and thirsts. Even more: following Christ, I slowly realize that the relationship with His presence enlarges my heart and broadens my reason, not only because it clarifies what the fulfillment of my thirst is, but also because, in doing so, it purifies more and more my understanding of the thirst itself. Let’s say it the way it should be said: it educates me.

For this reason, Giussani stressed the urgent need for an education, because otherwise we will find ourselves, almost without realizing it, imprisoned in a reduced awareness of our structural evidences and needs, falling into a subjectivistic use of the heart (so that what we feel becomes the criterion of judgement), with all the consequences we know. “All women and men have the same heart—the constitutive needs of the heart are equal in everyone—but if one has not been educated ...! In physics, do you know what ‘Quincke resonators’ are? If you strike a tuning fork and make it vibrate, then set it in front of these seven or eight tubes, the tube that corresponds to the tuning fork wavelength resonates. So, if these needs of the heart have not been developed and educated, then you can quite well say, ‘But I don’t feel this!’ just as many people do not feel it.”⁴⁰

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF FAITH

A new depth

Faith leads us over time to a level of experience, that is, an understanding of and gusto for things that are deeper than what would be possible only through human abilities and feelings or the natural religious sense. This is *the point we have to enter into and look at now*, because if we fail to do so the Christian experience itself will be emptied or reduced. I think of our many friends who have shown us a humanly inconceivable way of

staying in front of pain and death. They are not crazy; they are not fanatics who have lost touch with reality. No, the experience they have been given to live, that of an ultimate gladness even in pain, is made possible by faith, not by their own strength. *Only* faith can reveal what they been given to see *in their own suffering flesh* or in that of their loved ones: participation in Christ’s suffering. They have a real experience, but without the grace of faith it would not be accessible. Thus, on the one hand, faith is sustained by the correspondence experienced in the encounter, as we said, and on the other hand, faith is the door that leads to a *new experience of correspondence* which also comes to include what one without faith would never choose.

Fr. Giussani explained this well in *Alla Ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*: “And once again, it is Saint Paul who tells us to ‘test everything; retain what is good’ (1 *Thess.* 5:21). That which tests the value, that which judges can no longer be the enigmatic and confused depth of our elementary experience, with the rich but still uncomposed set of its needs, so difficult to decipher, of its interests and original needs, this enigmatic nature that makes the human person always restless. Instead, that which judges, that which makes this value vibrate is the gaze of Christ, the definitive word of God who created us, on our humanity.”⁴¹

It is like when you embrace a sacrifice or forgive some meanness done to you with a strange gladness of heart, simply because that day you had the grace of thinking of Christ, of “looking upon His face”⁴² more than usual, to use an expression loved by Fr. Giussani. We could say that the relationship between experience and faith is *almost* circular. I say “almost” because actually it is a progression, a journey that leads everything to new depth. From the experience of a fascination, faith is born, and from faith, a new experience is born, a new “fascination,” that I cannot access without faith.

Think of the episode of the Samaritan woman at the

⁴⁰ L. Giussani, *Tu (o dell’amicizia) [You (or about friendship)]*, Milan, 1997, p. 51.

⁴¹ L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Bur, Milan, 2007, p. 78.

⁴² L. Giussani, *La convenienza umana della fede [How Faith is Humanly Worthwhile]*, Bur, Milan, 2018, p. 136.

well. She had been looked upon as nobody had ever looked at her; she discovered she was known as nobody had ever known her. If, at a certain point as she was returning home, she had not reached the judgement that this man was not simply a prophet sent by God, but was God Himself made man, God Himself who had walked in the desert to the point of exhaustion to reach her, (here is the judgement of faith!), she would never have come to the realization of the Abyss of the preference given to her. She would have missed the most correspondent of all experiences. If she had not come to believe that which she could not see, that which direct experience could not have given her, she never could have savored fully, that is, paradoxically, never could have had full experience of the gift that had been granted to her. The encounter with that Presence would have remained a lovely memory to look back upon longingly, only that.

Having visited the communities over the last year, my impression is that when we speak about *Christian experience*, we are often tempted to reduce it to what we can measure, to what results from the impact of reality with the heart, to *natural experience*, as if faith had nothing to do with it, and did not determine its authentic profundity, re-shape its horizon. Fr. Giussani introduced a third factor, which he described in these terms: “It is an Other who takes initiative toward our life, just as it is an Other who saves our life, who brings it to knowledge of the truth, brings it to affection for the truth, leads it to love for reality. It is an Other.” Therefore, it is a matter of “accepting that an Other introduces Himself between me and reality and makes my relationship with it possible.”⁴³ Therefore, it is necessary to overcome a possible reduction of Christian experience to just two factors, on the one hand, the needs of the heart (for happiness, beauty, love) and on the other hand, reality, understood as the things that happen moment by moment and in happening “impact” the heart. In fact, if these were the only two factors involved in Christian

experience, it would be impossible, if not mad, to make the judgement that Jone Carrascosa did and offered us in the July-August issue of *Tracce*, sharing the story of her condition. As you know, more than a year ago, in the course of a few hours, our friend became progressively incapable of movement, having contracted Guillain-Barré syndrome after an infection. “All of a sudden I found myself full of tubes everywhere. ‘And who am I?’ [...] The intensive care unit is an unpleasant place, and it made me think a lot about the suffering that Father Giussani experienced with his illness. Because he had a strong sense of realism, when he had gone through a tough day he was able to talk about things as they were but, at the same time, he always went beyond. Whenever I thought about him, I would ask myself, ‘What is my place now?’ By following his realism, I was soon able to say, ‘This is a cross,’ and I would remember when he used to say that the circumstances that God has us go through are essential factors of our vocation. Faithfulness to the cross led to knowledge of Christ, a knowledge of Christ that led me to know and live the Resurrection more intensely. This became clear to me because I began to feel at peace. [...] How could there be peace, joy, and happiness in a state of extreme weakness? I felt like a head without a body. How was that possible? ‘They will recognize Me by the joy on your faces.’ This is exactly what happened to me. That period of time was a mission in silence, because I could not speak, but it was incredible how someone in intensive therapy could make friends just by looking at others. [...] How did it happen? Don’t ask me. I do not know how it happened, but I know Who it was.”⁴⁴

Struck by her testimony, we wanted everyone at this beginning of the new year to hear her tell the story of her experience again, and so today she is with us by video link from Madrid.

Watch the video

⁴³ L. Giussani, *In cammino (1992-1998)*, [*On the Road (1992-1998)*], Bur, Milan, 2014, pp. 193-194.

⁴⁴ J. Carrascosa, “The World in a Room,” *Tracce*, n. 4/2023, vol. 26, p. 8-10.

The judgement documented here was born of faith, from a relationship with Christ, acknowledged and lived: the religious sense is not enough. The experience Jone shared with us is rooted in the grace-given certainty, first, of the fact that the man Jesus, nailed to a cross 2000 years ago, was the Son of God who was transforming His suffering into the greatest and most useful act of love in history, and, secondly, of the fact that from that day, all suffering, if offered, can participate in the same mysterious fecundity. Her way of describing what she was going through would have been impossible and senseless without this judgement, which Jone certainly could not have formed exclusively on the basis of what was happening to her, but instead, came from her entire journey of faith, starting with the encounter with the Movement, that is, with Christ. Jone was able to have the experience that she did, an *experience*, that is, a *real* “feeling” and “seeing,” through faith in Christ, that is, the certainty that the man Jesus of Nazareth was and truly is who the Church says He is. Faith throws us wide open to an otherwise inaccessible depth of experience.

Faith in what this Presence said about Himself and reaches me through the tradition of the Church has the power to transform my way of looking at pain and sacrifice, or even simply the frictions that can arise in the relationship between a husband and wife, with children who misbehave, with the colleague who annoys me, etc.

If I do not reach this judgement of faith, dictated by faith, which I cannot access without faith, I cannot have the most corresponding experience of the wonder-filled realization of God’s bottomless, and at the same time so carnal, love for me in every circumstance. I would miss the best.

I would like to give another example, this time drawn from my rock-climbing experience. Imagine finding yourself at a rock face that is apparently smooth and thus at first glance inaccessible. For occasional rock-climbers, the wall would appear impossible to

climb and they would return home disappointed. But to the experienced eye, the small and apparently useless fissures are not insignificant imperfections in the rock, but can be hand- and footholds that bear the body’s weight, so in a place that is seemingly impassible, one can climb. Lived faith obtains a similar effect in us: it leads us to see what the “natural” eye cannot perceive, but which is essential to come to see, in order to savor what Fr. Giussani taught us to call the *hundred-fold*, the Mystery within circumstances, within the flesh of faces and things. As Fr. Giussani said, “I see what you see, but you don’t see what I see!”⁴⁵

Faith that informs life

It is important to understand how all this is real and impacts personal experience all the way to its visible consequences, things we can experience. “Faith informs life,”⁴⁶ Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori told us at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity. Informing the life of those who belong to the living body of Christ, it expands that “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in the letter to the Hebrews, a living cloud, not only from the past, but contemporaneous to us, that we can see and follow, like those who were able to meet the man Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, preached and performed extraordinary gestures. We, too, see extraordinary things happen that bear witness to this new life that faith introduces. We heard it just a short time ago from Jone. We also had proof of it this summer in the many testimonies we heard or that continue to arrive in *Traces*. You will find some on the CL site or in the magazine.

This is a *new, original judgement*, a new knowledge of things that enables us to stay in front of reality in a way otherwise out of our reach.

So then, what is the problem that often causes us to struggle and leads us into crisis, so that we no longer feel faith as the source of an existential certainty that can support life in its trials?

As Fr. Lepori told us at our Exercises: “Faith is not

⁴⁵ L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù* [The Attraction of Jesus], op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁶ M.-G. Lepori, *Our Eyes are Fixed on Jesus, Who is the Origin and Fulfillment of Faith*, p. 47. <https://english.clonline.org/cm-files/2023/06/06/fraternity-exercises-booklet-2023.pdf>.

a thing which one 'loses,' we merely cease to shape [inform] our lives by it." That is, it ceases to form life from within. To inform, etymologically, before the banal meaning of "give news," means "give form within," "form from within." [...] The fact is that faith serves to inform life and give it form; you understand what faith serves only when it informs life, only when it gives life a form that only faith can give it. Setting aside faith makes it useless."⁴⁷

4. A COMPANIONSHIP THAT EDUCATES US

What is the road, the essential road, for entering into such an enviable experience, for example, the one Jone told us about? Or those communicated to us by so many of our friends who without fanfare live a profound experience of faith? In a certain sense we have already said it: all this is made possible by the new eyes that faith itself gives us. At the same time, it is equally true that these eyes, even though they have been received through a pure event of grace, must like every organ be trained and educated. Just as the rock climber sees the handholds and manages to hang there because he has become familiar with the art of climbing, so the eyes of faith must be educated. Work and asceticism are necessary. But we do not educate ourselves on our own. We need a place, a companionship.

Allow me to read you a very beautiful passage by Benedict XVI: "I cannot build my personal faith in a private dialogue with Jesus, because faith is given to me by God through a community of believers that is the Church and projects me into the multitude of believers, into a kind of communion that is not only sociological but rooted in the eternal love of God who is in Himself the communion of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is Trinitarian Love. Our faith is truly personal, only if it is also communal: it

can be my faith only if it dwells in and moves with the "we" of the Church, only if it is our faith, the common faith of the one Church. [...] Like this, our "I" can be perceived in the "we" of the Church and, at the same time, be the recipient and the protagonist of an overwhelming event: experiencing communion with God, that is the foundation of communion among men."⁴⁸

We are on a road. The road for entering into the gaze of which we have spoken is *belonging*. True asceticism is this trusting, allowing ourselves to be enveloped in a communal reality that leads us to a place we could not reach on our own.

The companionship is the road that educates us to this new gaze. Making this journey that we entered upon through the encounter means allowing ourselves to be educated. Freedom is also involved in this journey: it is obvious. You need an energy of freedom, humility, or if you like, what the Gospel calls "poverty of spirit."

Contemporary society tells us that if you want to be free you have to judge everything for yourself and not let anyone invade your private space. Unfortunately, sometimes we, too, are tempted to think this way. Instead, we say the opposite: we say that communion is what liberates the "I" (in fact, for this reason we are called "Communion and Liberation"). How does the Mystery operate? "The way in which the Father works is called Christ, and therefore the Church, and therefore communion among us. What eternal weight, what infinite value, what density lie in these words that we use like the waste paper with which our children play!"⁴⁹

So then, it is not through my own efforts that I move my point of view to enter into the new gaze born of faith. Let's listen to what Fr. Giussani said in this regard. "An encounter: you encountered this companionship; this is the modality with which the mystery of Jesus, Jesus, the presence of Jesus in history, knocked

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, October 31, 2012.

⁴⁹ L. Giussani, *Faith is Acknowledging a Presence*, Notes from a conversation of Luigi Giussani with a group of adults, Milan, 1977, in *Traces*, Dec. 2000; <http://archivio.traces-cl.com/archive/2000/dicembre/faithis.htm>.

on your door. Now–now!–He is knocking on your door in the same way, because He is “yesterday, now and always.” You become yourself by following this companionship, that is, trying to conceive of life as this companionship conceives of it, trying to feel the relationships the way this companionship encourages you to do, the way this companionship suggests you do, the way this companionship exemplifies for you (this is why those who are older than you or have authority are important). You become yourself if you obey, if you become one with the characteristics of this companionship, if you do not object, ‘But I’m me! Why do I have to follow these people here?’ or ‘I follow the moral regulations but I don’t follow the emphases of these people here. For example, they stress that the most beautiful, human, effective and persuasive prayer is the liturgy. But I don’t, and I follow others who exalt private prayer.’ They are two ways of giving God His adoration, but if you have encountered this companionship you need to try to follow this companionship, to become one with us, with the experience that we live: this exalts your physiognomy, your character, your personality. So the problem is not to observe certain rules, but to identify with a spirit, become one with a mindset, become one with a sensibility; that is, become one with a charism—as a global term—with a modality with which the mystery of God made man reached you persuasively and said to you: ‘Come!’⁵⁰

If this is true, one could say, “Yes, OK, but if I don’t feel a correspondence, why should I follow?”, meaning correspondence with *what* is proposed and with *the way* it is proposed to me. Or, “I don’t think I understand,” another objection. I respond in this way: it is reasonable to follow even when you do not understand everything. It is a consequence of what we just heard from Fr. Giussani. This does not mean that I follow, denying my reason, denying my heart, because this would be alienation. Openness is not fideism. I am always given the opportunity to verify–verify!–the proposal made to me. But in order to verify it, I

must first of all trust the one who makes it, taking it as a positive hypothesis. Why do I follow even when something does not correspond, maybe throwing me into a crisis? I follow out of faithfulness to the encounter that happened, that is, the way the mystery of Jesus knocked at my door, at your door. Why, out of faithfulness to the encounter that happened, should I follow these people, rather than other people? Because the faithfulness is not ultimately to them, but to He who is present in the objectivity of this companionship guided to destiny; He remains present, regardless of all the mistakes each of us can make, demonstrating that He is the one answer to life. “Master, [if we leave You], to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life.”⁵¹

5. FROM FAITH, MISSION

The apex of this new gaze on everything, born of faith, is when we look at other people with an aching longing for them to be bowled over by the same Event that fills my life. This is called mission. On October 15 the Pope insisted on this word, dedicating the final part of his talk to it.

At the International Assembly of Leaders in August, Bishop Martinelli told us, “I’m learning that being sent means first of all that you are sent by Someone. This means that being sent is possible only if you are in a deep connection with the One who sends you. As soon as you forget this, you lose the meaning of mission. You no longer have the meaning of yourself.”

Mission is where you are called to be, and the development of this is what God wants. Otherwise, it is not mission. Mission means there is One who sends you. It means that you, through the encounter, have been chosen to make known to everyone Him who, without any merit of your own, chose you, preferred you. He chose you for this purpose. So then, if He chose you for this purpose, if He called you (vocation) and

⁵⁰ L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo [From Temperament, a Method]*, Bur, Milan, 2002, p. 7–8.

⁵¹ Jn. 6:68.

if being called coincides with being sent, this means that where you are, you have the awareness that you are not there just for yourself, just for your own project, just for your own advantage, just to get the most you can, but you are there to respond to Someone who wants you there; you are there because Someone sent you and wants to make Himself known through you, through what He, if you acknowledge Him and welcome Him, changes in you.

For us, having this awareness is the beginning of mission. Think, for example, of those who find themselves in the most unthought of places in the world for work, and how this awareness can change their way of being there. Yes, they are there for work, but not just for work; they are there so others may encounter and know Christ through their life, and this also impacts their way of facing work and the circumstances that regard them.

6. FREEDOM IS ENGAGED IN ENTREATY

All this is made possible, from the beginning to the end, by the event of the initiative of an Other. Grace holds primacy not just at the beginning, nor only at the end, but in every step of the journey. Therefore, grace is what makes me enter into the new experience of which we have spoken. But, as we said, our freedom is also in play, as a form of entreaty.

A passage from *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così? [Is It (Truly?!) Possible to Live This Way?]* says it another way, summarizing the itinerary done here.

A person who had begun the journey of novitiate in the *Memores Domini* said to Fr. Giussani: “One learns to love Christ in the relationship with reality, but I run the risk of pantheism, while I understand that I have to give my life to a person, to Christ.” Giussani responded by overturning the point of view in this way: “This is a purely abstract hypothesis, just words for words’ sake. You learn to love Christ because He re-

veals Himself to you. I’m sorry, you people here today have been the object of the initiative of an Other: you did not choose the occasion that led you here! Thus, not remembering this is a form of deep ingratitude, and rejecting it is even worse. You learn to love Christ by recognizing His presence. It is a grace: like the presence, so the recognition of it. The development of this grace is called entreaty. When Fr. Kolbe was in the bunker where he died, praying in those terrible hours, how much more deeply was he united with Christ, did he know Christ, than when he was in seminary studying theology! It is not in knowing reality that we know Christ, because we do not have the connection. It is in knowing Christ that we know reality. And we know Christ more through asking for Him.”⁵²

Obviously, with these words Giussani did not oppose Christ and reality, nor was he undervaluing the relationship with reality as the road to Him, but he wanted to emphasize that we can “love” Christ only if He takes the initiative to make Himself present. In fact, knowledge of Him, of His divinity, is not the outcome of a rational inquiry, but is a gift. We have been given a gift.

I’ll conclude with the words Fr. Giussani used in a conversation with a group of adults in Milan, in 1977, which I feel are addressed to us, today, in the same way. “I am glad to talk with you, a gladness that has to struggle-through all the thickness of my limits, of my consciousness of my sin—not to make a speech to you, but to say and say again these words which are *life*.

Not life in an abstract and generic sense, as a definition, but *you*: these words are you, your person; they are the destiny toward which all the energy to which God gave origin in your mother’s womb and that bears your name is flowing. But the meaning of this energy is not your name, because your true name is another one: it is the faith that has been given to you.”⁵³

⁵² L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente ?!) vivere così? [Is It (Truly?!) Possible to Live This Way?]*, op. cit., p. 572.

⁵³ L. Giussani, *Faith is Acknowledging a Presence*, op. cit.

