



YOU, THE SURPRISE OF MY LIFE. IN HOSPITALITY, THE COURAGE OF AN ENCOUNTER

NOTES FROM THE MEETING OF THE RESPONSIBLES FOR THE
FAMILIES FOR HOSPITALITY ASSOCIATION WITH JULIÁN CARRÓN

NOVEMBER 13TH, 2020

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Notes from the meeting of the responsables for the Families for Hospitality
Association
with Julián Carrón
Via video link, November 13th, 2020

Luca Sommacal. Good evening to all of you and welcome. Firstly, I want to thank don Julián deeply for having agreed to join us this evening, and for the companionship he has offered us for several years now. With you, our steps are far more aware and certain.

Hello to all our friends logging in from Italy and from overseas: Spain, Switzerland, Romania, Brazil—to mention but a few.

I remind you that it is possible to follow the assembly in Spanish by clicking the globe icon in the bottom right, and activating the translation service.

Tonight, we want to focus on the “Filo Rosso” [Red Thread] we gave ourselves this year to aid our Association’s journey, entitled: *You, the surprise of my life. In hospitality, the courage of an encounter*.

This theme emerges from the work undertaken on the dialogue with you last year, which you picked up again during the movement’s Beginning Day, when you reminded us of the importance of looking for and welcoming what God is doing in our lives. Last year you told us: “It begins with God being moved for us; and we, under the pressure of this affection we receive, can move others, too, living charitably towards others” (*Notes from the meeting of the Board of the Families for Hospitality Association with Julián Carrón, Milan, November 7th, 2019*).

Throughout the first few months of this year, we were dramatically affected by the pandemic, and still are. We discovered the importance of the “other” in our lives. A “you” comprised of the faces of our wives and our husbands, of our biological children and adopted children; faces through whom the Mystery, the “You” of the Lord, once again made Himself a companion to our journey, supporting us and reawakening our heart through an impetus, a courage, which has generated unexpected creativity. For example, the pilgrimage on October 7th with the Archbishop of Milan, which, broadcast via satellite, enabled our friends throughout the world to share a moment of communion and prayer which would otherwise have been impossible, whilst also introducing our experience to many people we did not know (over 1,400,000 people were connected!).

In recent weeks, we have seen the same drama we experienced last Spring reoccur, in some ways more violently. What we have discovered and learnt is not the guarantee of already acquired knowledge, as if already consolidated schemes and knowledge could be applied mechanically to face the current trying period.

In a certain sense, everything restarts, as you often remind us with the words of Benedict XVI: “man’s freedom is always new [...] [it] presupposes that in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning” (Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi*, 24).

Precisely for this reason, we wish to be helped to rediscover that knowledge which you reminded us of in November 2019, and which we have begun to re-experience over the past year.

Ahead of this event, we received many contributions and questions. We have selected various testimonies which we think can help us to retrace the path we have been on, and at the same time help us to deepen the experiences we are living.

But, before starting the contributions, I give you the floor to say a few words to everyone.

Julián Carrón. Good evening, everyone. I am truly grateful that I can share this moment with you, because—from when we first met—you have been a testimony for me, showing me how your life flourishes in front of the difficult challenges we will discuss today, which you face with courage. Let us begin, because I am here more to learn that to say anything in particular, because your lives already contain everything that we must identify and embrace.

TESTIMONIES AND QUESTIONS

A. ACCEPTING WHAT GOD IS DOING

Sommacal. Let's begin with a question and testimony from Spain, which introduce well what it means to identify and accept what God is doing in our lives, and what can be generated by living under the impetus of this emotion.

Here in Spain we wish to ask a question, together with a small testimony of gratitude.

We would like a clarification of what it means in experience that "the fear of death springs from our nature's desire, but the daring of grace's desire" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Super Secundam ad Corinthios*, 5,2). We wish to help each other, and better help the families who struggle to live out their hospitality and experience the goodness that comes from grace. Many of us, most of us, are undergoing positive experiences full of hope, but when faced with those who are struggling, really struggling and facing objectively very difficult circumstances, how should we position ourselves? How can we help them to move forward? In many cases, both the adopted children and the adoptive families are struggling. It is not always easy to recognise Christ in the adopted child, yet this is challenged by what is written in the "Red Thread", when it states that "courage implies [...] an active obedience to [given] circumstances, marked by hope: 'certainty in the future by force of a present reality'".

At the national seminar last year in Peschiera, we heard how many older children, having become adults, testify that this journey continues, and that our timeframes are not His timeframes. We realise that time is needed to understand what will come of these children and their lives, waiting, without losing faith that their destiny is in the hands of God.

We ask you for help to not lose sight of this hope and to better accompany the many families who are struggling.

I just want to add a small personal testimony of gratitude: I have been Vice President of Families for Hospitality in Spain for a long time; this year is the association's twentieth anniversary. I continuously put my position at the disposal of the executive committee, but a time has never come at which to leave the Vice Presidency. I see that my continuity in the committee has been a great gift for me, for my life, particularly in recent times. Three years ago, all of us, and other families, were forced to leave a foster-home, and on that occasion, I experienced—I remember the day you came to have dinner with us at our house—...

Carrón. I also remember it well.

On that occasion, I was truly able to experience what it means that our nature can bring a risk of resignation or superficial indifference, which is often a temptation for me. In my particular case, this was linked to a great sadness, which I experienced when I saw that our project was not going well. In that moment of profound sadness—I had never experienced anything like it—I discovered that the "I" is the relationship with friends, the relationship with another, first and foremost with the Lord, then with my husband—I truly experienced his tenderness towards my suffering—and with a real companionship which still astonishes me for the beauty that it leads me to experience amid all this sadness. With neighbours, and most of all my Fraternity group and the many friends you know well, with the executive committee for the Families for Hospitality and many people linked to the association, where I found the courage of a friendship through the Lord. I repeatedly offered to vacate my role, believing that it was burdensome for the association to have to support someone struggling so much, particularly in the last two or three years; yet my friends at the committee continued to insist I stay, and in that time, I witnessed so many beautiful stories. In the last few months we decided to make a documentary to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the association in Spain. With the help and encouragement of Javier Prades we also began to prepare a beautiful exhibition with paintings from the Prado museum, which tell the story of adoption. Over this period, myself and the others in the committee have heard many testimonies, which enabled us to understand how easy Christianity is, because it is not we who make it occur, it is Him. For me this became a certainty amidst the great pain I was feeling, and sometimes still do. I wanted our history to take hold in that family home, and it didn't happen—that certainty, that hope—but God makes it occur in many other places. We in the Spain committee wish to accept what we see happening. Making this documentary, we managed to bring many people together, speaking to them of the significance of adoption in our lives; seeing their favourable response, we were struck and grateful for this miracle that the Lord was allowing to occur amidst all our misery, our limits, our sins, so much greater than all of it. This

certainty has allowed us to become increasingly open to new realities far removed from our history. Even several public administration commissions began to open small doors for us: for example, we are developing a small programme which will allow around thirty children to follow a school curriculum away from home. The relationship with these associations is truly becoming something beautiful, and some of them have begun working with us by doing what they call "volunteer work". I think all of this is a product of the courage that is given by grace, and I want to thank the Italian association for making all this possible. For us, they are like parents who have always looked after us with a truly infinite esteem, with great tenderness and great patience, and have helped us to grow. Thank you, Julián, too, for your companionship.

Carrón. What does it mean that "the fear of death springs from our nature's desire, but the daring of grace's desire"? I think that right now, all of us, due to the circumstances the entire world is facing, can see how only fear and terror come from nature. We can use all sorts of words to describe how we are incapable of sustaining ourselves in this way, to give ourselves that hope—of which you spoke—that can only come from grace, from something that has happened to us, as we always hear from Péguy: "To hope, it is necessary to have received a great grace" (Ch. Péguy, *The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, Dorothy Brown Aspinwall, trans. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press 1970, p. 12). Everything you described speaks of how this grace remains, even amidst all our mess, our difficulties, the moments in which things aren't working with the children, with our children, and this testifies to the power of grace. In your "Red Thread", as you call it, you describe it well: we may often feel "lost" in the situation in which we find ourselves, often full of "uncertainty", etc, and I am struck by what you mention: "yet" surprised by the "flourishing of an unexpected grace", of life, that is, of what He does. This "yet" tells us that the surprise of this grace continues to occur, because if there is anyone among us living in a constant state of challenge, it is you. It is not the same to carry out a charitable gesture once a week, or every two weeks; it is not the same as living such hospitality 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year—this is the hospitality you offer. Yet, at the same time, precisely because you are so courageous, you ask yourselves: "Where does this capacity come from?", as you continue to realise that the difficulties you face are incommensurable to one's abilities: it is clear that alone (solely with the energies of your nature) you would not manage. This is how the surprise of this "yet" appears in all its power: you cannot help but be surprised by the flourishing of life, of this gratitude, this audacity, this freedom you find yourselves with, which stuns everyone, even public administration, as you said. Where does this come from? You said it yourself, from accepting what you see occurring in front of your eyes, what He is allowing to occur. You expressed it well: "Christianity is so easy, because it is not we who make it happen, it is Him". This becomes increasingly evident the more we are challenged by the pandemic and by difficulties with our children, because things don't work out, or play out differently, and we are forced to wait, as your testimonies make so clear. How much certainty is needed to await things in their own time! Yet even just witnessing such things—as you give me the opportunity to do this evening—is the greatest sign of this grace occurring, because without it, nothing would be possible. So how should we interpret a phrase like that about fear and courage? By not turning the other way, but by looking, looking at what is happening in front of us, because that is the only thing which will convince you that grace is real and not fruit of any strategy, because often, with children, no strategy is sufficient. The fact that after so many years, you continue to live with this gladness, being surprised by what you see flourishing, is the greatest sign of grace in action; a grace incarnate in friendships, in the reciprocal companionship you share, which sustains you. Everything is a sign of that You you spoke about throughout the year, which you constantly recognise among you. Thus, the only reason to understand expressions like this is to look. I am constantly amazed that the Mystery makes things happen in order that we may understand the important words in life. Instead of offering a theory of grace and courage, the Mystery makes them occur, that we may understand why they are always within reach. The Mystery makes the love for a child occur, because a child can only understand how much they are loved if they see it occur. Often, they need lots of signs to surrender to this; and if after many signs they do, it is only because of this, because they see it occur! No type of discourse, no type of exhortation can offer this possibility of them being taken. It is only the grace of an infinite tenderness towards them that, in time, can make even the most resistant children flourish. Thank you.

B. THE SURPRISE OF "YOU"

Sommacal. The surprise of the other as essential to one's own life is not something which becomes evident simply because we say it. It is, indeed, a surprise. And it is even more surprising to realise that within that difference—because the other is different to me, and different to how I think he or she is or should be—through that difference, the Lord comes to meet me, as the previous contribution described. "You were in the person I welcomed and I did not know. I thank You, oh Christ, for enabling me to do something I would not have been capable of", says the "Red Thread", quoting Fr. Giussani.

I am the father of an adopted child from the Far East. Recently, my wife and I are experiencing various challenges and issues in the relationship with him. Our son—who is fundamentally a good, kind child—often displays aggressive and violent attitudes towards us and those around him—classmates, friends, etc. This is partly because of his illness. It generates tense situations in all kinds of contexts, often leading to isolation, which he hates. Faced with this daily challenge, the dramatic question often emerges: "What have I done wrong to deserve this?", or: "Lord, what are you asking of me through this situation?".

These questions, despite often generating anger or prejudice, do not lead me to ignore that situation, by simply trying to tolerate it or not face it, or, worse, to simply tense all one's muscles in the hope of just getting by until the situation changes (if ever).

This year's "Red Thread", at one point, quotes Fr. Giussani, saying: "You were in that children, that companion, that person I welcomed, and I did not know". I have a great desire to discover the meaning of this situation, and what good it contains for me; I do not wish to waste time. I want to ask you to help me understand what the steps are to make this discovery.

In the "Red Thread", it says "Hospitality is allowing the other to enter [...] definitively and entirely, to the point of embracing his or her limits and wounds". In my many experiences of hospitality, this point has always been a provocation and a challenge for me. In my current adoption, I am experiencing and perceiving this more than ever: we have adopted a child who has lots of issues, not least a condition which impedes him from continuing his studies, and living a full life. He spends his days in his room, barely interacting with us, or our other children. More than ever before, this situation has brought out my limits and my struggle to face what, in *The Miracle of Hospitality*, Fr. Giussani calls "different from oneself".

Elsewhere in the "Red Thread", it says: "You were in [...] the person I welcomed and I did not know"; I know this, but I often forget it, because the struggle takes over.

What can enable me to embrace my child fully, and give me the reasons which will sustain me even in the hardest moments?

Carrón. The previous contribution asked: what goodness can there be in these situations your children put you in? If there is anyone who can appreciate how much these children have been rejected, not welcomed, faced truly painful circumstances—be it because of their background, or a complex infancy—it is you. In many instances, you realise that embracing them is beyond any capacity of your own, as you just said. One thus wonders what good there is for oneself in this. That is what I would ask you. In all this struggle, what did you experience as being good for you? Because all I can share with you is what I found to be good for me in the challenges life has thrown at me. Life doesn't spare you your challenges, I am not spared mine, she is not spared hers. All the situations I have found myself in, through the plan of Another, have been precious to my life, because without asking myself who was right or wrong (this is not important), they placed me on a path, they challenged me and continue to do so. What good does all this bring? That I cannot face these constant challenges without memory. As Bernanos said: "Injustice [...] don't go thinking you can make it turn tall by staring it straight in the face like a lion-tamer [...] never look at it more than you actually need, and never without saying a prayer". (G. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, Carroll & Graf, 1984, p. 69). We cannot look at evil, illness or suffering for long without putting ourselves in front of a Presence. So, for me, silence and memory as constant search for Christ is the only thing that enables me to respect the timings of Another. From when one begins the relationship with another, one cannot decide *a priori* what his or her timings should be, so one must wait. And whilst the other moves according to his or her timings—because we do not know what will happen or how—what should

we do? Who can sustain us in this situation? What allows us to embrace the other as they are? Only the awareness, which we must constantly renew, that we have been embraced by Christ, and continue to be so. When I saw Luca, I told him that I did not know how he could face such situations without a familiarity with Christ—it would be impossible. So, what good does this situation bring you, my friend? What good does it bring you, my friend? The ability to say, as Giussani says in the phrase you have quoted: “You were in that child, [...] you were in that person I welcomed, and I did not know”. It was He who came to knock on our door: “Will you let me in?”.

To welcome the difference that the other is—with all the complexity that only you will know—every hour of the day, there is no measure, no energy, no nature—to come back to the phrase from Saint Thomas—that can make us capable of embracing in this way. It is possible only thanks to the courage which is constantly provided through grace. It is only possible by turning to Him, being surprised anew by the patience which the Mystery has towards us which enables us to welcome the other. Without this, without feeling this embrace anew, not in the past, but now, it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to embrace the other. As our friend said earlier, anger would prevail, along with incomprehension, or prejudice towards every attitude you face. We cannot accompany people like this, without embarking on this journey. How can you embrace yourselves without making memory in the morning? We always think it is others who create our problems; what about ourselves? How can we embrace without letting Him in? What would a morning without finding Him be? What would that day be? Like a child lacking your presence. We understand this well; do we perhaps think we need this less than they do?

C. THE COURAGE OF AN ENCOUNTER

Sommacal. With the next two contributions, we would like to express the courage present in the dynamic of an encounter. In the first, courage as love for the freedom of the other, that is, stepping back in order not to micromanage, living a sort of vertigo, a relationship which will lead somewhere unknown. In the second, the courage to go out and meet others who share your questions—and frailties, we might add—thus becoming a testimony of a reawakened “I”.

When we adopted our son, through an international adoption, he was already 9 years old; now, he is 22. He was abandoned at birth, and has always lived in institutions, except between the ages of 5 and 7, when he lived with an aunt.

The road immediately became an uphill struggle, and after only two/three years the relationship between me and my son short-circuited, forcing me to adopt, as a defensive mechanism, both emotional and physical distance. For many years, I barely interacted with him, and limited myself to providing for his basic needs: making sure he was fed, buying him clothes, things like that. Over that period, time seemed to be wasted, and every day I asked myself what the point of that sort of motherhood could be: I wasn't building anything, and therefore thought that nothing good could happen to my son (he did not socialise with the friends who I thought might help him, the environments that could help, and he had stopped going to neuro-therapy).

At the same time, frequenting Families for Hospitality and certain other friends, I saw and understood that it was not automatic, and that the destiny of my son was playing out in a different timeframe, with a different horizon, to what I had in mind, and thus the only concrete thing I could entrust myself to was prayer. I have always been comforted by the passage from the Gospels in which Mary and Joseph return to Jerusalem to look for him; when they find him, the Virgin says: “Why did you do this? We were so stressed looking for you!”; the passage ends saying that Mary cherished everything that happened to her in her heart. So I told myself: “If she was distressed, I can be too!”. Like Mary and Joseph, we do not know what our children will say or do. Yet the hardest part for me was to “cherish” what was happening. To cherish, we must remember, protect and curate, yet all I wanted was for everything to pass, to forget everything. And since I was unable to cherish myself, I found—thank God—a heart greater than mine, that of this friendship which judges and accompanies, over time, towards a position which is otherwise humanly unsustainable.

One day, when my son was around 19 years old, without any sort of warning sign, I came across a stack of writing in which he spoke of the “torment” that he had felt in his heart for years, and that same evening—before I could do so—he came to me, burst into tears, and embraced me, saying he was sorry.

What I had deemed impossible had happened! And it happened in a manner which is still mysterious to me, which reminds me that my son—but this goes for everyone—is ultimately a mystery, and I cannot reduce him to his actions, to what I know about him, or what I have planned for him.

Today, that distance is definitely smaller, but I retain a desire (or a temptation) for greater closeness, or even intimacy with him. Sometimes, I think that if I were his biological mother I would not have this desire, because it would have been satisfied as soon as he was born; but then I realise that I harbour this desire towards my friends and my husband, too.

So I ask myself: is this a dangerous desire? Where will it take me?

I quote from this year's "Red Thread": "Hospitality is allowing the other to enter our lives [...] definitively and entirely, to the point of embracing his or her limits and wounds. An other by whom we are in turn welcomed, in a reciprocal dynamic made possible only by love. It is an encounter between two freedoms mysteriously in relationship with one another". My son entered my family entirely within this framework, because he was first taken into foster care, and then adopted. We welcomed his limits and his wounds, and we were also welcomed with our great limits as parents by this child who totally trusted us, and entrusted himself to us.

But what happens when, suddenly, after a long and intense journey full of beautiful, positive things, a strong desire reawakens in him to re-contact his biological parents, and all his relatives? What happens when one day he asks you to take him with his sister to his parents' house, not only to see them after many years, but perhaps even to have dinner with them or stay over? What happens when he tells my wife and I, already filled with unease and pain, that he would like to return to his country of origin to pursue a work opportunity, decisive and convinced of his plans, because his ex-parents and relatives will always be there to help him financially?

Then, suddenly, at a School of Community in which I shared my pain as a father, a friend who had listened attentively bowls me over by saying: "I am fascinated by your position, attracted by your freedom and the good it brings your child. Do you not feel suffocated? I would have gone crazy in your position. I want to know how you managed, to understand it better. I understand your experience in Families for Hospitality perfectly". I was struck immensely. I had come to the School of Community with the aim to "come clean" and being helped, but in reality, I emerged as a testimony of a Reality (with a capital r) that imposes itself, and of a true freedom and goodness that is not merely moralistic, that I only see now in my relationship with my son.

Carrón. What good can this situation bring you? The awareness of your son as mystery, no longer reduced to the idea you have or were forming of him, as we can also do with ourselves and others. Furthermore, it can widen the horizon of our gaze, as the friend who spoke before you told us; after eighteen years, she saw things happen that she had thought impossible. Faced with these truly challenging situations, we are all forced to widen, to dilate, our understanding of reality, which is always greater than our "philosophy". This enables us to face the mystery of the other person, of their freedom, loving this mystery, loving this freedom, because only thus can we truly love our freedom and be amazed by the mystery that we are. That "eternal mystery of our being" of which Leopardi spoke (G. Leopardi, "On the Portrait of a Beautiful Lady" in L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 48), without which we cannot understand all the diversity of what it means to be human. Forget about mechanisms! We find ourselves in front of a being, an other so different to us, which overwhelms us continuously from all sides. Like an adopted child wishing after many years to return to his biological parents: the mystery of the other re-emerges. You nurtured him for years, you took care of him in an "astonishing" manner. And suddenly, the mystery of the other appears, confounding all your ideas. What then? What do you discover, what good do you discover, even within the struggle of seeing a son leave? Your freedom, which you did not know you have, which astonishes a friend so much that he says: "I am fascinated by your position, attracted by your freedom and the good it brings your child. Do you not feel suffocated? I would have gone crazy in your position". He bowled you over and you were struck.

Where can we learn such things? In some book? No, we learn them, one after another, only by converting to what is happening. If you had not seen what you had seen, could you have sworn that something different could have happened? After years like that, you would have said: "No way!". Yet there is always space for something new. This is a hope for us, too, so much so that a friend notices that freedom. Why can another person be so struck by your freedom? What

enables you to have this freedom? Almost without realising, you have witnessed an overabundance of love grow within you, you found yourself harbouring such an intense experience of being loved that someone near you said something which bowled you over: "I would have been suffocated". We will carry these things to the grave, because they constitute our being humans in the world, and they change reality more than we think; for us, firstly, and then for others, who cannot help but be amazed when they say these things. This is what we must look at. Faced with any difficulty, when you ask yourselves questions such as those we have asked tonight, as correct as they may be—you have all the adequate reasons for asking questions of this calibre—no answer I could give would be capable of convincing you of what you have seen and will see occur in your lives. I am thus interested in you realising what you are saying, more than what I might be able to say! Do you realise that in your experience, in the reality you live, there is the answer to your questions? Because the answers exist beyond any prediction you could make! Because what you thought impossible can occur, thanks to the mystery and freedom of the other; so much so that another can see it incarnate in you and cannot help but be amazed. At the same time, this amazement you see in the other affects you, too. This is huge! The Mystery gives it back to you, incarnate; not through a discourse. Another person is left amazed so that you are re-granted that amazement in the flesh. Otherwise, you would not even realise that you are a "testimony of a reality that imposes itself, and of a true freedom and goodness that is not merely moralistic, that I only see now in my relationship with my son". Your children are regenerating you!

D. EXPRESSIONS OF COURAGE

ACTIVE OBEDIENCE TO CIRCUMSTANCES

Sommacal. In the "Red Thread", it says that within hospitality, courage is not "an attempt rooted in our own strengths or on chance, but on an active obedience to circumstances, marked by hope".

In recent months, my wife has fallen ill. This has caused her to suffer a great deal, and impedes her from doing a lot of things she did before; she has always been a pillar of our large family and crucial in many of the adoptions we have experienced. Initially, I faithfully awaited daily changes, asking the Lord to slowly allow her health to improve. After weeks then months went by, I eventually found myself at a crossroads: I either get angry, or I change my way of looking at this circumstance, and the time that was given to me, my children, my work, and my (often lacking) energy. I tried to begin to love this situation as it was, with all its facets, which truly highlighted, and continues to do so, my inability to live up to everything she has always done for us. Yet this is a difficult position to maintain. I seem to perceive that accepting reality means to begin to love the things that happen to me, as they are, even the small and apparently unimportant things, or those which seem to trap us. Thus, situation by situation, my vocation is being increasingly revealed to me; that is, the way in which the Lord makes me glad within a taste for life. Yet, precisely because this is a position I must continuously ask to maintain, I want to ask for your help to better understand what can save me from the temptation of moving from accepting reality to accepting the idea of reality that I have in mind. What does it mean to live out an active obedience to circumstances, and not merely an attempt depending only on my own capacity?

Thank you, truly! I thought that the hospitality we live and have always lived were the antidote to nihilism, and that all the helpful work we do for families were immune from it. Yet the work undertaken this past summer made me think a lot, and clarified the perception that nihilism emerges when I forget that I am a daughter.

So many situations I face are so difficult and painful that they often leave me breathless, pushing me to an almost frenetic tempo, or otherwise bring sadness when I see so many beautiful families who could go out of their way a little more. I ask myself: can nihilism take on the appearance of this prejudice or activism?

Another face of nihilism that I discovered painfully in myself—truly, in pain—lies in the thought: "These kids are not changing, maybe they will never change", or "these families make these

errors, we have tried a million different things, but they just won't change". A distrust of the present thus emerges, despite having seen so many miracles and things that change: "There is no hope here".

Hospitality occurs through a movement of the heart, a heart that lets itself be "moved", to the point of saying: "Come to my house!". How can we discern this feeling when we descend into breathlessness, into prejudice, into guilt because we are unable to respond adequately to particular needs? I understand the difference between this and a calm obedience to given circumstances.

Carrón. I feel like the person who spoke before you may have given you the key to overcome the alternatives of anger, or change. He said that accepting a problematic situation is not easy, it is humanly difficult, and then he used the word vocation. I think that whilst understanding this is important for everyone, it is crucial for you, because you are constantly at a crossroads, as he said, challenged in so many ways due to the complexity of the situations these children must face, due to their backgrounds, and the circumstances they found themselves–bless them–through no fault of their own.

If one does not recognise that circumstances are the modality through which the Mystery calls one to respond, it is difficult to carry on. It is difficult for anyone, let alone those with such challenges! The point is whether we have an adequate interlocutor for the challenge. It is not the child's fault, or the other person's: we can offer all these explanations, all possible and imaginable analyses, but at the end of the day, who is our ultimate interlocutor in this situation? As you say: is hospitality the antidote to nihilism, or is it our being sons and daughters? This is where we see how different this is from placing our hope in activism, or an expectation that others will change, because this will not withstand such a situation! Only the possibility of a personal relationship with Christ fulfils life and will give us the opportunity to respect the freedom of others, without haste, without prejudice, without anger.

It is inevitable and normal that we are constantly breathless: we desire what is best for our children, that they may find their way, that they may struggle less, and perhaps we hope we might too. All of this is absolutely desirable, we cannot avoid it, but the problem emerges when this doesn't occur according to our timeframes: what should we do whilst we await everything we desire, not knowing when it will arrive? We cannot live solely of a future what we do not yet know. We can wait only if, in every instant, we live a relationship that fills our life with affection! If we do not live of that overabundance that only Christ can bring, we will always depend on outcomes, on the results of our attempts which are not capable of responding to the desire for fullness that each of us continues to have. To look forwards with hope, waiting to see how the design of Another for our child will play out, to face this vertigo–this is how Giussani describes religiosity, as a vertiginous position in front of the Mystery–we must be children ourselves, as our friend said. Because the Son, Christ, awaited the journey of each one of us, and continues to await, as he awaited Peter's journey! Thus, it is not a strategy that will allow us to free ourselves from activism or distrust of change: is it only the certainty of being children. No one can look at their own child without the awareness of being, in turn, the child of a benevolent Father, who is responding to my desire and will also provide goodness for my child, though I don't know what that will be, and I may not know the method the Mystery will use.

What goodness can this situation bring us? It is asking for a unique relationship with Christ, to live an adequate experience of hospitality. Your journey to Christ is not separate, but passes through everything you have shared, otherwise you would not do it! Only when I am challenged as you are, even if it is by other things, am I forced into an ever more familiar relationship with Christ, otherwise I cannot manage. This is the goodness that a child can bring you. It is evident that you would have been spared many things if you had chosen a less challenging, easier life. I would have been spared much too if I had stayed in Spain! But we would not have undertaken a journey that has brought us to an intense familiarity with Christ, and we would not have seen occur what we thought was impossible, as one of you said. This is the goodness that a child, and others, can bring: the possibility of a vertiginous journey, certainly, but one also full of wonder at seeing things that others, in more comfortable lives, will never see. Because one will never see fully from a balcony; one can only see by getting stuck in, as you do. Hearing your experiences, I am filled with emotion. We cannot understand certain things without being challenged, because this enables us to see things we would otherwise not see.

PRESENCE AS A WORK WHICH ACCEPTS WHAT IS MADE BY ANOTHER

Sommacal. Another expression of courage is the risking of a presence, encountering other realities and collaborating towards building the common good. From the "Red Thread": "We wish to help one another not to lose the fullness of life we have experienced by risking our presence in the world, open to meeting those who, like us, still have the courage to be amazed, and, thus, the desire to build".

***I have never** thought back to your words at the Beginning Day last year as much as I have recently: "Accepting the life in front of us". Life is made of what the Mystery sends us and allows us to encounter. I think of the fact that many of our loved ones have recently been affected by Covid, with everything that brings; I think of the generosity between us, in particular in several very simple people; I think of the communal initiatives we share with many associations and social services, and of my participation in regional elections, in which I wished to build rather than demolish. All this occurs in a reciprocal relationship of trust which grows. I could give many other examples, which involve many others in different circumstances.*

I am thinking particularly of my experience at the National Forum of Families, my relationship with Gigi De Palo, and the esteem and relationships that were created there, constantly growing, which encourage us to go beyond our own "back yard". I think, too, of the Rosary we shared on October 7th, and the relationship with the CEI's National Office of Family Pastoral Care, in particular with Father Marco Vianelli, head of the office, or with TV2000, whose director wrote to us after the Rosary saying that the transmission was "an opportunity to get to know your experience of hospitality, one of the most interesting initiatives to have emerged from the charism of Servant of God Msgr. Luigi Giussani, but also to appreciate the care with which you organised the celebration of the Holy Rosary". I think back to what you said at the Beginning Day on the importance of accepting facts rather than ceding to interpretations.

How can we support each other in this personal and shared experience, to continue to be in relationship with everyone? How does my responsibility play out in what I do?

Carrón. Just as you said: accepting the life that is there. Because everything you quoted—from the Rosary for the Forum of Families, to the encounters with the people you mentioned—are opportunities. We can take advantage of them to share with others the grace we have received from the charism, or we can waste them. There is no particular strategy; the point is that each of us, in his or her own life, encounters colleagues, people in public institutions, or people in ecclesiastical institutions. We cannot stay in our own back yard: because of the life there is among you, it is impossible to stay in one's own back yard! All the things you mentioned testify that every gesture, however small, is public, with a public relevance. From such a gesture, people—who are not naive—perceive the novelty, and the newness that it brings. Novelty and difference do not depend on huge demonstrations; all that is needed is the care with which you organised the Rosary. That was appreciated. People are increasingly ready to notice novelty in the smallest particulars. We communicate it by living, because there is no other method to avoid losing the fullness of life; we do not do things to gain recognition from others—who might even sometimes offer it—because we live already for the overabundance we receive. Then, in some moments, we can also give thanks for the comfort of having this recognized, but we have already been repaid beyond any measure: the "hundredfold" we experience here on Earth is beyond any measure.

E. COMPANIONSHIP ("YOU" PRESENT)

Sommacal. The last contributions we have chosen seek to help deepen the understanding of what our companionship means. Everything we have said so far generates and sustains Families for Hospitality—to quote the "Red Thread". It generates and sustains our Association, because it generates and sustains each of us, it generates a unity of the individual moving and putting his or herself into play within a human companionship, open to the world.

***Over the summer** after the Pandemic, we were more desirous than ever of an infinite Goodness. We had the chance to meet many people, some over the phone, others in person. We found ourselves happier to accept reality because we were not alone. Within the many*

restrictions, I often asked myself: what withstands the test of time? What withstands the great fear that is still present, the great confusion I see at work every day? Only a Presence which is there, which waits for me and loves me, which I need as much as the air I breathe. Through many encounters, I experienced this goodness through people I had never met, and with whom I became familiar. Right now, it is difficult to sustain our hope together, to maintain the desires of the heart, but in our experience we can concretely touch the fact that He creates this goodness and it becomes familiar to my life, so much so that I can share it with others, because it is so carnal that it is unforgettable. A Grace which fills my heart with gratitude, and opens me to life. "From grace comes courage" says the "Red Thread". It is the courage to concretely sustain our friends experiencing the pain of an adopted child wishing to return to his or her biological family; the courage to go and encounter new families; the courage of a family wishing to start an experience of hospitality; the courage to call Social Services to continue to understand and build a path. There is nothing as beautiful as sharing a path; see the intensity of Van Thuan (in his book) speaking to a young man wishing to become a priest: "That you may be a presence of the living God". Being a presence of the living God! In my journey of hospitality, this comes up more and more, because reality presses in and often suffocates. A companionship like this, which prays for you, which passes through the concrete presence of a friend, is what I desire: an increased closeness and familiarity between us, which is charity. Can you help us with this?

My family and I are going through a very difficult time. I desire to say: "Friends, I want to live this difficulty with you, I don't want to feel alone".
 Within a companionship, when and how can this desire become a demand?

Looking at the experiences and lives of many families like mine, what dominates is pain. Pain of those who have not been able to have biological children, the pain of children we cannot welcome, the pain of families facing the rebellion of children they have adopted, which often leads them to make bad choices.

In all of this immense pain, there is a source of hope, our companionship within the movement and in particular within the Families for Hospitality. Through this "particular" experience, we encounter many people who are not in the movement, who feel welcomed, understood, and not judged.

Our eldest children are a great testimony of this. In a conversation with my son, who has recently become a father, he told me: "My rebellion, my anger with myself and the world—which had negative consequences—was born of fear! What fear? Of abandonment! But then I realised that looking solely at my past and my errors was stopping me from being happy! So I began a journey: I started to look at the present, you who have always been present, and have not boxed me in, have left me free to make mistakes, who have always told me: 'You must now take on your own responsibilities'. This allowed me to look at myself and think of my future! Then I met the woman that now is the mother of my child, but I could not have recognised her as something good if I had not begun that journey".

Within our association, how can we protect that "accompanying of families" without removing that pain, even if it bleeds and causes hurt?

Carrón. Only in one way, as we have heard: considering what withstands this situation (one of you said it earlier). What withstands these wounds? Each of us must consider what enables us to stay on our feet, what makes us bide our time when a child does what you have described. What withstands, what sustains you? Why? Because, as the friend who spoke before you said, we want to live everything! How? We cannot live without the light of this companionship. But what is this companionship? How can we truly accompany one another? Only if ours is a companionship which, as your son said, responds to the profound fear that leads to rebellion: the fear of being abandoned. Where can he place his certainty that, whatever happens, he will not be abandoned? Only in seeing us live this experience: we have not been abandoned. I spoke today with a person experiencing a real challenge of such abandonment, and I could not but quote from the Old Testament: "Even should she [a mother] forget, I will never forget you" (Is. 49:15). We can only accompany one another through the pain, and can only withstand all our challenges, if we place our hope in something present, as fragile as our companionship, but

which is the sign of His presence. Otherwise our energies, even if we are together, would be insufficient to sustain us. Because it is not a question of physical, mental or psychological support. No, because it is a question of the only support which truly responds to the root of our being, to our ultimate need which only Christ can respond to. Thus, if our companionship does not take us there, not only will we be unable to truly accompany each other, will we also be unable to accompany our children. Because our faces will show whether we are frightened, afraid of being abandoned.

It is incredible when our children reach this clarity, because they then teach us what we must keep in mind! Often, we respond to symptoms, but they tell us the origin of the symptoms! We see their rebellion and all the strange things they used to do, all their unease and their reactions; we see all of this and often respond only to this. But what good do they bring us? The awareness that behind the symptoms, at a certain point, true need emerges. But we can identify our true need only if we accompany one another's deepest need. If we do not respond to that, our efforts will be reduced to activism, as our friend said earlier. And any recognition we might receive—though not something to disregard—is yet not capable of responding to the profound fear of abandonment hanging over them! I think this shows us what is at stake. We ask: "What goodness can these children bring us?" The answer is that they bring us a depth of living which in turn makes us truly aware of what is at the heart of the human question; without them, we would struggle to reach this. Often, in fact, we struggle to even get close to the vortex they live in. They take us there, and tell us their true need, which is the same as ours. This is why they are so precious; because they bring us to a depth of human experience we would otherwise not reach alone. This is why sometimes we must accept their rebellion, things we do not understand, mood swings, until they have the freedom—what a mystery!—to look at their fear of abandonment, which they previously had not considered because they were distracted by their rebellion, or by the very fear itself. At a certain point, we discover it! Our interlocutor with our children is this fear of being abandoned, a fear that we share! The fear of nothingness! The fear that, in the end, there will be nothingness; the nihilism, the pull of nihilism which we escaped in Creation, as Giussani says! Something came from nothing. This truly is *the* question.

Thus, when we read the headlines—and you see this so often in your experience—we realise what the true issue is, the true need. Aside from needing a home, clothes, and having everything that we and others need, there are companions towards destiny, seeking this ultimate need, this ultimate fear of nothingness, of being abandoned. We thus begin to look at our children not full of commiseration, but as those who can bring us back to the issue at hand, which, as we said earlier, can only be answered with a presence. And this Presence must either become familiar to us, enabling us to relate to our children and to one another, or our companionship will prove insufficient, if it does not contain this hope.

Sommacal. Lastly, I would like to ask you a question considering the relationship between us, people with various levels of responsibility in the Association.

On the governing boards, and various places our association is led, how can we accompany one another and allow time for this consciousness of the journey to mature, without our judgement suffocating the other, rather than helping? How can we increase the communion and communality between us?

Carrón. Firstly, by understanding your responsibility as the most valuable thing for your human journey, before any kind of organisation. As you see, you can guide, help or judge an association which witnesses such things as we have shared tonight only if you perceive this as a challenge for you, and if it is not reduced to mere organisational difficulty. Only then will you truly be of help. This responsibility must not be side-lined, with your main life lived elsewhere; your involvement in being together is precisely for your own unity. Then, when you must say something to your friends, it comes from this journey you are on together.

When I ask people to take on responsibility in the life of the movement, I often feel uneasy. What gives me the freedom to do so is to say to them: "I invite you to participate in an adventure in which everything we do will be for a shared journey towards destiny". Without this, your participation in the Association would be like a toll to pay, with your focus lying elsewhere. No: as we have seen tonight, our focus must be to face these issues for each of us, because only then will you be able to give the Association that original method which will become a way of looking at everything. Therefore, do not satisfy yourselves with superficial, organisational things. You will, of course, also face organisational matters, but with an unknown depth, if you have not

reduced them to mere things to get done; that is, if you look at what is in play, as we said earlier. So, good luck on the journey to you all! Thank you for what you have shared, which always amazes me.

Sommacal. Thank you, I want to thank you deeply—on behalf of everyone, I think—for what you told us tonight, for the paternal gaze you offer us, and for how you constantly reenergise us to live profoundly, as men, everything that happens to us. Thank you, Julián!

Carrón. Thank you! Goodbye.