

**Notes from the Meeting of the Fraternity Group Leaders
in the Diocese of Milan
with Fr. Julián Carrón and Davide Prosperi (CL Responsible for the Diocese)
Milan, December 4, 2013**

Davide Prosperi: First of all, welcome. Thank you for coming here tonight in such large numbers; it is a clear sign of the utility of a moment like this one. Before proposing it, we asked ourselves if it would be useful or not, and I think that your presence is already a preliminary response.

In an interview in 1992, Fr. Giussani said, “Enrollment in the Fraternity is a personal act, wholly the initiative of the individual, not a choice made by a group. It is born as a personal need for one’s own faith and for the realization of one’s own Christian physiognomy. Its aim [...] is that of belonging to a company that helps in the journey to holiness; that is to say, in the knowledge of Christ, in the love of Christ for the good of men, for the Kingdom of God on earth” (“Per una fede matura” [“For a Mature Faith”], interview by Pigi Colognesi, *CL Litterae Communionis*, n. 19, February 1992, p. 26). That is, the Fraternity is the adult place where the experience of the Movement becomes mature: mature as consciousness, mature as awareness of its reasons, and mature as a possibility of fecundity, because it is where we discover that our own human fecundity, our capacity to generate, is tied—as Fr. Giussani always said—to the awareness of being generated. “No one generates, if he is not generated” (“La gioia, la letizia e l’audacia. Nessuno genera, se non è generato” [“Joy, Happiness, and Audacity: No One Generates, If He Is Not Generated”], *Litterae Communionis-Tracce*, n. 24, June 1997, p. IV). Therefore, for us, for those who have met the persuasiveness of the Christian experience in the encounter with the charisma, it is the place where the adult is generated. And the motive for this evening’s gathering is the need, which has grown over the years, for a point of verification and deepening of these things. There are two fundamental reasons that led us to call you together this evening:

1) On the one hand, the increasing request to discuss some questions that are concretely tied to the life of the Fraternity, the Fraternity groups, and the experience of belonging that each person has in his own life. This is the first time that we are trying this experiment.

2) The second motive is tied to the fact that enrollment numbers are growing every year; a growing number of people (many but not all of whom are young people) are asking to adhere to the Fraternity. And this is something big, a big sign, both as the continuity of an experience that perhaps started earlier—in college or elsewhere, when one met the Movement—and in the questions that it raises (as we are coming to realize), because the adherence represented by enrollment in the Fraternity (as a first fundamental gesture of decision for one’s own life) is not coinciding with clear signs of an awareness of what one is doing by enrolling, that is, adhering to the Fraternity. I say this because then, for months or even years, there is no trace of many of these people. For this reason, we feel the need to remind ourselves of the value, as awareness, of the gesture of enrolling, so that, starting from those of you whom we called here, this can then flow out to everyone. In this regard, at the end of the encounter we will indicate some operative consequences, because we have decided to modify the procedure for enrollment in the Fraternity.

This evening, we want to truly, concretely, answer the numerous questions and witnesses that continually come to us, and that arrived particularly for this occasion—because we were really flooded with letters, questions, and extraordinary witnesses of all kinds, from those who recently joined the Fraternity to the first people who started with Fr. Giussani and who recount the experience that they lived. I swear that for me, personally, reading all of this—I did read all of it, and we will try to respond to all of it in time—was already an impressive experience of realizing what this story is. In order to make this evening’s work more fruitful, so that each person will take home some clear ideas about the fundamental questions that have arisen in these years, we would like to proceed in this way: we have gathered some questions—a bit like what we do at the Exercises—that in

some way identify the most recurrent and most useful questions tied to the concrete life of the Fraternity groups, the work that is done, the value of the leader, the visitor, etc.

There is a whole series of questions about the small Fraternity group, and we chose to give more space to this, because it is what has the greatest *de facto* effect on daily life.

“Today, this question is very vivid: What is the meaning, the aim, and the real utility of the small Fraternity group? We have always been told that adherence to the Fraternity is the fruit of a maturity of faith, and therefore it cannot be equivalent to the Movement’s other educative proposals. Today we would like to get to the bottom of this, so that adherence, even if it is too hasty, occurring in the wake of the CLU experience, might daily become more laden with reasons.”

Fr. Julián Carrón: I think that the meaning, the aim, and the utility of the small Fraternity group should be judged and evaluated by starting precisely from the fundamental purpose of the Fraternity. In brief, it is what Davide just read: “Its aim [...] is that of belonging to a company that helps in the journey to holiness.” This is the aim for which it is worthwhile to gather in a small group: to help each other on this journey. How we stay in the group, what we do, what we decide to discuss, and what we share, should always be judged with regard to whether or not it helps us to reach this goal—otherwise, in time, especially in adult life, if it doesn’t help us to this goal, or if one doesn’t see the usefulness of the Fraternity group for his own life, then other interests and needs prevail, because it’s not as if an adult doesn’t have demands on his time—we have more than enough of them! So, if the Fraternity group is not something that truly helps us in this, then, at a certain moment, one lets it go, in the sense that he lets other things prevail on the time or energy given to that moment and its preparation. Therefore, each one of us, each member of the Fraternity group, must clearly understand this: the small group does not exist for something abstract, and so we don’t know what to say, but it is made up of people who help each other reciprocally. And how do we help each other? We help each other if, when we get together, each person shares all of the tension toward living the aim, which is the journey to holiness. I was amazed to see how Giussani got the idea for the Fraternity, as Savorana tells us in *Vita di don Giussani [Life of Father Giussani]*—how it started, which reflections gave birth to it: “They are grown [they are not children], they are mature, they are adults, they have [their] responsibility for workshops and factories, they have responsibility for work initiatives, they have responsibility for offices, and, above all, they have responsibility for the family, which is the most important business for nature, [and, one asks,] shouldn’t they have responsibility, shouldn’t they feel mature responsibility for their holiness?” (p. 591). It’s not that we have to appeal to someone in the group or outside of it, because the first responsibility is that everyone—at a certain age, with a certain maturity—become aware of what Fr. Giussani says. Can we have responsibility in civic life, and not take on the responsibility of our holiness, saying, “With all of the things that we already have to do, we cannot add more”? It is impossible to avoid taking on the responsibility of this road as well, because it is part of our maturity. In the measure in which this responsibility grows and each person takes it into consideration, the small group becomes an objective fact: the people who are with you (it’s not that we need angels to come) determine the way that each person faces this responsibility. And in this sense, each of us helps the other to live the moment in which we get together with seriousness, in such a way that we always have a greater desire to return, because the meeting of the small group becomes decisive for life. If it does not become decisive, then we will look for another companionship—and not out of malice, but simply because other needs prevail. And since, at a certain age, we have needs in abundance, either one has an adequate reason to participate in a small Fraternity group, or he lets it go.

Proserpi: *“At the present moment on the Movement’s path, marked by emphasis on the personalization of experience, how do you view the nexus between adherence to the Movement and enrollment in the Fraternity; that is, what is the relationship between Fraternity group, School of Community group, and surrounding community?”*

Carrón: I think that (as it was recently said at the Exercises for priests) the measure in which the personalization of experience grows has a repercussion on the way in which one lives the Fraternity, the small Fraternity group. If we are always becoming more ourselves, if we take more to heart the experience that we have, then this allows the small Fraternity group to realize all of the potential that it has. The nexus between the life of the Movement and the Fraternity lies precisely here: it is all in the attempt that we are making, in following what Fr. Giussani told us and what the Pope repeats, because we can live faith today only if we constantly respond to the invitation from Christ to a personalization of our response to the grace received. And this is the only possibility to be able to witness to it practically in life. The Pope focuses on this from the first lines of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, because the point of origin of the whole question, of all the rest, lies precisely there. So the whole proposal that we make at the Exercises, the whole effort of School of Community, is really to help each other to constantly pursue this personalization, because (as we repeated at the Exercises) if this personalization does not occur, then we see the bewilderment of the adult when faced with life's problems.

What is the relationship between the School of Community and the Fraternity group? The School of Community, together with the content of the Exercises, is the proposal offered to each of us for verification, in which we are constantly recalled to, helped with, and relaunched on this verification in experience, accompanied as we are by common gestures. And what does this have to do with the small Fraternity group? I have repeated it on various occasions: the School of Community essentially gives us—in following Fr. Giussani—the content of the proposal (I don't have anything else to propose to you other than what we find in Giussani); that is why we use the texts or the books, in order to offer the proposal that Fr. Giussani made to us, and there we have all of the content, like we also did at the Beginning Day. And what is the value of the small group? This image came to me—I discovered it years ago, teaching in the Theology department in Madrid: I used to look at my students, to whom I had proposed certain content, and I knew that they had acknowledged it, they had accepted it, because I had given exams and I had seen that the content had been received and expounded well—but this wasn't enough if it did not then enter into the fabric of life. And I could see that it didn't enter because, after two or three years, they declined. I see it constantly even now: if I ask, point by point, for certain passages from the School of Community, I am sure that the vast majority of you can repeat them to me from A to Z; but when we live, the criteria with which we live are different. That is to say, it's not enough to know certain things in order for them to be present in life. Many times, during School of Community, one doesn't even ask questions, because he's not even aware! So, what is the small Fraternity group? Why is the Fraternity group useful? Precisely because the small group is for sharing life; it is a relationship of friendship, an interweaving of relationships where we all know each other, we know how each person lives, how he approaches life, work, family, free time, money, etc., and so we can truly accompany each other in overcoming the difficulty or the dualism with which we often live. And why is this different from the School of Community? Because someone may have a question, and ask it at School of Community (as we see many times), but yet he does not realize what it is about. Or else, one is not even able to ask, because certain habits among us are such that we don't even realize what the School of Community is proposing. It happens with older people and with younger people; asking them a question is enough to make people understand that they have not even taken the School of Community into consideration. I've seen it recently in the CLU or in the verification group [those discerning a vocation to virginity] or in the *Memores Domini*: faced with a certain situation, a question is enough to make people understand. Why? Because as soon as the School of Community interferes with what one lives, this comes to light. But we don't need any sort of genius in order to bring about a real relationship of friendship among us. One person—with simplicity, living, taking the proposal that is made at the School of Community seriously—is enough to make us all aware: “Do you realize that you haven't even taken the proposal of the School of Community into consideration?” “Do you realize that, in facing this situation or in living that circumstance,

what is written in the School of Community didn't even cross your mind?" Look at what sort of friendship, what sort of help we can give to each other, if we simply make a suggestion, ask a question, offer a phrase that helps the other to become aware and to let the light—that we have learned in the School of Community—to enter within the normal fabric of life. And this cannot happen in an in-depth and personal way with those who speak at School of Community (even if, as much as possible, we try there, too—as you see during the video link), as it instead happens during a dinner or when meeting for coffee, because that is where the other tells you how he lives, what happened to him. It is there that you see if he is sad or angry—in the fabric of life, where no one can hide, in the relationship of friendship, where one is himself, where he cannot hide, because it's as if he's at home in his slippers, without defenses. It is precisely there that each person can be most helped to live. If this interweaving of friendship, of relationships, does not get to this point in the small Fraternity group, then we make the group into another School of Community, but reduced to a series of discourses, and thus we always talk about something else, but not about ourselves. And this is why sometimes people say that the Fraternity group seems like a duplicate School of Community. No, it's not a duplicate if one understands what the purpose of the one and the purpose of the other are. It's not a duplicate. And when we understand what their purposes are, then we try to help each other. All that is needed is for someone to introduce another fact, another criterion, another gaze.

Prosperi: Permit me to emphasize what you are saying here, because I realize that one of the ways in which we withdraw in front of the totality for which we are made starts precisely from the way in which we look, live, and feel the instruments that our story has brought into focus. In the end, our tendency to choose things—thinking that one is worthwhile and another is not—is the way in which we substitute all that is given to us with what seems best to us, without understanding that the depth of the experience of the Movement derives precisely from the fact that everything that is proposed to us is for the construction of our person, and its value lies in this.

Carrón: I realize many times—for example, when I am at lunch or at breakfast with some people from my house—that, in talking about this or that, I say something as a simple reaction to what someone else says to me, and I see what effect it has—that is, what help it gives, how it introduces a light; I become aware of the reaction that it provokes in the others, and I want to say: this is what we need. Because many times, when one recounts something that happened to him, or how he lived a certain circumstance, he is not even aware—it's not that he does it badly, but it is that (as Fr. Giussani says) we are so determined by the common mentality that we don't even realize to what extent we live according to many of the common criteria. If one has the charity, first of all, to be aware, to pay attention to what the other says, and therefore to tell him something (without beating him up, because we already beat ourselves up enough as it is), if one is aware and gives me a suggestion for the path, then I understand how he is accompanying me, what help he is giving me. And it's not that we do School of Community in my house at breakfast, it's simply that, by starting from the journey that each person is making, he can offer a suggestion, an experience, to the other—something that happened to him, something that struck him, something that he said, a passage from the psalm that we just said at Morning Prayer, something that helps on the journey of his own life.

Prosperi: The next question details quite well an issue that has often emerged.
“Deciding to get together after the summer was a struggle. During the vacation together, each person very freely did what he wanted and felt to be most right for him...”

Carrón: Do you see? It's difficult to get together after the summer. Why? If one simply stops and asks himself, “Why?” then he must respond, “Because other things prevail!”

Prosperi: *“Nevertheless, the need emerged among us to better understand what it means to be in the Fraternity and to support each other concretely in the journey of faith. If what truly matters, because it regenerates our ‘I,’ is to recognize for ourselves the grace that the good Lord unexpectedly grants to one of us, or to someone around us (as it happens in the common moments of School of Community, as well), then why was Fr. Giussani so meticulous in detailing a specific form for living the small Fraternity groups? Why does he talk about the ‘contents of the commitment’ and the ‘expressed communion,’ to the point of indicating ‘a responsible leader, a rule of prayer, a shared moment of encounter at periodic intervals, and a precise operative commitment which serves the common purpose’? And how can we help each other to follow this form and to mature within a method, without transforming it into formalism or moralism?”*

Carrón: Fr. Giussani was so meticulous because he was an educator. He gave us some precise suggestions—minimal, but precise—because the rule, though minimal, is something that saves us from ourselves. If this precision, this meticulousness, were not there, then we would be overwhelmed by our criteria, by our tastes, by our sentiments, by our moods, and we wouldn’t be helped, we wouldn’t be saved from ourselves because many times we think of the rule as a nuisance, as something that weighs us down, and not as something that saves us from ourselves, that is, from being a loose cannon. If we do not perceive it like this, then we defend ourselves from the rule, we free ourselves from the rule as much as before—it just takes an alibi, and we let it go. But if one doesn’t feel the need to stop for an instant, if he doesn’t feel the need for a moment of memory, if he doesn’t stop at a certain moment in the day (or at the end of the day) in order to have silence, if he isn’t helped with something precise, then what happens? Life, with all of its commitments, with all of its “stuff,” overwhelms us to the point that we end up at the mercy of all of the chaos. Then, if we don’t perceive a novelty in our way of living in this chaos, why are we surprised? We haven’t introduced even one different thought during the day. Do we think that everything comes about by magic? I don’t know how one can live without a rule for the need for something that constantly saves us from our impulsivity, our presumption, our distraction, our going to pieces. Therefore, without this we are victims of ourselves—all it takes is for someone to let himself go, and he will see how it all ends up eventually; at the beginning, as soon as the radiator is turned off, we don’t even notice—but then the cold arrives, and how! It is for this reason that I say that a change of mentality is necessary in order not to see the rule as a burden, but to start to perceive the salvation of the rule: thank goodness that someone saves me, thank goodness that someone reminds me why I am made, that someone tells me this at least for an instant... For this reason, Giussani wanted to do something that was within everyone’s reach—he didn’t establish an impossible measure, but a minimal one, though crucial, crucial! But this depends a great deal on the awareness that we have of our need. It is like when a person is sick: if he doesn’t have particular symptoms, then he can go without taking his medicine; but when he feels poorly, he doesn’t forget his medicine! And is this simply because of meticulousness, or is it because of a love for the life of each one of us?

Prosperi: *“The necessity has emerged of understanding how to adequately live the relationship between the individual and the group. There is a certain lack of reciprocal attention in daily life, or, in any case, the risk of living the Fraternity as a meeting place.”*

Carrón: This point, the relationship between the individual and the group, will always be an open question, because many times we affirm the one at the expense of the other, or we affirm the individual and we don’t care about the group, or we unload the responsibility of the individual onto the group. But no additional mechanism or rule that we can give ourselves will resolve this question. I remember a person in my Fraternity, years ago: he insisted that we had to give ourselves a more stringent rule in order to facilitate, to help each other, to support each other, etc.—as if this could resolve the matter by itself. I still remember saying to him, “Look, what else do you and I

need to live, besides everything that we are already sharing? What need do we have for a more stringent rule, in order to share everything that we are already living? Is there a more stringent rule than this? And even if there were, but we didn't want to share it, could someone force us into this?" As you tell me in other questions, if one does not share everything, or shares only certain moments, then this problem will not be resolved by any mechanism. Only if we—gradually, in the group, in staying together, through the modality of living it—create a climate of seriousness, will the other, each person, feel so at home that he can share everything, everything that he wants, according to a rhythm and a modality that we cannot decide with any type of management. So the question is how we live when we are together. It is elementary: if, when we are together, we make certain negative judgments and everyone hears them, then one says to himself, "The day in which I do what they are saying about that person, they will judge me like that, too!" And then who will want to talk? No one. It's not that, suddenly, no one talks anymore—they talk if they know that they can receive, not a "judgment" in the sense that I just used it, but an embrace; not connivance, but mercy, a capacity for affection that allows them to live. If, instead, it doesn't happen like this in the group, then rules will certainly not make you share what you don't want to share. Think of your children: when they discover that they are truly certain of your affection, of your love, then they are themselves. If, instead, they have to earn it, because you tear them to pieces when they make a mistake, then they are more guarded. It is for this reason that I say: in the relationships among us, there is no mechanism—everything depends on the fact that we continuously grow in creating a place where each person can truly be himself, and thus put himself out there even more in sharing what interests him. Otherwise, he will share it elsewhere, with another group; he will look for another place where he can truly express himself. And then that group will be his companionship, and not because we have to enter into the particular matters that are most intimate, but because the question is how we help each other in our way of staying together, in our way of talking about the normal things of life, about the others, etc., in order to create a place where everything can be lived together and is illuminated by the modality with which we relate to each other.

Proserpi: This question shows how the Fraternity group, which exists in order to help make the experience of the entire Fraternity more familiar and everyday, can become the main obstacle to it. *"I want to judge what, for me, has long since become the life of my Fraternity: essentially, a ghetto. Our meetings are a tired moment where everyone says something obligatorily nice with respect to his or her own experience; everything is beautiful. In reality, there are disastrous and difficult situations in our group: marriages in crisis, family and personal situations that are very serious, doubts about faith. But no one talks about these things—it's better to pretend that everything is going well, and at the most we talk about them in pairs over coffee. Not to mention the many contradictions that, unfortunately, have arisen in recent years in the life of the Movement: it seems like you have to say what side you are on, and worse doubts insinuate themselves with regard to our authorities and the ultimate authority. Instead, when one gets to be 50 years old, life is something with which one can no longer fool around."*

Even earlier!

Carrón: Each person must decide for himself, because this is the consequence of what we were saying before. The question is not to reprimand ourselves because we don't talk to each other, but to ask ourselves: Why don't we have the freedom to tell each other, to share, the things of life? We always think that it depends on the fact that we are not free, daring, (add your own adjective) enough. This is not the issue, this is a consequence. The problem is that, in order to talk to each other, there are necessary conditions; if one sees that the others will not take him seriously, that he will not be welcomed and embraced, then he doesn't open his mouth. And this kind of environment is the most complicated thing to generate. For this reason, through the seriousness and the truth with which we stay together, we are creating the conditions for one thing or for another—not when the moments of difficulty arrive, because this environment is constantly generated. We are constantly

generating one environment or another, with our comments, situations, and judgments. And then, when we get to a certain age, we can no longer fool around—and then what?

Prosperi: *“How do you judge a Fraternity group of people who live in different countries—in Europe, for example—and who manage to see each other in person twice a year at the most? How does one correctly interpret proximity?”*

Carrón: Is the question of proximity merely physical, or is it personal? Sometimes we can be very close by, physically, and not say anything to each other; on the contrary, we can be far away and seek each other’s company. Again, it’s not automatic that, for the fact of living close by, we share more, or for the fact of being far away, we don’t share anything. It depends on the need that each person has, because when one has a need, he will look for the other even at the ends of the earth. It is evident that physical proximity helps. But sometimes one is in a Fraternity group at the end of his CLU experience, and then life moves him here and there on account of his home, work, etc., and so those with whom he shares his life in practice are others, because the whole context has changed. But this is a *“de facto”* Fraternity group. If you go out for a walk every day with the children and you share your life with those people there, then, in the end, with whom are you playing the game of life? This is your Fraternity group. The issue is the *de facto* Fraternity with the people with whom we share life, with whom we compare it, to whom we ask questions. The problem of nearness, then, has to do with those with whom we play the game of life, because this is the decisive question. Then, if a physical proximity is possible, it will be easier, in a certain way, to give each other a hand, to help one another—but this physical nearness will depend on the objective conditions in which each person finds himself. However, the fundamental question seems to me to be the personal one: In what measure does each of us truly desire to seek out the other in order to share the needs that he has, the questions, the worries, or that which he discovers along the journey that he is making? And this does not depend on any distance, much less so now that we have a whole series of means of communication that facilitate this sharing: Skype, telephone, email—an endless quantity of instruments that allow us to feel together in many moments, even if we are on the other side of the world.

Prosperi: In fact, what comes to my mind, above all from the witnesses of those who are on the other side of the world, is that often it takes very little for someone who is further away geographically—it takes very little, an essentiality—to have everything needed in order to live his own condition, much more so than for us, who perhaps are together every day.

Carrón: When I travel around the world to visit the various communities, and I discover that they have already read the latest School of Community or the latest thing published in *Traces*, and I hear it quoted from memory, I say, “Are these people far away, or are they more in the center than those whom we have physically near us?” Because this is how it is now in the life of the Movement: in no other moment like this one have we had the possibility to make available contemporaneously, within everyone’s reach, the things that happen in any point of the Movement’s life. Now, the proximity is such that anyone can immediately access everything that happens. Then, it depends on the interests of each person, on how he works on the things that we have. It seems to me that nearness is within everyone’s reach, in order to be able to live what has been given to us to live.

Prosperi: Next there are two questions, which I will read together, about the modality of participation in the small Fraternity group.

“With what criterion does one invite a person to participate in this companionship, without it becoming a burden or a duty?”

“In recent years, ten people have joined our group. This phenomenon of requests to participate in the group has not stopped. At this point, I am asking for help: what is the criterion for accepting these continual requests, and continuing to maintain this group structure?”

Carrón: The first question is common sense, realism: it’s not that we can share life with 200 people at the same time—among other things, there would be the difficulty of finding a place to get together. A minimum of reason in things seems fundamental to me. Therefore, this already establishes an indication: Can we expand like this, without any criteria or restraint? It seems to me that this is already a criterion. But above all, let’s verify how—on the one hand—to have a missionary openness, without letting it, on the other hand, interfere with what a Fraternity group has to be—that is, a place in which each person has the necessary confidence to be able to talk about himself. If, at a certain moment, there are too many people, and one no longer knows how to move, then this is not right. Creating places where a person can find himself at ease is not immediate, as we well know. There are some things that we could even talk about in front of a stadium full of people, but there are others that necessitate that we be reasonable in asking. We have to see how we can grow in a reasonable way and, at the same time, how this does not hinder what we have gained in time, that is, a place where each person can talk about himself, can have the trust and the confidence to be able to talk about himself. Otherwise, it will be difficult for the group to achieve, to realize the aim for which it is made: a free gathering to help each other walk toward destiny and to be able to tell each other things (as we said before), because otherwise we will never talk about what we hold to be most personal or intimate.

Proserpi: Here is a question about changing Fraternity groups. I spoke about this once, two or three years ago, at the Fraternity Exercises.

“In the life of the small Fraternity group, every now and then, someone feels that he is struggling to live it; he does not find in it the response to the need for help on the journey to holiness. And when this discomfort is declared, an uncertainty emerges between the established freedom to change and to choose another place or group (which one, however, is not yet clear, otherwise the decision to change would be evident and simple), and the doubt that perhaps he is searching for the ‘right’ group. What are the criteria for self-evaluation, in order to accompany and help both the person who is living the discomfort and the whole group, which is nevertheless invested and feels interrogated with regard to its own life?”

Carrón: The first thing to say is that the small group is a form of realization of the larger Fraternity. What we all belong to is the Fraternity. It is not a dogma of faith that I have to remain in a certain Fraternity group for the rest of my life. Since the Fraternity is one, each person must verify what facilitates this belonging for him. Why should a person who, for x or y reason, as I said before—one changes residence, or struggles, or has found people who better facilitate his journey—not have the possibility to change? If I have a friend whom I see is helped by certain relationships, and if I take his destiny to heart, then I should encourage him to follow them. This does not cause him to lose his friendship with me, but rather it will be an increase in friendship, even if this means that he follows those who help him more now. The problem is the seriousness with which we do this: if one is searching for the “right” group, or if he entrusts himself to the first sentimental impact, rather than verifying if a path helps him more, then he remains like an adolescent. But if one perceives that certain relationships, which happen in life for x or y reason—as can happen to anyone—facilitate the aim of the Fraternity, then I don’t see why we have to remain in a certain small group simply for an apparent loyalty. The only loyalty is help toward holiness. This is the only matter that we have to defend, the only motive for which we are together, and the only motive for which it can be reasonable to change groups—not because I like a group or I don’t, or because it is more or less comfortable, or because I have more or less sympathy toward it. The only motive for which it is worth remaining in a group is if it helps me to live holiness; if I see that it helps me, and that it’s not

merely a fleeting or personality issue, but I simply see that it is a real help. Otherwise, the Mystery can make me change groups in order to introduce some newness into my life. Thus, it seems to me that we all have to be willing to follow. This does not eliminate any relationship, because if a person, in changing groups, lives more, then that would be a good for the others who remain in the group, as well. Sometimes I see that the small group can be like a trap, because it's as if one were to say, "If someone moves, it means that he's disloyal." Here the only disloyalty is to holiness. Let's knock it off! The only disloyalty is if we stop, if we are not truly willing to follow, because all of us, when we met the Movement, told ourselves that it helped our journey; I had friends for whom I could say that I had been disloyal to the previous friendship, but when I adhered to the Movement it was because it helped me more! Is this criterion true for everything else and not for adhering to the Movement? In the life of the Movement, too, the criterion that we have always heard ourselves given by Fr. Giussani is that God can give grace to one in order to move the others, to awaken the small group and all those who participate in it. And if the group has not moved for ages, do we perhaps have to remain there "loyally" to suffocate? Forget it! Here the only criterion is if the small Fraternity group helps me to walk toward holiness. Everything else, if it is less than this, is useless. For this reason, if you change groups for particular tastes of your own, then you will find yourself, after a while, in the same situation as before; and if you go to the "right" group, as if it were something mechanical, then the same thing will happen. The question is the motive for which we make choices, and not because "we have to" or so that it's "useful," but because it is the modality with which to respond to what the Mystery uses in order to call us to live, because it is given to us for this.

Prosperi: *"For those who are enrolled in the Fraternity, what is the value, the meaning, of the retreats—in which we return once more to the text of the Exercises, which was also used in the School of Community?"*

Carrón: Fr. Giussani clearly states the motive for the retreat: the Fraternity reminds us of the importance that the Church has always attributed to the liturgical seasons, because the Liturgy, with its rhythms, challenges us to get to the bottom of the Christian experience. Therefore, the Fraternity proposes two moments of retreat to us, during Advent and Lent, which, together with the Exercises, are the way in which the Fraternity accompanies each one of us with a communal gesture, but not so much the group as the person. It is in these retreats (as we have done for as long as I have belonged to the Movement) that we take up once more, as their content, the Fraternity Exercises. Why? Because it is evident that, in only one weekend of Exercises, it is difficult to be able to work in an exhaustive way, to familiarize ourselves with all of the content of the proposal. So we give ourselves more time to do it, and we go back to this content again during the Advent and Lenten retreats, actualizing it according to what happens in the subsequent months, in the life of the Movement and in social, cultural, and ecclesial life. Period. We don't have anything more to add to this, because the reason is clear. And I understand that, for anyone who is used to doing another type of retreat, another type of Exercises, with absolutely lower numbers, a concentration like the one that we have in a weekend in Rimini is something surprising. The reason that we do this annual gesture is precisely because we cannot have other gatherings of this caliber on the weekends, and in any case we give ourselves a proposal to work on all year, for the life of the Fraternity throughout the year. Thus, we give ourselves time to work on the proposal made at the Exercises, returning to it in the moments of retreat in order to relaunch the proposal by actualizing it. Without this, the amount of content that we propose during the Fraternity Exercises would be useless—it would be useless, if not done with the aim of taking it up again throughout the year, and in the Advent and Lenten retreats.

Prosperi: From this point of view, the form that is suggested is important, because the form itself of the gesture is synthetically paradigmatic of everything that we are saying now. The retreat doesn't

have to be entrusted only to the priest who leads it, but shared with him, prepared together, because it is the modality through which the life of the Fraternity is verified throughout the liturgical seasons, by following the proposal that was made at the Exercises. And so there is a lesson, a moment of silence, and a brief assembly in which to ask questions or recount experiences regarding the proposal that was made (and that follows the outline, the form, that is prepared centrally), and at the end there is a Mass. Over the years, we have seen that this modality is the most adequate to taking up the content of the Exercises again.

“What is the function of the leader; what role does he have in the Fraternity group?”

Carrón: As we have always said, the function of the leader is minimal. It’s not necessary to fill it with who knows what kind of particular aura—he is not a sort of “abbot,” but (as we have always said) almost a secretary who looks after the order in the moments of meeting together, of gesture; he doesn’t have to be overburdened with an educative function or I don’t know what else. No, it is simply necessary to have someone who carries out a function of service to the normal life of the small group—this is the fundamental purpose of the leader. From this point of view, it can be useful to change leaders—as happens, for example, in the *Memores Domini* houses, where Fr. Giussani wanted the leader to have a fairly “light” role. And this has also facilitated some changes, which we have made in recent years, because sometimes incrustations are created—and in that case, if there is a change every so often, it does everyone good. For this reason, it is useful to be able to change on this point, without any automatism, but simply like this: at one point, one person is the leader, at another point it is another person—but calmly, without any problems, and obviously helping each other. Because one can introduce something that facilitates or that changes without too much insistence, and without inflating the figure of the leader too much, because then it becomes a burden for the person who exercises it—we can see that he is weighed down by a responsibility that, instead of facilitating, becomes burdensome. We are all in the Fraternity group in order to live what we live, and each one makes his contribution, first of all, through the experience that he has, and not—because of his function as leader—through I don’t know what sort of additional responsibility. Our only responsibility is that with which we live life. And no one can take that away from you, be he the leader or the last comer.

Prosperi: It seems to me that this clarifies well what is effectively the function of the leader, which—emptied of all personalism—is to render current and present the guidelines of the Fraternity, of the central Diaconia, in such a way that they reach everyone, without substituting one’s own “personality” or one’s own feelings about things. Therefore, from this point of view, a great freedom is necessary. In the small Fraternity group, the authority is the person who, first of all, lives and witnesses the aim for which the Fraternity exists. Period.

Carrón: This is true authority. And this does not depend on one’s function, but on life.

Prosperi: *“In the same way, what is the task of the visitor within the Fraternity group? How can the link between the visitor and those who lead the Fraternity (central Diaconia, local Fraternity responsible) be assured, so that the visitor contributes to emphasizing and supporting the educative concerns and indications of those who lead the Fraternity, and not his own?”*

Carrón: It seems to me that we have already answered this question. I always heard Fr. Giussani say this, and I have repeated it myself on many occasions, regarding the function of the visitor in the *Memores Domini* or in the Movement: “What is my function as a visitor?” “You go where I cannot.” This is what Giussani used to say when they asked him. “Since I cannot make it there, you go.” Period. The visitor’s function is none other than to bring—with his presence—my own presence to where it is impossible for me to go, since there are many of us, in many places around the world.

Prosperi: Therefore, if this is true, then that means that the visitor is either indicated by the leadership or, at least, verified by the leadership.

Carrón: Certainly. It would be the normal thing to do—first, so that the visitor himself and the people whom he visits are certain that he facilitates this aim—otherwise, why would you need a visitor? This is the primary function of the visitor. On this point, Fr. Giussani was so free as to insist that the visitor does not belong—let’s say—to the “structure” of the *Memores Domini* (in order to illustrate this clearly, applied to something as dear to us as the *Memores Domini*) as, instead, the “head of house” or the “governing council” belong to the leadership structure. The visitor is a figure who wants to be (according to what Fr. Giussani told us) like the offer of a friendship, a relationship, a modality for bringing the gaze of the leader, the embrace that the person who has the responsibility of leading is not able to bring. Period. From this point of view, consider: with what sort of feeling, what sort of awareness, must a visitor go to visit a Fraternity group? If the visitor is not for this, then what good is he? On the other hand, precisely because the person who is chosen as the visitor, as Davide said, has this stamp, this certainty of being sent, he can be a person who facilitates—by coming from outside—and helps the Fraternity group to open up its gaze to all of the Fraternity. Because sometimes, without realizing it, in being together we close in on ourselves, and not because we want to shut ourselves in. A visitor who comes from outside and is thrown into our court can be helpful in opening it up to the larger Fraternity. For this reason, the function of the visitor is worthwhile for all of us, because if each small Fraternity group does not receive all of the fresh air of the whole life of the Fraternity, then it will become more and more suffocating. Instead, when a Fraternity group receives all of the wealth of sharing everything that the Mystery generates among us, then it’s better for everyone. Because of this, if someone comes to the group with a gaze that facilitates giving us a suggestion, opening us up, making us aware that perhaps we need to have this or that present, then it seems to me that it can be helpful for everyone—because many times we can all lose sight of the ideal, and emphasize certain things at the expense of others. This does not mean that every small group must necessarily have a visitor (in this case, too, there should not be any automatism), but it does mean that every group should decide if the presence of a visitor could be helpful on the journey that it is making in that moment.

Prosperi: These are some of the questions that arose and that we wanted to start to address, so that, from the points that surfaced this evening, and also in returning to them later, further analysis and clarification can emerge. From this point of view, I invite you to continue to send your contributions, especially in preparation for the Fraternity Exercises, because this will be a great help to Julián in considering the concrete life, the concrete experience, of the Fraternity, in the proposal that will be made at the central educative moment of the entire Fraternity.

Now I will give you some operative indications:

1) Concerning the choice of priest for a retreat, when one has to choose the priest for the retreat for the first time, or if he wants to change priests, all he has to do is go to the Fraternity website, find his location, choose among the priests proposed, and then advise the secretary of that retreat. In the Diocese of Milan, there are other priests available to lead retreats, besides those who have done it before. The only condition for a priest to lead a retreat and to be requested by a group is that he be approved by the President of the Fraternity—because at the retreat, the priest speaks in the name of the Fraternity leadership.

Carrón: For example, there are people who sometimes ask, concerning the retreat groups (since it is one of the most popular gestures, sometimes there are many people), “Are there other priests

available?” There are—just go to the Fraternity website, choose one of those available, and thus other retreats can be held.

Prosperi: 2) A Fraternity group that wants help external to the group (a visitor), after having identified the person, must ask the diocesan responsible, through the secretariat of the diocese, if this is appropriate, if the person is adequate—precisely for the central value that it has, because of what Julián just said.

Carrón: Sometimes we are asked questions, and we can approach them together in order to give you a suggestion, simply for this.

Prosperi: 3) If a new Fraternity group is formed, the leader must inform the secretary of the retreat group in which they intend to participate, so that the communications regarding the retreat, registration for the Exercises, etc., can be sent to the group.

Carrón: This is important because, if the secretary is not advised, then all of the Fraternity’s indications and announcements will not reach the group.

Prosperi: 4) For problems that come up within the groups and that necessitate some help, the reference point is the diocesan responsible and the people that he chooses to help him.

5) A useful instrument that has arisen in recent years, that accompanies us on our personal journey, and that perhaps should be considered more attentively, is the occasion offered by the work of the monthly School of Community proposed by Carrón, always to the same end we described before.

6) As you heard during the video link of the School of Community and at the retreats, the modality of enrollment in the Fraternity has changed, because we realized that it is important that one start with as great an awareness as possible, since everything begins there. Fr. Carrón now responds to the request for enrollment with a letter that invites the recipient to reflect well on the request that he is making and asks him, before deciding, to read some documents, in particular: what Fr. Giussani said about the Fraternity at the first Diaconia, some clarifications that Carrón has made at the Fraternity Exercises in recent years, and the CL Fraternity Statutes. Finally, he asks that the person express his commitment to the Common Fund, and his choice of a retreat priest among those proposed. If the person confirms this information, then the request, after being verified with the responsible, is brought to the Diaconia of the Fraternity for acceptance.

All of these requests are for prompt assistance in living the Fraternity according to its purpose.

Carrón: They are another ironic attempt to help us, so that the initial step of enrollment in the Fraternity is not formal—so that we help each other to grow as people, not just increase the number of registered members. Formal enrollment is not enough to bring about more personalization, because then we see that it’s not enough for living. This, too—I repeat—is an attempt to respond to certain issues regarding people who have come among us for the first time, in order to help them to become aware of what such a decision entails.

Prosperi: 7) It is important that everyone know they should go immediately to the Fraternity website and add their fiscal code, which will be used for the recognition of the payment of the fee for the Exercises. Also, as soon as you can, please all verify that your password works.

8) Many people ask us if they can have the list of dates and places of the retreats in the Diocese of Milan, in order to choose one in which to participate. If you think about it, you can understand why we don’t want to make the list public. First of all, it is because the priest who prepares and preaches the retreat does so keeping in mind the people and groups who normally refer to him (for the reasons already stated). And furthermore, the retreat locations are chosen on the basis of an expected number of participants. I had a direct experience of this: if, as it happened at the Advent

retreat, hundreds of people join a given retreat at the last minute without informing anyone, this causes a great deal of inconvenience to all of the participants.

Carrón: If, in a room chosen for those who normally come, double the number arrives, then there is not enough room for everyone, and people complain. We have to be clear about this: if people want to go to a certain retreat, then they have to make this known ahead of time, so that things can be organized—otherwise, all of the consequent inconveniences are catalyzed. So, we do not want to make the list public because of certain reactions, like: “No, I’m not going to this one, I’ll switch to that one.” And then—as happened to him—200 more people show up in a place where the expected number already filled the room. And then 200 people stand and everyone is inconvenienced. Let’s help each other to avoid useless inconveniences.

Prosperi: 9) This year, as we know, the Fraternity Exercises will take place before Easter. This is because, immediately afterward, we will be called upon to go to Rome twice in a short period of time: first for the canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II on April 27th, and then on May 10th for the Catholic Schools Day with the Pope. For this reason, this year there will be no Lenten Retreats.

Carrón: The Lenten Retreat will be the Fraternity Exercises.

Prosperi: 10) We want to make a recommendation regarding secretaries. It is important that the people who make themselves available to be the secretariat of the retreats and of the groups 1) live it as an act of great charity toward our companionship and 2) can adequately carry out this service.