



**“HE WANTED TO
COME AMONG US,
WHEN HE COULD HAVE
SIMPLY SETTLED
FOR GIVING US HELP”**

(Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

**Notes from Julián Carrón's Summary of the Spiritual Exercises for Priests
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The more time goes on, the more I am struck by the truth of Fr. Giussani's words about the importance of circumstances: they are not something secondary, but are essential for understanding—we can say concisely—the nature of Christianity (cf. L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino [Man and His Destiny]*, Marietti 1820, Genoa, 1999, p. 63).

We find this perception in those who are most conscious of what is happening. Someone recently quoted a famous text by Joseph Ratzinger written in the 1970s on the phenomenon of atheism, which Ratzinger perceived as a call for Christians to live a more aware faith: "In relation to the modern pagans, the Christian must know that their salvation is hidden in the grace of God, on which his own salvation also depends; he must know that concerning their possible salvation, the seriousness of his own faith is indispensable; their lack of faith must urge him to a fuller faith, because he knows he is involved in the function of representing Jesus Christ, upon whom the salvation of the world depends, not just that of Christians" (J. Ratzinger, "The New Pagans and the Church," in *Il nuovo popolo di Dio. Questioni ecclesiologicalhe [The New People of God, Ecclesiological Issues]*, Queriniana, Brescia, 1992, p. 362).

Many years later, Ratzinger described with peremptory lucidity the outcome of the attempt over the centuries to shield the universal values (introduced by Christianity) from the religious conflicts unleashed after the Reformation, detaching them from the historical fact that had caused them to emerge and had made them evident. As the conflicts between the confessions deepened and a crisis of the image of God emerged, there was an effort to separate the essential values of morality from the contradictions, seeking for them autonomous evidence that would make them independent from the disputes and uncertainties of the various philosophies and confessions. At the time, it seemed that the great foundational convictions created by Christianity could endure and remain undeniable. But, Ratzinger concluded, "The search for such a reassuring certainty, one that could remain uncontested beyond all the differences, met with failure" (*L'Europa di Benedetto nella crisi delle culture [The Europe of Benedict in the Crisis of Culture]*, LEV-Cantagalli, Roma-Siena, 2005, pp. 61-62).

Another very acute observer, Henry de Lubac, wrote that many attempts of modern society "often preserved a number of values that were Christian in origin; but, having cut off these values from their source, they were

powerless to maintain them in their full strength or even in their authentic integrity. Spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice: these great things, without which there is no true humanity, which ancient paganism had half perceived and Christianity had instituted, quickly became unreal [how striking: unreal!] when no longer seen as a radiation from God, when faith in the living God no longer provides their vital substance." Either they continue to be seen as a radiation from God, or they become unreal. I think there is no more cogent way to put it: unreal. "Then they become empty forms. Soon they are no more than a lifeless ideal," because "without God, even truth is an idol, even justice is an idol. Idols too pure and pale in face of the flesh-and-blood idols that are regaining their pedestals; ideals too abstract in the face of the great collective myths that are reawakening the strongest instincts" (Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1995, pp. 70-71).

In order to live our faith today, we cannot do without this awareness, documented by the most attentive spirits of our time.

The origin of the epochal change we are going through is therefore this separation of the truest things—that have characterized our history for centuries—from their source. It was the project of the Enlightenment, as we said the first day, quoting G.E. Lessing: "Contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason" (*Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Philosophical and Theological Writings*, transl. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 85).

Kant moved along the same lines: "A historical faith, based merely on facts, can extend its influence no further than the tidings relevant to a judgment on its credibility can reach" ("Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, transl. A. Wood and G. di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 113).

WHAT DO THESE OBSERVATIONS HAVE TO DO with a course of Spiritual Exercises, with what has happened among us in these days? They are pertinent first of all because it is possible that we have lived this moment dualistically—on the one hand knowledge, the provocations of history, and on the other hand belief, the Christian announcement—setting the experience of the Spiritual Exercises "apart," as it were, from the challenge indicated by Ratzinger, de Lubac, and Pope Francis when he speaks

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of an epochal change, consequently reducing our awareness and the importance of what we have lived. So then, let us try to look at what has happened.

We said that without an experience of mercy, the dualism between knowledge and belief will not be overcome. For this reason, the first verification regards ourselves: what has happened among us, what has happened in each of us? We have to realize all the factors of the experience we have lived, otherwise we will end up reducing it. We will say, "What we have heard is all right for us," but in front of the pressure of a certain mentality, in front of the dimensions of the cultural challenges, this is too fragile. The method is too quiet. It is all right for the Spiritual Exercises, but to face the world you need something else.

In this sense, what Fr. Giussani is helping us to understand is crucial, that is, that the question of the epochal change makes it necessary to understand the relationship between belonging and cultural expression. If we do not grasp this point in its fullness, we will end up proposing the same solutions all over again, the same initia-

tives that have already proven a failure in our past. Pay attention, this concerns our daily life, because the way we are priests sets in front of everyone a cultural expression, that is, we document a certain way of engagement with reality. The cultural expression "expresses" our being priests, that is, the belonging that we live, the concept of faith we have. In front of what happens, we too can repeat the right words, try to propose to people the "great things" of which de Lubac spoke, but detached from their origin, from their source, from the method through which the Mystery has communicated them to women and men. We, too, can use a method different from the one the Mystery chose, that is, we can replicate the method that made them become "unreal," "empty forms," in the eyes of our contemporaries. I think that the Church faces no more powerful challenge than this, and it concerns us too.

Therefore, the first thing to consider is the experience we have had: the starting point is always from our experience. What has thrown wide open our reason, making us use it in an adequate way? What has caused all >>

» our capacity for fraternity to emerge? What do all the observations on the current era have to do with what we have lived in these days? What do our freedom, our desire for truth and justice, have to do with these Spiritual Exercises? What is the origin of the “great things” we have spoken about? What is their source? If we do not grasp the nexus, the belonging in which we have been immersed in these days will remain a “devout” act, more or less intimistic, and will not relate to our capacity to know, that is, to know reality. It will be a victory in us of the break between knowing and believing.

History has shown us that without the continuity in time of the One who is their source, the most beautiful things, the greatest, the truest, those that most fascinate us, become unreal and are no longer self-evident: we no longer see them, no longer touch them, and it seems they are no more. In this regard, what does Saint Bernard’s sentence quoted by Fr. Lepori during these Exercises say to us? “He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help.’ [...] Yes, God could have settled for aiding our misery, our need. He could have saved all of humanity with just one thought, with just one word. Just as in the beginning when He said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light, so He could have said, ‘Let there be salvation,’ and all of us would have been saved. It was not necessary for Him to enter into time, into the history that He Himself created, for the Creator to enter into the creation, for Him to accompany it, for the Word, who could achieve everything with a single word, to become flesh, a man, life of man, not only for thirty-three years, but for all the time of the Church, His Body, for all the time of the ecclesial, Eucharistic, and apostolic revelation of His Presence. But this is the way He wanted to do it. He did it. He became ‘Fact.’ He came. He happened as ‘Event.’” (M.G. Lepori, *Riconoscere Cristo, misericordia del Padre [Recognizing Christ, the Mercy of the Father]*, publication forthcoming with Itaca).

“He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help” (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *In vigilia Nativitatis Domini, Sermo III, 1, PL 183*). With this sentence, Saint Bernard is describing the essence of the method of God, its full import. Let us not reduce it to a pious, devout line, one we accept easily—no one casts doubt on it—but without letting it challenge us deep down. Fr. Giussani spoke in this regard of “the correspondence between content and method typical of

Christian revelation” (“The Method of a Presence,” part II, section 1, *Traces*, n. 1, 2003).

The historic circumstance we are living helps us to grasp the full importance of Saint Bernard’s observation. Today we understand clearly just how important a historical fact was for enabling us to discover necessary truths of reason, contrary to what Lessing thought. Why did Jesus come, when he could have settled for helping us without entering into time? He came because our mortal weakness prevents our humanity from living up to the greatness for which it was made. Our reason becomes clouded, our freedom shrivels, our affection freezes. Without the Presence of the One

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who makes them shine, the “great things without which there is no true humanity” (spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice) become unreal: Christ is the one who makes us discover what reason is, because He throws it wide open with His Presence. He makes us discover what liberty is, because He fulfils it, filling us with attraction for Him. He makes us discover what communion is, what brotherhood is, because He makes us one in Him. This is why the one chance for these “great things” to become accessible to man is through “a radiation from God,” as de Lubac reminds us, through the humanity of Christ. This is why He sent His Son. Wanting to truly help us, God did not settle for acting in another way. He wanted to become an event in the life of the human person.

THE LORD CAUSES US TO DISCOVER all this within an experience. This is why He wanted to come, and this is what amazes us, as Fr. Lepori said. “It is with surprise, with wonder that Saint Bernard exclaims, and certainly repeats to himself continually, ‘*Venire voluit, qui potuit subvenire.*’ He is not understanding something: he is looking at a fact, an incredible event. He is admiring the ‘wondrous mercy,’ filled with amazement in front of the mercy of God manifested in Christ.” Faith is this acknowledgement full of wonder, this openness, to “allow Christ to enter our home, our life, the life of our loved ones, the life of the world, to save us. [...] Faith begins when you yield to this wonder, and do what children do when they are in front of beauty, when they open wide their eyes, their mouth, their nostrils, spread out their arms, reach out their hands, in an instinctive opening, making space for that which or the one who surprises us, to let themselves be filled, to give entry to the good



beauty that surprises us" (M.G. Lepori).

So then, what are we invited to do? To let ourselves be pervaded—always and before any other thing—by His gaze that calls us by name. This is the source of Peter's recognition of the One who had recognized him first, who had recognized Peter and who also recognizes us. "Regarding the recognition of Christ [...] the inexhaustible point of reference is the experience of Peter, so often re-examined and explored more deeply in our journey. He, too, he above all, had to have the fundamental experience—fundamental for him and thus for the entire Church—of recognizing the One who recognized him. Few saints, few disciples have had as many proofs of how Jesus knows us 'first' as did Peter" (M.G. Lepori).

If we do not immerse ourselves in this experience, everything becomes abstract, unreal. So then, concerning what we said about the era in which we live, the question is whether we who have experienced this gaze—who has not experienced at least a little crumb?—subject reason to experience, realizing that we cannot communicate the gaze to others in a different way than the way it happened

to us: through a testimony in which the radiance of God was made present to us. We can collaborate with Christ only by letting ourselves be attracted by Him. Following is just letting ourselves be drawn by Him, and for this reason the alternative is dialectic: either John or Judas, that is, "two ways of living the following of Christ, discipleship to Christ. John lives it according to Christ, corresponding deep down to the event encountered; Judas according to his own conception of the event, according to his own interpretation of Christ" (M.G. Lepori).

What is at stake here, my friends, is faith, not the consequences we can draw from it, but its origin. For this reason, asking the question about the relationship between belonging and cultural expression, Fr. Giussani answers with the "yes" of Peter, challenging us radically. "The twenty-first chapter of John's Gospel is a fascinating documentation of the historical birth of the new ethic. The particular story narrated there is the keystone of the Christian conception of man, of his morality, in his relationship with God, with life, and with the world" (L. Giussani, S. Alberto, and J. Prades, *Generating Traces* >>



» in the *History of the World: New Traces of the Christian Experience*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010, p. 59). We must grasp the crucial meaning of this affirmation, otherwise our way of living faith will be dualistic, whether we like it nor not; even if we talk constantly about Peter's "yes," we will communicate morality and culture as if they came from a different source, not from immersion in the event of a particular story.

The true challenge that we have before us is this: becoming aware that we cannot do without a "particular story," recognized as method, for living and transmitting the Christian conception, for living and transmitting morality and culture, because without Presence—Giussani says, speaking of Peter's "yes"—without adherence to a Presence, there is no morality; values do not adhere in us, do not enter into our innermost being, and sooner or later become "unreal." Without the encounter with Christ that constantly opens my eyes wide open, I look at things the same way everyone else does. My prejudices are not broken apart and my mentality does not change; they remain the same as everyone else's. If we defend the

values of which de Lubac spoke, but detached from their historical origin, they can become unreal in us too; they "become empty forms. Soon they are no more than a lifeless ideal [...]. Idols too pure and pale in face of the flesh-and-blood idols that are regaining their pedestals; ideals too abstract in the face of the great collective myths that are reawakening the strongest instincts." Without the Presence of Christ here and now—we also verified this in the experience of these days—neither Christian anthropology nor Christian morality have purchase and adhere in us. Therefore, what is needed is a womb, a place—the Church, our companionship, a particular story—where His contemporary Presence makes itself evident, something we can experience, and shapes our reason, attracts our freedom, educates our gaze.

SO THEN, THE TRUE CHOICE IS BETWEEN allowing or not allowing His initiative, following or not following. What has Fr. Lepori proposed to us in these days? "Following means allowing ourselves to be swept up by Christ's coming in the world. A person who is wonderstruck

that God chose to come when He could have settled for sending us help, follows. What can you do, other than follow, than follow this Presence in its continual, gratuitous, and unconditional coming into the world, coming to save us and not just to help us?" At this point, the theme of authority comes into play. Who is an authority? The authority is Christ.

Authority is the method through which Christ does things. Authority is Christ who has introduced us to the Christian conception in a certain way, through a given method: by becoming flesh.

"He wanted to come among us, when He could have simply settled for giving us help." The import of these words! But who grasps these things? Who grasps the importance of the "yes" of Peter and the fact that a particular story is the keystone of the Christian conception?

Following authority is obeying the method used by God, the same method used and proposed by the charism that has reached us. Do not think that Fr. Giussani is naive when he talks about Peter's "yes"—he is dialoguing with modern culture. Let's listen to what he says: "Today's culture holds that it is impossible to know, to change oneself and reality 'merely' by following a person [that is, it holds that Christianity is impossible]. Our era cannot conceive of the person as an instrument of knowledge and change, because these factors are understood reductively, the first [knowledge] as analytical and theoretical reflection, the second [change] as *praxis* and application of rules" (L. Giussani, "From Faith, The Method," *Traces*, n. 1, 2009). This was the position of the Enlightenment, and it is active today, because, as we have seen, the universal truths that were defended in the abstract have become unreal. This defense failed, precisely because the person was no longer considered to be an instrument of knowledge. But today as well, reason is conceived in terms of Enlightenment ideas merely "as analytical and theoretical reflection," such that we can know without needing to follow someone, without the living and crucial encounter with another. Just "analytical and theoretical reflection" is needed; together with this, in order to achieve change, you need only the rules to apply, change being understood as *praxis* and as application of rules. This position can worm its way into the Christian context, saying, "The rules have been given to us, and we just have to apply them and make sure the others obey them. Nothing else is needed!" But it is worrisome when there is an effort to promote this not with other words, but with Christian words: with the same

identical words, with the same ingredients, you get a totally different soup.

Where does Fr. Giussani start from to address the problems of reason, of knowledge and morality? "Instead, for John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, it was precisely by following that exceptional person that they learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality." He does not draw his answer from some dictionary of philosophy or morality, from some arcane text: "Instead, for John and Andrew"—he seeks the answer in the experience of the first ones who followed Him, just as described in the Gospel, not reducing that experience to intimism. "John and Andrew" are the keystone of the method of God, indicating the way we ourselves can know, exactly as happened to them. "Instead, for John and Andrew [...], it was precisely by following that exceptional person that they learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality. From the moment of that first encounter, the method began to unfold in time" (*ibid.*).

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Fr. Giussani insists: "Our companionship is defined by a method. It can be said that the 'genius' of our Movement lies entirely in its method [not in the method understood as a set of instructions and formulas to repeat, but as following the modality with which He has communicated Himself since the first encounter]. It is, first of all, an educative 'genius,' since the method is the road by which a man [a man!] achieves awareness of the experience being proposed to him. It is precisely by safeguarding the authenticity of the method that the content of our experience can be transmitted." Here we see how Fr. Giussani faces and overcomes the position of Lessing, emblematic of modernity, that is, the divide between knowledge and belief, re-affirming the method of God: "It is [...] by safeguarding the authenticity of the method [used by God] that the content [the truth] of our experience can be transmitted." There is no other road. We must decide whether to follow it or not. This is the crucial point for us, for the Church and for the world. "The method has its origin in faith, which is the acknowledgment in your own life of an exceptional presence that you see as important for your destiny. [In fact] faith comes to fill the entire horizon of your life, through the relationship with a presence that corresponds to your heart" (*ibid.*). This is the epochal importance of Saint Bernard's sentence. "If we do not open ourselves to this experience, talking about mercy, [...] forgiving our enemies, giving your life for others, all >>>

» this becomes abstract, everything slips into moralism and ideology" (M.G. Lepori).

Therefore, the true choice is whether to go with this method, submitting ourselves to experience, as John and Andrew did. They followed Him because they yielded to the experience they had. After meeting Him, they did not need to look elsewhere for culture and morality; they did not need to find criteria outside their experience for judging and facing the provocations of reality. It was not necessary to detach themselves from the relationship with Him, from His Presence in history, in order to know the truth and to be moral. Everything was in that relationship: the disciples did not separate the experience they lived with Him from judgment; they did not separate the particular history that was the encounter with Him from the emergence of the truth, because experience holds in itself the judgment, otherwise it is not experience: it would remain pure "trying," unjudged, useless for knowledge.

Experience "carries its reasons," Fr. Giussani said (*Vivendo nella carne [Living in the Flesh]*, Bur, Milano, 1998, p. 211). "The thing that challenges society [...] can only be an experience that carries, bears on its title page its reasons" (L. Giussani, *Dall'utopia alla presenza. 1975-1978 [From Utopia to Presence, 1975-1978]*, Bur, Milano, 2006, p. 295). But this has a hard time "passing" into us, so much so that we see certain problems of the past show up again. The others may or may not have been aware, but it was very clear to Fr. Giussani as early as the mid-1960s that in the midst of the same belonging there can emerge two methods of living the faith that are seen in different forms of cultural expression. "Those who would later leave GS put the accent on a conception according to which Christianity was understood as a form of moral and social engagement. In doing so, they lost sight of the specific nature of the Christian fact, and thus inevitably ended up placing their hope in human action and organization, and not in the gratuitous gesture with which God chose to enter into history" (L. Giussani, *Il movimento di Comunione e Liberazione 1954-1986. Conversazioni con Robi Ronza [The Movement of Communion and Liberation 1954-1986, Conversations with Robi Ronza]*, Bur, Milano, 2014, p. 62).

In every era, from the beginning until now, the same

drama re-surfaces. It is not different. "Instead, for John and Andrew [...]." This expression of Giussani will always accompany us. "Instead, for John and Andrew, the first two who ran up against Jesus, it was precisely by following that exceptional person that they learned to know differently and to change themselves and reality." This is the grace that has been given to us: an experience that enables us to grasp the full import of the method of God, its usefulness for overcoming the modern obstacles that generated the climate in which we live, such that the most sacrosanct things have become unreal. This experience keeps us from fooling ourselves that we can resolve this lack of reality using the same method that generated the problem, that leads the "great things" brought by Christ to become unreal.



LET US HELP EACH OTHER TO UNDERSTAND these things, in order not to become in turn part of the problem, not out of ill will—heavens no!—but because we do not realize what is at stake. Imagine what responsibility we have for the task to which we have been called with our ministry! We can live it differently—without needing to change anything in terms of circumstances and efforts—by simply facing daily duties with a newness inside; that is, with His present Presence as the content of our consciousness, as Jesus

did: "The man, Jesus of Nazareth—invested by the mystery of the Word, and therefore assumed into the very nature of God (but His appearance was completely identical to that of all men)—they didn't see this man do one single action whose form didn't show his awareness of the Father" (L. Giussani, "A New Man," *Traces*, n. 3, 1999). The very form of His testimony documented His constitutive relationship with the Father. "This revelation of the mystery of the Word, that reveals to us the mystery of the human person, comes to us from Jesus only inasmuch as it is 'in the heart of the Father,'" said Fr. Lepori.

Only by re-living this immersion into the mystery of Christ present can we respond to the need of our fellow human beings: "Testimony, mission, is a love for the journey of the human person, for the unity of the flock of God, for the growth of our brothers and sisters, for all of humanity, that is possible only by remaining attached with all our thirst of love to the thirst of love of Christ, following the Presence that looks at us, speaks with us, and loves us" (M.G. Lepori). **I**