

# The Miracle of Hospitality

By Luigi Giussani

Translated by Caterina De Marchi

*Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by so doing some people have shown hospitality  
to angels without knowing it.*

*-Hebrews 13:2*

Dear friends,

Your example to me sheds light on the future path: familiarity—or fraternity—that opens itself up in an embrace with no hesitation. I urge you never to stop welcoming, imitating Christ's embrace to the children He encountered.

If He, our Lord, used young children as an example marking the way for adults, you who do the same are made signs of novelty. This novelty, like a wave, will spread from the nearest family to the farthest one, in a movement beginning a society that is more human, being it made of people passionate about human destiny. You would give your life for any one of them because you have met the One that gives life and breath to everything.

I pray that by meeting you, people may finally feel at home, feel welcomed and safe like children in their father's arms.

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# THE REASON FOR CHARITY<sup>1</sup>

Sharing in a human and Christian way does not require the premises of this act to be conscious. Most of the time, they live implicitly in our good will. A good will that is, however, supported by a contemplated explanation, especially in difficult moments.

Therefore, when the Gospel says, “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come,”<sup>2</sup> it means be conscious of your destiny, of your relationship with God, with the source, the substance, and the end of what you are.

This is the most important premise we must remember.

I wanted to communicate the value of the implicit and of the unknown to you, because the gift of the Spirit and the Grace of God can act within anyone; the Lord is not limited by anything. I also wanted to point out the importance of being vigilant, because the clarity, joy, and peace that are born of an act of charity with well-defined aims, are unparalleled. What I will bring forth is a small contribution to this clarity of aims.

If we immediately want to feel ourselves filled with richness in our contemplative life, we must always start from the original truth: we were not and now we are. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Contribution of Msgr. Luigi Giussani titled *Anthropological Foundations and the methodology of Sharing in Reception, the Face of Gratitude*

<sup>2</sup> Mark 13:33, New International Version

being—living, existing, moving—is participation in something else. How peacefully exhaustive it is to be able to say with clarity (clarity regarding your motivation, not regarding content, which is the mystery that Christ has revealed to us) that everything we do participates within something else. This is where gratuity is rooted: everything that we do and that we are is given to us; we participate in something else. I believe that there exists nothing more evident than this: no instant in our life do we make ourselves. It is in the vibration of this self-awareness that the possibility of real prayer is developed within us.

The root of gratuity is all here, precisely because nothing is ours. Ultimately, I just want to allude to what the first page of the Bible says: “Then God said: Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”<sup>3</sup> This goes to say that the life of the Mystery vibrates and echoes within man’s dynamism, according to an immensely far yet real analogy. We can then draw three conclusions.

## **The Awareness of Being Loved**

If we do not feel welcome or loved in the first place, we cannot share. In other words, we cannot make our presence part of another’s presence, we cannot open our presence to welcome that of another.

Here we see that, without God, it’s like facing a problem without an adequate hypothesis. We can possess generosity, openness, a capacity for compliance, a great capacity to welcome—even if we do not live a human correspondence in any sense—if we have a clear perception of what is at the origin of our being: that is, if we live, it is because we are wanted and if we exist, it is because we are loved.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:26 NIV

I said a clear perception, but it could also be an unclear and confused awareness, a hunch or intuition, even in one who would not consider himself religious but who, without knowing it, is. Whatever the case, without the presence of God on the horizon of our life, we cannot open ourselves to welcome, we cannot dedicate ourselves to sharing, nor can we accept a presence that is not our own and that, precisely in that it is not ours, does not match with ours.

Our behavior is defined by this imitation (“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness”) or, like I said, by the participation in something else. For this reason, true religiosity is expressed in the ability to share and welcome before anything else and, in a certain sense, before even saying “God.” If one has this inside, it is because God is already perceived, however subconsciously.

So, only if we are loved can we love: loved not by who and in the ways that we want, but in a way that is much deeper and more essential. I understand this from experience. If a child is truly loved by his parents, he knows what love is, he grows up knowing it, even if he is unaware of this knowledge, even if this wisdom (yes, it is really wisdom) is not mirrored.

## **Forgiving Difference**

The structure of hospitality that the Christian word “mercy” defines, is the forgiveness of difference.

To better understand the foundations of the ability to welcome, you should think not of the homeless you can welcome in your house, but of your wife, your husband, or your son who grows older. If these factors do not emerge in your relationship with them, you are living these relationships obtusely or taking them for granted, or you may be unaware of what is going on.

The word “mercy” indicates welcoming as energy and freedom that—like intelligence and affection—overcomes the emptiness, the gap, the distance between differences. It’s impressive to think of the infinite distance that God overcame compared to our nothingness. The Bible says: “The Lord has appeared to us from afar: I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”<sup>4</sup> There is no greater difference than that between being and nothingness! I believe this is an aspect of awareness that needs to be constantly revived. If a man welcomes a woman, paradoxically whetting his awareness of their difference, and embraces her with this awareness, he will never have embraced her wholly: he must be aware of this difference and her presence must be embraced in this awareness. I am not “defining” the mercy with which Christ identifies the living God, or the last possible human word on the living God, but I am emphasizing the striking connection that we are called to live with it, because, as St. Paul states, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, He loves us as sinners (imagine how much He must love us when we seek Him out)!

## **Love for the Person**

Welcoming and sharing are the only ways to achieve a humanly worthy relationship, because only in them is a person exactly a person, meaning in relationship with the Infinite. When speaking of children, Jesus said, “I tell you that their angels always see the face of my Father in heaven.”<sup>6</sup> The path through which sharing—or a presence’s welcoming embrace to another—occurs, can be anything. Therefore, it can be any path so long as it has an *a quo* point and an *ad*

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 31:3 NIV

<sup>5</sup> Romans 5:8 NIV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 18:10 NIV

*quem* point. The starting point can be anything, even a trivial and concrete interest. But the *ad quem* point, the necessary point of arrival, is the person, a being whose angel sees the face of the Father, a being that is a relationship with the Infinite. My embrace to another cannot, then, be exhausted in the reasons for which I initially connected the other to me and accepted him. It is for this reason that welcoming a poor stranger and welcoming the dearest beloved must ultimately be lived with the same gratuity, otherwise—sadly—what should be the greatest thing becomes obtuse and dull.

Participating in the initial Event, therefore, sparks gratuity: within this participation, vigilance or awareness contribute to bringing clarity and joy which would otherwise be more difficult to achieve.

Only if we are aware that we are loved—with clarity or confusion, implicitly or explicitly—can we love, meaning embrace, welcome within us, and share.

The great road we must take to make ourselves similar to the Bible's image of Christ—who comes to us from eternity, walking the path like a giant on our Earth—is in overcoming difference: mercy. Embracing another means embracing somebody different—remember that God is the Different, the ultimate Other.

The path can start from any cue, even the most trivial (the Lord is the master of this across nature), but it must reach a love for the presence, a place of relationship with the Eternal, with the Infinite. The point of arrival is the person who has an infinite destiny, which is a relationship with the Infinite.

## **The Method and its Factors**

1. *Be Free.* Without freedom, there can be no welcoming, but only an illusory invitation; the other would be trapped, used, and exploited. Being fully oneself is what it means to be free.

Freedom, therefore, is a necessary condition for the method of welcoming.

This freedom—which I defined as being fully oneself—has precise components, the first being the awareness of one's belonging to the Infinite, to the Mystery. The more one lives out the relationship with God, the more one has the awareness of his destiny—and recognizes it—and the more he has an affection for being. This affection for destiny and being, then, manifests itself in the peaceful affection for one's circumstances (maintaining all possible personalities: both a restless personality and a tranquil one will show it as best as they can according to their character).

Freedom, with its peak being forgiveness of oneself, is the most difficult imitation of God. His condemnation is, in fact, His forgiveness. His method of judgement is Mercy. The humility which allows gratuity is rooted here because humility is made of awareness of our own misery, paradoxically vibrant in total certainty, because Christ is Risen, has won and wins me.

2. The second methodological factor is that which the Church Fathers stressed most when explaining Christ's relationship with man: His *acceptance*. This freedom, this being oneself, must bend and be molded, clinging to the welcomed presence according to all the corners, the remote angles, and forms that presence may take.

This means pretension must be avoided. We do not have any reason to expect the other to be different; that would not be welcoming! The desire that the other become himself, according to the ideal that our consciousness has of the relationship with God and the Infinite, is very different. This is the desire to walk together towards the same destiny, Christ.

The condition on which one's acceptance of another is founded, is already implied in what we've been calling the path to



follow and what we have said about freedom. Acceptance as such, insists on adapting to the other without having to make pretentious claims.

3. This *compliance* is love of suffering, not as masochism, but as Christ who said, “Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”<sup>7</sup> Suffering is born from the impossible correspondence between the attitude or disposition of another and what we think or imagine, be it either a good plan for them or satisfaction of our own need for affection. Pain is born when we realize we are unable to fill the void of difference, because difference is truly an abyss that only a tie with the Infinite, with God, can overcome (think about husbands and wives, think of their differences when dealing with details; even that is an abyss!).

Gratuity, in practice, springs from this suffering. It deeply purifies us from our innate tendency to plan, our natural need for requited affection, and our natural pull to manipulate. It’s not that gratuity dwells in this suffering, but suffering challenges it and purifies it, making it exist concretely. The purity in gratuity is truly saved by suffering—by that we mean a perceived correspondence, a non-correspondence that is at the roots of almost every relationship, because only in the Eternal will we find true correspondence.

I always tell my students a story that greatly moves me which took place in my early years of priesthood. A woman had been coming to me for Confession every week, when suddenly, she stopped coming. After a couple of months, she came back and told me she had given birth to her second daughter. She said, “You know, the first feeling I had when she was taken out of me was not curiosity as to whether she was a boy or a girl, or if she was doing well, but I thought, ‘She is already beginning to leave!’” Accepting this separation is sublime gratuity. This

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 26:39 NIV

is precisely the original seed parents must face when it comes to their child's vocation. "Begin[ning] to leave" means that when one is born, they are born for their destiny, one they cannot even determine because vocation is given by God and no one else.

In the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews, St. Paul says, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison and those who are mistreated as if you yourself were suffering."<sup>8</sup> When I read this passage I am terrified and I'd like to disappear because I have participated, with all my freedom and conscience, in this Western Christianity that lived fifty years without once mentioning our brothers in Eastern Europe who are persecuted under the Soviet regime. Thank God that He has shaken us with this Pope!

The verse from St. Paul means that welcoming is empathy: you are me and I am you. Hospitality is great if one understands and feels that every relationship is hospitality, welcoming another. But the word "hospitality" significantly expresses the entire phenomenon that is welcoming. In that chapter, St. Paul says, "Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for God is pleased with such sacrifices."<sup>9</sup> In hospitality, in the very sense of the word, this empathy operates according to the concreteness of its factors. As a matter of fact, the Second Vatican Council points Christian Parents to adoption as the primary ideal. Concretely, there exists no act greater than hospitality: from a radical hospitality, like adoption, to a simple one like offering lunch or shelter to someone passing through town for a night.

One of the most beautiful things I see happening among my friends is this connection, this network of families, open to accommodating anyone.

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 13:3 NIV

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 13:16 NIV



# LIVING GRATUITY<sup>10</sup>

It's so striking—imagine those who heard this directly—to hear Jesus say, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>11</sup> As a seminarian, I was moved by a preacher who said, “Guys, those are not just empty words.” Many years later I realized just how much we need to remember that these are not empty words.

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” Therefore, paradoxically, great certainty springs in the spirit and great affection is born among us, like a child in his mother's arms (this is the eternal comparison used by Jesus Himself). If we do not become as children, we will draw assumptions, judge others, and we will build nothing, not even—in our microscopic space of brief possession—our *I*.

For this reason, in his letter on the *Educational Pathways*,<sup>12</sup> Cardinal Martini said that the active subject and promoter of humanity's great educational pathway is the mystery of the Trinity. It's like we said before, we are here as men, therefore as people journeying to our destinies, and the active subject and promoter of this journey is not me, but something I must welcome within me: It is the Holy Spirit and it is the mystery of God, three in one. Beginning Day<sup>13</sup> must make one “gaze

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<sup>10</sup> Interview (Witness) at Beginning Day for the adults of Communion and Liberation in the Diocese of Milan, October 2, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> John 15:5

<sup>12</sup> C.M. Martini, *Itinerari Educativi*

<sup>13</sup> Beginning day is the assembly of Communion and Liberation that marks the beginning of the social year, offering the guidelines of the journey to complete

up,” like the first great prophets often repeated.<sup>14</sup> “Gazing up” means entering in the great memory of Christ with all of one’s heart and soul. It is therefore a moment of enthusiasm for Christ and the mission that He entrusted us. In fact, this is the ultimate apparent contradiction: we don’t know how to do anything, yet He entrusts us with a mission (it isn’t a contradiction, it is a paradox). Therefore, memory of Christ and enthusiasm for the mission to which He has destined us are the two most important things: no one among us is not destined to this mission precisely because we all have heard the word “Jesus.”

In his *A Story of Antichrist*, Solovyov writes,

Now, in a grieved voice, the Emperor addressed them: ‘What else can I do for you, you strange people? What do you want from me? I cannot understand. Tell me yourselves, you Christians, deserted by the majority of your peers and leaders, condemned by popular sentiment. What is it that you value most in Christianity?’ At this, Elder John rose up like a white candle and answered quietly: ‘Great sovereign! What we value most in Christianity is Christ himself -- in his person. All comes from him, for we know that in him dwells all fullness of the Godhead bodily.’<sup>15</sup>

This is the memory and the mission. What comes from Christ who is the way in which the Mystery has invested our life and is dragging, pushing, guiding towards its destiny? Everything! “Apart from me you can do nothing.” If only this thought accompanied us more often throughout the year. If only we would remind each other! “That which we hold most dear in Christianity is Christ Himself. What we value most in Christianity is Christ himself -- in his person. All comes from Him, for we know that in Him dwells all fullness of the

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<sup>14</sup> Hosea 11:7

<sup>15</sup>V. Solovyov, *A Short Story of the Antichrist*, from 3 Conversations.

Godhead bodily.”<sup>16</sup> I just reread what by now must be the permanent manifesto of our Movement;<sup>17</sup> there is no literary text that can better express the sentiment that moves us. The great Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz, recipient of the Nobel Prize in 1980, was invited by our friend to attend a public encounter in Italy at the San Carlo Cultural Center. After seeing our manifesto, he exclaimed, “What? You say these things? Then you are trustworthy people!” When I heard about this, I thought to myself, “how many among us still struggle to trust, after all we have received!” However, this is the mission: to make Christ known, because Christ is the Salvation of man. Christ is the Redeemer of man. This year we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the encyclical *Redemptor Homilis*.<sup>18</sup> Our Pope’s prophetic inspiration and all his impetus of charity and passion for Christ and for people is in the title of his first encyclical, “Christ Redeemer of Man.” Without Christ, man is not himself, does not know himself, and does not realize himself. The great evangelization that the Pope always talks about—that all may recognize and love Christ Redeemer of man—is entrusted to us, our hands, and our hearts. Let us then lift our gaze to the beginning of this new stretch of our lives, a long stretch of a short life (“our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures”<sup>19</sup>).

## **The Concreteness of a Story**

First, I would like us to remember one important thing. Relationships with Christ, my relationship with Christ, can

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Reference to the ecclesiastical movement Communion and Liberation, founded by Fr. Luigi Giussani, founded in 1954. It began in the city of Milan and then rapidly diffused throughout all of Italy and is now present in about seventy countries in all the continents.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor Homilis*, Encyclical letter, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1979, from Libreria Editrice Vaticana, w2.vatican.va.

<sup>19</sup> Psalms 90:10 NIV

pass only through the concreteness of a story: the way in which He persuasively and pedagogically showed Himself to me, evoking a creative capacity within me. Without obeying or adhering to the concrete historical way through which we have had the encounter, and I mean without passing through historical concrete ways through which Christ presented Himself to us, persuasively even if in passing (we have within us the intuition that the faith can be persuasive for our reason, our heart, and useful for our life and the life of all people)—if, in short, we do not live in relationship with the concrete way through which Christ came towards us and intrigued our humanity, if we do not respect the love of and adherence to what we call movement—without this historical depth, even if trivial, we pursue our own image of Christ, just like we can pursue our own image of the movement.

Facing the world, facing our worldly context, we need to be determined by something preceding it. The worldly context is concrete: think of TV and magazines, and of how everyone—everyone! —is invested and invaded by them, and therefore everyone repeats what TV and mass media feed them. In front of the concrete world we must be determined by a concrete origin, that being the development of our friendship and of our movement. This is what gives depth to our presence. The more we belong to this reality born of the Holy Spirit by grace of the encounter, the more our presence makes a change, is propositional and open to everything and everyone, because knowing Christ means suddenly feeling the world as part of my being and my heart.

In his pastoral plan, Cardinal Martini reminds us that within the global Christian itinerary there is room for “many personal and communitarian itineraries, within which the journey of the immense people of God is articulated.”<sup>20</sup> Our

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<sup>20</sup> C.M. Martini, *Itinerari educativi*, cit., pg. 28

companionship is a way in which the journey of the immense people of God is articulated. We do not choose it. We have not chosen it. If we are here, it is because we were moved by something. It is God who makes, the Lord who chooses, elects, and removes. This creates in us capacity, sensitivity, and will to communicate previously unknown to us and, therefore, through the compatibility of His choice, He creates a companionship that, if expanded, can be called a movement. It is only within the concrete reality of a companionship, of a movement, that one can face the world—One’s personal itinerary could also be hermitical, that would be an exceptional case, but usually one’s personal itinerary tends to generate companionship and movement.

This morning in bed, when I woke up very early, I thought, “What if I had to stay here and could no longer move?” I understood that this would be the only salvation because the glory of the king’s daughter<sup>21</sup> is in the awareness with which I recognize You, oh Lord, and love you despite what I am. There is only one sin that cannot be forgiven: the refusal of this urgency ramming through our half open door—or closed door, even—investing it and constricting it, *dives in misericordia*, rich in mercy. Therefore, when we lift our gaze in this memory of Christ (as Dionysius the Areopagite said, “Christ, that you used to call ‘mine’”) and in this contained enthusiasm for the mission that we were handed, wherever and wherever I may be, wherever and however I will be tomorrow. We must first pay the first tribute of awe, gratitude, and intelligent love to the life of our companionship. Certainly, a small group may be more helped and wealthier than another. Some could seem more fortunate, but it is across all the concrete days of our daily life that

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<sup>21</sup> Psalm 45:14 NIV



Christ guides us on our journey (“I am the way and the truth and the life”<sup>22</sup>).

## Gratuity

Given the necessity to lift our gaze, the second word I would emphasize is the one that best characterizes the way the Mystery communicated himself, the one that exemplifies Christ’s reality among us, the Mystery among us. This word is *gratuity* (there is no stronger and more powerful word than this and we cannot express ourselves differently). Gratuity is love without profit, humanity “without motives,” without reasons that reason can understand or explain, without rights to adhere to or obey.

He came *gratis*<sup>23</sup> in this *caritas*, in this charity. “Why did you create me?” “Because I loved you!” “And why did you love me?” “Because I loved you!” “And why did you come, in the confusion and darkness of the world, as light on my journey, on my road, grasping me, and placing me within You, within the Mystery of Your person, and calling me to communion with You?” “Because I loved you!” “And why did you love me?” “Because I loved you!” Gratuity is the infinite, which is a reason in and of itself. “And in the long line of the Christian people, so easily distracted, so easily deterred from the core by the world in which we live, so easily abandoned like sheep abandoned by shepherds, why did you reach me so concretely, on a specific occasion that provoked in me a different attitude and different order of life?” “For love, for charity, *gratis*, freely.”

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<sup>22</sup> John 14:6 NIV

<sup>23</sup> “For nothing, freely.” From Latin, contraction of *gratiis*, “as kindness.”

So, when we start contemplating that what is dearest in Christianity is Christ Himself, we can't help but desire—trembling, perhaps, but desiring with our whole heart—to imitate Him, to follow Him into this astonishing thing that leaves us speechless: the fact that He loved us gratuitously. We cannot avoid desiring to follow Him in his charity (*charis*, gratuity).

This year, we want to help each other more, so that our spirit may be more united to His. At the beginning (let's try to imagine those first months), the apostles followed Him filled with admiration and affection, attached but unable to desire being like Him because this desire burst open when the Spirit of Christ descended upon them on Pentecost. Then they understood! How often He repeated in long conversations before His death, "You do not fully understand yet, you cannot understand, but I will send the Spirit." Now, this spirit descended on us all. It descends on us every day, because He has called us to be invested by it. So, this year, we must make the imitation of His charity our main theme. It must be the main passion of our relationship with Christ and therefore the most cherished aspect of our companionship.

True work in life is unpaid work, that is the change of oneself and, through oneself, the change of the world. That is the collaboration to the transfiguration of the cosmos and of history that the Pope always talks about: it is true participation to the *opus dei*, to the work of the mystery of the Trinity in the world—Christ—to the work of Christ in the world. Gratuity is facing our relationship with oneself and our relationships with people and things in light of destiny, in the perspective of destiny; because destiny became man, in light of Christ and in the perspective of Christ. Rest assured, people and things will not fall into monotony and become pretenses. When seen with the eyes of Christ, in light of Christ, people become more themselves and things too, if gripped with the

same love with which Christ's hand gripped, become more themselves.

Before, I used the word *work* because it encompasses the totality of our day (work is not just eight hours in the office or the factory). Gratuity must become the soul of our work. Even atheists can sense it: Cesare Pavese said that carrying pain without meaning is unbearable and ignoble.<sup>24</sup> But the relevant purpose of difficulty inherent to work and of suffering that always accompanies work and relationships that can give reason to bear work is Christ, destiny made man.

There is something that must truly change in our daily sensitivity. We must make a habit of the noble practice still unknown to us but that we carry, and of which we carry the need, so life may be worthy, full of attraction and gusto. This practice is gratuity. This is the idea that created the *Compagnia delle Opere*.<sup>25</sup> All this to say that work must be faced with attention to the ultimate meaning of our person and of the history of all people, Christ. Consequently, all the effort we put into our workplace and in our work should reverberate attention and tenderness toward others, like children or the sick who, like us, need to be helped and supported.

At this point, I wish I could read many witnesses (I brought them with me) that the Host Families sent me. This work of the Host Families is not "unusual;" it is a great inspiration that is invading the whole community of the movement. May Christ help us and may Our Lady, in her month of October,

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<sup>24</sup> C. Pavese, *Il metiere di vivere*, Einaudi, Torino 1952, pg. 191

<sup>25</sup> The Compagnia delle Opere is a non-profit organization founded July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1986. It arose from graduates and young adults, both in CL and not, as proof of an education and a mature faith. The organization has the finality to promote and protect the "dignified presence within people in a social context and of everyone, as well as the presence of works and companies in society, encouraging a conception of the market and its rules as understanding and respecting the person for each of their appearances, size, and age."

expand this generosity and its possibilities! I'm sorry that I cannot read them right now, but I will quote some passages. "Through the failing of some relationships [her husband left her, and her mother died], I understood that I was in this world for Christ." This is exactly what they all say in one way or another. All the families that welcome and live this hospitality don't do it for public contribution in response to various needs, but for an impulse, for something greater, for a meaning that dwells in anticipation in their hearts, for the meaning of their lives. All the Host Families, in one way or another, repeat in the letters they sent me (for which I am grateful), "In our difficulties, we understood that we are in the world for Christ," meaning for the Redeemer of man, for the salvation of man, for He who is the salvation of man. If we came to the world for He who is the salvation of man, then all our life—even in the pettiness with which life can be perceived—cannot avoid desiring to do some good to others and to participate in the struggle of another's journey.

When we met the community and the movement ten years ago, we were an empty family, although nothing seemed to be missing. At that time, we had a son. Absence of meaning had brought us to isolation. We were yielding to the anguish of loneliness. This surprising and unexpected encounter reawakened a gusto for life, giving us energy and vitality that we had never experienced. Feeling welcomed without pretenses by the company of the Host Families, that seemed to us the way to give back to other people so that they may find purpose in their lives again. Our house became open to the needy. First came a boy, Mario, for a couple of months. Then came three brothers for a longer period. We welcomed them simply, offering them our house and our things. I remember in tough moments, and they weren't few, we would pray to the Lord to help us. We did not even have cots to put on the ground. Then came Nella, an alcoholic, and Pietro, a drug addict, and these were the experiences most filled with suffering. Nella died after her

period with us passed and Pietro, after being completely clean for the four years spent with us, relapsed.

There is another example, a shockingly beautiful one, that I hope you will read in *Litterae Communionis*. It is a letter from our old friend Rose, recounting an episode from one evening at the end of a work-day at the hospital (she is a nurse), when she saw a leper dragging himself on four stumps. He had traveled one kilometer in three hours to seek treatment at the hospital. He had dysentery, and no one wanted to welcome him. You can read how she welcomed him.<sup>26</sup>

However, we must mind one thing regarding charity. Our community is filled with such examples and one would want to quote one after the other (I should quote one after the other of the ones I know--there are hundreds! Like how one of you who lost her husband and welcomed a woman sick with terminal AIDS into her home. After six months, the woman passed away in peace and glad of the companionship that she had been offered). In front of the great glimpses of charity that fill the life of our community with examples (it makes me want to talk only about these stories), especially in front of the example of the Host Families (hospitality is the most difficult

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<sup>26</sup> *Rose e il lebbroso*, in *Litterae Communionis* n.11 (November 1988), pg. 6-7. Here is an excerpt from the letter: "While I was returned to Eugenia, I was passing through the clinic when I saw what looked like a corpse under the table. I bent down while a nurse told me, 'Leave him alone. He is a man who walks on four legs. Look at his stumps and at his feet!' It was already night. The leper had left at seven that morning and had traveled three hours to cover the kilometer that separated him from the hospital. He had dysentery and had asked to be treated. He had already been refused the admissions form because he could not pay the admission fee. He was weak and depressed and told me, 'Could I die now? What sense is there in me living?' I did not have any money to help him, but I took a prescription pad from a nurse, put the leper on a wheelchair, and strode to the on-call doctor. The doctor first yelled at me, then asked me, 'What's wrong with the old man? Is he your relative?' So, I told him, and the doctor asked if I was a nun. I answered, 'No but I am a Christian of the Catholic Church.' [...] I wanted to have company of the movement near me because I did not know what to do with the old leper. Even my nurse friends mocked me instead of helping me. I went to the kitchen to ask for food for the man and they responded that if I wanted to give him food I would have to give up my dinner. I was very hungry, and I did not want to fast but there was no other way. I gave my plate to the leper who was very hungry. The nurses asked me, 'You would let him use your plate?' 'Of course,' I responded. I brought the sick man to the corner of a room, gave him my blanket and my pullover, and he fell asleep in peace. [...] In the morning I met the doctor who was on his way to visit the leper. He said to me, 'Pray for me.'"

charity, taking hold of you entirely, from morning to night and from night to morning, like a son, a brother, or a husband), there is an observation to be made. All of this must become a struggle within us that ultimately changes us. After seeing our brothers and our friends, our companions, and the families that are with us do this, we can no longer be as we were before. Each one of us may feel shaken and incapable because the Spirit is handed out according to the measure of Christ, but the Spirit is given so that we may change: “If another makes one hundred, Lord, I will offer you one.”

It is a pain that must change our person. We should not praise these families from afar. We must not look at these things behind our walls of self-sufficiency, even if benevolently or in admiration. We stop at admiration but no, these things must define us. This is not about being touched, but shocked and changed. In fact, the generosity of the Host Families raises the bar for the whole community.

### **Belonging, source of the criterion**

There is a third and final thing that I want to touch on. There is no authentic gratuity if we do not live with gratitude the charity with which Christ touched our lives through examples of others or across the encounter with a companionship. Without faithfulness to the companionship that we met, our charity would be false. It would not make history, that is, it would not truly contribute as it should to the Kingdom of God and to the construction of the Kingdom of God.

I will give you an example. One of you wrote to me, “When TV and magazines began to cover the Meeting in Rimini, I asked myself, ‘What is happening?’ So, I decided to take an identity dive and I went to the Meeting. I understood, and I came back peaceful.” What you did and said are correct, my friend.

Differently, let us imagine a large community in which only three people went to the Meeting. Everyone was speechless whenever one of them spoke, but the atmosphere was full of objection and they were the same objections heard on TV and read in the press. But when you think these objections belong to you, you are drawing from a belonging; you belong to the world of TV and the press. Instead of starting from the same origin, like the first man did (“I decided to take an identity dive”), you allow your opinion to prevail and you distance yourself from what your brothers and companions in the movement are doing. You are not even close to noticing that your opinion is influenced by the dominant mentality, the mentality of power.

In every scope, it is like this. Either the origin, the root that determines your concern, is what you belong to—the company to which you belong, to which Christ lead you to belong—or while claiming to affirm your opinions and judgements, you are hindered by and imprisoned inside the great prison that power, any power, intensely builds ever more widespread.

Many years ago, Msgr. Bartoletti—then Secretary of the CEI—asked some of us who were visiting him, “Where is your statute?” They responded, “We do not have a statute.” “But how can you be so cohesive, so united, without a Statute?” In the end, he himself concluded saying, “I understand. This is your statute: your friendship.” I do not know if he really perceived the depth of this word, the deep well of faith and charity that constitutes the human reality and that is our friendship, but this is true.

An example in this sense is given to us by an engineer and CEO of a large company. While asking to join School of Community and the movement he wrote,

Reading the Saturday polemic on common values opened up a question for me: What is Christianity? After I met you all, I felt pain and bitterness for how I had lived my life

that, in the name of a generic dedication to Christian ideals, had excluded Christ. The newspapers won't ever report that Communion and Liberation, as I now understand it, is a movement for the sanctity of the person; That it has the courage to bend everything to this desire. What shocks me about your political relationships, is that the criterion is not political. In politics, in fact, we can agree on whatever without having any identity. In front of your proposal, though, everyone must respond by name and not by whatever label they have. I was taught that life was a Mystery, but it was as if this lesson did not count. After I met you all, I cannot say exactly what the Mystery is, but I can say that I encountered it. I ask you to accept me with you, so as not to lose this encounter. I would like to sometimes be an apostle in my work environment, but I am so clumsy in starting that I ask myself, after thirty years of work, what I have learned to do, seeing as being missionaries is, in the end, the meaning of work. I believe that I must start again, from zero, and I need new teachers. At this point, it is not enough to have a career. You need to be convinced that a moment that you value can last forever.<sup>27</sup>

The gap between this moment and forever is my openness to learning. The gap between the initial perception that we had and the “forever” is the openness to learning.

Of course, we can have different reactions and thoughts regarding contingent things. What does this mean? It means that the same origin, the passion for the same origin, seems to lead me to have to say differently from you, my friend. But I do this with respect for you, with desire to clarify myself to you, with tenacity in trying to correct what I think is your mistake, with patience in waiting for you, asking you for equal patience and tenacity towards me. Then it becomes totally different; it is no longer about distancing yourself, but about increasingly engaging yourself in everything! This is gratuity.

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<sup>27</sup> “Il criterio non e' mai politico,” in *Litterae Communionis* n.11 (November 1988) pg. 6



I wanted to mention that the most imposing aspect of gratuity is the life of our companionship, the life of the movement, because it is stitched together by one thing: Christ. The movement could not be held together—we cannot obey it, follow it, serve it, use it to serve—if not for the ultimate goal of our common destiny, which is Christ. This is the enthusiasm for our movement, this is its only origin, and no one can leave and become better—no one! One could quote the terrible phrase by St. John, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.”<sup>28</sup>

What dictated Christ’s love for us? Or the gratuity that qualifies Christ’s love for us? Obedience to the Father and adhesion to the gratuity of the love of the Trinitarian mystery. But, as a man, it is because of this devotion to the mystery of the Father that He loved and wanted us.

All this is what we want to delve into this year. But we want to delve into it intensely, into the density of concrete daily life, helping each other with mercy so that this gratuity may be increasingly imitated in our lives.

There are infinite examples among us that must make today different from yesterday and awake in us a divine restlessness, good and sacred. We must not fear following. If the primary thing that we are indebted to happens, let us remember that anything can happen—that thing being that grace that led me to meet you, friend, and that allowed for that instant in which I felt my destiny was identical to yours, that instant in which we met, we recognized each other, even without saying it or understanding it, unclearly, so much so that we are here!

Cardinal Martini, in his pastoral plan, tells us that the Liturgy, the liturgical life, is an instrument to teach us this

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<sup>28</sup> 1 John 2:19 NIV

gratuity. Therefore, this year, we try to pray following the sacramental life more intensely, humbly, and faithfully.

The Eucharist brings visibility even greater than our companionship and, therefore, of our communion, because the Church, the whole Church, the Church in our country, and the Church throughout the whole world, anticipates, always more visibly, the coming of Christ! This is, in fact, salvation. Salvation is His second coming, when He will come and reveal Himself. We get up every morning to anticipate, in the dusk of our poverty, His coming, His revelation.

“Our senses with thy light inflame, our hearts to heavenly love reclaim.”<sup>29</sup> “Our senses with thy light inflame:” Christ, in some way, dictates our meaning, the faces that we touch and the things that we use, the way we grip and clasp!

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<sup>29</sup>*Oh Come, Creator Spirit Come*, trans. Robert Seymour Bridges (1899)