

Chapter 8. The Divine in the Church (part III)

Week of	Text for School of Community
04/23	Why the Church? pp. 195-197 <i>d) The Answer to an Objection</i> <i>“Christ who begs for the heart of man and the heart of man that begs for Christ”</i>
04/30	Why the Church? pp. 197-200 <i>e) The sacrament as Prayer</i> <i>“Certainty of the future comes to us from Christ”</i>
05/07	Why the Church? pp.163-200 <i>Concluding reflection on the work done since December</i>
05/14	Introduction to the work on the Fraternity Spiritual Exercises

Introduction to Part III

“Life becomes useful when it becomes obedience. Ultimately, it is an openness to the presence of Christ; a yielding to the greatness that Another wants to achieve in you and for you, for the world, in a way that is perhaps different from how you would have it. We live so that Christ may be acknowledged everywhere. We live for the human glory of Christ. How can we help each other to live the awareness of dependence?”

A few thoughts. When you have the opportunity to read the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, you will see that in it Pope Francis identifies two old heresies that are particularly interesting in our modern time: Gnosticism and Pelagianism. Gnosticism deals with man’s attempt to explain what is mysterious (if I understand how I work and how the world works, I’m set). Pelagianism deals with man being able to reach perfection without grace (you work hard at it and you’ll get through). Both of them are considered heresies for a simple reason: as Chesterton says, heresy is truth gone mad, a point of truth that is exaggerated. Faith provides greater understanding and a different way of living and, if it goes mad, it is because it lacks reliance on grace, meaning you don’t need Jesus to be like God. This falls in the same category as original sin; we all desire to be somehow perfect and good, but we think we don’t need a relationship with God. To be like God without God. Adam and Eve left, driven by the thought they didn’t need Him. The Christian experience is reduced to intellectualism and moralism--which are two words that define these two heresies. But I think tonight, after the things that we heard, it’s most interesting to be mindful that both reductions hide within a lack of reliance on grace.

If we think about the question that we kept in the back of our mind as we worked on School of Community in the past months, we will say, as Angelo said tonight, *“We live so that Christ may be acknowledged everywhere, we live for the human glory of Christ.”* But this is only possible in obedience, as Prosperi says in the Beginning Day. So, *how do we help each other become more aware of our dependence?*

After reading this chapter of School of Community, I think it would be interesting for us to consider the connection between dependence and relying on grace. When we use the word “grace,” we are speaking of having to rely on another completely, including the whims of the other, the images of the other, and the projects of the other. It’s not like the obedience of the soldier who is told where to go, but like the reliance on the Mystery who thinks differently and in ways that cannot be understood.

However, we don’t rely on grace; we think we do. At times, we will get on our knees and pray for help to get our projects done, but we don’t rely fully on grace. We ask God for help to do our will, not His. Through these weeks of School of Community, we begin to have a taste of that grace which necessitates us to entrust everything on another.

Doni used a rather illuminating expression: the one who relies on grace is aware of being “an empty bag.” I rely on You for everything. In the morning, I get up longing for You. Every step of my life relies on You, needs You, long for You (Psalm 63). An empty bag that longs for another helps us to understand that dependence, as we said before, has this ontological dimension: I cannot be myself without You, I cannot breathe without You, I don’t find direction without You, I don’t know who I am without You.

Simply hearing these words, begins to help us understand that to depend is to be loved, “*subject to a divine relationship,*” as Paolo said while quoting School of Community. This is what it means to be

personal: “subject to a divine relationship.” In fact, the word personal comes from our understanding of God as Trinity, as three persons. The concept of “personal” doesn’t exist in Buddhism or in the Muslim faith, for that matter. Personal means subject to relationship. I cannot be myself without You. And subject to divine relationship means loved. That is, dependent, willing, open to what God does in me, what He has promised for me. Therefore, at the root of the Christian action we find two movements: begging and gratitude. We beg for His grace. We are grateful for what we receive. Everything is given. Everything is *gratis*, given for free, given. This is the description of grace.

We then notice two things. First, the opposite of given, of being subject to divine relationship, and of a relationship of love, is a relationship of power, a transactional relationship at best. “I do this if you do that. I am with you if you help me.” The more we stop relying on grace for our perception of self—You make me—the more we become isolated, as Henry mentioned, individualistic and, as Paolo was saying, “limited to a perspective of an isolated ‘I,’” as if the meaning of my person began and ended with me. Therefore, we become moralistic and intellectualistic, Pelagian and Gnostic, only interested in what we can produce, in what we can do, interested in our ego, in ourselves.

Being individualistic means perceiving oneself isolated from relationships. Loosely quoting Dostoyevsky, Paolo said that “the only way to be saved is to be guilty of all of the sins of the world.” There is great truth in this because, as Henry was saying, “in the experience of the awareness of my sinfulness, I find my lack.” I lack and I am powerless. Most of the time, in front of our sin, we experience shame and we hide—this is as old as Genesis 3—not realizing that Christ can only exercise grace if that sin is offered. A doctor can only heal the wound that is revealed. The shame we perceive in ourselves because of our lack, our sinfulness, is an expression of our individualistic mentality, for by grace, everything is saved. One thing is asked of us and it is to offer our sins. Think about this experience—one that I am pretty sure all of us would not be willing to engage in lightly: going in front of the One who gave you life, offering as a gift your nothingness; not gold or myrrh, not your good actions, but the nothingness that you are, an empty bag, so that you may, in your misery, bring salvation to the world. Here I bring up that beautiful quote by Fr. Giussani that Henry read to us, “we become spectacles to ourselves” because something happens in us that is not human, the divine piece in the life of the Church.

Our freedom plays a very significant role in the salvation of the world—our freedom means our “yes,” our willingness to open the door and offer an empty bag. Human freedom is the only thing that can stop God’s grace from acting. Nothing can oppose grace but human freedom; the simplicity of a “yes.” This, as Tim said when reflecting on his experience, is what is at stake in our lives.

The road towards the Mystery splits in two directions. We can try to perfect ourselves, being as close as possible to God, being as perfect as possible, trying to be virtuous, trying to live a dignified life, working hard at it, and it would be a dignified life; the apex of humanity, the best that humanity could offer on a good day. This is the direction in which we most of the time move, trying to find the greatest joy that humanity can offer, doing good things, beautiful things. The second option is that of grace. Bring your empty life. Because many days you get up tired, depressed, alone, misunderstood. You can feel a hundred million ways and you can choose to ignore them and resolve them, or you can choose to offer them so that the grace of God may shine brightly through you, not because of the great humanity you have, but because of your willingness to say “yes” to the grace of God to fill your life.

The sacrament is a continuous introduction into this divine relationship and, as the last paragraph of *Romaria* says, it doesn't matter whether you arrive there with your head full of thoughts, with your tiredness, with your happiness, with your joy, with your sorrow. Only one thing is asked of you: to say, "Here I am, Lord."

This introduces the second part of the question that Annie brought up: it's impossible for me to be open to grace alone. To become aware of my person, my being, means to become aware that I need another to give me to myself, to give life to myself. If there is one thing that I hope—and this last School of Community was helpful for me in this respect—is to realize that to depend is not to give a piece of yourself to God but to allow yourself to be taken. To allow the action, the dynamic, to come from Another. It's not what you bring, but whether you are willing to receive.

I participated in a presentation on *Disarming Beauty* at Boston College last week and I was very moved by Professor Fred Lawrence, a Lonergan scholar and a sweet old man. The theologian had read the whole book and was moved and intrigued by it. There were two things he highlighted very much. He said, "You know, a person's life is all about gaining autonomy, that is, gaining the capacity of being aware of who you are and say it." To become aware of my origin, to decide for my origin. A little kid is not autonomous, he needs to be with mom and dad to be continuously reminded of who he is. "But we don't develop this capacity to say yes in isolation. We need to be introduced within the life of a community," he said. We need to encounter someone that accompanies us and, he continued, "that mediates the liberation for you to become authentic;" the liberation that Tim was speaking about. The community mediates this liberation for you to become your authentic self.

The most recent expression of community that I've seen was this morning. I attended the funeral of a 21-year-old kid whose parents are friends of ours. The church was filled with a thousand people of faith and it became very clear to me that burying your son can only be done within the experience of a community that understands itself as part of the history of salvation. That is, as the father was saying in his eulogy, "it doesn't end here, it didn't begin when he was born, it doesn't end here." The community can become individualistic in itself inasmuch as it extricates itself from the divine relationship, from the history of salvation. We don't build the community, we recognize one another as chosen, as loved, as people who are preferred by God.

At times the community can become isolated within itself, we can become isolated within our friendships. And this way, the community quickly becomes a limited perspective outside of the divine relationship. In that sense, as Annie mentioned, the community disappoints because its members don't think themselves part of the history of salvation, the particular history of salvation which has reached you and I in a particular place. You can't bury your son with a glimpse of hope unless you have experienced being preferred by God in a particular place.

In the same way that when we think of ourselves we think of what we can offer, we tend to think of the community similarly. It's not about what you can offer to it, but what is given to you through it. It's not your gifts, but your lack, your thirst to receive, that allow the door to be open for grace to enter. This is the origin of our interest in everything and everyone, not as an expression of good will, as we were talking about before, but as the realization that the world was created to become the Church. And therefore, that the Church exists with its only purpose being to embrace the world

through grace--not through power or transaction, not through the genius, creativity, or intelligence of man, but through grace.

Saint Paul's letters are a continuous reminder of this authentic human position. When I am weak you are strong (2 Corinthians) and all I have to offer is my empty vessels, a treasure in *jars of clay* (2 Corinthians 4). The experience of being made by Another now coincides with the fulfillment of self, the authentic self. This is the conversion that the School of Community has been inviting us to in the last five months and what the Church invites us to during Lent. The conversion is better described by that beautiful moment when Jesus corrects Peter: get behind me, because what you are saying is of man and not of God (Matthew 16). The conversion implies turning away from my interpretation, my project, my idea of how things should be, and what I think I can offer to my community, to the people I live with, and my friends. No! Leave space for Another to act on you, say "yes." This is the simplicity of this continuous reminder that Giussani has educated us to: your "yes" is what I want, your willingness to at least open the door for God to act on you. Otherwise we are never that spectacle, that beauty that fascinated us, that brought us here in the first place. We are not here because we happen to be intelligent, smart people or really moral people. We are here because of a glimpse of the divine. In the letter Angelo read, Jennifer wrote, "There is something here profoundly familiar, yet not human, of a different origin."

In the next couple weeks, we will conclude our work on this chapter. As we continue, we will begin on page 195 with the subsection, "The Answer to an Objection," where Fr. Giussani writes, "In discussing freedom and a condition of grace..." Freedom and grace are the most important aspects of the game we desire to play: your "yes" and the grace of God. As you read through these two sections, I want you to keep that in mind. It's so simple yet so easy to move away. You don't make your life authentic, but it's Another. It's not you, your creativity, or your intelligence that will bring forth the happiness you desire. It's Another that gives it to you. It's the sacrament that acts on you. You offer. You beg for it. And, when you discover this sense of self in you, you are grateful for it.

After you finish the work of School of Community in the last two sections of the chapter, I invite you to have a third School of Community on the whole chapter with the purpose of drawing personal conclusions on the work done. I encourage you to do this in your own Schools of Community with the people you have toiled with during these months. I invite you to answer the question that has driven our work in the past few months personally: *What is your personal understanding of dependence? What helped you? How do we accompany each other to become aware that it is only in obeying that we find fulfillment? What have you seen? What clarity do you have of that first question that we read at the very beginning?*

In the middle of May, we will begin working on the Fraternity Exercises before many of us have attended the Fraternity Exercises.

Crossroads video on "Life Stories in the Aftermath of a Massacre"

The [video](#) of the Crossroads event "Life Stories in the Aftermath of a Massacre" that Angelo was referring to is online and it is worth watching. If you have time, watch it with friends, but I really encourage you to watch it. It's an illuminating witness. Christian life is just different, and it fills me with gratitude to actually see these things.

Giussani Series

The second thing is the presentation from the Giussani Series on May 1. One of my confreres will be speaking, Fr. Paolo Prosperi. In his college years he had a very personal relationship with Giussani. Michael Hanby will also be speaking, and he is also a dear friend. I am very much looking forward to this one. I think it's a very beautiful and simple way to also invite friends. It's a very simple offering in that sense. There is very little we can offer to friends and giving this is one way of allowing them to taste the particular history that has touched us. We will [stream](#) this online as we have done a couple of times in the past if people want to watch this. For us in New York, if you want to go, that would be great.

Spring Book: The Life of Luigi Giussani

Finally, for the spring season our book is going to be *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, but not the whole book. I propose we read four chapters: **7,8,9,12**. I have chosen four chapters from here until the end of July and another four for August through October. These four chapters are about the way in which Fr. Giussani educated. They focus on two particular things I think are important to us: the heart and experience. Chapter **7** is the beginning, walking into the public school for the first time, chapter **8** has to do with *The Religious Sense* and the origin of much of the things that we talk about, chapter **9** deals much more with experience, and chapter **12** is a little bit difficult but some of you who are theological buffs are going to enjoy it because it has a lot to do with the Vatican Council. It is particularly important to us because it helps us understand the originality of the life of Giussani within the stories of the people that lived it.

We will propose four more chapters for the second part of the summer. I also encourage you, if you choose to share the reading with your Schools of Community, to have a moment to discuss them. Maybe one, maybe two, you can decide on your own. You can invite friends to talk about it, you can maybe choose a chapter and share it with other people. Since it is on education, many of you who have children will be interested, but education doesn't end when you are done with college. Education is the whole of life. The moment we stop thinking we need to be educated in this authentic life, we are dead, we are done, we become isolated. Our history is part of this education. So, it also becomes a great opportunity to engage other people with these things, whether you have children or not.

8. The Divine in the Church pp. 195-197

THE SELF- COMMUNICATION OF A DIVINE REALITY

d) The Answer to an Objection

In discussing freedom as a condition of grace, I always expect some objection to be raised: if there is so much insistence on freedom as the necessary factor for the mystery of Christ to act, why is baptism imparted to children when they are still too young to consent freely to the profound renewal of life that comes about through this sacrament? The answer to this problem highlights not only one of the most fascinating experiences in Christian anthropology, but also concerns the Christian vision of history.

The Church conceives of a person's freedom as something deeply inscribed within a context of community, in a body. If there were not even a minimum context of a community that could educate, freedom could not act. [...] It is precisely this communal dimension which allows for the development of his capacity for freedom. [...] Communionality is essential for a person's development, for his education.



8. The Divine in the Church pp. 197-200

THE SELF- COMMUNICATION OF A DIVINE REALITY

e) *The Sacrament as Prayer*

Contrary to what many people think, the sacrament is the simplest form of prayer, the form to which everyone can relate. [...] The sacrament does not demand the ability to reflect, to find the right words, to have emotions adequate to the occasion. [...] What matters is our presence before Christ, our conscious presence, which is an act of asking, just like that young farm worker who stood there, tongue-tied, before his boss. [...] Man's presence at the sacramental act, lived as a prayer, as asking, consecrates his being chosen to be a presence in the history of the world. [...] It is the participation of a man's life history in God's plan, an individual history within the history of the world, which, in Christ, has already reached its fulfillment.

We are reminded of Paul's words also often quoted: " Whatever you eat, then, or drink, and whatever else you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10: 31). This is the mark of the Christian conscience - the glory of God in all things, Christ ever- present to man in all things and man ever- present to Christ. It is the type of consciousness no religious experience has ever offered or could ever claim, that touches the very consistency, not of an act or a moment, but of every act and every moment, and as such should invest every action of every day. This is the implication of the sacrament.

“Certainty of the future comes to us from Christ”

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 1141-1142

It was uncertain whether Giussani would be able to participate in the 16 October 2004 pilgrimage to Loreto celebrating CL's fiftieth anniversary up until the very last minute. In the end he was forced to give up the trip, as it was too much for his frail physical condition. Instead he decided to write what would be his last letter to the fraternity. "Our Lady, you are the certainty of our hope!" he began, explaining, "This is the most important phrase in the whole history of the Church; the whole of Christianity is expressed in it." Without the Blessed Virgin, he said, "we would be unable to be sure of the future, because the certainty of the future comes to us from Christ: the Mystery of God who becomes man. This could never have happened, it would even have been impossible to retell it, if we had not had Our Lady. [. . .] In Mary's womb the final history of mankind began. It is a miracle: the beginning of the end of the world." Christ's death and resurrection, he said, were "the announcement of that final message in which the meaning of every instant of time and space flows as the memory of the Eternal." Therefore, "prayer to Christ is more and more identified with prayer to Our Lady." The letter ended with an invitation to pray the rosary every day as a gesture of contemplation of the Mystery and the Trinity." Giussani had a little card made for the pilgrimage with an image of Caravaggio's painting the "Pilgrims' Madonna" and an inscription taken from the first sentence of his letter. On the card it appeared written in his own handwriting: "Our Lady, you are the certainty of our hope!" Giussani was also unable to attend the twenty-first Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, of which he was a consultant, on the topic "Rediscovering the True Face of the Parish," which took place in Rome from 24 to 28 November 2004. He sent written remarks, which were read aloud by Giorgio Feliciani, vice president of the CL Fraternity. He began by stating that "the greatest obstacle to the acknowledgment of Christ is, first and foremost, the non-acknowledgment of one's own human need, of the question that our humanity itself is." He then anticipated the question of how something that had taken place two thousand years ago could still be present today. "It is in the Church that Christ is present." What form did the relationship between the Church and an individual person take? To answer this question Giussani quoted John Paul II, who had said that the Church had its roots in sacramental grace, beginning with baptism, but that it found its "expressive form, its operative modality, its concrete historical incidence, through the various charisms that characterize a temperament and a personal history." Giussani observed that "if it were not to become concrete, adequate to my temperament and to my history, the Church would remain abstract." If a parish is alive, Giussani concluded, then "it is a movement, in the sense spoken of by John Paul II: "The Church herself is a movement." So a movement was "in no sense an alternative to the institution, but indicates the way in which the institution becomes alive and missionary, because the faith is not given us in order that we preserve it, but in order that we communicate it. If we don't have the passion to communicate it, we don't preserve it."

“Christ who begs for the heart of man and the heart of man that begs for Christ”

Life of Luigi Giussani, pp. 1014-1015

After a few introductory words by Cardinal James Francis Stafford, head of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Chiara Lubich, Kiko Argüello and Jean Vanier spoke. Giussani spoke last, standing at the microphone to read his talk and, perhaps due to the emotion, skipping some passages and adding others:

“Your Holiness, I will say— I will attempt to say— how an approach came about in me, which God would bless, as he wished, that I could neither foresee nor desire.

1. ‘What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?’ (Psalm 8). No other question in life has struck me more than this one. There has been only one man on earth who could answer it for me, and he did it by asking a new question: ‘What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself? Or what can one give in exchange for himself?’ (Matthew 16: 26, Mark 8: 36, Luke 9: 25). I have never felt implicated in this way by another question, leaving me breathless, like this question of Christ’s! Only Christ takes my entire humanity to heart. It is the wonder of Dionysius the Areopagite (in the fifth century): ‘Who will ever be able to speak to us of the love for man proper to Christ, overflowing with peace?’ I have repeated these words to myself for more than fifty years! The *Redemptor Hominis* entered our horizons like a blaze of light in the thick gloom enveloping man’s dark world of today, with all its confused questions. Thank you, Your Holiness. It was simplicity of heart that enabled me to feel and recognize Christ as exceptional. ‘Lord God, in the simplicity of my heart joyfully I have given you everything,’ one oration of the Ambrosian Liturgy says. That this recognition is true is demonstrated by the fact that life, lived this way, has an ultimate, steadfast capacity for joy.

2. How can this joy, which at times fills my heart and my voice, be discovered as true and reasonable for people today? Because that Man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Reality on which depends all the positivity of every person’s existence. Every earthly experience, lived in the Spirit of Jesus, flowers in Eternity. This flowering does not only bloom at the end of time; it had begun already at the sunset of the day of Easter. The Spirit of Jesus, of the Word made flesh, becomes tangible for ordinary people in the radical change it produces in whoever bumps into Him and, like John and Andrew, follows Him. For me, Jesus’ grace became the experience of a faith that in the Holy Church, that is, in the Christian people, revealed itself as a call to nourish a new Israel of God: ‘I have seen Your people, with intense joy, recognize existence as an offering to You,’ the prayer from the Liturgy continues. Thus I saw a people take shape, in the name of Christ. Everything in me became truly more religious, including the awareness reaching to discover that ‘God is all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15: 28). In this people joy became the crucial element of its history as ultimate positivity and, therefore, as happiness. What could appear to be, at most, a unique experience becomes a protagonist in history, and therefore a tool for the mission of the only People of God. Now this underlies the search for unity expressed among us.

3. The beautiful text of the Ambrosian Liturgy concludes with the words: ‘Lord God, save this disposition of their heart.’ Infidelity always rises up in our heart, even before the most beautiful and true things, in which, before the humanity of God and the original simplicity of man, man can be diminished by weakness or preconceptions, like Judas and Peter. Even our personal experience of the

infidelity that always rises up, revealing the imperfection of every human gesture, demands the constant memory of Christ. In response to the despairing cry of the shepherd Brand in Ibsen's play by the same name ("Answer me, o God, in the hour when death swallows me: is all man's will not enough, then, to obtain even one single piece of salvation?"), the humble positivity of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus replies: 'When I am charitable it is only Jesus who acts in me.' All this means that the freedom of man, which the Mystery always engages, has prayer as its supreme, most perfect expressive form. Thus freedom, according to its whole, true nature, posits itself as an entreaty to adhere to Being, and, therefore, to Christ. Even within our human incapacity, our great human weakness, affection for Christ is destined to endure. In this way Christ, the Mystery, appears in his ultimate relationship with creatures as mercy: *Dives in Misericordia*. The mystery of mercy underlies every human image of tranquility or despair; even the feeling of forgiveness is within this mystery of Christ. The Mystery as mercy remains the last word even over all the terrible possibilities in history. Because of this, existence expresses itself, as an ultimate ideal, in beggarliness. The true protagonist of history is the beggar: Christ who begs for the heart of man, and the heart of man that begs for Christ."