

## From Fatherless Child to Son of God: Freedom as Belonging

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Good afternoon, and first of all I really thank you, Giacomo, for inviting me, especially for your witness, for the passion I felt in your voice, and for spending time with you; for the passion you show in helping us, the community of the movement here in the UK. It is always very moving to see people like you who really give everything, who live what they have encountered.

I know I am expected to speak about my experience in Russia and America – this is what my friends who invited me asked me to do – and I will: about what it meant, in contexts like those, to live out my belonging to Christ through the companionship of the movement. But before doing that – or, in order to be able to do that – I cannot help spending a few minutes trying to communicate, to give you the sense, the meaning, the ‘flavour,’ so to say, that the word belonging has taken on in my life, in my personal journey of faith, from early on, long before I went to Russia and then to America, to the U.S.

I was five years in Moscow, from 2005 through 2010, and then I moved to Washington, D.C., where I spent eight or nine years, until about 2019. So, Moscow and Washington: the two capitals of the twentieth century – the capital of communism and the capital of liberal capitalism... probably they both thought I was of spy of the enemy (which I am: I am a spy of the Vatican!).

I do not know a better starting point for saying what I want to say, than Fr. Giussani’s interpretation of the D-major concerto for violin and orchestra that we listened to at the beginning. There were a couple of lines from his wonderful commentary – I hope you had a chance to read it. In short, paraphrasing in my own way: for Fr. Giussani, this amazing Beethoven concerto is a metaphor of life – life understood as a kind of dramatic fight, I would say, between two different, rather opposite understandings of freedom and thus of human happiness and fulfillment. On the one hand, freedom as autonomy, as independent self-affirmation; on the other, freedom as belonging, as response to a communion, as the flourishing of the ‘I,’ of the personality, within a communion with other, by following a guided communion.

Where is the truth? Who is right? I do not think the answer is obvious, especially today. It is not to be taken for granted that freedom is found in dependence, in belonging; it is actually a paradox. And it is all the more a paradox for us today, because we live in a society, in a culture, where everything is built on the opposite idea – i.e. on the idea that freedom is independence, autonomy and self-determination. It is important for us to be aware of that. I lived in America, where this is lived out even more radically than here, though there are common cultural roots. But it is not just the culture in which we live today, the reason why the bond between freedom and dependence is for me not

obvious: it has never been obvious for me, I have to say, also because of my personality and my personal history – my biography.

Therefore, the first thing I want to pause upon is precisely this: the way I came to personally realize that freedom truly comes from belonging – how this happened in my life. The title I would give my first point would be: “From Fatherless Child to Son of God”.

I would like to start with a quote from one of my favourite novels, *The Lord of the Rings*. Yesterday a friend of mine reminded me of a very interesting quote from one of the first chapters. When Tom Bombadil, after meeting Frodo, addresses him, he says: “Who are you, who walk alone and nameless?” This is very strange, because Tom already knows Frodo’s name; it is not that he doesn’t know it. So why call him “nameless”? This friend suggested an interpretation. Tom – I put it in my own words – is prophetically unveiling a truth about Frodo that perhaps Frodo himself does not realize. He is “nameless,” in a deep sense, because he still thinks of himself as alone. “Who are you who walk alone and nameless?” Because he conceives himself as alone, as if he had to give himself a name, that is an identity, a consistency, by himself. He is already on a mission, but it is as if all the burden of it, were on his shoulders. He alone has to ‘make it’, as if he himself were the origin of his destiny, i.e. as if he *alone* were the one who has to ‘forge’ his own name, his identity, his own face.

But the name is not something we give ourselves. According to the Bible, the name – which the symbol of our personal, unique identity – is given to every child by his father. The earthly father is the first, great sign in the life of a child of the eternal origin of being, of the eternal love that speaks him/her into being. And this is why the father has such an important place in the development of the human ‘I’. The ‘I’ starts to really be, ‘he/she’ starts realizing to be someone with a name, with irreducible dignity, destined to great, good things – because they see themselves through the gaze of another: as born through the eyes and the voice of another, as called into being by someone who blesses them.

Well, something in this dynamic in my life broke very early. As some may know – also because my brother has spoken about this more than once – my dad died when I was four; he was six. This is why, if I look back at my childhood and adolescence – at least until I was twenty, which is when I had my overturning encounter with Christ through meeting Fr. Giussani, listening to him speak about Christ in 1994 during the Spiritual Exercises of CLU – I can really say that Tom Bombadil’s words describe perfectly the way I secretly felt: alone and nameless. I had a name, but in fact I lived as if I did not, as if I had to constantly struggle to make a name for myself through my doings, my successes, my achievements, my performances.

I grew up Christian – my mum was in the movement – but deep down I was an anarchist, as some friends loved to say about me, in the literal, tragic sense: someone

without a source, without a principle (an-archē). Someone who lives as if he has no source other than himself – practically, not theoretically. Theoretically I was Christian and had faith, but psychologically and practically this was how I felt; my self-awareness was this, without me even realizing it. Immersed in today's culture, this kind of practical anarchism is, I think, more widespread than we realize, and it causes more suffering than we realize. Because living like this is unbearable. Everything becomes performance: you are what you make happen. That is the measure of your dignity. It is devastating. In fact, I was devastated at twenty. And it is devastating because it is a lie. That is not who we are. We are made by another, and there is no more fundamental and healthy evidence in our life, as Giussani over and over again repeated to us, than this: that in this very moment, you do not make yourself. Sometimes we do not realize how important it is to remember this.

So the encounter with Christ for me was, briefly, a light in the dark. Without entering too much into details, if I had to say a few words about what it meant for me – the encounter with Christ through Fr. Giussani, and then through the friendship in the CLU that followed – I would describe it as an earthquake that set me free: free from the bondage of loneliness and namelessness, opening my eyes to the mystery of the love of the Father – the love of the Father. I was no longer a fatherless child; I was a son of God. I often found myself mumbling the words of Saint Paul (which at the time I did not fully understand, but this is how I interpreted them): “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” That is: it is no longer the fatherless child, but the Son of God in me. For who is Christ, if not the one who lived every single breath, every single moment of His existence before the love that generated him, entirely defined and shaped by the awareness of this love and by the desire to bear witness to it in the world?

That new desire led me to decide to become a priest in the Fraternity of Saint Charles. Of course, one can think: you have had this glorious encounter and then life will be a triumphant ride, communicating the love you bear inside. That was the image I had in mind of what my life would be initially. But I was wrong. Life is much more mysterious than that, and the fight is never over. Actually, the fight began in that moment: the fight between the old ‘I’ and the new man, between the fatherless child and the son. In my mind it was clear that there was no longer opposition between freedom and belonging – I had tasted their coincidence, and it was sweeter than any feeling I had ever had – and yet, strangely enough, I found myself fighting against it. The exodus, the passage from the old man to the new, is a journey that lasts a lifetime. It is still not over – but it is beautiful.

Now I want to say a couple of words about a few steps that made me grow in this belonging, and how being thrown into the deep end – into the open sea of situations, circumstances, and missions that were tough – was the greatest grace for me in deepening this belonging, this self-awareness as belonging.

First of all, Russia. In 2005 I went to Russia full of fire and romantic enthusiasm. Of course, speaking about Russia today sounds very different than in 2005. There was then a great hope, an openness that seemed likely to grow. The movement was growing in Russia. I had devoted time to studying Orthodox theology because my first mission was to try to contribute to ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox. I earned a doctorate in theology at the Pontifical Oriental Institute and left with great enthusiasm.

Very quickly I realized that all my preparation and studies, once I was there in the dark and cold of Moscow, were not enough to make anything happen. My dreams of doing great things dissolved. I faced a mission that found me totally unprepared; I felt like a child who, literally, could not speak the language well.

In that moment I discovered an important law – what I call the law of the charcoal fire. In the Gospel of John (my favourite Gospel), in the story of Peter's denial, the evangelist notes: "Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself." Why does John tell us this? Who cares that it was cold and there was a charcoal fire? There is an intimation here. In the Bible, the charcoal fire is a symbol of home. When you are alone, it is cold – so cold that you end up, without even realizing it, denying your mother, denying anyone you love, in exchange for a place around a charcoal fire.

That was exactly my experience. For me it was clear that Christ was the love of my life, that I wanted to give everything for him, but I found myself unable to risk myself for him in front of people because of the environment; it seemed impossible. I remember in my second year the only job I found was teaching Italian at the Pedagogical University in Moscow. I did not even dress as a priest. Of course, I was a teacher of Italian. I went there with missionary desire, but at the same time I found myself extremely shy and afraid – and I had to be prudent.

At the same university there was Oksana, a member of the movement. She is Russian, so she was much more at ease. In January – I had already been teaching for six months – we planned a winter vacation. The question arose: do we invite our students? Should I invite my students? I could not decide; it seemed completely out of my league. At the same time I noticed that my students were all girls, and they kept looking at my hands. I asked Oksana: "Why are they looking at my hands?" "It is obvious," she said. "Because you are not married." I felt mortified. "What are you here for? Just to make them fall in love with you?"

Then Oksana asked me, "Have you invited any of your students to the vacation?" I asked her about hers. "Of course – almost all of them. And two are coming." I felt so humiliated; it lit the charcoal fire in me. I went to my class and found the courage to invite some of them – especially those in whom I sensed some interest. Three came.

None of them is now in the movement. One, however, found her husband at that vacation!

I share this to explain what communion is for me. What does it mean that belonging to Christ, needs the 'sacrament' of communion? By 'sacrament' I mean this: I knew who Christ was for me, but without the word, the fire, that passes through the flesh of your brother or sister, that knowledge does not become fire in the present. Full of the glorious memory of the Love that had touched me at the beginning, through Fr. Giussani – I had fallen into the subtle illusion that being reborn from that encounter was enough, and then I would go on by myself. The experience of Russia taught me the reality of what I had learned especially in the years in the seminary of the Saint Charles Fraternity: either you are regenerated *now*, through the flesh of the Church, or Christ becomes a devout memory, unable to throw you into reality with certainty and passion.

A second point. If I had to find a way to succinctly describe the meaning of those 'blessed' years in Russia I would say this: a progressive surrender to dependence – to rely totally on Christ's presence rather than on myself and my desire to be 'up to the task.' For me it was like living out the drama of the rich young man. What is his tragedy? He has the highest opinion of Jesus – 'Good Teacher' – but for him Christ is only a model to imitate. Jesus says instead: surrender yourself to me, give up everything, abandon yourself to me. That seems the easiest thing, but it is in fact the most beautiful and the most difficult.

Now, there are moments in life when this surrender becomes flesh in a way that leaves no way back. For me, this came through the most unlikely person: 'Elenina', the daughter of friends. There was a moment in which I particularly felt my disproportionality, my inadequacy before the mission. I went back to Italy for summer vacation, to the mountains in Champoluc, where these friends also came. They had just had this baby. She had a very serious condition from birth - she was born with the so called Delange syndrome (she is now 17 and cannot speak nor walk, among other things...). Outwardly, she was very marked, to put it softly. She was three or four months old when I saw her for the first time. I found myself mysteriously attracted to this little child, who seemed so disgraced. Maybe because it resonated with my feeling of being inadequate.

One day, after mass, a rich lady – the typical rich lady who goes on vacation in a place like Champoluc – came by saying, "Oh my God, a little child, what tenderness, let me take a look..." She looked into the pushchair, she saw the baby and fell silent, like in shock. I looked at Sara, the mother, and felt her humiliation – the lack even of that small consolation you expect any mother to have when her child is born" people who say 'she is beautiful,' even if she has problems... I felt an incredible tenderness, a tenderness I had never felt in my life, as if I wanted to give the whole world to this

mother and her child; such passion and such a strange, mysterious admiration for her, bearing all that she was going through...

Then I had an illumination: what an idiot you are. If you, with such a small and cold heart, can feel this in front of this woman and her child in all their weakness, think about what God feels for them. And think about what God feels for you, when you struggle with your pathetic weaknesses. This was completely liberating. My last year and a half in Russia was the most beautiful time of my stay there. It is incredible how, within our companionship, through the most unlikely and unpredictable faces, the glory of Christ shows up and transfigures our perspective.

Lastly: communal judgment. Sometimes when we speak about this, we risk thinking it means simply appropriating the judgment of the leader – in other words, groupthink. That was not my experience of communion and judgment, especially during the years in I spent in America. In the second part of my experience of mission, I had the grace of finding myself in a beautiful place. I taught theology at the John Paul II Institute with a couple of confreres of the fraternity and of the movement, and other great Catholic thinkers. It was an incredible experience.

One fact at the very beginning changed my approach, humbling me. I arrived in the U.S. with my background and, as a good CL guy, I had the idea that what matters is the event of Christ, not ‘secondary’ thinking about moral law, sex, gender ideology – all that seemed secondary to me. I said as much to the head of the Institute, David Schindler, a great Catholic thinker (now deceased). “Why waste time getting into the details of gender studies and criticizing them?” I asked. “We need to go to the foundations, to the event of Christ; the rest comes after.” He looked at me: “Why did God become man? You speak about Christ, but do you not think sexual difference touches the very heart of the Incarnation? Was Jesus male, or androgynous? Why was he male?” I was blown away, humbled; a completely different path began.

I learned poverty of spirit. For me, communal judgment means first letting myself be wounded and provoked by the questions alive in the culture where I am. I was in America; everyone was speaking about these things. I could not speak about something else. I had to face them. By myself I would have been afraid; instead it was beautiful to have a place where we could patiently and humbly, without rushing to answers, help one another think them through.

The last point is this. Earlier I spoke about the ‘society of performance’ (some of you may know the book of Byung Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*). America – the America where I worked – was like that: everyone working all the time. On campus, if you met someone without an appointment, you would not start talking because everyone was so busy. That mentality became mine, though I had never been like that. I found myself

anxious: “You are not doing anything... you are wasting time.” Performance became a gospel.

I became frustrated, because teaching theology – speaking about Christ – while constantly comparing myself with others (“you are not doing enough; others are better”) led to a psychological spiral. When you work in a bank, perhaps it is tolerable; but for a theologian, the contradiction is disgusting. One morning, I was in my office and I thought: everyone is publishing more than I am. I felt awful. I wanted to call my superior and say, “I give up; I don’t want to be in academia; I will lose my soul.”

Then a lady entered the room – who came to empty the rubbish, a Mexican lady named Carmen. We sometimes talked; she always had a smile. That day, particularly agitated, I asked, “Carmen, may I ask you a question?” “Yes.” “Are you happy doing your job?” “Yes,” she said. “I am happy. I am okay.” “Why?” She took her time and said: “Because it is my way to serve the Church. And I am proud to do this, because I know the work you do here is very important.” I was moved. When she left, I began to cry. I realized she was living the glory of her work with an awareness deeper than mine in teaching theology.

This changed me. It was the beginning of a change: understanding that the problem was not theology; the problem was whether what you do is shaped by love for Christ and His glory— whether it is placed at the service of building something greater than your personal success, that is the kingdom of God. In time, I came to the decision to leave the Institute, but not out of disgust for theology – the last few years in America were wonderful and full of beautiful fruits – but to put my talent at the service of the people to which I belong. There was an element of sacrifice in that, for I loved working at the Institute. It was such a stimulating place. However, I decided to go back and keep teaching theology – which is what I seem to be good at – in a perhaps humbler place, the seminary of our fraternity, out of the desire for my talent at the service of our seminarians, out of the desire to help them get to know and see the beauty of Christ as best as I can.

That is it. Thank you. Thank you very much.