



WITNESSING AND RECOUNTING

Notes from Fr. Julián Carrón's Speech at the CL Regional Diaconia
Milan, February 25, 2014.

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Let us ask ourselves: Does the School of Community on Chapter 8 of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) allow us to face and to judge the challenges that open up before us? Is it possible to be in circumstances with the entire human measure of the dramatic nature of life, in light of the School of Community?

Faced with the reality that we find ourselves living, the first question that each of us must ask himself is: What type of provocation does it generate in us? Because reality provokes us in any case—and we can accept the provocation in all of its magnitude, or we can reduce it. Each of us reacts to the same provocation in different ways, and thus tries to respond. In every personal or collective gesture, one approaches this problem with the question of what is useful for responding to it and what is not. Indeed, it is not enough to affirm that reality provokes me in order for me to reach something objective that opens the other's "I" and reawakens a relationship. Here each of us must verify, independently of the opinion that we might have, whether or not the response that he gives to the provocation of reality is truly able to offer a response, to respond to the problem that provokes and challenges me.

For this reason, the School of Community is a clear example of this dynamic, because even Jesus was provoked by reality: "They are like sheep without a shepherd" (cf. *Mt 9:36*), He said of the people, because they didn't have a sense of themselves, they didn't have a sense of the person. And His entire response is precisely an attempt to respond to this provocation. This is where the value of Chapter 8 emerges, because the whole chapter is Fr. Giussani's response to the question, "Who is Jesus?"

I challenge each of you to verify whether, in all of our responses to provocations, we have in mind all of the factors listed in this chapter. If we really took it seriously, then we would begin to see whether or not our response takes into account all of the factors in play. And we would be able to discover whether or not it is able to reawaken the person in reality.

It is evident that, in our history—without having to go back through all of it now—we have tried to respond to provocations in many ways. And Fr. Giussani always accompanied and corrected us in all of our responses to provocations. We tried to respond to the student protest movement of 1968 with the meeting at the Palalido in 1973 (to put it briefly), and Fr. Giussani, faced with this response, said: This is a totally reactive position, unable to respond adequately to the chal-

lenge. We shared the protestors' desire for freedom, but this was not enough for the response to be adequate. And that is why, at the Beginning Day, we took up Fr. Giussani's judgment from 1976 once more ("How Is a Presence Born?" in *Traces*, Vol. 15, No. 10 (October) 2013, p. I).

But, in 1982, when the first Easter Poster came out, with the title "Christ, God's Companionship to Man," everyone was bewildered—yet everything had already seemed clear since 1976. Listen to what Fr. Giussani says: "We went on for 10 years, working on Christian values and forgetting Christ, without knowing Christ" (*Uomini senza patria. 1982-1983 [Men Without a Homeland: 1982-1983]*, Bur, Milan, 2008, pp. 88-89). We could have all thought that we were following Christ, but Fr. Giussani says: Be careful! It's something different. If you watched the video that aired on Rete4 this

weekend, for the anniversary of Giussani's death, you saw him respond to the journalist's question, "What will you give to young people? Some values?" with "Not only some values, but first and foremost the need for an ultimate meaning, because values, if they are not perceived as the echo of an ultimate meaning, leave one indifferent, and are only useful for a project that is, if anything, partial, political." It's not that one plans to be "political"—but if the response is partial, then he inevitably ends up becoming political in all that he does.

For this reason, placing the Poster about Christ in front of everyone was like the recovery of the origin for Fr. Giussani, like a return to the origin of the Movement. Fr. Giussani had realized that, in our "doing," there was something that no longer corresponded to the origin; even in following the life of the Movement, responding to life's provocations—and not staying at home in front of the fireplace!—a loss of the origin was taking place. "The Poster is like the recovery of the origin, like a return to the origin of the Movement;" we were "taking for granted that for which the Movement arose" (*Ibid.*, p. 27). "The Poster re-proposed the origin [...], it re-proposed the Movement in its original moment" (*Ibid.*, p. 61). So you see that not just any response to provocations is adequate—our history constantly teaches us this.

And again, after the referenda on divorce and abortion in Italy, what did Fr. Giussani do? Did he pursue this battle, or did he shift all of the attention to the battle against the reduction of desire carried out by the powers that be, precisely because, without desire, there is no person? For this reason, he insisted that the powers that be, through the exaltation

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of the lie as instrument, reduce desire, tend to reduce desire. The reduction of desire or the censorship of any need is the weapon of the powers that be. And this, he said, has become the dominant mentality: that we can defend values, but with reduced desires.

Therefore, faced with these things-in which he saw the “I” fading, because it did not let itself be provoked in all of its profundity as “I”—Fr. Giussani spoke of the “Chernobyl effect,” in order to say to each of us: “It is as if there were no longer any real evidence other than fashion, because fashion is a project of the powers that be” (*L’io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987 [The “I” is Reborn in an Encounter: 1986-1987]*, Bur, Milan, 2010, p. 182).

Fr. Giussani also identifies two consequences: 1) it is difficult for Christian life to become “conviction” and 2) “in contrast, one takes refuge in the companionship for protection” (*Ibid.*, p. 181). That is why, precisely in order to respond to a provocation, his affirmation in 1987 that “the person finds himself again in a living encounter” (*Ibid.*, p. 182) acquires all of its importance. This is not a spiritual phrase; it is not an easy way out, in order to avoid responding to provocations. The issue is how we stay within reality to the point of allowing this reawakening of the “I,” without which the powers that be can let us go on in our struggle for values, meanwhile emptying us from inside. And that is why there is not a more realistic description of what man is than the one contained in Chapter 8 of *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*. It demonstrates who Christ is, and thus one can see how any other attempt can be the response to an aspect of the problem, but it is not a Christian response and, therefore, it is unable to respond to all of the dramatic nature of man.

Each of us, then, can decide what to do, but the chapter is a hymn to this, to this comprehension without which we—even with all of our agitation—could not do anything that could truly respond to all of the dramatic nature of the situation. For this reason, the School of Community says, “Only the divine can ‘save’ man [that is, all of] [t]he true and essential dimensions of humanity and its destiny” (p. 83). Only a Presence can order instinctiveness toward the goal, respond to human disorder. “‘Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ (*Rom 7:24*). This cry [says Fr. Giussani] is the only starting point which enables a man to take the proposal of Christ into serious consideration” (p. 95). For this reason, Chapter 8 is not a lesson on spirituality or morality! It is the documentation of who Christ is, because “Christian religiosity arises as *the one and only condition for being human* [...] without which every claim to a so-

lution of these [human] problems is a lie” (pp. 86, 97). Now you understand that it is not enough to repeat this phrase or to substitute it with another one and get agitated. No, this is the verification that each of us must make where he is: whether this is useful to us for living and whether it is useful to others, for all of the dramas with which life provokes us every day, through the people around us; whether it is able to respond to the provocation of life. If we are not aware of this, then our agitation will not be enough, and that is why the powers that be allow us this agitation—since, in the end, those in power will make some law in any case! But, if the person does not reawaken, if the person is not reawakened, then it is very difficult not to let other preoccupations prevail. This does not mean that we no longer take initiatives, but that, if this reawakening of the “I” does not happen, then we will be constantly defeated.

Here, again, one could say, “But when faced with certain provocations, it will be necessary to do something!” The first necessary thing is to judge the dimensions of the problem—if we treat a tumor with Tylenol, it can be a response to the provocation, but how adequate is it?—because the magnitude of the problem that Chapter 8 describes is of such a caliber that not just any “Tylenol” will be enough. It is only by taking the dimensions of the problem into account that one understands what action will be proportional to it. And thus we understand why Fr. Giussani insisted so much on the personalization of faith—it’s not that he wasn’t a realist or that he didn’t accept the provocations of reality!

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If we do not learn from this, then we repeat an attempt that has already demonstrated itself to be a failure, because the Enlightenment attempt to defend values without Christ is not Christianity, it is only Kant. The Enlightenment did not want to erase Christian values, but it deluded itself into thinking that it could live and preserve them without Christ.

The School of Community’s correction is situated precisely at this level: without the divine, the human and its values are not saved. Only the divine is able to preserve all of the dimensions of the human, as we are seeing. To save values without Christ: that Kant could think this, I understand—but it amazes me that we can think it after having seen the alarming result of the history born from the Enlightenment. What we see now is nothing other than the documentation of the failure of the attempt to affirm values without Christ. That we can think of re-proposing what has already been historically documented as a failure—permit me to say that it astonishes me—because, in the end, it is the prevailing in us of the dominant, Enlightenment, com- ➤

►► mon mentality. But this is not the Movement!

Either we recover the origin, according to all of the dimensions that the School of Community places in front of us, or we will be absolutely “nobody” in the world, because it would mean that the powers that be have succeeded in reducing the needs of the “I,” and we would end up being exploited for other ends. Let’s not forget that we all started from perfect laws, but that this was not enough to prevent the avalanche from wiping everything out! And this is a historical fact—we can get angry or not, but we don’t change it with our anger. And if we repeat what has already demonstrated itself to be a failure, poor us!

So, the value of Chapter 8 is crucial precisely for this reason, because it offers us a complete and realistic gaze on the real situation of man, and an indication of where to start again. Significantly, Pope Francis said to *La Civiltà Cattolica*, “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the Church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the Church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time. [...] The dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church are not all equivalent. The Church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow” (“Intervista a papa Francesco,” edited by A. Spadaro, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, III/2013, pp. 463-464). And in light of this preoccupation, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he emphasizes: “The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are [secondary does not mean that they are not important], do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ’s message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty, and attractiveness” (34). Do you think

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that Fr. Giussani would not have endorsed all of this? In 2004, when Giussani wrote to John Paul II that he simply wanted to re-propose “the elementary aspects of Christianity, that is to say, the passion of the Christian fact as such in its original elements, and nothing more” (*Traces*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (April) 2004, p. 2), he was saying the same thing. It would be enough to have in mind one of the Movement’s first booklets, *Traces of Christian Experience*. There is nothing more elementary than that.

I will read again from *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing” (35). The true challenge is whether or not this occurs, because we were chosen to be able to witness to it, to show this conviction for which the person can reawaken. “All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel” (36).

When, at the Mass for Fr. Giussani, Cardinal Scola asked himself how we can respond to all of the challenges of life, he said to us, “By witnessing and recounting.” He spoke of the witness of a life, and we see among ourselves many examples of how this life communicates itself. For this reason, I have often recounted the episode—which is extremely elucidating for me—of Rose’s women, in whom we see that even a value as decisive as that of life can dim, and that only in the Christian encounter is it reawakened in all of its beauty. Initially, Rose had thought of responding to the provocation that, for her, was the impact with the illness (AIDS) of some women in Kampala, by helping them to procure medicine for themselves. But soon thereafter, she saw that this was not enough, because, after having taken the medicine a few times, they stopped and let themselves die. Therefore, aware that only the divine saves all of the dimensions of the human, she started to proclaim Christ to them, and this reawakened in those women the awareness of the value of their life, embraced and loved as it was by the Mystery. Consequently, they started taking the medicine again. We have seen this same dynamic occur in many others among us, as well, like Natascia or the prisoners in Padua, who are a witness of the modality with which, today, we can defend life and its infinite dignity without ambiguity.

It seems crucial to me that we reflect on these things, if we do not want to lose our bearings. ■