

FROM UTOPIA TO PRESENCE

Notes from a talk by Fr. Luigi Giussani to a group of university students in Riccione (Italy) in October 1976.

The problem we have to face this year can be formulated like this: we have to succeed in understanding the opposition existing between two words—"presence" and "utopia"—and our choice in favor of the first one. The fate of our community, in terms of its effectiveness inside the university and in society, depends on the emphasis on *presence* as opposed to the temptation of *utopia*.

I - *Presence is making communion concrete.*

First of all, our presence in the university *cannot be a reactive one*. Reactive means determined by the moves made by others, not our own, i.e., offering initiatives, using ways of speaking, creating instruments that are not generated as an all-embracing method by our new personality, but suggested by the use of words, the creation of instruments, the attitude and behavior of our adversaries—in other words of those who try to create a human world not in accordance with Christ, and therefore objectively according to a falsehood, setting aside whatever their intentions might be.

A reactive presence cannot help falling into two errors. Either it becomes a *reactionary* presence, i.e., attached to its own positions as "forms," without the contents—the motives, the roots—being so clear as to come alive (the reactionary is always a formalist, to a greater or lesser degree); or, if it is not reactionary, a reactive presence falls into the opposite excess, that is, it tends to become mimesis, *imitation* of others, and this constitutes the first, fundamental giving in to them (it is like playing on their home field, agreeing to fight by their methods).

Therefore, *an original presence* is needed, a presence in accord with our originality. The right to exist and to act anywhere and in any case does not derive from following others' methods, but from what we are.

A presence is original when it springs forth from the consciousness of one's own identity and one's affection for it, and finds its consistence in this.

II - *Identity is knowing who we are and why we exist*, with a dignity that gives us the right to hope for "something better" for our life and the life of the world because of our presence. But *who are we* to have the right to this hope, without which our life falls into a sinister bourgeois-ness—whose supreme criterion is insurance against risk—or into the colorlessness of a dissatisfaction that soon turns into complaint or accusation of others?

"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (*Gal* 3:26-28). I have never quoted a passage from the Bible as much as this one (except for this: "And everyone who follows Me will receive eternal life, and the hundredfold here below" (cf. *Mt* 19:29).

"You have been seized and made one with Christ;" "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (*Jn* 15:16). This is an objective choice that we can never rid ourselves of again; it is a penetration of our being that does not depend on us and that we can no longer erase. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ;" therefore, there no longer exists any difference among you. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus": *this is our identity*. The Letter to the Ephesians says, literally, "We are members of one another" (*Eph* 4:25).

There is nothing culturally more revolutionary than this conception of the person, whose meaning, whose substance is unity with Christ, with an Other, and through this, a unity with all those whom He seizes, with all those whom the Father puts into His hands.

Our identity is to be one with Christ. Being one with Christ is the constitutive dimension of our person. If Christ defines my personality, you, who have been seized by Him, necessarily enter into the dimension of my personality. This is the “new creation” of the very beautiful conclusion to the Letter to the Galatians (*Gal* 6:15), or the beginning of the “first fruits of his creatures” of which St James speaks (*Jam* 1:18).

“This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith,” says John (1 *Jn* 5:4). *Faith* conquers the world, that is, it demonstrates its truth over all ideologies and conceptions, over all the ways of perceiving the human, because it is the structural truth for which the world was made. It is the truth that will manifest itself and be completely established at the end, but it is the factor that urges history on now and catalyzes good in the world, enabling the world to be more human.

Whether I am alone in my room, or three of us are together studying at the university, or twenty of us eating together in the cafeteria, everywhere and in any case, this is our identity. The problem is, therefore, our self-awareness, the content of the consciousness of ourselves: “It is no longer I who live, but it is You who live in me” (cf. *Gal* 2:20). This is the true *new man* in the world—the new man who was Che Guevara’s dream and the lying pretext for cultural revolutions by which people in power have tried and still try to take the people into their hands, in order to subjugate it according to their ideology; and this new man is born above all not out of being consistent, but as a *new consciousness of self*.

III - Our *identity manifests itself in a new experience* within us and among us: the experience of *affection for Christ and the Mystery of the Church, which finds its closest concreteness in our unity*. The identity is the living experience of affection for Christ and for our unity.

The word “affection” is the greatest and most comprehensive of all our ways of expressing ourselves. It indicates much more an “attachment” that is born out of a value judgment—the acknowledgment of what there is in us and among us—than a sentimental, ephemeral facility as fleeting as a leaf at the mercy of the wind. And in faithfulness to the judgment, i.e., in faithfulness to the faith, as one grows older this attachment increases and becomes more sturdy, vibrant, and powerful. “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (*Phil* 3:7-9).

This living experience of Christ and our unity is the locus of *hope*, therefore of the willing forth of the *gusto* of life and the possible blossoming of *joy*—which does not have to leave out or deny anything in order to affirm itself; and it is the locus of the recovery of a *thirst to change one’s life*, the desire that one’s life be consistent, that it change by virtue of what it is at bottom, that it may be worthier of the Reality it carries.

The passion to change one’s life lives within the experience of Christ and our unity. And it is the opposite of moralism: not a law to which we conform, but a love to which we adhere, a presence to follow more and more with all of ourselves, a fact within which we can truly sink. “And all who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure” (1 *Jn* 3:3). The Letter to the Philippians is even more impassioned: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own” (*Phil* 3:12). The serene, well-balanced, and at the same time passionate desire to change oneself thus becomes a daily reality, without any shadow of pietism or moralism. It becomes a love for the truth of one’s being, a desire as wonderful and as uncomfortable as thirst.

These almost furtive observations come down to touch the hearts of those among you who have already begun along this path. It is, after all, what Anna Vercors exclaimed in *The Announcement Made to Mary*: “I live on the threshold of death, and I am filled with inexplicable joy” (P. Claudel, *The Announcement Made to Mary*, Cowa Publications, Kampala 1990). This is what many of us have already begun to feel, what is already part of a new experience: “I live on the threshold of death,” on the threshold of falsehood (which is worse than physical death), on the threshold of evil and pain, of the inhuman, and yet “I am filled with inexplicable joy.”

IV - But we do not build this *presence*, which springs forth from the consciousness of our identity and our affection for it; we are still confused.

We are together for a beginning of something that rings true, which struck us a blow when we encountered the community. What unites us, even though tenacious, is still small and embryonic, built up from the impression provoked in us by the ring of truth of the encounter we have had. Everything is still at the beginning, and it has to become mature, otherwise the Lord can let the tempest of the world overwhelm us.

The time has come when we can no longer continue to struggle unless that initial ring of truth ripens to maturity; we can no longer bear, as Christians, the enormous mountain of work, responsibility, and toil to which we are called. For people are not brought together by initiatives; what brings them together is the ring of truth of a presence, which is given by the Reality that is among us and which we “carry”—Christ and His Mystery made visible in our unity.

Pursuing more deeply the idea of presence, we must then redefine our community. The community is not a cluster of people to carry out initiatives; it is not the attempt to construct a party organization. *The community is the locus of the effective construction of our person, i.e., of a mature faith.*

The purpose of the community is *to generate adults in the faith*. What the world needs is the presence of adults in the faith, not capable professionals or competent workers, for society is full of these but all of them can be contested profoundly in their capacity to create humanity.

V - The method by which the community becomes the locus of the person’s construction of a mature faith is indicated by the first word we used in the history of our Movement (which we have forgotten, even when we repeat it, because we do not repeat it seriously): *“follow.”*

God the Creator and Redeemer, in the natural originality and in the mystery of the new life which Christ brought, knows no other method for making man grow than *the method of sequela*. “As He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And He said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’” (*Mt 4:18-19*); “When Jesus turned and saw them following, He said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to Him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see’” (*Jn 1:38-39*).

To follow means to become one with persons who live the faith more maturely, to *become involved in a living experience*, that “passes” (*tradit* in Latin, which gives us “tradition”) its dynamism and its gusto into us. This dynamism and this gusto pass into us not through our reasoning, not at the conclusion of a logical process, but, as it were, by osmosis: it is a new heart that communicates itself to ours; it is the heart of another that begins to move inside our own life.

VI - From this arises the foundational idea of our pedagogy of *authority*: truly authoritative for us are the persons who draw us in with their hearts, their dynamism, and their gusto, born out of faith. *True authoritativeness, then, is the definition of friendship.*

True friendship is the *profound companionship to our destiny*, to the destiny of who we are. And it is not a question of temperament—there can be one that is more effusive and another that is more discreet and cautious—true friendship is felt in the heart of the word and the gesture of presence.

VII - Our bourgeois-ness can be seen by the naked eye. For bourgeois-ness is the non-radical way we perceive the relationship with Christ. Were we to perceive it in a radical way, our relationship with Christ would judge everything: what we are, what we do, the life of the community, the news in the newspaper, and the university environment. It would judge it like the plow that lacerates the earth so that the seed can burrow into it and bear fruit: God’s judgment is the renewal generated by the Spirit and, indeed, God’s final judgment on the world is Paradise.

It is necessary for us to start to take faith seriously as a “reagent” on concrete life, so that we are led to see the identity between faith and what is more truly human—in faith, the human becomes more true and man achieves his true proportion to his destiny. Thus, for example, the relationship between man and woman lived in the radicalness of the relationship with Christ—in other words, in accordance with faith—is made true. It surfaces with its demand for truth and unity, fidelity and lastingness in time. So we are against divorce, because it is a lie about man’s possibility of and capacity for love. Thus, man’s attitude toward life in accordance with the radicalness of faith becomes respectful of the person and the dignity of his destiny. So we are against abortion, because if there is already a human life, even though hidden in its mother’s womb, it is fully worthy of respect.

All this must become true in us, and this is why time has been given to us. The search for truth is the adventure for which time is turned into history, as St Paul already indicated to the wise men on the Areopagus of Athens, when he told them that the only reason for which all people move about (and what were then movements from territory to territory are now ideological movements) is to “search for God and perhaps grope for Him” (*Acts 17:26-28*).

If we think over what was just said, we understand also—concretely—our choice of method: we have to *be a presence*, that is to say, we have to construct, right where we are, this piece of new humanity on a journey. This is why we exist—and for no other reason—because in order to be engineers or doctors or parents, the mysterious event that has hit us would not have been necessary.

VIII - Our temptation is utopia.

What I mean by *utopia* is something—considered good and right—to be brought into being in the future, whose image and scheme of values are created by us. In this sense, I would like to touch upon the history of our Movement.

We have lived these *last ten years* inside an enormous social and political provocation. This has made us slide slowly down the slope of placing our hope and our dignity in a “project” generated by us, without its expressing a corresponding deepening of life.

The beginning of our Movement is extremely significant (to understand a history, you always have to look at its origin). In 1954, we *burst* onto the scene of the state schools, which were not yet Marxist—even though the Marxists were already setting the climate in many places—but were substantially liberal and thus secularist and anti-Christian, like the Marxist schools that are their direct result.

We did not come into the schools trying to formulate an alternative project for the schools. We came in *with the consciousness of bringing What saves man also into the schools*, what makes living human and the search for truth authentic, that is, *Christ in our unity*. And it happened that *by virtue of this passion* we brought about also a new interpretation (which we called a “revision” at the time) of the contents of history, philosophy, and literature, which represented for the students the true alternative to the liberal-Marxist interpretation prevailing in the classes. We enacted an alternative project *without setting for ourselves the purpose of enacting it*. Our purpose was presence.

The history of the Movement *began to dim in 1963-1964, up to the darkness of 1968*, which burst open the consequences of those five or six years when the influence of certain people had overturned the original situation and made the purpose of our action not a presence in the schools, but a project of social action. Thus, the density, the identity itself of our presence was lost.

In 1968, only a certain group remained, inflexible, not knowing what to say, but the determinant influence on the whole Movement of Gioventù Studentesca was in the direction of destruction. Faced with social, cultural, and political proposals, to which we were not able to respond, given the level we were on, but which, on the other hand, were perceived with very great admiration—the only thing that was respected by that point was the cultural-political project—most people fell away, into betrayal.

What did they betray? The presence. The project had taken the place of presence; utopia had knocked it away. What happened from 1963-1964 to the explosion of 1968 was a process of adaptation and giving in to the environment; a reactive presence was brought into being, thus no longer a true, original presence.

In 1969, some realized the situation and took up the original idea again, out of fidelity of heart: “We have to be a presence, because *communion with Christ and among us is liberation*; we must therefore make our communion become a presence once again.” But the political, cultural, and social pressure was so great, the provocation so violent that, immediately after this correct insight, to a greater or lesser degree *there was a slide toward an emphasis on the alternative project*, this time with an awareness of deep attachment to the Mystery of our communion; but in terms of method, it was overshadowed and masked by the fascination and urgency of an alternative project, as though we wanted to demonstrate that we could have a better utopia.

The big congress of 1973 [the national congress on the topic, “In the Italian University for Liberation,” held in the Palalido in Milan in March 1973, where the presence of the Honorable Aldo Moro was noted among the 6,000 students attending] was the strongest, most well-balanced and powerful expression of this line, but it demonstrated that this line of alternative social, cultural, and political work was for a chosen few, an avant-garde, an elite (in fact, the great Acts of 1973 were never used, but only clumsily and naively imitated, and they became the pretext for autonomous attempts on the part of some groups).

In the meantime, the trajectory of history had already cleared away the *vanity and emptiness of the utopias of 1968*; what they had awakened had become nothing but the *tool for a new hegemony, even more despotic and leveling*. Therefore, already two or three years ago we were saying that we were the only ones left who were carrying forward the words of 1968. And yet, we are still playing on the others’ field: if the others do a flyer, then

we do a flyer too, and so on. It is not that operatively it must not often be like this, but it is the way things are born that has to become clear.

IX - *What is new is presence* as awareness of carrying something definitive—a definitive judgment on the world, the truth of the world and the human—that is expressed in our unity. What is new is presence as awareness that our unity is the instrument for the rebirth and liberation of the world.

What is new is the presence of this event of new affection and new humanity; it is the presence of this *beginning of the new world* that we are. What is new is not the avant-garde, but the Remnant of Israel, *the unity of those for whom what happened is everything* and who await only the manifestation of the promise, the realization of what is inside what happened.

What is new is not, then, a future to be pursued; it is not a cultural, social, and political project. What is new is presence. And being a presence does not mean not expressing oneself; presence, too, is expression.

Utopia uses as its method of expression speech, projects, and the anxious search for instruments and organizational forms. Presence has as its method of expression an operative friendship, gestures revealing a different way of being a protagonist, one that enters everything, making use of everything (school desks, studies, the attempt at university reform, etc.)—gestures that are, above all, gestures of real humanity, i.e., of charity. A new reality is not built by speeches or organizational projects, but by living gestures of new humanity in the present (to be sure, a gesture like the attempt to elect to the Faculty Administrative Councils people who help everyone in a human way, not political adventurers or incompetents, for example, must become a gesture of charity).

In short, if we yield to the temptation of utopia, we compete with the others, on their same level and ultimately with their same methods; in being a presence, conversely, we develop a critical capacity, the capacity to bring everything into the experience of communion that we are living, into the sense of the Mystery that has burst into our life, the sense of the liberating Reality that we have encountered.

X - But, with all this insistence on presence, in what sense do we intervene in the needs and requirements of everybody and of every sort, public and private?

The initial presence of the Movement in 1954 was taking an interest in our schoolmates, and starting from this gesture of friendship, we created a great structure of *caritativa* [charitable work]. A thousand people went every Sunday to the farmhouses of the Milanese countryside, at significant personal sacrifice, not for a political project but to share need (the families in that area lived in depressed conditions). To fight for something that does not yet exist is the greatest illusion and thus the most terrible source of disappointment in life. For man is not a creator; man collaborates in the manifestation of what God has already made, like the seed that develops into a plant, flower, and fruit.

The problem is, then, to plant the seed, i.e., the presence. Only what already exists can be made manifest: the design, the project, is inside the seed, inside what already is, inside the mystery that we are, and it will come to the surface, as a matter of consistency, in its own time.

Thus, today, we are culturally, socially, and politically more astute than before, to the point that we are considered one of the political forces in Italy. However, our strength is not a project, but consciousness of the mystery that we are. And if others are not able to understand why we are the way we are, even though we are not as well-equipped with instruments and as powerful as they, it is because they do not understand what we too still have difficulty in understanding: the content and force of a presence. We are culturally and politically more powerful than when we were going into the countryside in 1956 or 1958, because the project is contained in the seed that is Christ in us, in the seed that is our mysterious and real unity, and time brings the design to the surface. This is what happened to the early Christians, who went into the world not to change the philosophy, but to make present what Christianity was, to make Christ present by sharing everybody and everything, including philosophy; and thus, with the passing centuries, in the monasteries, schools, and universities, a new philosophy and a new culture were born.

Therefore, *the presence is full of expressiveness*, it penetrates and is immanent in the situation. This situation is already ours, because it is Christ's; it is already possessed, even if it kicks and curses on the surface, and this profound possession will be made manifest through our history. Christians were imprisoned, martyred, kept in the dark for three centuries! History is not defined, in its times, by us. It falls to us to live the presence: a total credit to the Infinite that entered our life and reveals itself immediately as new humanity, as friendship, as

communion. “Do not be afraid, little flock, I have conquered the world” (cf. *Lk* 12:32). “This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 *Jn* 5:4).

Will our faith need seven, eight, or nine centuries for all the university world to be vested again with the Christian presence? These are not calculations that we can decipher. We are interested in the university for the construction of our subject, not so we can say, “We win.” This subject is at the same time myself and the unity with you—i.e., the person, and unity in Christ. The subject is, as Chapter 37 of the Book of Ezekiel says, the valley of the bones and the Creator Spirit who works on them, so that the bones move and come together as joints, and from these joints the body is formed, and the body is infused with the soul. Each one is created anew and a people is created anew *at the very same time*, by the very same gesture.

We have to abandon this ideological interpretation of university life that produces labored and exhausting, heavy and bitter work, which causes many to go away, whereas no one goes away from a new humanity, except in the case of a diabolical, fierce rebellion.

XI - What I have said is an insistence on method, not the abolition of a responsibility. I indicated what has to happen so that we may work more, be more incisive on reality, and with greater and greater gladness, not in exhaustion and bitterness that divide us from each other. The task that awaits us is the expression of an aware presence, capable of being critical and systematic. This task implies a job.

This job is to put our identity into the materialness of life. My identity, in as much as it penetrates the materialness of life, that is to say, *in as much as it is inside* the condition of existence, works and makes me react. If I am in the car and in a hurry to get someplace, but there is a big rock in the middle of the road that keeps me from passing, then my “car-driver identity” gets to work: I bend down, get close to the rock, pick it up, and move it.

If this is the first thing to be said, i.e., that the method is putting forth our identity and asserting what we carry, the second thing to be said is that *all the rest comes after it*.

The purpose for going into the university is to put our communion inside the university. *The rest will come*. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (*Mt* 6:33). In this way, we are full of *irony* and humor, because all the attempts at expression of our communion that are born as a consequence are fragile, reformable, modifiable. If the purpose of every action is the presence of what we are, we are freed from the inevitable claim made by the forms that our action assumes. The presence “acts” through ironical, not cynical attempts; irony is the opposite of cynicism, because it makes you take part in something, but with a certain detachment—because you recognize its fragility—and a sense of peace, because it is filled with passion for the already immanent Ideal. Thus, we can be agile in changing tomorrow what we made today, free from what we do and the forms that we necessarily give to our attempts.

The job, for those in the university, should be overall redefinition of the task that the university has and for which it lives. This job depends on the way in which our presence can “attack,” in the chemical sense of the word, the university in what and for what it exists: study, teaching, relationships, administration, political activity, etc. A long history will be needed—as happened with Christianity, which waited century after century before creating the universities—for this redefinition to become mature. But *our program is the presence of what we are*, because our program is for the present. It will be a long history that, drawing its conclusions and articulations from our faithfulness, will give the ability, at a certain point, to reformulate an image—it will happen *in its own time*, without arid and exhausting, irritable or impatient claims.

Our program is the presence of what we are: *a piece of humanity vested with Christ, a new people* that moves forward, traversed by the energy that brought Christ back from the dead. It is this energy—it is called Spirit—which is throbbing in history and seizes it from within and takes it forth to its destiny, which is the total manifestation of Christ (and only we are predestined to see its signs).

But what is the university if not the critical and systematic expression of a people’s experience, or rather, of a social experience? Our presence collaborates in reformulating the university precisely by affirming and deepening, in the patience of time, its reality as a new people. In this work, every presence and the presence of everyone is a factor of culture, i.e., a factor of mobilization in history and time for the reformulation of things—even a stammering and fragile presence in terms of its capacity for action, unexpressed or incapable of expressing itself theoretically and as a discourse, even the presence of the most psychologically poor among us, is useful.

The university today is the critical and systematic expression of an experience of society that is atheistic, profoundly opposed to Christ and the religious sense that is the soul of every man. Therefore, if our program is to make the new people that we are—our unity and our faith—be a presence, we cannot win; we will be ostracized and marginalized in every sense. But this does not take away the *possibility of that joyous indomitability* that is faith: “This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” We are aware of this because *this faith is already inside us*; its *sign* is this unity of ours that the world cannot succeed in crumbling, that our cunning world cannot manage to stop.

As we go forward, we shall develop the implications of this formulation of our work. But *the point of departure* is not a speech, a project, or an organizational scheme, but *a new and present reality*, in which the illumined desire and the heart of what is human live (it doesn’t matter if there are five of us or five-hundred).

Everything lies *in this Reality* which we carry. Woe to us if we do not help each other with all our hearts to betray it as little as possible from now on.