



THE FASCINATION OF AN UNARMED BEAUTY

Notes from the Assembly with the Responsibles
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by Julián Carrón

“Do we Christians still believe in the capacity of the faith we have received to attract those we encounter, and in the living fascination of its unarmed beauty?” (J. Carón, “The Challenge of True Dialogue after the Attacks in Paris,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 12, 2015, p. 27). This is not a question that we can take for granted. In fact, every time we respond to a situation like this and ask ourselves “What should we *do*?”—we demonstrate that we still haven’t understood the answer to this question. This “What should we *do*?” is the biggest giveaway. There is one thing we have to do, just one: to be converted, to let ourselves be won over once again by the fascination that is the only reason that we are here. Everything else is a consequence of this: at a certain point in time, the fascinating power of the faith—the conquering fascination of its unarmed beauty—won us over, as yesterday’s Gospel reminded us. “I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way. [Unarmed, carrying nothing else and fixing our eyes and every fiber of our being on nothing but that which has won us over] [...]. Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick in it [which means carry with you that newness that cures every sickness in the house; it’s not an exaggeration, when a person who is changed enters a house, he heals what is ill], and say to them [only after healing them, because only then can they understand], ‘The kingdom of God is at hand for you’” (*Lk* 10:3-9). It’s an event that allows people to comprehend the content of what is proclaimed. First it happens, and then it is understood; it’s precisely because it happens that they understand. Though this has always been the method, and it’s even more crucial now, it’s as if at some point, without realizing, we substitute something else for this fascination—as Fr. Giussani told us over and over again.

In 1982, during the first Fraternity Exercises after the Pontifical recognition of CL, Fr. Giussani said, “You have grown up, and while you have reached a level of competence in your professional lives, in the relationship with Christ there is a kind of distance possible (in contrast with the zeal of many years ago, especially considering certain moments years ago) [in other words, the energy of the beginning is no longer there, we no longer have the same fascination to communicate to others, the zeal of many years ago is gone]. There is a kind of distance from Christ, except in particular moments. What I mean is, there is a kind of distance from Christ except when you sit down to pray [which often becomes just something extra, “stuck on” to life]; there is a distance from Christ except when, for example, we take on an initiative in His name, or in the name of the Church

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or of the Movement [and in so doing, often we are able to “cover up” the distance, as Cardinal Ratzinger said]. It’s as if Christ were far from our hearts. With the poet of the Italian Renaissance we can say we are ‘with graver interests occupied’; our heart is as if isolated, or rather, Christ remains isolated from our heart, except in particular circumstances like prayer, initiatives, when there is a meeting, or School of Community to be led, etc. This distancing of Christ from the heart, apart from certain moments in which His presence seems to be at work, generates another distancing, which reveals itself in the ultimate uneasiness we feel amongst us—I am speaking even of husbands and wives—in an ultimate mutual uneasiness. [...] The distancing of Christ from the heart distances the ultimate dimension of my heart from the ultimate dimension of your heart, except in the simplest of shared responsibilities (taking care of the house, looking after your children, etc.)” (L. Giussani, “The Familiarity with Christ,” *Traces*, no. 2, 2007, p. 2). As a result, we find ourselves anxious in front of the challenges we face because, as we say, “We have to be able to do *something*.” But this doesn’t help, precisely because we are up against this collapse of evidences that we have been talking about for months. We are immersed in this melting pot of cultures, religions, and diverging worldviews that we call “multiculturalism.” In this context, the place of freedom that is Europe is threatened by those who want to impose their worldview using violence, as we saw once again this morning on the front page of all the newspapers reporting what happened in Copenhagen. And so I ask myself, “Do all of those who meet us find in us something capable of attracting their humanity,

of challenging their reason and their freedom?” In many, “a great nothingness” or “a deep emptiness” is what prevails. Today we see how true it is that there is no evidence except this nothingness, because nothing is enough to attract people, and so for many life degrades into violence. Each and every one of us in our society finds himself in front of this nothingness, and so every attempt at a response will have to verify if it is capable of overcoming this nothingness. All else is merely a distraction.

As Fr. Giussani says, the first battle takes place inside of us. If we have lost the fascination of the faith, after having experienced it, if we find ourselves with our hearts separated from Christ, what can we offer to others? Do we really think that, if the fascination no longer shines in us and through us, we can respond to the situation described by doing something else? With his characteristic incisiveness, Fr. Giussani catches our mistake, and tells us still today: we can be here, busy with a hundred projects, but if that fascination has disappeared, our heart is far from Him.

This is the real question, my friends. This means that our historical circumstances are a unique opportunity for us to ask ourselves, “Can those who meet us be so attracted by the truth

that we carry that their reason and their freedom are challenged and re-engaged?" This question tells us that we constantly need to deepen our awareness of the relationship between truth, reason, and freedom. The problem is that it's not enough to repeat these words, not if we don't understand the connection between them and what we mean by truth, what we mean by reason, and what we mean by freedom. As we have seen, there are others who claim to defend freedom or to belong to something that they claim possesses the truth, but who, in the name of their truth, commit the most reprehensible acts. If the relationship between truth, reason, and freedom is not clear, any kind of belonging admits itself to suspicion. The same words can be reduced in a thousand ways. If this isn't clear, then we will continue repeating these words without ever introducing something capable of responding to the emptiness in society. This—as I have said—is why we must come to terms with the relationship between truth and freedom. Throughout Christian history we have had to learn that “the only way to truth is through freedom” (J. Carrón, “The Challenge of True Dialogue...,” op. cit.).

It's crucial that we understand what unites these two things, because otherwise they remain just words thrown together. We need to understand more deeply how truth is capable of attracting our freedom and fulfilling our reason. Truth is not a definition, nor is it a doctrine that, simply because I affirm it, commands another's freedom. If a definition is not something one has acquired in experience, as Fr. Giussani always used to say, then it is a schematic imposition, a formality; even a correct definition, if it is not understood in one's experience, will easily be viewed as an imposition, and people will rebel against it. Christianity is not a definition. Guardini writes, “[It] is not a theory about Truth, or an interpretation of life. It is also this, but this is not its essential nucleus. This is constituted by Jesus of Nazareth, by His concrete existence, by His work, by His destiny” (R. Guardini, *The Essence of Christianity*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2007, pp. 11-12). Truth is, therefore, a person. Think of the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate: *Quid est veritas?* What is truth? *Vir qui adest*, a man who is here, a presence. Truth, then, is understood within a relationship, as Pope Francis said, in an encounter.

If there is anyone who can understand this, it's us. The video with clips of Fr. Giussani and his words (which will be distributed in Italy with *Corriere della Sera*) is yet another proof of this. Fr. Giussani is an encounter for us; Christianity communicates itself through an encounter. It was he who said, “What is missing is not so much the verbal or cultural repetition of a proclamation. Today's men and women await, perhaps without realizing it, the experience of an encounter with people for whom the fact of Christ is such a real presence that their lives are changed. [It would be enough just to read this, what man is

waiting for now more than ever, “perhaps without realizing it, is the experience of an encounter with people for whom the fact of Christ is such a real presence that their lives are changed.” If life is not truly changed, even if we verbally or culturally repeat the Christian proclamation, nothing happens; not in us or in those we meet.] It is only a human impact that can shake up today's man: an event that is an echo of the first event, when Jesus raised His eyes and said, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly; I am coming to your house.” In this way, the Mystery of the Church, which has been handed on to us from two thousand years ago, must always “happen again” through grace. It must always be a presence that moves; that is, a movement that by its nature makes life in the place around it, in the place where it happens, more human. [People recognize that Christianity is “happening” there because it is a presence that makes an environment more human.] Those who are called experience a miracle analogous to that which happened for the first disciples. The encounter with the redemptive event of Christ is always accompanied by the liberation of one's full humanity” (L. Giussani, *The Christian Event*, BUR, Milan 2003, pp. 23-24). The liberation

of our humanity comes along with the Christian encounter because it is an encounter that frees us; it is an encounter with truth that engages our freedom, that attracts our freedom, and therefore liberates us. We cannot speak of a Christian encounter in any other way.

Kierkegaard said, “Christianity is communication of existence. [...] [T]he difficulty is to become Christians, or to continue to be so, and the most dangerous illusion is that of becoming so sure of being [Christian] as to

desire to set oneself to defend the entirety of Christianity” against adversaries, “instead of defending faith inside ourselves from the illusions” of our adversaries (cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Volume 1*, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 353).

We can't get by with cultural discourse alone, with just a cultural message, otherwise God could have saved Himself the trouble of the Incarnation of His Son and sent us the message in the mail—He could have saved us and Himself some trouble! By becoming man, taking on flesh, Christ chose the method for communicating truth: stripping Himself of any power beyond the sheer splendor of the truth, He was a witness to us, unarmed, of the fascinating power of truth. This means that if we don't connect our belonging with a witness, it will be difficult for us to give any meaningful contribution to help our brothers and sisters in humanity in today's situation. It's only through our witness that others can recognize our belonging as a positive challenge to their reason and their freedom. This fascinating power of what is true, this splendor of truth, however, is not something that I generate, because only “those who follow >>

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» me will have the hundredfold on earth,” as we said in yesterday’s liturgy. The continuation of the initial fascination in us is a result of really following. We can see that we are following when we see the fascination that our presence provokes in others, and there are others who tell us how much they are fascinated when they meet many of us.

For all these reasons, I would say that the article published in *Corriere della Sera* is a synthesis of the proposal we make to ourselves and that we extend to everyone. “In front of the events of Paris it is sterile to mount opposition in the name of an idea, no matter how right it may be.” You see, without a witness that challenges their freedom, it’s unlikely that some other thing will bring people back to life out of the nothingness in which they are immersed. The issue, then, is that Europe and its space for freedom not be an “empty space, void of proposals for life,” but rather a place where one can witness to the fascination of the truth, the fascination that draws us from the pit of nothingness—us before anyone else, because we are the first to distance ourselves from Christ, despite remaining in the Movement and doing a thousand things, as Fr. Giussani said in 1982. This is the only way that Europe can be a “place of a real encounter between proposals of meaning, different and numerous as they may be,” a place of freedom where we can “[say] in front of everyone, individually or together, who we are.” In other words, “each makes available for everyone their vision and their way of living. This sharing will enable us to encounter each other on the basis of the real experience of each person, and not on ideological stereotypes that make dialogue impossible” (J. Carrón, “The Challenge of True Dialogue...,” op. cit., p. 27).

Because often we don’t understand all the things we have just said, often we don’t understand the primary concern and witness of the Pope, either. We don’t grasp the importance of him saying, “Dialogue, thus, begins with *encounter*. The first knowledge of the other is born from it. Indeed, if one begins from the premise of the common affiliation in *human nature*, one can go beyond prejudices and fallacies and begin to understand the other according to a new perspective” (January 24, 2015). Often, we think this is not enough and so look for a shortcut to impatiently impose the truth, which only generates confusion in everyone.

The historical circumstances in which we live give us an extraordinary opportunity—again, first and foremost for us—to more deeply understand the truth that fascinated us. It’s not enough to repeat that truth has become flesh if this hasn’t sunken into our very bones, affecting the way we face all of reality, and if we don’t accept that the only way to communicate truth is called “witness.” Just as the Pope says, “In this way alone can the liberating message of the love of God and the salvation that Christ offers be proposed in its strength, beauty, and

simplicity. One can only move forward in this way, with an attitude of respect for people...” (February 7, 2015). We must respond to this decisive question that I posed in the beginning: “Do we Christians still believe in the capacity of the faith we have received to attract those we encounter, and in the living fascination of its unarmed beauty?” In his Message for Lent, Pope Francis reminds us that “mission is to bear patient witness to the One who desires to draw all creation and every man and woman to the Father. Her mission is to bring to all a love which cannot remain silent. The Church follows Jesus Christ along the paths that lead to every man and woman, to the very ends of the earth” (*Message for Lent 2015*, October 4, 2014).

What is at stake today is faith, more than ever. This is the why we are going to see the Pope—we’re not going to Rome on vacation! We’re going to beg for faith, which has as its anchor and surety the tie with Peter, in a moment in which the figure of the Pope seems to be a topic of debate for many Christians. As we have said, belonging without following leads to confusion. “If one doesn’t grow in decision journeying *within* our history, he creates problems for himself as well as in the community [...]

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[and] the first symptom of this is that they don’t follow the Movement represented by its central leadership!” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose* [“Certain of a Few Great Things”]: 1979-1981, Bur, Milano 2007, pp. 21-22) or, alternatively, we don’t follow the Church in its central leadership. If we live like this, we will become one of the many interpretations of Christianity, as I wrote in the letter in preparation for the audience. We will go on thinking that

we don’t need anyone else, and “managing” a Christianity reduced to our own measure.

We are all facing a challenge and a proposal that we must verify; we go to Rome as beggars asking for faith. We have this entire year to ask Fr. Giussani, 10 years after his death, to continue to watch over us that we may overcome this distance from Christ, because if we can’t continually rediscover the fascination that moves us, there’s no way that we will move others! “That which we will do for others is the overflowing of what happens in us, and nothing more” (*ibid.*, p. 22), as Fr. Giussani reminds us. The pilgrimage to Rome can be an opportunity for everyone if each of us—in our respective home or wherever we spend our time—communicates the reasons that we are going, the reasons that we beg and the real need that we have. We are meeting with the Pope because without the tie to him, there would be no Movement, there would be nothing like it. The underlying foundation of our experience, as Fr. Giussani always reminded us, is the relationship with the fragility of Peter. Without this relationship, you couldn’t even dream of an experience like CL! Let’s help each other to be fully aware and present for this great event, and to live even the time we spend on the road to Rome as a pilgrimage. **¶**