

“PRESS ON TO MAKE HIM MY OWN”
Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation
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Notes from the Introduction by Julián Carrón

“Press on to make Him my own.”¹ Who of us would not want to be here this evening with the same face, wholly open, striving, desiring, full of wonder, as that of Peter and John running toward the sepulchre on Easter morning?² Who of us would not desire to be here with that striving to seek Christ, that we see in their faces, with a heart full of expectancy to find Him again, to see Him again, to be attracted, fascinated like the first day? But who among us truly expects that something like this can happen?

Like them, we too struggle to believe the announcement of the women, that is, to acknowledge the most overwhelming fact of history, to give it space within us, to welcome it in our hearts so it may transform us. We too, like them, feel the need to be seized anew, that all our nostalgia for Christ be reawakened.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit together to reawaken in each of us the expectant waiting, the desire for Him.

Come Holy Spirit

Welcome!

I greet each of you present here, all our friends joining us in different countries by satellite link-up, and all those who will do these Spiritual Exercises in the coming weeks.

Two facts marked our journey in recent months: Beginning Day and my audience with Pope Francis.

During Beginning Day we focused on two questions: “How can one live?” and “What are we doing here in the world?”. Asking ourselves those questions on that occasion, we saw that what we need most is to become more and more an original presence, not a reactive one. Fr. Giussani reminded us, “A presence is original when it springs forth from the consciousness of one’s own identity and one’s affection for it, and finds its consistence in this”.³

Since then, many months have passed and we have been challenged by many events. What has happened in the face of the provocations that reality has not spared us? These days are a precious opportunity to see what verification we have done on the proposal we set out for ourselves on Beginning Day. Has the impact with these challenges caused our originality to emerge? Have we verified our consistence, or have we let ourselves be dragged along by the common mentality, failing to go beyond a reactive position?

The audience with Pope Francis, the content of which was taken up in my subsequent letter to the Fraternity, highlighted from the first moment what the Holy Father has at heart as pastor of the whole Church. It does not seem superfluous to return to it at the beginning of our Spiritual Exercises.

What does the Pope have at heart? He told us in his succinct style: the new evangelization, the urgent need to reawaken “the life of faith in the minds and hearts of our

¹ *Phil.* 3,12.

² See the painting by Eugène Burnand (1850–1921): *The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on Easter Morning*, Oil on canvas, 1898, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

³ L. Giussani, “From Utopia to Presence,” *Traces*, Vol. 4, No. 11 [December] 2002, Word Among Us, p. II

contemporaries. Faith is a gift of God; however, it is important that we Christians demonstrate that we live faith in a concrete way, through love, harmony, joy, suffering, because this gives rise to questions, as those that were raised at the beginning of the Church's journey: Why do they live that way? What urges them on? [...] [The] heart of evangelization [...] [is] the *witness* of faith and charity. What we especially need in these times are credible witnesses who make the Gospel visible by their lives as well as by their words, and who reawaken the attraction for Jesus Christ, for the beauty of God. [...] We need Christians who make God's mercy and tenderness for every creature visible to the men of our day."⁴

What the Pope has at heart, therefore, is mission. "The New Evangelization is a renewed movement toward those who have lost the faith and a sense of the deep meaning of life. This dynamism is part of Christ's great mission to bring life to the world, to bring the Father's love to mankind. The Son of God "went forth" from His divine condition and came to meet us. The Church abides within this movement; every Christian is called to go out to meet others, to dialogue with those who do not think as we do, with those who have another faith or who have no faith. To encounter all, because what we all share in common is that we were created in the image and likeness of God. We can go out to everyone without fear and without renouncing our membership in the Church."⁵

The Pope also clearly identified the method: going back to the essential. Going "towards the outskirts of existence," he writes, "requires a shared commitment [...] which brings us back to the essential and which is *solidly focused on the essential; that is, on Jesus Christ*. To get diverted by many secondary or superfluous things does not help; what helps is to focus on the fundamental reality, which is the encounter with Christ, with His mercy and with His love, and to love our brothers and sisters as He has loved us." This "urges us to take new paths with courage without becoming fossils! We might ask ourselves: what is the pastoral plan of our dioceses or parishes like? Does it make the essential visible, namely Jesus Christ?"⁶

In the letter after the audience, I wrote: "I ask you to embrace Pope Francis' question as directed at us—particularly at us, who were born only for this, as all of Fr. Giussani's life witnesses. Does each of us, each community of our Movement, 'make visible the essential, that is, Jesus Christ'?"⁷ In the face of the historical circumstances through which the Mystery has challenged each of us, have we made visible the essential, or have we been diverted by many secondary and superfluous things?

Calling us back to the essential, the Holy Father shows us where he looks to respond to the challenge of living the faith today in our world. The call back to the essential is a crucial indication of method.

Thus the fundamental question is this: what is the essential for us? The essential is that which answers the question about how one can live. What is the essential for each one of us? No question is more pertinent as we begin our Spiritual Exercises, precisely because it is so radical. "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other."⁸ These words of Jesus tell us that each of us can affirm only one thing as ultimate, so unavoidable is the unity of the human "I". For this reason, in the face of the provocations of life, each of us is forced to decide what ultimate

⁴ Francis, *Address to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization*, October 14, 2013, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ J. Carrón, *Letter to the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*, October 16, 2013.

⁸ Mt. 6:24.

thing she or he prizes more than any other. The impact of circumstances leaves us no way out; it forces us to reveal what we hold dearest.

How can we discover what the essential is for us, without self-deception? Once again, Fr. Giussani taught us the method: observing ourselves in action, in experience, because “the factors that constitute humanity are perceived [and we become conscious of them] when they are engaged in action - otherwise they are not noticeable. [...] The more one is involved with life, the more one also, even within a single experience, comes to know the very factors of life itself. Life is a web of events and encounters which provoke the conscience, producing all different kinds of problems. But a problem is nothing other than the dynamic expression of a reaction in the face of these encounters. Life, then, is a series of problems, its fabric made up of reactions to encounters that are provocative to a greater or lesser extent. Discovering the meaning of life - or the most pertinent and important things in life - is a goal which is possible only for the individual who is involved with life seriously, its events, encounters, and problems. Being involved with life does not mean an exasperated entanglement with one or another of life’s aspects; it is never partial. Rather, one must live one’s engagement with life’s various facets as a consequence of a global involvement with life itself. Otherwise, one’s engagement risks being partial, without equilibrium, existence possibly becoming a fixation or an hysteria. To paraphrase a saying of Chesterton, ‘Error is a truth gone mad.’” For this reason, “in order for us to be able to discover within ourselves the existence and nature of such a crucial and decisive a factor as the religious sense, we must commit ourselves to our whole life. This includes everything - love, [work], study, politics, money, even food and rest, excluding nothing, neither friendship, nor hope, nor pardon, nor anger, nor patience. Within every single gesture lies a step towards our own destiny.”⁹

So then, what happens when you engage with all the factors of life, with all of life? The more you live, the more the nature of your needs appears before your eyes. The more we discover our needs, the more we realize that we cannot resolve them by ourselves, nor can others,—people like us, wretches like us. “A sense of *powerlessness* accompanies every serious experience in our lives. This sense of powerlessness generates *solitude*. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others. We can well say that the sense of solitude is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity.”¹⁰

What needs to be answered is precisely this sense of powerlessness, which ultimately generates the solitude that each of us experiences in life. Without this answer, all the rest is distraction.

We are alone with our need, documented in many questions that have emerged in these months. Now, if this is our situation, what enables us to stand? In other words, what is the essential thing we need to live as human beings, according to all the depth of our need? What is the essential *for us*? There is no other way to capture what is the essential for us than discovering in experience whence we expect to find the answer to the need of living.

It would be easy, even obvious or taken for granted—because of the education we have received—to answer immediately that for us the essential is Christ, the presence of Christ. But we cannot get off so easily. A mechanical answer will not suffice. In fact, observing ourselves in action, we often must yield to the evidence that for us the essential is elsewhere.

⁹ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, pp. 36-37.

¹⁰ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 55.

The criterion for discovering it comes from the Gospel. “Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”¹¹ Here you see the distance between the intention that Christ be the essential of life, and the discovery that often in experience this is not the case. Here the difference between intention and experience emerges. Thus, we can discover that even in good faith, the essential has become something else, and is no longer Christ; we have shifted to something else, maybe even in the name of that essential that continues nonetheless to be quoted in our discourses.

It is crucial to grasp what we are saying, so as not to immediately reduce everything to the problem of our mistakes or daily frailties, our instances of moral incoherence. In talking about the distance between intention and experience, the core is not primarily coherence, how often we err, but what defines us even when we err; the core issue is the content of our self-awareness, our real substance, what we actually pursue and love in action, what is essential for us. In fact, one can be incoherent and yet be highly focused on the essential, like a child—described so often by Fr. Giussani—who misbehaves mightily, drives his mother to distraction a thousand times a day, but at the center of his gaze there is no one but his mother. Heaven help anyone who tried to take him away from her! He would wail and scream; he would be inconsolable.

Thus the gap between intention and experience has nothing to do with the gap between theory and application, but indicates that the content of awareness and of affection has *de facto* become another, regardless of ethical coherence or incoherence. It is as if without realizing it at times we have shifted, oriented our gaze elsewhere; we have become centered on something else (the essential has not been denied, but has been transformed into an *a priori*, a postulate in the back of our minds that does not define who we are, our personal identity and our face in the world today).

We have seen this demonstrated particularly clearly at certain moments of our history, as we will see tomorrow. For now, let it suffice to recall what Fr. Giussani told us, and as we repeated in the Beginning Day: “the project had taken the place of presence,”¹² without our realizing it.

What enables us to look at everything—even our mistakes, even this lack of self-awareness—without fear, free from the temptation to justify ourselves (like the publicans, who went to Jesus because only with Him could they be themselves, without having to reject anything of themselves; this is why they sought Him out, why they needed to return to Him—to be able to be themselves, finally)? The certainty of His covenant, the certainty that He will take even our mistakes as an opportunity to make us discover how different He is, who He is. The certainty of this love defines the covenant that God made with us, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us: “Thus says the LORD: ‘In a time of favor I answer you, on the day of salvation I help you, I form you and set you as a covenant for the people, to restore the land and allot the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves! Along the ways they shall find pasture, on every bare height shall their pastures be. They shall not hunger or thirst, nor shall the scorching wind or the sun strike them; For He who pities them leads them and guides them beside springs of water. I will cut a road through all my mountains, and make my highways level. See, some shall come from afar, others from the north and the west, and some from the land of Syene. Sing out, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth, break forth into song, you mountains. For the LORD comforts His people and shows mercy to His afflicted.’”¹³

¹¹ Mt. 6:21.

¹² L. Giussani, “From Utopia to Presence,” op. cit., p. VII

¹³ Is. 49:8-13.

Despite this preference, we challenge the Lord with our murmuring. “But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’”¹⁴ How often we think this! He could react to this provocation like us, with our usual reactivity, getting angry, but He surprises us with an entirely original, irreducible presence. Instead of letting Himself be determined by our murmuring, by what we say or think about Him, He takes the opportunity to show once again how different He is, challenging our reason in an astounding way: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.”¹⁵

What would our life be if we could not hear these words over and over? This is His faithfulness, that enables us to look at everything, that enables us to let His very presence enter our life. Only His presence can increasingly reduce the distance between intention and experience, because He makes possible an experience of unity of living like the one the publicans had in meeting Jesus. This is why they kept returning to Him, as we also return, hoping to hear “that word that [...] freed me,” “because of the hope that He [...] awoke in me.”¹⁶

This is the unity of life that we all desire. “Adults are those who have attained unity of life, awareness of their destiny, of their meaning, energy of adherence.”¹⁷ This is what we all desire: this unity of life. Only in this way can we be truly ourselves, can our presence be useful for ourselves and others. As Fr. Giussani reminded us at a certain point in our history—it was 1977—, “In these past years we have been truly victims of the Movement’s presumption to be the cure-all for the Church and Italy. But [...] if the Movement is not the experience of faith as something that solves my problems, illuminates them, it cannot be proposed to others, either.”¹⁸ This is why he desired that faith become an experience, and why he always taught us that the road for reaching it is none other than for faith to become personal. “‘The time has come for the personalization [...] of the new event born into the world, of the factor of new protagonism of history, which is Christ, in communion with those whom the Father has given Him.’ Giussani underlined that it is a problem of experience, ‘The first thing we have to help each other with is to confirm that the beginning of everything is experience [...]. The concept of experience is to live something, judging it’.”¹⁹

If faith does not become personal experience, there is no mission, and we end up presumptuously becoming judges of everything. The proposal passes through my changed humanity, and “the impetus of mission is gratitude; otherwise, it is presumption.”²⁰ This makes us understand that the only adequate position today is to be witnesses, as the Pope said. Again, Fr. Giussani reminds us of the reason. “In a society like this, nothing new can be created, if not with a life: no structure, organization, or initiative will suffice. Only a different and new life can revolutionize structures, initiatives, relationships—in short, everything. And life is mine, irreducibly mine.”²¹ What a beautiful phrase!

¹⁴ *Is.* 49:14.

¹⁵ *Is.* 49:15.

¹⁶ Cf. C. Chieffo, “Ballata dell’uomo vecchio” [Ballad of the Old Man] and “Il monologo di Giuda” [Judas’ Monologue], *Canti* [Songs], Società Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milano 2014, p. 218 and p. 230.

¹⁷ Consiglio di CL [CL Council], Milan, June 18-19, 1977. CL Archive. (FCL, AMCL, fasc. CL/81, “Consiglio 18/19 giugno 1977”).

¹⁸ CL Center, Milan, November 17, 1977, CL Archive. (FCL, AMCL, fasc. CL/85, “Centro 17.11.77. Sintesi”).

¹⁹ A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani* [Life of Fr. Giussani], Rizzoli, Milan 2013, p. 762.

²⁰ CL Center, Milan, November 17, 1977, CL Archive. (FCL, AMCL, fasc. CL/85, “Centro 17.11.77. Sintesi”).

²¹ “Movimento, ‘regola’ di libertà” [Movement, ‘Rule’ of Freedom], edited by O. Grassi, in *CL-Litterae*

What is needed is life! Dialectic is not enough. Yet there are those who think that witness, that is, life, the experience of living, is the choice of “quitters,” something inward-looking, something to justify our lack of commitment. Nothing could be more mistaken. Bearing witness is actually the most demanding choice, because it requires a commitment that is more all-encompassing than any other option. It asks everything of us, not just a snippet of time that we decide to dedicate to some project. Bearing witness is for people who want to live up to their own humanity; it requires we be present with all of ourselves as we reach out to others, bringing them a newness lived in such a radical way that all their humanity is re-awakened, person to person. “God saves man through man,”²² we read in School of Community. All my humanity is demanded. All of our friend Natascia’s pain for her son was demanded to prompt the creation of a new ward for neonatal pathologies; a pro-life conference would have made no difference. Bearing witness does not mean standing on the sidelines or withdrawing from the battle. It demands the commitment of all my humanity: energy, affection, intelligence, time, and unity of life. This is anything but spiritualism! Anything but delegating to some expert, passing the buck!

Therefore, insisting that faith become personal means insisting on the source of the difference that makes us a presence, capable of an original witness in society. Who does not feel this need? We can shoulder the responsibility to which the Pope called us only if we do not take for granted the subject (that is, claiming we are already witnesses just because we say so), but choose to travel the road that will make us witnesses according to the design that God wants. Giussani says that the Movement is what helps us in this, period. It helps you to be yourself.

“The journey to truth is an experience.” It has always been this way. “In the concept of development, Newman’s own life plays a role. That seems to become visible to me in his well-known words [from *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*]: ‘...Here on earth, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’.” Ratzinger gives us this quote, and continues, “Throughout his entire life, Newman was a person converting, a person being transformed, and thus he always remained and became ever more himself. Here the figure of St. Augustine comes to my mind, with whom Newman was so associated. When Augustine was converted in the garden at Cassiciacum he understood conversion according to the system of the revered master Plotin and the Neo-Platonic philosophers. He thought that his past sinful life would now be definitively cast off; from now on the convert would be someone wholly new and different, and his further journey would be a steady climb to the ever purer heights of closeness to God. It was something like that which Gregory of Nyssa described in his *Ascent of Moses*: ‘Just as bodies, after having received the first push downwards, fall effortlessly into the depths with ever greater speed, so, on the contrary, the soul which has loosed itself from earthly passion rises up in a rapid upward movement... constantly overcoming itself in a steady upward flight.’ Augustine’s actual experience was a different one. He had to learn that being a Christian is always a difficult journey with all its heights and depths. The image of *ascensus* is exchanged for that of *iter*, whose tiring weight is lightened and borne up by moments of light which we may receive now and then. Conversion is the *iter*—the roadway of a whole lifetime. And faith is always ‘development,’ and precisely in this manner it is the

communio, n. 11, November 1978, p. 44.

²² L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1998, p. 103.

maturation of the soul to truth, to God, who is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.”²³

This maturation occurs through all the circumstances of life. “The world’s turmoil is an instrument of God’s call to authenticity and to truth of life for everyone, but in particular for the Christian, who is like the sentinel on the battlefield of the world.” At times this turmoil shakes us terribly. It is normal, as Fr. Giussani reminds us. “Deep down, as a law, we can’t avoid this bewilderment. ‘The world will laugh, and you will cry.’”²⁴

All that we have said makes us aware of our need. This awareness is key for a gesture like the one we are beginning, because the Spiritual Exercises are precisely a gesture. Therefore, the Spiritual Exercises are not only the lesson and the assembly, but also the silence, songs, prayer, and above all, the asking. We can reduce our participation in a gesture like this, each of us using our own criteria to pick and choose what to participate in or what to follow, out of the whole packet! As if we were at the doctor’s office, but we were the ones to decide what medicine to take. Instead, the more aware we are of our need, the more everything we will live these days, and all the sacrifices we will make, will become a cry, a cry for the Lord to have mercy on us. Let’s ask Him to!

²³ J. Ratzinger, Presentation by His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Card. John Henry Newman, Rome, April 28, 1990.

²⁴ L. Giussani, The Long March To Maturity, Notes from a talk by Luigi Giussani at the “Scuola quadri” of Communion and Liberation in Milan, on February 27, 1972. *Traces*, Page One, March 2008.