

## *Christianity as an Event Today*

*On the nineteenth anniversary of his death, here follows the full text from a talk by **Luigi Giussani** organized by the Charles Péguy Association and the San Carlo Cultural Center (Milan, October 28, 1992).*

Edited by **Davide Proserpi**

**Moderator.** Fr. Giussani will speak to us this evening on “Christianity as an Event Today,” which is the inspiration for the experience he generated and today lives in and for the Church, one that has touched all of us. There will be time at the end for a few questions as well.

**Luigi Giussani.** Objectively, it seems that the meaning of the topic (“Christianity as an Event Today”) is shaped by the fact that today the word Christianity is more easily identified with a series of moral values or the preaching of moral values, with a concern for moral values. I am not saying that Christianity does not care about moral values, but I do want to say simply that Christianity does not coincide with the preaching of moral values. If we were at Mass last Sunday, we heard the beautiful parable of the Pharisee and the publican (cf. Lk 18:9–14), which once again surprised us. It always surprises us, in the end, when He says that the publican left the temple forgiven, “justified,” set right, at peace, while the Pharisee, who had boasted about all the good things he had done (and he was not lying—Christ did not say “the Pharisee lied,” not at all), left the temple condemned. It is not immediately necessary to elucidate the ultimate reason for this contrast. Maybe it came as the conclusion to other thoughts. But I would like to say that for someone who has to speak about Christianity, to think about it or live it, the main thing, the important thing is that you cannot reduce what you want to be concerned with, or what you want to live, to some moral values that you manage to translate into action through the force of your own willpower. Christianity is a fact, an event, an objective fact, and even if the whole world did not believe, it would no longer be able to blot it out. There is no line of reasoning that can hold. “Contra factum non valet illatio”: it is useless to oppose a fact with a line of reasoning, with the power of a line of reasoning.

Christianity is an event in the sense that first of all it is not preaching about morality. Given that an event points to God, an initiative of the Mystery in the life of the human person, in the history of humanity, I believe that the most important premise is the type of attention or tenderness people have for themselves. If they lack attention and tenderness for themselves, a mother’s tenderness for her child, I say they are necessarily in a position that is hostile to the Christian event. I often use a line by Rainer Maria Rilke as a point of departure for meditation on myself: “All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope.” (Duino Elegies, vol. 2, in Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus, translated by Stephen Mitchell, Vintage International, 2009, p. 13, verses 42–43). I have never found a synthesis of what human beings existentially feel about themselves if they think with attention, a minimum of attention that leads to themselves, that is comparable to this line by Rilke. If we look at ourselves, we feel shame, boredom, shame to the point

of boredom, and yet we cannot deny an impetus, an irreducible impetus that constitutes our heart, an irreducible impetus toward fullness, let's say toward perfection or satisfaction, which etymologically are identical: "perfection" has a more ontological meaning and "satisfaction" is more eudemological, speaking of sentiment. I believe that God moved precisely to be the answer to this perception that, I repeat, I consider to be the one realistic perception that human beings can have about themselves if they think with attention and maternal tenderness. If God moved, He moved to respond to human beings, to human beings who feel shame, shame and boredom with themselves, who find limits in themselves, limits with which they are complicit, while at the same time, they cannot suppress this cry in their hearts, this expectancy they have in their souls.

**So, God moved** to respond to the human situation. For this, He took the initiative, becoming the savior of the human person. He is the savior of the human person. He is the redeemer of the human person. But I do not want to insist on just these details, though I think this premise is necessary. God took initiative for me. Saint Paul says exactly this when he refers to "the Son of God who has loved me and given Himself up for me" (cf. Gal 2:20). And excuse me for saying this, but everyone here can and must repeat this line: "For me"; that is, to free me. To free me, yes, to free me from boredom with myself and from the weight of this limit that I find within everything I do. From this point of view, Christianity has a pessimistic point of departure regarding the human person. It is no coincidence that it speaks of original sin as the first mystery, without which nothing else can be explained. It is a mystery, but without this mystery there would be no explanation for the inexorable contradiction of human life. However, while it is initially pessimistic, it ends up in optimism, in deep optimism, deep and demanding. This optimism enables us to say with Saint Paul: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (cf. Rom 8:31). God's initiative consists of the fact that the mystery of God became a real man, took the reality of a true man, a man conceived in the uterus of a woman, and from this little and almost invisible clump developed into an infant, a child, a young boy, a teenager, and a young man, and then He became the center of attention of the social life of the Jewish people, drawing crowds wherever He went until the crowds turned against Him because of the attitude of those in power, and then He was crucified, killed, and then rose, rose from the dead.

Therefore, the initiative of God is a wholly human fact. I explain the meaning of all this to students by saying: "Think of a husband and wife who for two years could not have children. Imagine how easily their life could be ordered, how it expressed itself. After two years they have a child, and this child disturbs their whole life and they can no longer live as they lived before." Well, the Christian fact is like a child born into a family. In fact, Jesus was born as a child. The Christian event is God who enters into the life of the human person and into human history, just as a child is born to a woman and enters into the life of her family and into human history. In his first letter, Saint John told the early Christians: "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life"; that is, the truth, and "we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim it to you" (1 Jn 1:1-3). The truth was made touchable, visible, hearable, just as you listen to someone who speaks, just as you see someone who becomes a presence, just as you touch the hands of a friend.

**At this point** I could stop here; what remains to be done at this point is just to look this event in the face, look at what happened. And all your responsibility is truly challenged, whether to acknowledge Him or not, because you can acknowledge this or not. Many people who had seen Him acknowledged

Him and then did not acknowledge Him, and cried “Crucify Him!” (Mk 15:13–14). But this is understandable for us because we know from ourselves what the human person is, how the human person can behave. And then the rest are suggestive insights, which in a faith education must be communicated to young people and which everyone can redo on his own. I say I can stop here because I would like to know what can be said beyond this: that God became a man! So then, Christianity is touching, seeing, listening, adhering to, following this man, as it was for Saint Peter.

That time in the Capernaum synagogue Jesus had spoken at length and was moved because the people who had been with Him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee the day before had walked all the way around the lake to go get Him. He had eluded them because they wanted to make him king: He had multiplied the loaves and fishes! They entered the Capernaum synagogue and He was moved in front of their fierce desire to seek Him. He said: “You are looking for Me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. [...] I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:26–58). Exactly because Christ was a man, images came to Him from His experience as a man, and the most inconceivable image that came to mind, that of remaining with us in the sign of the bread and wine, this thing that is the most inconceivable of those He could have thought of, came to His mind then, with the emotion evoked in Him by the (at least exterior) faithfulness of those people, those people who sought Him. But His response did not correspond to what the people expected of Him. So, under the influence of the intellectuals as well, all those people slowly, slowly left, until in the silence of the evening twilight only those bound to Him by affection remained. Jesus was the first to break the silence: “Do you also want to leave?” Peter answered with his usual spontaneity: “Master, even if we do not understand what You say, if we go away, to whom shall we go? Only You have the words that give meaning to life” (cf. Jn 6:59–69).

I say that this little group of men who followed Him constituted the beginning of Christian history because they followed Him, acknowledged that there was something exceptional in Him, though they could not explain the why or how. In fact, when Christ asked them on another occasion: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” they answered “Some say You are the son of Beelzebub; others say You are a great prophet.” “But who do you say that I am?” “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” responded Peter. And right away, Christ said: “You are blessed Peter. You are fortunate, because you gave Me an answer that you cannot understand and you gave it because the Father suggested it to you” (cf. Mt 16:13–17). In fact, Peter had done nothing more than repeat the words Jesus had said about Himself on other occasions. They followed Him, drinking His words, adhering insofar as they understood, doing what He said, as far as they could manage. Just as they were, they acknowledged Him, following Him. They followed Him. Well, Christianity is the story of men who in some way, coming into contact with this event, with the event of Christ, with this fact in history, followed Him, each one as they could, each as they can.

Actually, there is another thing to add before drawing the two corollaries I want to stress.

God’s initiative is that the Mystery became a child in the womb of a woman, a clump of flesh in the womb of a woman, part of the body of a woman, born like any other child. I always think, I am always very struck, at the beginning of the Gospel by the angel’s annunciation to Mary because there is the whole speech and then at the end Mary says: “Fiat, may it be done to me according to your word.” Then after that point there is a line that says: “The angel departed from her” (Lk 1:38). I am truly struck and think almost daily about the situation of that fifteen-year-old girl, absolutely alone with the

Mystery she held within. She could not even sense its presence because it had just begun. I imagine her like that, having to tell her parents and fiancé. “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45), her cousin Elizabeth would say to her when Mary hurried to her because the angel had told her that Elizabeth was six months pregnant (cf. Lk 1:36–45). So then, the mystery of God took initiative toward humanity, becoming a child. This is the fact. Christianity is an event, “it is” this event.

But now? I do not say just “now,” but ten years after Christ died, a year after Christ died, one hundred years after, five hundred years after, a thousand years after, two thousand years after, now, because the question I ask myself is: Where is He now? The first Christians also asked this, those who were still living in the time of the apostles, after Jesus had left. A person, contacted the day after His ascension into heaven, asked the same question that I ask myself today. And yet He said: “I will be with you ‘all’ days.” Pay attention to these key words in the Gospel, which are always very important. “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Cf. Mt 28:20). I am a Christian because He, God, is present among us and will be present always until the end of the world. I am a Christian because of that. I could have committed a thousand errors yesterday and ten thousand crimes, but if I say this, I am a Christian; I will need the mercy of Christ more than others, but I am a Christian, and a person who committed no crimes, who paid tithes, who celebrated all the feasts of the Jewish liturgy, the Pharisee, no!

Christ has remained present in the world, in history, and will be present until the end of the centuries through the unity of those He seizes and brings within His personality. He created a gesture by which He takes people and brings them within His personality; it is called baptism, the sacrament of baptism. His presence is visible, tangible, hearable, like the unity of the believers in Him, which historically also has a name—“church”—which means nothing more than gathering. The objectivity of His presence is saved, is assured, precisely by this unity, as if it were a tent, a tent that is the dwelling place of the mystery of God, the tent erected in the midst of the Jewish people. It is like a tent, this unity among people who believe in Him, who acknowledge Him, whom He has seized and brought into His personality. This unity in which He really is present is like a tent. And the Eucharist is simply the extreme concrete expression of His concrete presence.

**Saint Paul** emphasized more than anyone that the presence of Christ, of God made man, could be seen in the unity of the believers in Him. He understood it when he was thrown from his horse and heard: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). He had never seen Jesus of Nazareth. He had never seen Him; he was persecuting the Christians: he was persecuting Christians. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” This must have been the intuition that made clear to Paul the identity of which we are speaking. But this identity was already visible in the times of Christ Himself. Since He could not go everywhere Himself, He sent His men, two by two, into the villages that asked for Him, and they returned enthusiastic, saying: “Master, what You do, we have also done; the miracles You perform, we have also performed. The people listen to us, too” (cf. Mk 6:7–13). The same phenomenon that happened where He went happened in the villages where the pairs of men went. In the village where the two men went, how was Christ present? Through those two men He had sent. The method Christ used to continue His presence among us, His method, was already used when He was alive. Through the presence of those who believe in Him, He is present, in the literal sense of the term. Therefore, Christianity as event is God made man and present in history within (to express myself clearly) the unity of those who believe in Him. This unity does not have an affective value. It cannot

be defined using the term “companionship.” It cannot be identified as people who have the same views. As Saint Paul said: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person”; that is, the great social and cultural divisions of the time, and “there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (cf. Gal 3:27–28). He uses the term *eis*, which in Greek means “one” in the personal sense, of the person, but male. “You are one, *eis*...”. “You are me,” He had said to Saint Paul. “Why are you persecuting me?” Undoubtedly, this is the most difficult aspect for me, and forgive me if I dare say for all of us, because the way we have been educated forgets or skips this a bit. I also said this to a journalist the other day at Lourdes (cf. “Don Giussani: il potere egoista odia il popolo” [Fr. Giussani: The egotistic power hates the people], interview by G. da Rold, *Corriere della Sera*, October 18, 1992, p. 3; now in *L’io, il potere, le opere* [The ‘I,’ power, works], Genova: Marietti 1820, 2000, pp. 214–19). But I can know Christ through something present. This is the genius of God, who made Himself present in order to make Himself known to us and to save us.

**The unity of believers** is the contingent, even banal face of this divine presence. And just as back then, those who followed Him became Christians and changed, so today a Christian is a person who changes, changes as a person, and follows this unity to which Christ gave a sign of absolute objectivity, which is the bishop of Rome, the head of the community in Rome, because everything, everything converges here (even an ecumenical council is not valid, would not be valid if it lacked the signature of the bishop of Rome). This is exactly the opposite of what we imagine for ourselves, or love to imagine ourselves as: what leads us to God is not our opinion, or our way of thinking, or a dialectical comparison with others, or the outcome of a theological study: it is following a presence. The first corollary I wanted to bring up is this—following a presence.

But “follow a presence” also explains the moral journey, not only the appearance from the point of view of membership, but also the moral journey a person makes. There is a beautiful comparison in nature: How does a child acquire her own personality? The more a family is humanly rich, intense, attentive, and respectful; that is, the more a family is human in the way it treats the child and the more it is faithful to its task, the more the child grows with her own personality, becomes herself, acquires a personality following the parents and the fact, the event, of the family. Following the event of the family, absorbing its provocations, almost by osmosis, almost by osmotic pressure, at fifteen years old she is different from the others because she had a family like this, and she is herself because she can explain the reasons for what she chooses, for what she does. The moral problem for the Christian is analogous.

**Just as being Christian** is adhering to a presence, similarly, it is in following this presence, participating in the provocations of this presence, that one changes, one changes oneself, one changes and transforms. With a beautiful conclusion that the Lord stressed with His formula of perfection when He said: “So be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (cf. Mt 5:48). And who can be perfect like God? Thus, Christ indicated that true morality is a lived striving as a journey, life as journey, *homo viator*. The people of the Middle Ages understood this well: life is a journey, and for this reason the value of a person lies in being faithful to this striving to learn and follow. If you fall a thousand times in a day, you get up and start again a thousand times. The second corollary I want to stress then is this concept of morality as striving. Saint Ambrose wrote in a letter that a saint is not someone who never makes mistakes, but who tries continually not to fall (cf. Saint Ambrose, *Explanatio Psalmi* vol. 1:22;

Explanatio Psalmi vol. 36:51). Reading this passage to the students at school, I observed: “Imagine a man who made mistakes every day because he had a very grave and strong defect, and every day he erred, every day, and every morning when he rose he said, ‘God, I humbly beseech You, help me to surpass myself, help me to correct myself,’ and every day he erred, and for fifty years it went on like this, getting up in the morning with this sincere new start, this sincere cry, and every day he erred. He is a saint! A saint! A saint whose days would be full of errors.” This is the concept of morality born of Christianity as event: morality is striving that happens like following, and you follow as well as you can, as you are able, according to the grace given to you.

Within a frame like this, the Mystery takes on a figure, a face. Christ said: “He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Lk 20:38); that is, He is not the God of our thoughts but the real, true God who exists before everything else, incommensurable with any thought of ours. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Is 55:8). But in a similar frame, this Mystery does not remain entirely mysterious and unknown. That child who grew to manhood, who died and rose, and in rising inhabits history irresistibly, attracting people to Himself, whose unity constitutes His Body, mysterious Body, mystical Body—as it is said—or People of God, which is like (I took the liberty of making the comparison earlier) the tent of the Jews in the desert that contained the Ark of the Covenant, this truly present Mystery, in a similar frame, truly explains the Mystery to us, in the sense that it shows the precise, perfect, powerful, evocative, very tender correspondence of the Mystery with our life, as Rilke said, weakened but full of ineffable hope: it is called “mercy.” The supreme definition of the Divine, of Being, that Christ introduced into the world and that through the unity of believers He causes to remain as proposal to the poor person of any era and any condition, is the word “mercy.” God is mercy, a word that would otherwise be inconceivable for us.

**Moderator.** Thank you! As I said before, now we have time for a few questions that may help us better understand the import of what Fr. Giussani has just told us.

**Giussani.** Well, there is continual further confirmation of this import, at least for me, because speaking this way, tens and tens of thousands of people have followed and follow. Speaking this way! I remember that a great priest of our diocese, whom I greatly respect, Fr. Barbareschi (Monsignor Giovanni Barbareschi, 1922–2018, of the Diocese of Milan), came to a gathering I held for university students in the red room of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions. He had entered and sat in the back. I thought to myself, “Who knows what he’s doing here?” because he seemed a bit embarrassed. When we had finished and everyone had left, he was still there and asked me: “Listen, do you always talk this way?” And I said, “Yes!” And he said: “What do they find in it?” So I had to pray the act of humility.

However, I do not believe it is blind intransigence. Christianity can only be understood in these terms. I did not exhaust all the terms; I just touched on some terms that seem fundamental to me. The Child Jesus is fundamental, just as the unity of the Church is fundamental, which is the unity of believers, but without recognizing the objective norm of the papal magisterium there is no longer unity. It is abandoned to hermeneutics, the interpretation of the people, and we could all think what we like. Who would stop us? If this Church did not become so close to me and you in a companionship where we gather and help each other, with fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty other people, what would it be? Something abstract or political, a curious phenomenon or a political phenomenon. This is why John Paul II, speaking to the Spanish Bishops of Tarragona a short while ago (and he repeated it recently,

I do not remember when) said that the Church must be a living community, around the person (*Speech to the Bishops of Barcelona and the ecclesiastical provinces of Tarragona and Oviedo on their ad Limina visit November 11, 1991*). He said, “The reawakening of the Christian people to greater awareness of the Church, building living communities where the following of Christ is concrete and embraces all the dimensions of life, is the appropriate answer to the secular culture that seriously threatens the Christian principles and moral values of society.” This is the method I was describing to the journalist I mentioned before. Since God made man and woman and made the history of the human person as salvation, making Himself our companion, the God of the family is the God of the Church, that is, of the people who cried to God and was saved, as Esther said in the Bible (cf. Esth 10:3 ff). We read it once a week in the Liturgy of the Hours. “The people who cried to God and was saved” (cf. Ps 22:6). So then, it is the same method. To bring a child into the world, to have him grow and become himself, to define a man, to perfect a man, God uses the same method: the family as the first companionship. But if the family does not expand, it becomes a prison or tomb, and you flee it; you flee it.

So then, this is why you are born in the “family” that is the unity of the believers, the Church, the Church body of Christ. You are born in the body of Christ and you grow to adulthood because nobody in the Church is like you and nobody is like me. Nobody is the same as the other. In the liberal and rationalistic culture, this diversity is a powerful objection to shared living. Diversity is a powerful objection for modern culture, for example, for the feasibility of the State itself. In the Church it becomes the richness of an identity that is beyond and that generates everyone, because Christ is yesterday, today and forever. It is for this guy that has his character, which I would like to have, and it is for me that I have my character, which he would like to have.

**Contribution.** I’d like to ask how you live and follow that Presence in your daily life, which is often swamped with scores of problems.

**Giussani.** Following the Presence is identical to another expression: making memory of that Presence. When I attended elementary school (and then later I entered the Seminary), I viewed my father, especially my father, as a continual presence. I have stolen only once in my life. I was going to school with a friend who had started walking alongside me, and as we passed a stand with roasted chestnuts he said: “Take some, take some!” And I reached out my hand and took some, and nobody saw me. That evening my father came home from work and asked, “Listen, what did you do this morning?” I felt he was omnipresent, like God. So, the way to follow this Presence is to remember it. This is why the Church says that if during the span of time that becomes for all people the measure of their own expressivity, which is work, the workweek, if during this measure of time you do not dedicate even a moment to the memory of Christ, if you do not go to Mass on Sunday (this is the bare minimum): mortal sin! It is not evasive to say that in order to follow this Presence you have to remember it, to make memory of it.

There is a beautiful book that you must have read, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, a Russian Orthodox book, that says you must accustom yourself to invoking the Lord, making memory of the Lord, once, ten times, a hundred times, ten thousand times a day, to the point that it coincides with your breathing (cf. *The Way of a Pilgrim*, London: Penguin Books, 2019). It is expressed beautifully. If I think that the Lord is more concrete than my mother, is more mine than my mother or my father, if I think of this, then the desire to multiply the memory is not only understandable but inevitable, and doing it

becomes not only possible, but real, such that you can commit an error consciously and immediately remember that Presence. This multiplication of the memory reduces more and more the time of forgetfulness and the time of betrayal. In fact, for an adult, forgetfulness is the forgetfulness of He from whom you are being birthed, because in this moment I am not making myself. I always tell the kids: “Tell me if there is anything more evident than this, that in this moment you are not making yourself, and I am not making myself.” So then, in this instant I am being born of another thing, and this other thing is called God, who became a man, and therefore I am being born of Christ. The more this reflectiveness matures a personality, it is not something extra, it is not a flight into abstraction; the more I multiply this memory, the more I feel the substance of my “I” being born there, from whence it is born. And yet I still have the same weakness, and as I am thinking of this, I can slip and fall.

I stress these things because it is beautiful that Christianity is mercy, that Being is mercy. It is not humanly conceivable to think of your own destiny, if it is not mercy. In fact, those for whom destiny is not mercy do not think about it: they cannot think about it. Since destiny looms ever closer and arrives, the former are more intelligent than the latter. The first is more intelligence than the second. And excuse me, but the true answer to the question you asked (that in order to follow you need to remember) frees us from all moralism. It is not a matter of laws to apply, but a memory to have. When I was at school in the fifth grade, with my teacher, Mr. Fossataro, who was an official of the Fascist volunteer militia, I always had my father in mind. My father was not explaining laws to me, it was him! I applied the laws, remembering him. It is more succinct, affective, human, and simple.

**Contribution.** If memory makes it possible to keep alive this fact, this event, then why, even among us Christians, maybe even as we are making memory, do we reduce the event to human rules? I tend to do this myself and often see it happening, for example at Mass, when I see it reproduced in the homilies commenting on the liturgy.

**Giussani.** I agree with you. I do not know what to tell you. The method is wrong, the method of transmission. As I said to that journalist in Lourdes, parents want the happiness of their children, but it seems they have forgotten to teach them the method for trying to achieve it. It is as if they do not know what road to teach for getting there. So we can communicate our faith, our evidence of the Christian fact, our message that “the Mystery of God is among us,” without respecting the method that this truth requires. The method is the one Christ created: the method is the presence, as He defined it, the presence of the unity of the believers, of a companionship. Companionship means people who are together because He is there, because they recognize Him. It is absolutely not necessary to have the same heated enthusiasm I sometimes show; everybody has their own character. But this is the answer. He taught the answer: “Be united. Follow. To follow Me, you must follow your companionship, that is, the unity of people who come together because I am there, because they recognize Me. And so we teach each other, and forgive each other.” It is a defect in the method of transmission.

I think that over the past hundred years, as Christians, as the Christian people, we have made a mistake on this point of the method of communication. “The fundamental factors of the reality of the Church are the infallible Magisterium...” the magisterium, which is an objective reality, infallible, because the final word is not my interpretation. The final word is outside of me, and this is a value intrinsic to Christianity. The ultimate value, the truth, is a reality outside myself. They walked out the doors of



their homes and found the Truth who was speaking in the streets, God, the companion of the human person. “The Magisterium of the Church and the Sacraments.” What is a sacrament? A presence. A sacrament is the simplest form of memory. So, first we say these two things but then, in terms of method, we follow our image of communication or evaluation, judgement, our conclusive image, the result of our discussions, the theological opinion of a theological dispute, what the newspapers say, what the television says, what the priests say. And, as I say to the kids, it is spectacular that Christ demanded just one thing of us as the method for communicating with Him: the sacraments, which are gestures in which we do not need to do anything but be there with our eyes open, aware, like the men who came to confession at Easter, *illis temporibus*, came there and stayed there, still. So then I asked a few questions and they said *yes* or not even *yes, no*, just nodded, and I gave them absolution. This is the absolute minimum! It is not necessary to think who knows what, to be able to feel, to have particular emotions. It is like saying, this is a book! Christianity is a fact! So the method for learning it is to be there, to be in a companionship of people who gather or who recognize themselves as united because Christ is there. It is called “communion,” like the sacrament. But there is a distance between this and the way we usually live, because, excuse me, precisely this was not taught to us. Now we are losing the sense of the family, the cohesion that almost by osmosis, osmotic pressure, raises a child and makes her herself, makes her a person, affirms her personality, and similarly, for a long time now we have lost the sense of this “family,” this familiarity with Christ, which is the unity among us in His name. For this reason, in the companionship of the Church, a criminal and a saint can enter, and the person who has the least problem with the criminal’s presence is the saint.

**Contribution.** You spoke of tenderness, people’s tenderness for themselves, and God’s tenderness for them. I would like to know something more because tenderness belongs to a very intimate sphere and I can’t understand well how it fits in.

**Giussani.** The answer is already in your question. You said that the word tenderness belongs to and indicates a very intimate sphere, more intimate than me for myself. As I said before, if I consider and perceive myself as a reality that in this moment is being made by Another, if I am conscious of the fact that I am emerging from the Mystery now, I see myself with wonder. If I look at myself as a given or a gift, I am amazed by myself, and I look at myself the way a mother looks at the child to whom she has just given birth. Instead, our pride and our will for affirmation makes us strangers to ourselves and hard on ourselves. This is why I always think of Rilke, in that line: “All things conspire to keep silent about us, half out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope.” Both things are within us, and the Church is the one place where these two things are affirmed in us, the only one that comprehends this paradox or this contradiction, this pathetic and beloved contradiction (not that the contradiction is loved; what is loved is the unity that is in this contradiction). However, the most beautiful thing they taught me is the word “mercy.” It does not exist in the dictionary. That is, it exists in the dictionary but it is the only word, intensely necessary, necessary daily, that cannot emerge from our experience. I’ll never forget (excuse me if I add this, then I swear I won’t talk about it again) when I was three years old, I always used to go to Vespers with my mother. The church had a very big pulpit in the shape of a gold spiral staircase. I was sitting there with my mother and the priest was waving his arms and yelling and I was always there, very attentive. At a certain point, he quoted the line: “Even if your mother were to abandon you, I will never abandon you” (cf. *Is.* 49:15). I was so frightened that I looked to my mother there, terrorized at the idea that she might leave me. My mother

turned to me and smiled, and so I calmed down. But in an entirely different sense, that moment was one of the most important in my life, because the root of the things that I have understood began then, in that moment. Having a mother is an event. There are no moral laws to apply. But having a mother means having from within the drive to behave in a certain way, to give her a kiss or say yes, or to cry because you erred or disobeyed. It comes from within. Instead, morality throughout the world comes from outside and normally becomes a State morality; the State accentuates it because the moral values imposed are those that are useful to the State in that moment of history.

***Moderator.*** We are infinitely grateful. We are moved and amazed. Our deepest thanks, also for the difficulties in coming here to be with us.

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