

## A Responsibility that Grows with the Power of the Origin

*Notes from the talk by Julián Carrón at the General Assembly of the Companionship of Works, Milan, November 21, 2010.*

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“If life satisfied us, there would be no sense in producing literature at all.” This line by the writer Flannery O’Connor, which stood out at the entrance to the exhibit dedicated to her this summer at the Meeting for Friendship among Peoples, came to mind when Bernard Scholz invited me to speak on the theme of this assembly. Producing literature originates in the desire to be satisfied, in the desire for fulfillment.

Analogously, every movement of ours starts out from this need for fulfillment that we find deep within. According to the words of Thomas Aquinas, “all desire their own perfection,” that is, our own ultimate happiness, our own true realization.

Precisely this desire is at the origin of your works. So then, in order to maintain the power of the origin, it is vital not to lose the power of the desire they flow from.

In this sense, what is the problem today? On many occasions, desire is reduced to sentiment. But desire reduced to sentiment is desire emptied of its being. If you take away the power to pursue what you desire, what kind of desire is that? The shadow of desire. Desire reduced in this way lacks the power to sustain a real commitment, a responsibility, as Fr. Giussani explains: “We take sentiment rather than the heart as the ultimate engine, as the ultimate reason for our action. What does this mean? Our responsibility is rendered vain precisely by yielding to the use of sentiment as prevalent on the heart, thus reducing the concept of heart to that of sentiment. Instead, the heart represents and acts as the fundamental factor of the human personality; sentiment does not, because, taken alone, sentiment acts as reactivity; deep down it is animal-like. ‘I still haven’t understood’—says Pavese—‘what the tragedy of existence is .... And yet it is clear: one must overcome sensuous abandon and stop considering moods as goals unto themselves.’ Moods have a far different purpose in order to be dignified: they have the purpose of a condition placed by God, by the Creator, through which one is purified. Instead, the heart indicates the unity of sentiment and reason. It involves an unblocked conception of reason, reason according to the full breadth of its possibility: reason cannot act without what is called affection. The heart—as reason and affectivity—is the condition for the healthy realization of reason. The condition for reason to be reason is that affectivity invests it and thus moves all of the human person. Reason and sentiment, reason and affection: this is the heart of the person” . When this emptying of desire is accomplished, then there is no other road for action than moralism. An action becomes moralistic when it loses the nexus with what generates it, as happens in continuing to live as husband and wife without the nexus with the attraction that generated the love relationship, or in working without the nexus with the desire for fulfillment even if you earn a good salary. When this happens, the only thing left is the rules to respect. Everything becomes burdensome, a titanic effort to do something that no longer has anything to do with our desire.

We all know how arduous it is to keep desire alive. So then the most obvious temptation is to gloss over it and close down the game. How many of you have felt this temptation when desire has flagged in the face of the enormous difficulties you have to deal with in these times of crisis!

So then the question is simple: Is it possible to keep desire alive in the face of the challenges of the present?

In the child we can see all the total openness of desire. We discover it in the phenomenon of curiosity, so human, that makes children cordially open to everything: “The heart of a child is made for discovery, for staying there and enjoying, for journeying through the whole universe without resting, never tiring and always glad, at peace, curious, and satisfied” .

But we see that, as we go along in life, this openness full of curiosity can decline to the point of almost disappearing, as seen in the skepticism of so many adults. In fact, all the impetus with which a child leaves its mother’s womb cannot avoid its decline toward death.

We can see the same parabola in adult life, in work, in works. All the impetus with which one begins work cannot avoid slowly diminishing, nor can it avoid one’s becoming fed up with it.

So then, here we have the true challenge before us: Is it possible to maintain the propulsive force of the origin? We see in the example of children the fact that all their energy is insufficient for keeping alive desire in all its breadth. We are incapable of keeping the origin fresh and alive by ourselves, as Fr. Giussani tells us again: “Maintaining in life the original fondness of being or reality with which we are born, being in life truly like children (or poor in spirit, the Gospel would say), because this continuous positivity before reality is nothing other than being children, is the position of the child: we recognize that we are incapable of being this way in life; therefore something other is needed” .

One understands then how modern presumption acquires the face of moralism: “The separation of the meaning of life from experience also implicates a separation of morality from man’s action: morality, thus conceived, does not have the same root as action. In what sense? In the sense that morals *do* have to do with man’s action, they *do* have to do with experience, but without having the same root as action; they do not respond to the physiognomy, to the face that experience gives us. Thus, for that matter, one understands the emergence of moralism: it is morality that, paradoxically, has nothing to do with action, in the sense that it is not born contemporaneously with it. Moralism is a set of principles that precedes and invests the action of man, judging it theoretically, abstractly, without giving the grounds for why it is right or not, the reason man must or must not do an action. Defining *a priori* the action that man is doing, one judges what man does, without his having been aware of it, or without his having conceived his action in the world and his walking on the roads of time and space as practicable. Morality like this does not have the same root as action, and thus it ends up underlining common values, generally felt values; its principles are thus either derived from the common mentality or imposed by the State” . It is the triumph of the most sterile voluntarism: “Before the impossibility of achieving a human image, before a materialistically understood nature that overwhelms and eliminates, the force of iron human will establishes a project and with all its energy tries to achieve it. I’ll read as an example this excerpt from [Bertrand] Russell: ‘...I experienced something like what religious people call conversion. I became suddenly and vividly aware of the solitude in which most people live, and passionately desirous of finding the ways to diminish this tragic isolation. ... The life of Man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can

hope to reach, and where none may tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death. Very brief is the time in which we can help them, in which their happiness or misery is decided. Be it ours to shed sunshine on their path, to lighten their sorrows by the balm of sympathy, to give them the pure joy of a never-tiring affection, to strengthen failing courage, to instill faith in the hours of despair.’ Courage: why? faith? which? Voluntarism shows its blindness and irrationality. With it man seeks to extend his capacities to a horizon that his most reflective conscience knows he cannot reach, like the frog in the fairy tale who made himself swell up, but at a certain point could not help popping” .

If we are incapable of keeping desire alive, moralism forces us to do things even when that desire is exhausted. We can all imagine what life or work are when they are reduced to pure duty. The attrition, the chronic tiredness, the absence of an adequate reason for action are the greatest threat of responsibility. The consequences lie in ambush. The only unknown is how much time will be needed to make a dash for it.

Is it possible to continue your own activity in adult life without being condemned to escaping sooner or later? Yes, but only if the desire is constantly reawakened. And we know from experience that we cannot do this on our own. This is what Christ came to do. The encounter with Christ produces the surprise of the reawakening in us of desire: an encounter is the great and only resource for a renewal of our “I.” But what is the importance of this event in the life of the person? “An encounter is what kindles the personality, the consciousness of your own person [the person is generated by God when He gives us life through our mother and father]. The encounter does not ‘generate’ the person ... but it is in an encounter that I become aware of myself, that the word ‘I’ or the word ‘person’ is awakened. ... The ‘I’ is awakened from its prison in its original womb; it is awakened from its tomb, from its sepulcher, from its closed situation of origin and—so to speak—‘resurrects,’ gains consciousness of itself, precisely in an encounter. The outcome of an encounter is the kindling of the sense of the person. It is as if the person were born: the person is not born there, but in the encounter gains self awareness, therefore is born as personality.” This encounter that reawakens the person represents the beginning of the adventure—here we see in action all the educative genius of Fr. Giussani—it is not the end of an itinerary or the goal of the journey, but the beginning of a story destined to impact all of reality. Giussani also makes us aware of the negative consequences of treating the encounter like a point of arrival: “The problem begins here, at this point, when the person is awakened: the whole adventure begins here; it does not end here. Why does CL become a disappointment for many? Because, once they join, it is as if they had closed, as if they had arrived.” On the contrary, the encounter constitutes the beginning of everything: “The adventure begins when the person is awakened by the encounter.... And the adventure is the dramatic development of the relationship between the reawakened person and the whole reality by which she is surrounded and in which she lives” .

Therefore, the true challenge is for this beginning to remain contemporary. Christ is contemporary to us in the charism. In the encounter with the charism of Fr. Giussani our “I” is reawakened, and many of the works among us are the fruit of this “I” reawakened by the charism. We can maintain the force of the origin if we remain connected to the charism, as Fr. Giussani told us in the Company of Works National Assembly in 1995: “The more one loves perfection in the reality of things, the more one loves the people for whom one does things, the more one loves the society for which one runs a business, of

any type, the more desirable it is to be perfected by correction. This is the poverty of our possession of things, that makes the person actor, creator, and protagonist in every work, in every undertaking. But in addition to the awareness of one's own limits, freedom also means the creative impetus. If it is relationship with the Infinite, it derives from the Infinite this unexhausted will to create. It is not this way only for those who are so old as to be already dead—and this can happen at twenty! How many twenty-year-olds do we see who no longer have desires, no longer have imagination, no longer attempt, no longer risk in life! Everything is correctable and everything must be creatable. This creative instinct is what qualifies freedom in a way that is more positive, in a way that can be experienced as more fascinating” .

This is why the Companionship of Works is different from any other organization, with its own originality: awakening and supporting the energies of the individual. Only from here is it possible to respond to today's challenges. I'll quote this beautiful passage of Fr. Giussani from the Company of Works National Assembly in 1993: “Your companionship strives to create a more habitable home for man. And it succeeds, it does not matter whether it is a little or a lot: it succeeds. Each of you has experienced this. Why does your companionship strive to create a habitable home for men and women? Because your passion is humanity in its evident concreteness—in other words, humanity that is in need. In fact, it is in need that people are truly themselves, and truly find themselves again. The need is in today. Thinking of resolving a need tomorrow or in a year is highly questionable if it does not immediately place the factors in the most propitious way for responding to the hunger and thirst, the need that man experiences now. Why did Jesus arouse such curiosity and amazement in those who met Him? Because He was a man in whom whoever saw Him act and heard Him speak, perceived a thing, above all, a thing: not the Trinity, Hell, or Paradise, but a passion for men and women, above all a passion for the need of humanity. A compassion for humanity: ‘At the sight of the crowds, His heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.’” This is why the people followed Him” .

This gaze of the other world in this world generates among us a new responsibility (not the old responsibility according to the framework of the world, which seeks in the work and in profit its own fulfillment, once desire has been reduced). This gaze gives us a new face to present to our sisters and brothers, and is the only thing that can make a real contribution to contemporary society.

And this gaze, directed upon others because it was first of all recognized upon us, is what I wish for myself and for you.

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*Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, 1, 7, c, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benziger Brothers, New York, 1948, p. 23.

L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino [Man and His Destiny]*, Marietti, Genoa, 1999, pp. 116-117.

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L. Giussani, *L'io rinasce in un incontro (1986-1987)[The “I” is Reborn in an Encounter]*, Bur, Milan, 2010, pp. 206-207.

L. Giussani, *L'io, il potere, le opere [The I, power, and works]*, Marietti, Genoa, 2000, p. 117.

*Matt 9:36*.

*Ibid.*, p. 131.