

A Present Fact Truly Introduces Us To Reality

*Meeting of Fr. Julián Carrón with
the teachers of Communion and Liberation
Milan, March 15, 2009*

Franco Nembrini: Hello, everyone. Thank you for your words and the contributions you've sent (so many!) to give flesh and blood to our work today.

Greetings also to the almost 2,000 teachers gathered in different points of central and southern Italy, Sardinia and Sicily, and our colleagues in 40 countries who are following us live or will watch the recording.

There have been a great many contributions and, as always, it was difficult to have to choose those that seemed best at gathering a common story, impression, judgment, work, concern, or question. As I said to Julián, while we were preparing today's gathering, I'm impressed by the richness of the contributions, because it's evident that there is a road. We began our work with him on October 14, 2007¹, with an unease, a heaviness, a difficulty even in finding the reasons for our work and our profession, for our attempt to be a presence within our schools. I think I can say that, during this year and a half, many of us—and not always those with the “degrees”—have taken seriously Carrón's invitation, his challenge, in asking, “Is there someone among us still willing to verify his faith, willing to verify his relationship with Christ?” Well, I think I can say that precisely in the most pressing moments, among those that have opened a wound and know pain, who have the experience of such widespread pain, so forceful—how much pain we encounter, how much pain we bear, how much pain our friends bear, our colleagues, our fellow men!—here, before the emergency and the force of this pain and this toil, there's the emergence of a certain, sure testimony, to which the first con-

¹This refers to the meeting of Fr. Carrón and the teachers of Communion and Liberation in Milan on October 14, 2007. See the booklet, “Educating: a communication of yourself, that is, of your own way of relating with reality,” enclosed with the November 2007, no. 10 issue of *Litterae Communionis-Traces*.

tributions this morning will testify, with rediscovered faith and hope. And in the face of the protests and the confusion caused, for example, by Minister Gelmini's proposed reform [of the Italian school system], or the "mercy killing" case of Eluana, what a sight we see, what a marvel, what testimonies, what courage, and what desire to be there to tell the truth, to witness to the truth, to all the truth, to the whole truth, with classes rather than with colleagues, with friends rather than on the street with a flyer in hand!

So, it seems to me that the first step this morning, for mutual comfort as well, can and has to be that of testifying to each other about this. I don't know about you, but I've come here again with an open wound. I was thinking about it as I was coming here: it's impossible to come here for a work like this morning's and not have in our heart and our mind's eye the Winnenden tragedy [March 11, 2009], that school where all those students were killed by another student, and, in addition, where our friend, Thomas, who I don't know personally, wrote a few hours later with disarming simplicity: "Any answer given formally would be ideological, inadequate. I'm asking you for help. -*Thomas*." I'm asking Julián this question, because it seems to me that this morning's work should start out from this wound: how and what sustains and will sustain my hope, and therefore yours, and therefore that of the people who live in that place, that of our colleagues, that of the world? What is the foundation of hope in men, mine first of all, and, then, that of my friends?

Anna: Two months ago, a 19-year-old student of mine died. I wanted to tell you how this fact changed and continues to change my life.

What happened was particularly painful, because he had a serious case of muscular dystrophy but with the upper part of his body he was awake and active. He basically died of a banal pneumonia because of the doctor's neglect, and the family's pain was all the more intense because, three months before, his 30-year-old sister had committed suicide, leaving two children. I felt, literally, swept away by this apparently unjust, bottomless, hopeless pain. When I met the parents for the first time, they said that they prayed to God before, but now they wouldn't, because if there is a God, He's bad and shouldn't have permitted such a thing. Instead, for me, when this fact happened, I felt as if the Mystery came to see me personally and asked me, "Well, now, what do you found your hope on?" It was like being Elizabeth and finding myself before

Mary. What was I looking at, the seed hidden in the womb of that woman, or something else? So I returned to visit those parents. I had nothing to say that could in any way console them, no discourse, no pat expression, no explanation that would be minimally logical; I just stayed with them, that's all. But in the meantime, what unexpected certainty, what surprising intensity, what hope opened up inside me! This, only this, enabled me not to escape—I was entirely founded, not on myself, but on Him. Nothing else would have held. It was the beginning of a bond with those parents, which, thanks be to God, continues today. I found within a strength that wasn't mine. I experienced that, before the pain and the contradictions of life, the Christian doesn't run away, but stays, stays because she is grounded in He who holds firm.

At school, then, I didn't want the thing to pass unjudged, that Patrizio was gone without any of us feeling questioned. So, again without having discourses that would stand up, notwithstanding the general consternation, I moved. I contacted all the colleagues of the class council and his classmates, and we made a poster that said that Patrizio's destiny wasn't nothingness, that it was now fulfilled in the arms of the Mystery. Then, I wrote a letter that I gave to everyone and put in the teacher's room. This simple act was an instrument for great things. At his parents' request, I read the letter at his funeral and, again at their request, the next day it was published in the newspapers. In a few cases, it was the occasion for restoring relations with colleagues who hadn't spoken to me for some time, and who came to thank me. How true it is that everyone is waiting for what we, by grace, have encountered! A colleague even used it on the Day of Memory of the Holocaust to help explain what memory is, and others used it in class as a starting point for discussion and judgment on the question of Eluana.

Finally, I want to tell you about two simple, brief facts that particularly touched me. One day, going to visit Patrizio's mother, I brought her a plant as a little gift and she, thinking it was for Patrizio, put it in front of his photo. So I told her, "No, Isella, it's not for him. It's for you." She stopped, looked at me, and gave me a caress, saying, "I've never encountered anyone like you before." I accompanied her to the Mass marking a week from his death, and sat close to her. When her sisters and close relatives arrived, I got up to give them my place, but she said, "No, I want you here close to me." On both occasions, I felt a chill run through me. There was never a moment when I said to myself, "Well done; maybe you'll convert her, too," but rather, "To whom can you say, 'I want you

here close to me,' or, 'I've never encountered anyone like you before'? To whom can we say it, if not to Jesus?"

So, what emerges in this whole story is a need for Him that is growing in me and, together with this, the discovery of Him at work. Like those parents, I need Him; I want Him here close to me, and I say to Him, "I've never encountered anyone like You before." Now, when I enter that house so steeped in suffering, I discover that I seek Him and acknowledge Him, and I say to myself, "Who knows how You will be able to console them today? Who knows how You will make me see today that I can place all my hope in You?"

Julián Carrón: Our trip here would have been worthwhile if only for these words. We could go home right now, because this is touching with our hands what has happened to us, what happens in life, and what we truly need. When the Mystery challenges us beyond our measure, as we see, the first temptation is to say, "God is bad."

What makes it possible for this not to be the final word, for us not to be the first ones to be defeated? A hope that, over time, opened up and filled her more and more. This is what enables us not to run away; this is what enables us to look everything full in the face, and mysteriously to begin to establish a bond with everything, first of all with his parents, then with her colleagues. Simply this, this is what we need to start fresh, because our life, too, like that of everyone, is touched by bad things.

I'd like to thank Anna for sharing this with us, because we have to look at how things happen, so that everything will become clear, so that reality will become transparent in experience, not in thoughts.

Look how often we're worried about how to act, how not to act, how to set out, how not to set out. It's enough to look at how it happens. All our thoughts are nothing before this recurrence of hope that has been awakened in us. Who can do this? To whom can we say, "I've never met anyone like you before"? To whom, if not to Jesus? This is faith: this acknowledgment of Christ present (we've also seen it in the case of Eluana). What changed that woman? With the appalling pain she was suffering, with her conviction that God is bad, how did she wind up saying, "I want you close to me"? What does it mean to educate? What truly introduces people to reality, if not a present fact, a presence that eliminates our abstract image of God, the fact of a presence to whom someone says, "I want you here close to me"? And so the Mystery introduces Himself right there, in the midst of the most appalling pain, and

makes Himself so close, bends Himself over our need in order to make us discover the true face of the Mystery; a face that enables us—in the flesh of someone—to be introduced into the true nature of the Mystery, which isn't according to our image or our fear. Without this contemporaneity of Christ—not abstract, not in our thoughts, not just in our feelings, that touches us this way and draws us close this way—we, like everyone, would be overwhelmed. And this tells us, friends, what it means to educate: it's not a discourse, a sentence, an explanation, because, as the Pope says, the nature of Christianity is that the concepts have become flesh and blood, and so a road opens up. What does a thing like this ask us to change? Our conception of the method. Mysteriously, everything becomes one thing only.

What do we all need so that we don't just stop at the appearance of things, but are introduced to the Mystery, the sense, the meaning of such pain? It's not that this doesn't have anything to do with school! As you see, it has everything to do with it, because when we teach something, we want to be able to introduce our students to reality, even the darkest, which is pain. When we teach math or literature or history, if we don't have this, what are we teaching? Our partiality is revealed when, before these things, we have nothing to say: there, we verify that our expertise in certain subjects isn't enough to introduce our students to the totality of reality.

Barbara: A second-year middle school student of mine, who had tried to run away from home two weeks ago, decided to leave our school and enroll at a different one. The day she tried to run away, her mother dropped her off at school and, instead of entering, the girl snuck away. We realized immediately what had happened, and went through several hours of fearful waiting (you can imagine the anguish of her parents). Once she was found, her father and mother told us that this girl had planned her escape and left a note saying, "I hate school with all my heart." A few days later, at her explicit request, her parents decided to let her change schools.

Now, this struck me deeply, since I'm her literature teacher, and right away a tumult of questions began whirling around in me. Where had we gone wrong? Why hadn't we understood her? We'd taken initiatives with this girl, assigned her a tutor, but the reality that slowly emerged was that you can do everything for the kids, but at the same time remain abysmally distant from them. I was scandalized by my position, because

I discovered I was incapable of looking at this fact, which first of all made me feel very defensive. I tried to make it clear to myself and the others (my colleagues, the principal, my students) that I'd done everything possible, that I couldn't be blamed for anything. Yet I kept looking back, almost obsessively, on every possible episode when this girl's difficulty might have emerged. The striking thing for me was that the more I analyzed the situation and played along with the ups and downs of my feelings, the more the figure of this girl disappeared, evaporated; I was more interested in myself than in her, the correctness of my position, so that I could be above reproach, and she, in some way, became less important.

I stayed like this for several days and then, at a certain point, it was an experience of liberation to return to what you said about the situation of Eluana: "How needed is a caress from the Nazarene!" I realized that, truly, running up against a witness to changed humanity is what frees me from my interminable defensiveness. Only the witness of a person who is changed and different can free me from my ongoing reduction. I found myself desiring that my relationship with this student not end this way; that is, I returned to hoping that it could last, and that she could meet the same gaze that makes me live. In the meantime, the other evening, I went to the Companionship of the Knights junior high youth group, which is our version of the Seekers of the Holy Grail, and saw her there, because she'd been invited by one of her ex-classmates. That was an answer for me.

So then, in this situation, I am very alive to the question of what it means to learn from what happens, because I was very struck by what you said recently: that striving to learn from what happens is our original contribution. I want to understand this point better, because I normally swing between two positions: either I get depressed because I'm not the way I should be, or I analyze the failures of others (a very common hobby among teachers), for example, those of the families, as if the kids were exclusively the outcome of their parents. But these positions obviously leave me dissatisfied and sad. So, I'd like to ask you to explain more about this subject.

Paola: Five years ago, after 20 years of marriage, and two children born to us and one foster child, my husband and I had a grave crisis in our marriage and everything suddenly seemed to disappear. Instead of thinking of strategies to adopt to correct this situation, I found myself

realizing that this crisis stripped my life bare and exposed its truth, as nothing before had done. I had always been very active, embracing every initiative, GS, DIESSE (an association of teachers), the choir, foster parenting, Families for Hospitality; whatever the Movement proposed, I tried to do. Suddenly, in the face of this family crisis, I realized that all my busy-ness had no meaning. Christ wasn't there; He had nothing to do with my life.

You can easily understand how, after 30 years in the Movement, I was left with despair, anguish, and sadness. I wrote to Fr. Giussani, because I didn't know whom else to turn to, to entrust this pain that was destroying me. I began praying like I never had before, entrusting my days to the Lord, minute by minute, to Our Lady, to the Holy Spirit, because "only the Spirit knows what to ask." The only thing I asked was that the Lord would embrace my pain and show us our destiny, whatever that meant. To my great surprise, Fr. Giussani, who was ill, had someone call to give me this message: "Your task is to be a wife and mother. The Lord is asking you to love Him in your vocation, not to do busywork." I was so moved—such tenderness!—receiving this phone call, knowing that Fr. Giussani was thinking of me, and had embraced me to that point!

I dumped all my commitments and dedicated myself to my home and family. The rift with my husband began to heal, almost miraculously. I continued praying. What a discovery, to entrust myself to Jesus and see Him day after day putting my pieces back together, one at a time with patience: the relationship with my husband, with my children, but above all, with myself! This is what I understand by the expression, "affection for yourself, without having an image of how your desire should be fulfilled." These five years have been tough, but the good presence of Jesus has made them glad. Prayer, leaving space for the things that happened without harnessing them to any project of mine, the presence of great friends in the Fraternity... everything was and is a sign of my one desire, that Jesus embrace me.

Fr. Giussani worked his miracle in my family, and things have taken an unexpected road: a friend got me involved in starting the adventure of Companionship of Works-Sport. Among others, I've met Fr. Eugenio, and a great friendship has developed that helps me judge my everyday life. I didn't go looking for him; he was just given to me. I continue teaching, and my only commitment is the charitable work I do, helping students after school with their studies. I go to school completely changed; I don't have preconceived goals for myself or my students, and I'm no

longer concerned about how to involve them in GS, or about the strategies to use (I never succeeded anyway!). Now, I look at them with the same tenderness with which I have been looked at, entrusting them to Jesus, because the only way I can stay with them is with a heart full of gratefulness for how I am loved, for the overflowing grace that has infused our life. This year a miracle has happened.

After a friend of mine read the booklet, “The Darkness and the Lighter” [notes from a meeting between Fr. Carrón and CL teachers—see Traces Vol. 10, No. 6 (2008), p. 24], she called me to say that it made her think of me and what I told her about my students. Provoked by this, I picked up the booklet again. How far I was from this awareness! However, those relationships were there; those kids were there everyday, and had to be taken seriously. It was clear that it wouldn’t be a strategy that would change myself and them, and I continued asking the Lord to be there for me and for them. Twenty days ago, a student stopped me after a lesson and asked me question after question about CL, and then said, “You’re happy, like the other CL people I’ve met. I want to be happy this way, too.” Two days later, we began School of Community with some of his classmates, the reading of some documents about Eluana, the formation of a study-help group for the kids of his fifth year [high school] class and of the other one I teach, a moment to tell each other, as one of the kids said, “what our heart cries for.” Fifteen days ago, I brought the whole class to the Music Conservatory graduation of one of their classmates, and the kids, particularly those who didn’t know much about music, thanked me because I’d given them an opportunity to participate in a gesture of beauty unimaginable to them. Things are happening one after the other in an entirely unexpected way. I teach Physical Education, and always thought this subject was what blocked me from reaching the kids, since I didn’t have any strong content to propose. Now, I haven’t changed my strategy in teaching, but I’m changed. And I enjoy my lessons!

I’ll close with the expression from the assembly that most corresponds to my experience: “What a method, what tenderness of the Mystery, who bends down over us, stoops down over us to draw us to the knowledge of Him through what He makes happen in reality.”

Nembrini: Thank you, Barbara and Paola. Julián, these two episodes seem to me to exemplify a position that—even starting out from something negative, as in Barbara’s example, even based on a failure, with all

the questions and drama that follow—slowly develops certainty about one’s task and consistence.

I’d like to add this consideration, this last question, which I think has a lot to do with what you said before and with Barbara’s question. A great many of your contributions are about a powerful beauty. There’s an avalanche of goodness, truth, initiatives, and also certainty. Here, a great many of these witnesses speak about a present miracle, and they speak not as visionaries, yet they seem to suffer from an ultimate uncertainty, in the sense that seeing the miracle, seeing the experience of good and truth that is imposed on life in facts, in things, it’s as if they were afraid of losing it. So many people conclude their stories by asking how it can endure, how they can make this thing endure, how they can avoid betraying it, how—to use your exhortation—they can avoid deviating from the method. It’s as if they suspect that, the next morning, one might get up and find that the powerful nature of the experience has evaporated, disappeared.

How—having seen a beauty, having seen a truth, seen the miracle—can one remain correctly, loyally before this Presence that imposes Himself on life?

This question is all the more cogent because, as several contributions mention, it’s easy to use the words we say to each other to betray the method. You can even use Carrón’s words to a friend...

Carrón: ...of the series, “Carrón told me...”

Nembrini: Exactly. To a friend who tells you, “Hey, in your school there’s this group of kids we met a short time ago, who’ve begun to get together and would maybe like to do School of Community. Look out for them; give them a hand, will you?” You could respond, “But Carrón said that we’re the problem, not the kids,” which is true—there, evidently, the problem is him! You understand how you can even use Carrón’s words ...

Carrón: ...to justify what we’ve already decided! You don’t need to quote me to do this. You can do it without asking me. Let’s call a spade a spade.

If you ask this question (“How can it endure?”), if you’re afraid of losing it, in the face of all the imposing beauty you find before you (as Franco said just now), it means we haven’t understood the beauty we

have before us, and therefore our fear begins the instant we block the journey of knowledge initiated by this beauty. Our question arises because we've interrupted this journey of knowledge! How can you see that we've interrupted it? From the fact that we're afraid of losing it, and this means that we haven't met it; we haven't understood that this beauty we've encountered is so different from everything we have in our heads, that it exists, and if it exists, it doesn't vanish.

Very often, we don't realize the full cognitive importance of the facts we find before us, and we always remain at the level of appearances. In what sense do we remain? Who fears that it won't endure, that it will vanish? Those who haven't arrived at faith; to put it succinctly: those who don't realize that what we're talking about is the sign of His presence, that is, the most powerful sign that He exists, that the Mystery is at work, or, in other words, that Christ is risen. And if someone has experienced that Christ is risen, will he hatch the idea that maybe Christ will no longer be risen? Will he get the idea that He can vanish? If we get the idea that He can vanish, it's because we've stopped first; we've remained blocked at the level of appearances. We take for granted that the beauty witnessed has an origin different from Him, detached from Him. It's not the documentation of Him at work among us. We always detach the sign from its origin, so then the signs don't confirm for us that He is at work, but are signs that then can always fade away. Instead, He is at work and therefore He will be the one to take care of giving me other signs, or making Himself present in other ways, to come forth, because He is the only one who said, "I will be with you always, all days, even to the end of the world." This isn't our problem; it's His. Understand? Relax. He exists! Relax, kids. We can say, over and over, "Christ," or, "Christianity is an event," but when we speak, deep down, we think we produce Him. It's the ethical reduction of Christianity. Stated another way, we're still at the level of the religious sense, reduced to what we have to sustain, as if we had to bear the weight of the world, right? This is why you're always tired: you have to support the world! Relax; go to sleep in peace. He'll take care of supporting the world! I'm speaking jokingly, but these jokes have within all the meaning that tells us the work to do.

With good reason, Fr. Giussani always insisted that ours is a problem of knowledge, because all these worries come to us out of lack of true knowledge of what happens. Since we never reach the acknowledgment of Him at work, therefore of Him alive, of Him as the mystery present

who makes all things, we think He can fade away. Can He vanish? No, He can't vanish, and all this imposing beauty we find before us documents Him continually.

What makes us learn this? The fact that if we stop this journey of knowledge without reaching recognition of His presence, we immediately let ourselves be taken over by other useless worries. Don't let this scare you, either. If it comes to mind, if this fear assails you, at least look it full in the face. If you start to fear losing Him, feel this as a special insistence, now, with which He is challenging us. What does it mean to learn from what happens? It means that if fear comes to me, it is the present point of departure. So then, let's look at this fear: let's look it in the face and see whether it's true or not that I have to worry; let's see if there's Someone who remains, if there's Someone who is at the origin, who is different from what we have in mind! Why do we say that something can't remain? Because we reduce it to the phenomenon that appears, not to the origin that is always the source of that phenomenon. If we freeze up before this fear, before these questions, we'll never reach this certainty, that is, we'll never arrive at faith, because faith is the recognition of Him present, at work in history. We are talking about the Christian faith, not faith in the unknown! The Christian faith is the acknowledgment of Him at work in our midst, of which we have a great number of witnesses, but it's as if all these witnesses weren't enough for us to acknowledge Him, and for this reason those questions come to us.

But—as you see—it's not for lack of signs. It's for lack of the "I"! In what sense? He can document Himself, and does so before all of us, but what's missing is an "I" that, so taken by His presence and so helped by this beauty, makes the entire journey of reason, the entire journey of faith (a journey Jesus didn't even spare His disciples), to move on to the encounter with a Presence—and this happens through the amazement that it evokes: "Who are You?" or, "Who is He?"—and to full acknowledgment of Him. Since we don't do this, then we stew in our own juices. Why? Because, deep down, we don't get to the point of acknowledging the diversity that is Him, that is the Mystery, that is Christ risen; not acknowledging this diversity, we treat Jesus as if He were a thing among others that, a moment after it elicits a certain attraction, then falls off—something that arises and then an instant later declines. But if Jesus were this, we all might as well go home. So then: is He different, or do we make Him different? Does He exist, and therefore does He last, or does He last because we, with our efforts, with our thoughts, make Him

last? Does He exist or not? We have to get to the heart of this because, if He doesn't exist, then all our attempts are useless, and if He exists, all our worries are equally useless.

Therefore, all that happens is, first of all, for us, and we have to thank the Mystery that all this happens, because it's precisely the modality with which He continues to challenge us to make this journey. This is the way He educates us to what it means to educate, educating us to introduce us into g introduction to the totality, isn't enough for us, and we experience this in our own lives. It's not enough for us; it doesn't serve us. So then, the Mystery accomplishes the first educative work in us, because if we don't let ourselves be shocked by the questions, if we aren't afraid and with the companionship of His presence we look everything in the face, then we can enter into reality ever more fully, starting from anything, to penetrate ever more deeply into the Mystery of the totality, that is, to educate, to introduce into the meaning of what happens. What is the meaning of what happens? That all this is given to me so that I can understand ever more clearly what reality is, all the way to its origin. If we don't personally make this journey, we won't be able to educate. It's useless! We won't be able to educate because, at the first fact that shakes us up, we'll be eliminated!

We can teach if we are the first to participate in the adventure of knowledge. I realize that if I hadn't taken seriously every provocation, every objection, every difficulty, I wouldn't have learned many things; this has stimulated me to seek ways and examples for explaining them ever more effectively. It is because my "I" has been generated that I can also look at my students, and when they still object, I continue to be generated now, because everything is part of this adventure to introduce me to the meaning of every piece of reality that happens to me. If we don't participate in this, what is education for us? Giving lessons to others? But education, as Fr. Giussani told us, is the communication of yourself, that is, of your own way of living reality. We can educate if we, first, have accepted the challenge of reality in everything, even in those who don't agree, even in those who object, because even he who objects has been given to us. Why has the person who objects been given to you? So that you can try to say it in another way, to express it more intensely, to make it more present, to testify to it more powerfully. If this stops us, the game is over. If, instead, I perceive it as the contribution that he gives, even objecting, to the modality with which I can enter more into the relationship with the Mystery, enter more into every-

thing, then everything is my friend; reality is mine, not because I say so in a formal way, but it's mine because I acknowledge the contribution this reality gives me.

Do we want to participate in this modality with which the Mystery introduces each of us to reality, or not? Do we instead have the attitude of those who already know and have to explain it to the others, and not of those who enter into the relationship with reality trying to learn what the Mystery intends to communicate to us through what He makes happen? These are two forms for facing reality. The first, of those who think they already know, is invincible boredom: I already know, then I get angry with the others because, deep down, they're hostile and don't understand me. Does it occur to us that maybe they don't understand us because something's not right? Does it cross our mind that maybe something's not right, that there's something I still have to learn in order to communicate it better? This is the entire testimony that Fr. Giussani gave us for years, in his attempt to tell us things better, to try to understand them better so as to be better able to communicate them to us. Do we think we can spare ourselves this? It seems impossible to me to spare ourselves this, if we want to teach, if we want to accept the challenge of each day—and for this reason, it's worthwhile to begin again. But if we think we already know, the game is already over. If, instead, every day I'm at school waiting to see what modality the Mystery will use to call me, then the game is still on. For this reason, everyone has to decide what we count on to live this adventure: on the already known, or on His presence, which enables us not to be shaken by anything. His presence doesn't spare us the work—it's what makes it possible (because, otherwise, we're shaken and we defend ourselves).

Do you see that we, too, need the "caress of the Nazarene"? Not just the others. Because the Mystery has made us, not to cut us off with wholesome, clean, and correct doctrine (which we so often pass off for communication of the truth!), but to make us have an encounter that has fascinated life and introduced its value. We think we can introduce others with the force of doctrine—well, yes, okay: it's not that we say something that isn't true; the doctrine is very true. But to make us learn, what did the Mystery do? He became flesh; He communicated Himself in a fascinating way, and thus He communicated life to us. What did Fr. Giussani do? Did he found a pro-life movement, or did he communicate his fever for life? And then we say that the others don't understand. Maybe they understand all too well! All of this brings us to understand

what truth is and what communication of the truth is. It's an impressive challenge, from which we have so much to learn. So then, let's not close the wound, saying, "The others don't understand." Let's ask ourselves what has to change in us so that we can communicate to the others a fever for life.

Nembrini: Paolo and Francesco... These last two contributions try to respond to the other aspect of your challenge posed last May about teaching, when you said, "Do you have any idea what it means to teach?"² They will try to answer your question this morning on education, on teaching in the sense of the hour of lesson, and on the relationship with what one has to communicate through our profession, in the most specific sense of the term. There was an incredible blossoming of efforts, more or less successful, from the smallest initiative to those of national significance, and thus it's all a richness, a beauty, a road undertaken, for which we ask your judgment and help.

Paolo: I recently participated in a meeting of teachers from different schools on the relationship between teachers and parents, and the contributions were a series of complaints about the intrusiveness of parents in the life of the school, or grievances about what can be called an absence of families in scholastic life. The only road that emerged from the contributions was to keep relationships strictly formal. I spoke up and dealt with the question starting from a few facts, affirming that the encounters between teachers and parents are the encounters of two needs, that of the families to be accompanied in the educative adventure of their children and that of the teachers to live within the community of educators, which is formed of parents and teachers, not just of teachers.

Regarding the question of formal or informal relationships, I asked the following question: when a parent stops me at the door of the school to thank me for a word said to his son, or asks me something and I answer him and speak with him, am I in a formal or an infor-

mal context? I don't know and I don't care: I'm an "I," and as such, relate with another "I." The more I keep present my human needs, the more I can stay before the other without formal torments and without worries related to role. The only indispensable element is that the heart be alert; the truest needs of my nature must be awake. I had intended to say two words and ended up speaking for ten minutes. The coordinator of the meeting said that in the second part of the gathering we would not work on the scheduled agenda, but on my contribution.

The second thing that struck me happened shortly after. A teacher from another school said, right off, without mincing words, "I think that nothing our colleague said can stand up without a reference to an absolute upon which your whole life and your whole 'I' are grounded, which frees you from captivity to the outcome." He didn't use these precise words, but this was the concept. "For example," he said, "I bring my children to Mass every Sunday. The problem is that the world has set aside God." And he mentioned the example in England of the atheist group running a big campaign promoting atheism, with ads on the sides of English busses. The topic of the meeting became God. I hadn't spoken of Him, and so I sensed a challenge: testimony simply passes through what has been asked of us. We're asked to be faithful to the place that educates us, which coincides mysteriously with His very person, through the faces of the people He puts there. The rest, He makes happen, and when it happens, it always surprises us.

The third and for me the most moving thing that happened that afternoon was when a teacher came up to me and said, "Your words have me questioning myself, because ours is the most beautiful profession in the world, as you said, but I've already put in my request to retire and now you've made me doubt my decision." I asked her, "Why have you applied for retirement?" And she replied, "Because I want to go help my sister, who has been widowed and lives in another region, and I can't keep going back and forth." This startled me, and I asked her how her brother-in-law had died. She told me about a man who was a hard worker, a youth soccer coach, full of energy. I imagined this fellow who did all sorts of activities, who then died at a certain point, and I asked her what he died of. She said, "He died of ALS [Lou Gehrig's Disease], like Welby [an Italian artist and ALS victim and champion of the right-to-die movement who succeeded

² "Il buio e l'accendino," ["The Darkness and the Lighter"], a meeting of Fr. Julián Carrón and the teachers of Communion and Liberation, in Milan, May 18, 2008, available at Tracce.it. See also *Traces*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (2008), p. 24.

in removing his own life support in 2006]. For over a year, he'd been immobile in bed, and couldn't even use the computer to communicate." I said, "Well, maybe you should've retired earlier, to go give a hand." She said, "As long as he was there, my sister didn't need anything. His presence was enough to keep the household together. But now, she's alone with her children and I have to help her. It was a really beautiful family; they loved each other, up to the very last moment. The last sentence my brother-in-law wrote on the computer was, 'Don't be sad. If God has permitted this, it means that it's okay as it is.' My brother-in-law was a man of great faith. If there's no faith, if love is lacking, I can understand why people get strange ideas to unplug life support and things of that kind, but if there's faith and love, it's unthinkable. He's a life; that man is a gift. He's someone who taught people to love, staying in his bed. I don't tell people these things because they'd think I was nuts. I've only told you because judging by what you said about school before, it seems that you certainly understand these things."

How can anybody feel alone after such an overflowing abundance of facts? I told you these things out of gratitude. If that day my "I" was alert and awake (and I desire and ask that this always happen), I owe it to this companionship—which untiringly provokes me—and to some "I" who live their adventure burning with passion for man and who teach me to become truly passionate about my "I." I sense that the challenge is to live a real friendship, one in which the friend loves my destiny more than I do, and in so doing educates me, revives me, and enables my "I" to burn with passion. Thank you for being on fire with this passion.

Francesco: I teach Science. Julián, last May, you responded to a question by saying, "Every now and then, do we ask ourselves what it truly means to teach? Do we ask ourselves what knowledge really is?" Well, this question wounded me and continues to provoke me, especially since before the May meeting, when I told you about my difficulty in getting the kids to be passionate about organic chemistry, you asked me the same thing: "What do you want to teach your students through organic chemistry?" And then you added, "Understanding organic chemistry means perceiving its nexus with the totality." You told me, "Work on this, and then we'll talk again about it next year." This challenge totally determined my way of

working. I'll try to tell you what happened.

First of all, I wanted to live this affection that I so often felt with you and Franco. I think that, above all, this was what saved me and enabled me also to look at and embrace my teacher friends, from elementary school to high school, in a way that had never happened to me before. Then, something happened with my colleagues of the scientific disciplines, with whom I prepared and ran a forum in the school where I teach; we called it: "Three Days of Science."

In October 2007, you said that without meaning, things lack the power to interest us. I can say with certainty that I've discovered that this meaning is tied to the Something that comes before the subject I teach. It doesn't involve studying more or perfecting a technique; rather, it simply and dramatically means giving space to a precise relationship, the relationship with Jesus, through your friendship and that of Franco (who teaches different things than I do)—in short, with God-made-man, who set me in motion again and makes me live the same things as ever with new eyes.

Together with my colleagues, we got to work, trying to ask ourselves what it means to teach science to kids. What is our goal in proposing a day on evolution or global warming? What is moved within us, staying before these issues? What does one or the other issue have to do with our lives? Well, what I saw happen, first of all for me, was that trying to stay like this before the particulars, together with those colleagues, some of whom I hardly knew, opened me to the Mystery, and I can say that I am certain of this because, before them, I felt my reason provoked to the maximum, and the greatest thing is that I could talk about reality without leaving the Mystery aside; and then I desired as never before their happiness. A colleague of mine, who worked with me in preparing these days and whom I got to know better in those weeks, at the end of the three days, said, "I've never worked this way. Above all, for the first time, I came to school without having to leave behind anything of myself, like my fear of making mistakes or my problems at home, and with a great desire to have an impact on the reality of the day."

Carrón: Do you see? We have to understand that the encounter isn't the end; it's the beginning that enables us to make a journey of knowledge, and therefore the encounter doesn't spare us the work to do. It's not that we have to teach like everyone else and then some-

how add Christ on, because this dualism in the end doesn't make us different; in fact, the others simply judge us as ideologues, and they're absolutely right. The point is that we have been introduced to something that doesn't spare us the work. On the contrary, because of the fact that I am accompanied, I can risk this work even more, and this is the attempt that we have to make. Otherwise, why should our ideological position be any more valid than the others? We have to be able to document that our way of facing reality is more attentive to all the factors, and this is something we have to learn. (We're not spared this. We teach a lesson like everyone else and then say something from School of Community? No way!) It's only when we try to *know* truly, that is, to truly use reason according to all the factors, that we can show from within our action what this attitude means for knowledge.

This is a journey that we don't always undertake, because it's easier to repeat catch phrases. Often, we reduce Fr. Giussani to little pills for various occasions, instead of identifying with the modality with which he introduces us to reality. Here I must document, first of all for myself, that faith—that is, the acknowledgment of the encounter I've had—introduces a capacity to use reason, an acumen and capacity to go deeper into exploring reality, that is much greater than what I had before. If it isn't this way, how can I verify the newness that Christ introduced into the world as the meaning of everything? For us, it's easier to just stick Him on: we do our lessons like everyone else and then we stick on Christ. But not only is this boring, it's of no value, and makes us lose the best of that input that the encounter introduces as a challenge to enter into reality.

Instead—do you see?—when someone accepts this challenge, first of all she begins to be truly interesting. The comment of Francesco's colleague is indicative: "I've never worked this way. Above all, for the first time, I came to school without having to leave behind anything of myself." That is, going to school isn't a misfortune, something from which you'd want to free yourself. Do you think this isn't seen in your faces, notwithstanding all the quotes about Jesus you can make? This weight is seen by your students, colleagues, everyone. What meaning can we transmit, if it doesn't concern us? Only if we accept the verification of faith—in the way we stay before our teaching, in the way we face the subjects we have to explain, in the way we use reason in those subjects, in the way this challenges us to never

tire of being loyal to that goad that asks us to enter ever more deeply into reality—can we testify to the others the meaning of the newness Christ introduces.

It's *for* us. We still have a lot of work to do on this point, because it's like rebuilding—in the midst of a concept of reason entirely reduced to measure—the conditions for living what the Pope said: "Broaden reason." The Pope said this first of all to you, whose task it is to help the students broaden reason. But again, this can be a slogan stuck on top of a use of reason as measure. Do you understand what a challenge we have before us? How can we document it before ourselves, before our colleagues? How can we educate ourselves to this, if we don't personally feel the urgency of this goad to broaden reason? Is it true or isn't it, what the Pope said, or what Fr. Giussani testified to us, that is, that reason reduced only to measure doesn't give an account of its true nature? How can we document it to others? Not repeating for the *n*th time the definition of reason (they know it already), but rendering evident in experience a different, truer use of reason. This impassions those who have a heart for teaching. And we—let's be honest—often reject this inquiry; it's easier to repeat catch phrases. But, in this way, we don't fascinate anybody, while the true testimony provokes the others, forcing them to come out of their ideological hiding places. And one begins a truly human road, without useless opposition.

Nembrini: There's one more question. I wrote it down because it seems to me that it intersects with many of our contributions and your words. In part, you've already answered it, at least one aspect, because what you said just now settles the question. Many of you asked something of this kind, and I'll formulate it like this to be brief and simple. I will try; I'd like to go all the way into all the aspects of reality and all the aspects of our work, of our profession, with all that an attempt of presence implies—that is, on the level of culture, didactics, and discipline—for this work, which you have called the teacher's work of research, the work that the encounter doesn't spare us, but into which the encounter launches us. And I find myself alone, as if occupying myself in the full scope of reality, in all its consequences—cultural, educative, didactic, and also social, political, etc.—could be someone's luxury or fixation.

Within this challenge, there's another, final one, which is this: in

the attempt one has undertaken, there's often an unease due to not feeling together with the others of the Movement present in the same school or in the same educative setting. It arises as a question: I've tried, but can it be so difficult to be able to express ourselves together, to walk together, to help each other in this work? Because both things are there: on the one hand, one understands (and you have said it) that communion, being together, is indispensable, because you can't handle this attempt alone; you don't do it alone. On the other hand, as soon as the theme of unity or communion comes up, the immediate risk is to depend on the organization.

Can you help us with this question so we can travel this road better?

Carrón: We find it hard to understand the method of God. What is God's method, as Fr. Giussani always taught us? That He calls one in order to reach all; that He gives the grace to one, moves one, gives a push to one so that through the flesh of this one, He can reach everyone, can flood to everyone. This means that the Mystery doesn't ask us for permission. He didn't ask anyone's permission to call Abraham, then Francis, then Benedict, then Fr. Giussani. He didn't ask for ecclesiastical permission.

We understand this very well when we talk about others. But we think it has to be different for us, that the method of God in us has to be different, that we have to give our assent, that is, reduce communion to agreement. What consequence does this have? That nobody moves until we're all agreed. It's murderous! If someone receives such a grace, and the others don't understand, he can feel alone. When Fr. Giussani entered the Berchet, in a certain way he was alone, in a certain way; but he had that whole history behind him—that is, he wasn't truly alone. Who could have imagined that something would happen there? It was Fr. Giussani who slowly, slowly generated, precisely because of this loyalty, this response of his to One who was calling him. It was he who responded in the first person. All his other colleagues remained there, being teachers like always. Fr. Giussani responded. In a certain way, we can say he was alone. And what did this generate? If he had had to wait until all his colleagues agreed, he never would've begun. Instead, his apparently solitary response was the grace for all of us, generating the place we're living in now, a different communion—not because he asked

our permission, but because he put before us something that enthused all of us.

This is the method of God, as Giussani always taught us, and he taught us this because this is what the Bible and all of Church history recount. Do we think it's different now, among us? No, it's the same. This is why I say that if someone feels the urge, he must respond in the first person, even if the others of the community don't understand. Then, in what this brings forth, it will be seen how much truth that attempt contained. Otherwise, in the name of an organization—as if we all had to be synchronized—we block the modality with which the Mystery acts in our midst.

We see this in Anna's story: a grace given to one person is a grace for everyone, first of all for the family members, for the parents, then for the students, the colleagues who wouldn't even speak to her. I ask myself: how is this communion generated? Look, it's not that this initiative is against communion—it's precisely what generates it! We shouldn't expect that our attempts will be right in every situation; it will be seen if the attempt we make is able to fascinate the others. But we certainly can't block each other in turn, either, friends. Each responds to his own, and then you find yourselves united in acknowledging what goodness and beauty this personal move, suggested by the Mystery in each of us, has generated.

Remember what Fr. Giussani told us (I quoted it last October to you): "The Movement was born of a Presence that imposed itself and brought to life the provocation of a promise to follow. But then we entrusted the continuity of this beginning to discourses and initiatives, to meetings and the things to do. We didn't entrust it to our life, and so the beginning very soon ceased to be truth offered to our person, and became the starting point for an association, for a reality upon which we could dump the responsibility for our own work and through which we could expect things to be resolved. What should have been the embrace of a provocation and thus a living *sequela* has become homogenization with the organization."

If one doesn't embrace this beginning and tries to suffocate it in the organization, it's evident that it ceases right away. Instead, if we're all truly striving to acknowledge that beginning—which is the resource that the Mystery gives us for the continuation—then He happens again, and then this can generate that communion that isn't a matter of agreeing, but of all being fascinated by Someone.

My greatest hope for myself and each of you is to obey the absolutely unexpected modality with which He continues to be present. What does it mean to be available for what He does? Being willing to acknowledge whatever point of newness, of action, of truth, that we find in the flesh of anyone we have alongside. It's not abstraction, but the most powerful modality with which the Mystery calls us to conversion, to acknowledge Him. It's the good that He gives me in this moment.

I'll finish with an episode a priest told me about. He'd been invited by some of our friends to accompany them to the Holy Land. He is an Old Testament scholar; thus, he was the expert who accompanied the pilgrimage. While he was doing this task, he saw how the others were moved by what happened at the holy places they were visiting, and he was amazed by this. I thought, look at what a face the Mystery, the grace of the Mystery, has for this expert Biblicist, who gives his expertise to the others, and the Mystery makes it yield a hundred times as much in the face, in the flesh, of those he has before him. Can you imagine another type of concreteness of grace greater than having before you faces shaken and moved? What other humanity, what other method, what other more consonant, more adequate thing can there be to make the Mystery present to us, than having them before us, moved?

This is and will always be the method; this is the contemporaneity of Christ; the contemporaneity of Christ doesn't mean an abstract thing, ahistorical, faceless (as we so often think). No; those moved faces make Him present for me, much more than my expert explanation. As I've said to you many times, I say things and then I see them return multiplied a hundredfold by Cleuza, and so I learn to understand the thing I say. If, in the name of the already known, we aren't open to this, we lose this grace that the Lord gives us. Is this, the modality that the grace acquires for us, now or not? Or do we have to defend ourselves because there isn't the seal of approval of the organization? What madness... Like those in Jesus' time who already knew: the scribes and Pharisees already knew, and used their knowledge as an alibi for not letting themselves be provoked by that Presence they had before them. They already knew, and couldn't imagine that the Mystery would want to become flesh, because they couldn't conceive of it. In the same way, we can't imagine, at times, that that colleague or that friend of the Movement (whom we've always thought of in a certain way) can be invested with the presence of the Mystery and begin to move in a way that shakes us up. Is it reasonable, then, that in the name of what we already know, we block this? Each of us can respond. ■