

THE CARESS OF THE MERCY

The Address of the **HOLY FATHER FRANCIS**
to the Movement of Communion and Liberation
Saint Peter's Square, March 7, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good afternoon!

I would like to welcome you all and thank you for your warm affection! My cordial greetings go out to the Cardinals and Bishops. I would like to greet Fr. Julián Carrón, President of your Fraternity, and also to thank him for the words he wrote me in your name: and I also thank you, Fr. Julián, for that beautiful letter you wrote to everyone, inviting them to come. Thank you very much!

My first thoughts go to your founder, Monsignor Luigi Giussani, on the tenth anniversary of his birth into heaven. I am grateful to Fr. Giussani for a variety of reasons. The first, a more personal one, is the good that this man did for me and my priestly life through the reading of his books and articles. The other reason is that his thought is profoundly human and reaches all the way to the innermost depths of the human heart's yearning. You know how important the experience of the encounter was for Fr. Giussani: the encounter not with an idea, but with a Person, with Jesus Christ. Thus he educated to freedom, guiding to the encounter with Christ, because Christ gives us true freedom. In speaking about the encounter, I'm reminded of "The Calling of Matthew," the Caravaggio painting in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi, in front of which I would stop at length every time I came to Rome. None of the men there, including Matthew, greedy for money, could believe the message of that finger pointing at him, the message of those eyes looking at him with →

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→ mercy and choosing him to be His follower. He felt that wonder of the encounter. This is the encounter with Christ who comes and invites us.

Everything in our life, today as in the time of Jesus, starts with an encounter. An encounter with this Man, the carpenter of Nazareth, a man like everyone else and at the same time different. Think of the Gospel of John, where it tells of the disciples' first encounter with Jesus (cf. 1:35-42). Andrew, John, and Simon felt themselves looked upon to their depths, known intimately, and this generated in them a surprise, a wonder that immediately bound them to Him. Or when, after the Resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" (*Jn.* 21:15), and Peter responded, "Yes." That *yes* was not the product of an effort of will, did not come only from the decision of the man Simon: it came even before, from Grace. It was that "*primerear*," that Grace that precedes. This was the crucial discovery for Saint Paul, for Saint Augustine, and many other saints: Jesus Christ is always first. He "*primerea*" us; He awaits us; Jesus Christ always precedes us, and when we arrive, He is already there waiting. He is like the flower of the almond tree, the one that flowers first, and announces springtime.

You cannot understand this dynamic of the encounter that arouses wonder and adhesion without mercy. Only those who have been caressed by the tenderness of mercy truly know the Lord. The special place of the encounter is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ on my sin. And for this reason you have sometimes heard me say that the privileged place of the encounter with Jesus Christ is my sin. This embrace of mercy is what gives me the desire to respond and to change, and can pour forth a changed life. Christian morality is not the titanic, voluntaristic effort of those who decide to be coherent and who succeed, as a sort of solitary challenge in front of the world. No. This is not Christian morality; it is something else. Christian morality is the response, the moved response to the surprising, unexpected mercy—even "unjust" according to human criteria—of One who knows me, knows my betrayals and loves me anyway, esteems me, embraces me, calls me again, hopes in me, expects of me. Christian morality does not mean never falling, but always rising, thanks to His hand that pulls us up. And the road of the Church is also this: allowing the great mercy of God to be manifested. I said recently to the new Cardinals: "The way of the Church is not to

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condemn anyone for eternity; [but rather] to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart. The way of the Church is precisely to leave her four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those essentially on the 'outskirts' of life. It is to adopt fully God's own approach," which is that of mercy (*Homily*, February 15, 2015). The Church, too, should feel the joyous impulse to become the almond flower, that is, springtime like Jesus, for all of humanity.

Today you are also commemorating the sixty years from the beginning of your Movement, "born in the Church not by the will of an organized hierarchy—said Benedict XVI—but originating from a renewed encounter with Christ and thus, we can say, by an impulse derived ultimately from the Holy Spirit" (*Address to the Members of Communion and Liberation*, March 24, 2007: *Insegnamenti* III, 1 [2007], 557).

After sixty years, the original charism has not lost its freshness and vitality. However, remember that the center is not the charism. There is only one center: Jesus, Jesus Christ! When I put in the center my spiritual method, my spiritual journey, my way of actuating it, I go off the road. All spiritualities, all charisms in the Church must be "decentered": at the center there is only the Lord! For this reason, when Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians speaks of the charisms, of this beautiful reality of the Church, of the Mystical Body, he closes by speaking of love, that is, of what comes from God, what is proper to God and enables us to imitate Him. Never forget this, to be decentered!

And then, the charism can never be preserved in a bottle of distilled water! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean "fossilizing" it. The devil is the one who "fossilizes," don't forget that! Faithfulness to the charism does not mean writing it on parchment paper and framing it. The reference to the inheritance that Fr. Giussani left you cannot be reduced to a museum of memories, of decisions that have been already made, of rules of conduct. It certainly means faithfulness to tradition, but faithfulness to tradition—Mahler said—"means keeping the flame alive, not worshipping the ashes." Fr. Giussani would never forgive you if you lost your freedom and transformed yourselves into museum guides or worshippers of ashes. Keep alive the flame of the memory of that first encounter, and be free! →

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→ **Thus, centered in Christ and in the Gospel, you can be the arms, hands, feet, mind and heart of an “outward oriented” Church.** The way of the Church is to go out, to look for those far away on the outskirts, to serve Jesus in all those who are marginalized, abandoned, without faith, disappointed by the Church, prisoners of their own egotism.

“Going out” also means rejecting self-referentiality in all its forms; it means knowing how to listen to those who are not like us, learning from everyone, with sincere humility. When we are slaves to self-referentiality, we end up cultivating a “spirituality of labels”: “I am CL.” This is a label. And then we fall into the thousand traps that self-referential complacency offers us, the way of looking at ourselves in the mirror that leads us to become disoriented and transforms us into mere managers of an NGO.

Dear friends, I would like to conclude with two very significant quotes by Fr. Giussani, one from the beginning and one from the end of his life.

The first: “Christianity never realizes itself in history as fixed positions to be defended, that relate to the new in terms of pure antithesis; Christianity is the principle of redemption that takes on the new, saving it” (*Porta la speranza. Primi scritti* [Bring Hope: Early Writings], Genova 1997, 119). This would have been around 1967.

The second is from 2004: “Not only did I have no intention of ‘founding’ anything, but I believe that the genius of the Movement that I saw coming to birth lies in having felt the urgency to proclaim the need to return to the elementary aspects of Christianity, that is to say, the passion of the Christian fact as such in its original elements, and nothing more” (*Letter to John Paul II, on the 50th anniversary of the birth of Communion and Liberation, January 26, 2004*).

May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady protect you. And please, don't forget to pray for me! Thank you.

(Translation by Communion and Liberation)

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