

**Notes from the Introduction and Homily of Julián Carrón
at the Advent Retreat of the Fraternity of San Giuseppe
Pacengo (VR), Italy, Friday, November 29, 2019–**

*During the entrance: F. Schubert, Symphony n. 8 in B minor “Unfinished,” Carlos Kleiber–Wiener Philharmoniker
“Spirto Gentil” n. 2, Universal*

Who among us, participating in the Beginning Day, did not desire to be entirely drawn to Christ? I think that nothing is more urgent for each of us at the beginning of today’s gesture than that once again our “I” should be seized all the way down to its innermost depths. But we cannot generate this. It is not the outcome of our own effort or our own success. It is something that must happen. Yes, it asks for our openness, but it is a grace. Therefore, the more we desire it, the more intensely we should ask it of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is the One who causes Christ to enter our “I” so deeply that He becomes truly ours. Only the Spirit can cause Him to reach all the way to the center of our hearts.

Veni Sancte Spiritus

• *Canzone degli occhi e del cuore [Song of the eyes and the heart]*

Good evening everyone. It is a pleasure to be here with you at the beginning of this Advent retreat to look together at the things closest to our hearts. What is dearest to our hearts? In the time of Advent, which begins tomorrow, the Church has expectant awaiting most at heart. We await! With this expectant awaiting we desire to prepare for the fact of Christ, for Christmas. Every year when Advent season begins I cannot think that this awaiting is something that automatically happens. In fact, how many people wait for nothing? For many people, there is nothing to await. Thus it is not to be taken for granted that we await something, and each of us should ask, “Why do we await expectantly? Why is our life full of expectant awaiting and desire?” It is certainly not because we are better than everyone else. So then, let us ask, “Who gives us this desire? Who awakens in us this capacity to await expectantly?”

Expectant awaiting belongs to our nature. Everyone participates in this nature, but often we encounter people who no longer await. So then, why do we await? Because something happened to us. We await expectantly because Christ has already come and has awakened all our longing for Him, all our desire for Him, all our expectant awaiting for Him. If you reflect on yourself, all your expectant awaiting, what is the origin of it if not the fact of Christ? It is like someone who longs deeply for the beloved: first, that person needs to have encountered the loved one. For this reason, expectant awaiting for Christ is already a sign of His presence within us, which continually kindles an expectant awaiting that the Church encourages us to live even more intensely during Advent season.

What do we await? We await His presence. We await His return. This is why the Church connects the expectant awaiting of the coming of Christ at the feast of Christmas and the awaiting of Christ’s final return. How could one not desire to encounter Christ? What unity there is between the expectant awaiting of His presence, of His birth, and that of His definitive return! This necessarily reminds us of Jesus’s question we quoted at the Beginning Day (and which Fr. Giussani set before us at the Beginning Day of 2018): “When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8) (J. Carrón, “Who Is This Man?” *Traces*, October 2019, PageOne, p. 7). Will He find faith in us or will He find us busy? Will He find us with many things to do, even many things for His cause, for His Church, but as Fr. Giussani told us, with our heart far from Him because He is no longer its treasure? This is the most pertinent question for our life because we can do many good and right things, but so often we discover that our hearts are not seized by Him! When this happens, it is as if He did not exist, as if Christ generated insufficient attraction to seize our entire being, as if He did not fulfill all the expectant awaiting He has kindled in us. If He does not fill our hearts, we will end up distracted by everything else whether we want to or not. If He no longer seizes us, if He no longer attracts us, we will be at the mercy of everything else. What we said at the Beginning Day is a test for all of us: in the situation of nihilism in which we live, as Galimberti said, in which nothing seems to grasp us anymore, we are like a drifting mine. If nothing totally magnetizes us, we are at the mercy of the tides of everything we have to do, all our worries, all our thoughts.

If He returned in this moment, would He find anyone seized by His presence, totally seized by faith in Him? We can busy ourselves with many things and yet not be seized. It is almost inevitable. We can apply to ourselves the lines quoted by Fr. Giussani at the beginning of the School of Community in *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, lines he lived by for many years, for example this one, “What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:5). I don’t know about you, but I always take note of how these words affected

Giussani! Don't get me wrong: I don't mean to beat us over the head because we are not as good as Giussani; rather, I want to make us jealous. Just think of what we miss if this does not happen in us, too, as it did with Giussani, in front of certain questions in the Gospels. I only say it to awaken all our will and desire to live the same experience. If Giussani was able to live this way, we can live this way, too. As a recent arrival said, entirely caught up: "Is it possible to live this way?"

What could be more beautiful than beginning the journey of the San Giuseppe Fraternity with this question?—"Is it possible to live this way?" We can answer "yes" because we have seen someone live this way up to his last breath. Almost at the end of his life, in Saint Peter's Square, Giussani repeated this question to the Pope and the entire Church: "What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?" and said, "No question in life has ever struck me like this one" (L. Giussani, S. Alberto, and J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2016, introduction, p. ix). So don't waste time considering whether you measure up, but make your desire to live this way a prayer to Christ: "Lord, I don't want to lose life in living. I want to be seized the way Fr. Giussani was, the way the people alongside me are, even the most recent arrivals." Just think of how often the latest arrival brings us, even those who have been here a long time, the freshness of our vocation, like the friend who asked, "Is it possible to live this way?"

We have such a responsibility to testify to those who arrive and to each other, not in words, but through our seized life, showing that it is possible to live this way. What else could you desire for yourself than when Christ returns He will still find you a person entirely magnetized by Him, entirely seized by Him? Without His hold on us, nothing can magnetize us. As Malraux, the French thinker, said, "There is no ideal to which we can sacrifice ourselves, because we know the lies of all of us, we who do not know what truth is." (A. Malraux, *La tentation de l'Occident*, Bernard Grasset, Paris 1926, p. 216, our translation ["Il n'est pas d'idéal auquel nous puissions nous sacrifier, car de tous nous connaissons les mensonges, nous qui ne savons point ce qu'est la vérité"]). If there were nothing so true, so fascinating, so beautiful capable of attracting and seizing us, Malraux would be right.

And what about us? Do we have some resource for letting ourselves be attracted? We often think, "Yes, we have our willpower, our energy, our initiative." No, I say. We have something more elementary than all this, because no particular ability is required for us to let ourselves be seized. Do you know what is needed? Something through which a reality like yours can be a possibility for anyone, no matter what their situation, age, condition, or circumstances. What is this? Our humanity, your humanity. Today, you are the best example of how any type of humanity can be seized by Christ! It does not matter what your situation may be—just let yourself be seized, just as you are. Precisely this humanity of ours, which often displeases us because of its many limitations, because the sums do not add up, is actually the one thing able to be seized by Christ, seized all the way to our innermost depths. It is beautiful to see this in the Gospel and to see it in you as well. Each person, taking her own road, with her own struggles, her own story, can be seized like the sinful woman we spoke about at the Beginning Day. She had tried to satisfy her desire in many ways (just as the Samaritan woman at the well had gone through five husbands), but what remained in her beyond all her mistakes? Her humanity, even with all the mistakes she had made. When she encountered that man, Jesus, she was so magnetized that nobody could hold her back; she challenged everyone and went to the banquet to wash His feet with her tears. This is one of the most beautiful things Fr. Giussani communicated to us: by continually immersing himself in and identifying with the people in the Gospels (whereas we take the Gospel stories them for granted, having read them so often), time after time becoming one with the stories, he moved us deeply as he helped us see how Jesus addressed our wounded humanity, at times full of limits. Nothing stopped Him.

If we could just for one moment look at our humanity the way Jesus does! If we discovered even an instant of such tenderness for our humanity, there would be a celebration! As Fr. Giussani said in Saint Peter's Square in 1998, "No woman ever heard another voice speak of her son with such an original tenderness and unquestionable valuing of the fruit of her womb, with such a wholly positive affirmation of this destiny; only the voice of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth. [...] No man can feel his own dignity and absolute value affirmed far beyond all his achievements." What liberation! "Far beyond all his achievements. No one in the world has ever been able to speak like this!" (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, introduction, p. ix). What vibrated in Fr. Giussani all his life long that he could say this? He did not have or listen to a different Gospel than ours. The Gospel was the same one we read, but often we do not understand it as he did, and consequently our life is not seized.

What must Fr. Giussani have experienced, to come to say such a thing? "Only Christ takes my humanity so completely to heart. [...] 'Who could ever speak to us of the love that Christ has for man, overflowing with peace?' I've been repeating these words to myself for more than fifty years!" (*ibid.*, introduction, pp. ix-x). Only if our humanity is held and embraced in this way can we truly become ourselves. This does not depend on our own effort, but simply on allowing our whole selves to be seized: "Christ in His beauty draws me to Him!" (Jacopone da Todi, "Laud XC," in *The Lauds*, trans. S. Hughes and E. Hughes, New York, Paulist

Press, 1982, p. 260.) This is why Fr. Giussani always told us, as we can read in the introduction to *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*—and how moved we are each time we read it!—“It would be impossible to become fully aware of what Jesus Christ means if one did not first become fully aware of the nature of that dynamism which makes man human. Christ proposes Himself as the answer to what ‘I’ am and only an attentive, tender, and impassioned awareness of my own self [note the difference between how we treat our humanity and how Fr. Giussani looks at his] can make me open and lead me to acknowledge [...] Christ.” In fact, “Without this awareness, even Jesus Christ becomes just a name” (L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1998, p. 6).

This is why it is striking when we hear people tell their stories, for example at School of Community. Remember the testimony of that friend of ours who is with us today? She met a young Muslim mother, who at a certain point removed her veil, showing her face. How must she have felt looked upon by our friend, what an intense gaze must she have perceived upon herself to make that gesture? That gesture says more about Christ than all the talking we can do about Him. So don’t be scandalized, as some are, when I use the expression “all the way down to our innermost depths”! If that woman had not felt seized all the way down to her innermost depths through her encounter with our friend, she would never have removed her veil, no way! Instead, she felt bowled over even if she did not yet know what had happened to her, something Fr. Giussani described in front of the Pope: “The acknowledgment of who Christ is in our lives invades the whole of our awareness of living” (*Generating Traces in the History of the World*, introduction, p. x). What must she have experienced if this gaze made her so herself that she was free, that she could say everything about herself and reveal herself to our friend? Who would not want to be so magnetized by Christ?

We begin this time of Advent with the desire that Christmas not be a mere formality, an anniversary we have to celebrate, expecting nothing more than some special meals with the family. What power there is when Christ happens, as the shepherds, Our Lady, and Saint Joseph experienced! In front of that absolutely overwhelming fact, great gladness invaded their whole life. It was clear that they had recognized something because gladness filled their hearts. Fr. Giussani perfectly described what happens when a person acknowledges Him. “What shows that this acknowledgment is true is the fact that life has an ultimate, tenacious capacity for gladness” (*ibid.*).

For this reason, when we see certain people in the Gospels who in their simplicity of heart allow the humanity of Christ to express all His passion for their humanity, we are left speechless. “As He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a sizeable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out.” You only cry out to someone you have encountered; you expect something only of someone you have encountered. We await expectantly because we have encountered someone. We can cry out because there is someone present to whom we can call. Many people may have seen Him pass by, but who cried out to Jesus? Only that blind man. “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!” Many, who did not feel urgency to cry out because they did not need Him to respond to all their humanity, rebuked Bartimaeus, telling him to be silent because he was making a disturbance. But he was so taken by that presence that he could not help but cry out even louder. “Son of David, have pity on me.” (Mk 10:46–48)

When Jesus sees us so desirous, what does He do? The man born blind had not participated in a series of spiritual exercises, but merely obeyed his own humanity. You do not need a master’s degree from Harvard or anything particular: you just need to be desirous. Bartimaeus was a man like others, but unlike them, he had his own humanity at heart, and could not settle for less than everything, and for this reason cried out. While the others tried to hush him up, Jesus “stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take courage; get up, He is calling you.’” Imagine how he must have felt. “He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.” In its sober economy of detail, the Gospel does not expand on things, but all of us can picture the scene. “He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’” (Mk 10:50–51). Jesus is moved by our nothingness, by our humanity just as it is. “What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?” In Jesus, we see incarnate the answer to Psalm 8. What does Jesus see in us that we do not see? We, too, cry out to Him: “Master, I want to see!” Jesus gave the man born blind much more than physical sight. In healing him, He did not simply enable him to see who was in front of him, but he broadened his capacity to see, to the point of making him recognize the exceptional nature of His presence. In fact, the Gospel recounts that after Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you,” he followed Him along the road. What must he have seen, if he could not help but follow Him?

The faith to which Jesus refers in his question, “When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on earth?” is not the outcome of our own efforts, but consists in the simplicity of an acknowledgment that we have been magnetized, seized, as was Bartimaeus. “Master, I want to see!” I want to be seized. “Immediately he received his sight and followed Him on His way” (Mk 10:52). Sequela, following, is not our effort of will. We follow because we do not want to lose what we have seen.

Therefore, at the beginning of this retreat, we ask Him to glue us with “coats of glue” because if Christ does not glue us, when He returns He will not find faith in us. He might find someone busy, but not seized and magnetized by Him.

Let's take advantage of these days to help each other and support each other in this cry, the same cry as that of the man born blind. "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!" This cry is born of a desire to be magnetized by Him. In this way, we will be able to discover once again His coming. May He find us all desirous of Him! If He came now, if by chance He should come right now (it would be wonderful if He came so soon!) and found the entire fraternity of San Giuseppe desirous of Him, wouldn't it be beautiful? Wouldn't it be the most beautiful thing? Who would not desire it? Nothing is comparable to this. Therefore, let us ask it of Him. Let us support each other in this cry to Him who comes. In the silence of these days, let nothing distract us from this cry, because the more we desire Him, the more we make space so that Christ may seize everything of us and thus, in whatever way He comes into our life, we can hear, like the man born blind, "your faith has saved you"; that is, your acknowledgment of Him has saved you, your openness has saved you, your letting Him enter, not your goodness, but your letting Him enter, has saved you. What is salvation? Salvation is not something that happens like a routine. Salvation is this being seized by Him, vibrant with His presence.

We desire nothing more than to be totally magnetized by Christ, by the Christ who comes. As we said at the Beginning Day: "This is the test that documents the presence of God in history, that is, Christ at work in our life: that we are 'blocked,' magnetized by Him" (J. Carrón, "Who Is This Man?" *Traces*, October 2019, PageOne, pp. 5–6). Christ took on our humanity in order to magnetize us. If His divinity does not again become concrete, human, carnal, and historical to the point of magnetizing us, we will live like drifting mines, even if we continue to remain in the association or in the Church or in some Christian club. The issue is not to have the membership card of the group or club. There is only one true issue: being magnetized, to the point of being able to cry out to all the world, "Christ exists! There is One who responds to our nothingness!" There is someone who takes care of us. There is someone who saves us from being at the mercy of everything, a presence able to fascinate us forever, no matter our situation, age, life condition, story, or wounds. None of these things are an obstacle. Who can cry this out better than you? Where could a greater or more beautiful symphony come from, one more capable of seeing that no one feels excluded? It is a consolation that in the Church of God there are places like this, where you can encounter a group of people who are so different, who have gone through all the troubles and toils of living, having found themselves in the most varied existential conditions. It is very difficult to find a more heterogeneous group; in fact, I think it is practically impossible. But this means that it is for everyone, for all, without exception. This removes any reserve, because everything is grounded on being seized and magnetized by Christ present. As I said to the leaders of the San Giuseppe group, thinking of you, an expression came to mind that summarizes your vocation. Because of the condition you are in, the form of your vocation can be summarized with these words of Fr. Giussani: "The strength of a subject lies in the intensity of his or her self-awareness" (*Il senso di Dio e l'uomo moderno [The meaning of God and modern man]*, Bur, Milan 2015, p. 132). Each of you, in the conditions in which you live, bases your entire consciousness on being magnetized by Christ. This is your strength: this is the strength of your testimony to Christ, in a boundless diversity of forms. It is extraordinary that in the Church of God there is a place like this. Here, the victory of Christ is documented—you bear witness to His victory in the simplicity of your letting Him seize you. During Mass, let us pray for this simplicity.

HOLY MASS

Liturgy of the Holy Mass: Dan 7:2–14; Cant. Cf. Dan 3:75–81; Lk 21:29–33

HOMILY

After the reading from the prophet Daniel, full of strange animals, like a scene from a film, we said, "The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God." But what is this word for which we thank God? What is this strange book? It is a literary genre born in a moment of persecution of the people of Israel. In order to support the faith of the Jews, it was necessary to speak in a way that was inaccessible to their enemies. Thus nobody understood (not even us) except those who were introduced to the meaning of the images. Through the vision of the great beasts who rise up from the sea, from the depths of the abyss, Daniel spoke to the people of the kingdoms that battled against Israel, against those faithful to the God of Israel. The first beast is similar to a lion with eagle's wings, the second like a bear, etc. (like the strange animals in certain films your grandchildren watch). They are the symbols of the powers, the empires of the time, who persecuted the Jews. In the time when Daniel wrote, the descendants of Alexander the Great were the oppressors of Israel (we read about it recently in the readings from the book of Maccabees.) Therefore, this literary genre, which is called "apocalyptic," was used to support the faith of the people, as if Daniel were saying, "Look, these empires are nothing, absolutely nothing. They seem to have terrible, terrifying power, but actually they are nothing." In fact, together with the description of the power of those beasts, the prophet introduced a new image, that of the Ancient of Days, which is the sign of God, and for this reason in the language of the Old Testament is described with the signs of the divine, that is, vestments white as snow, hair white as wool, and

a throne. Daniel used the figure of the Ancient of Days seated on the throne who judges all peoples so that those who were persecuted would not remain in fear. In fact, the Ancient of Days had thousands upon thousands ministering to Him, and myriads upon myriads standing before Him. He pronounced the judgment that “his dominion is taken away,” which meant, “The power and the duration of each kingdom represented by the beasts have an end, have no fear! They seem destined to last forever, but actually they are nothing.” Why? Because one “like a son of man” will come, to whom “dominion, splendor, and kingship” will be given. This is the expression Jesus used to refer to Himself: “The Son of Man.” In fact, He asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). This is like saying, “When I return, will I still find someone who has believed in the power of my presence?”

We, like the people of Israel, feel besieged and at times fearful because of the situation in which we find ourselves, the conditions in which we are called to live the faith. Precisely for this reason, the Church today has us listen to these readings, as if to say, “All these things are nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing! But are there those who still believe in Him and do not allow themselves to be frightened by these things?” What sign does the Church give us? That of the gospel, which is even more impressive than the one given by the prophet. Jesus offers an almost commonplace example, but even so, a crucial one. “Consider the fig tree and all the other trees: when their buds burst open, [you know that summer is near].” During Advent season we will hear this image of the bud proposed often. It is like seeing an enormous tree trunk, 99.9 percent dead, yet with a sprout. A sprout! Who would wager on a little sprout?! And yet all the deadwood of that trunk cannot cancel out the sprout. It holds all the hope that the tree can come back to life. A sprout. All the rest is nothing; it can do nothing against the power of that sprout. With this image, Jesus is saying that if you do not look at the sprout I put before your eyes in the midst of the whole situation of persecution and confusion—back then and now—if you do not pay attention to this sprout, you will be overwhelmed by fear.

Jesus reassures us that “heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” This is the certainty that enables us to say yes, to say “The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God,” because His word is fulfilled. Do you know why it is fulfilled? Because of all the reigns of Alexander the Great, of the Medes, of the Persians, of Nebuchadnezzar, nothing remains, nothing, absolutely nothing! But He remains, as each of us who acknowledges Him can testify. His words do not pass away, and we today are the proof.