

# "WE WANT TO BE OUTRAGEOUSLY HAPPY, TOO"

## LIFE AS VOCATION

Notes from Julián Carrón's talk at the GS Beginning Day  
Milan, October 6, 2012



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*I cieli*

*Cuando de mi Patrona*

*Il mio volto*

**Alberto Bonfanti.** I would like to start by greeting all of you, as well as all of those who are joining us via video link throughout Italy, and by thanking, on behalf of everyone, our friend Julián, who chose to accompany us in such a particular way again this year, in this beginning. Many contributions arrived for this day, constituting a sign of the expectation with which we are here and with which we started the school year. I was moved by the depth of the need for meaning that emerges, a need provoked by reality and

by a seriousness and sincerity in personally facing it. This depth of need emerges in front of the dramatic facts that the Mystery does not spare us, like the death or serious illness of someone dear to us, but also, and I would even say above all – and many of you emphasized this, as well – in approaching daily life, as we resume the academic routine and the effort of our studies, as we face certain relationships and a way of life in which it seems that there is no possibility to thoroughly verify the encounter we have had, the experience of good we have glimpsed. Daily life raises the question of “forever,” of the verification of the encounter we have had; it brings out the need provoked by the intuition of good that we have experienced on certain occasions, like the Easter Triduum (so many of you spoke of it as a decisive event for the discovery of your humanity and of He who responds!), GS vacation, or in certain moments in which we live the awareness – of which you, Julián, reminded us last year – that life is a gift, and therefore is positive. That is, daily life brings out the need that this intuition of good can be experienced within *all* the circumstances that we are called to live. So what came to my mind, and to some of yours in your contributions, is what you, Julián, wrote to us at the Easter Spiritual Exercises:

“Never before have you felt vibrate within you all of the desire for happiness that constitutes you, to the point of astonishing yourselves. ‘Human nature, if you’re merely weak and worthless, dust and shadow, why aspire so high?’ said Leopardi, amazed. The need of our heart is so great that at times we are bewildered. Nothing gives us peace. Nothing appears to be at the height of our desires. What tenderness we must have toward ourselves in order not to abandon our hearts! Those who do not give up, sooner or later, will understand why it was worth it: to discover the fascination of Christ. I hope to always find among you more friends who, like the tenth leper, are content with nothing less than His presence, His friendship. Your companion toward destiny.”

Thus it appears decisive to us to understand the journey that we must complete personally in order to remain at the level of our de-

sire, on which our freedom and our reason must rest, so that life is fulfilled within the circumstances that we are called to live. And therefore we ask you: what is this tenderness toward ourselves that is necessary in order not to abandon our hearts? What journey must we make to have a true affection for ourselves, which prevents us from being content in daily life with the many “false infinities” into which we inevitably and repeatedly fall (as the Pope reminded us in his message for the Rimini Meeting)?

### **JULIÁN CARRÓN**

Greetings to everyone! I am happy to be able to share this Beginning Day with you, because the beginning places us in front of the decisive things of life once again. For this reason, we will begin immediately with the question that you asked me: what is this affection for ourselves? This is the first point that I would like to address.

#### **1. WHAT IS THIS AFFECTION FOR OURSELVES?**

Tenderness, affection for ourselves is an attachment full of respect, compassion, and mercy toward ourselves. It is like having toward yourself – says Fr. Giussani – a little of that attachment that your mother had toward you, especially when you were small. Because this affection, this capacity to take ourselves seriously, to embrace ourselves... Imagine the tenderness with which a mother holds her child in her arms, entirely moved by the fact that the child exists, aware of all of the desire for happiness that will be unleashed in that child because of the great destiny to which he is called.

If we do not have within us a little of this tenderness, this affection for ourselves, it's as if we were lacking the terrain on which to build. And so it's understandable that you would ask me what this tenderness is. It's what – and I don't know if you realized this when we sang *Cuando de mi Patrona* – this song says, too: when one finds himself before the eyes of Our Lady, he desires to look at himself with her eyes; how much he desires it and how much, sometimes, he is unable to embrace himself and to have this tenderness toward himself. What a journey is needed in order to have this affection for

ourselves! We all know that it's not immediate; we know it well, so much so that often, instead of being tender, we are violent, harsh, ferocious with ourselves. Thus tenderness is anything but taken for granted. Just think, each of you, of when you have looked at yourself with a little of this tenderness, and how many times, instead, we look at ourselves with that harshness, that fierceness, that lack of mercy that makes us almost unbearable to look at.

So let's help each other to discover how this tenderness arises, by observing what Fr. Giussani described so wonderfully: "In the psychological history of a person, the source of affective capacity is receiving and recognizing a person that you have in front of you" (cf. L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona" ["The Time of the Person Has Come"], edited by L. Cioni, *Litterae Communionis CL*, No. 1, 1977, p. 12). Let's think, as I was saying, of a baby with his mother: the affective source, that which causes all of the baby's affection to spring up within him, is the presence of his mother; his affective capacity comes to the surface in responding to the smile, the care, the love, the presence of his mother. For the baby, this presence is so decisive that, if it is lacking, the affective source remains arid; it's not something that the baby gives himself, it's not that the baby can slowly give himself this capacity for affection. We see it well: the first person to whom he becomes attached is not himself, but his mother; the entire affective source comes out in front of that good, positive presence that, in looking at him with that tenderness of which he is not capable, causes a capacity for affection toward his mother to spring up in him.

In order to make us understand things – friends – the Mystery does not explain them to us – He does not give the baby a lesson about what affection is – but instead makes them happen. The baby first lives that affection, feels the affection that his mother has, sees how he starts to be attached to his mother, and slowly he understands. But, at a certain point – we all know this – this natural sign, which is the mother, is no longer enough, and not because our mother got mad at us or because our father is not there. No, they are there like they were before, but it's as if everything that was

enough before, at a certain moment is no longer enough. Why? If we don't look at what happens in us, then we don't understand ourselves, and we can't understand what happens at a certain age in our life. Why is it no longer enough? Because each one of us has evolved toward youth; and what is the sign that this evolution exists? Fr. Giussani says (and how many times you can observe and recognize this in your experience) that one gets ruffled and feels an absence of affection, as if that affection were not enough, and he feels confused, lost, and flustered (cf. L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona," *op. cit.*).

And one says, "But if all of the factors are the same as before, if my mother and father are there, and they haven't changed their attitude toward me, then why do I now feel confused, lost, and flustered, and nothing is good enough for me?" This is the experience that we must try to understand, because otherwise we start to get tangled up, as Anna says: "Lately, it often happens that I perceive a sort of disproportion with respect to all of the things that I do. Every time that I do something, even something that I like – volleyball, evenings with friends, etc. – I feel that, deep down, it doesn't satisfy me, it's not enough, and therefore I plunge into a whirlwind of things to do, which, however, does nothing but strengthen this cry. I wanted to ask for help precisely in judging this thing, how to stay in front of it."

If we don't understand what happened at a certain moment in our life – how is it that, at a certain point, our father and mother are no longer enough – then what do we do? Since our father and mother are no longer enough, we substitute our parents with friends, and then with our girlfriend or boyfriend, and then with other things, but the pattern doesn't change. Why doesn't it change? Because, essentially, we haven't understood that this is not enough and that, if you exchange your mother for something else, the same problem repeats itself; and even if I like things, at a certain point they are no longer enough for me – and then we repeat, with things, the exact same experience that we had with our mother. And how do we normally try to get out of this situation? By plunging into a

whirlwind of things to do: "What do I have to do?" And so begins the race to see what we can do. And since it always seems like too little, then we do more, to the point of exhaustion. But the only result is that this, instead of resolving the problem, causes the cry to grow even stronger. Then we start to realize that, maybe, before continuing with this whirlwind, we need to understand – judge – what was revealed at a certain moment of our life in the most beautiful and true relationship that we have had (with our parents), in order to help us to truly become aware of ourselves, to thoroughly understand what is happening to us. Because if you don't understand this, it's not like you can resolve it – you simply reproduce it in other ways, a thousand ways. Therefore, it is about becoming aware of yourself, it is a problem of self-awareness. How does Fr. Giussani define this self-awareness, that is, this awareness of self? Self-awareness is "a clear and loving perception of self [I have to clarify what I am in order to be able to have this love for myself], charged with awareness of one's destiny and thus capable of true affection for self [because only if we understand this, can we have this affection]" (L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona," op. cit.).

So, what happened? At a certain moment in our evolution, the ultimate structure of our *I* came out: all of the desire for which we were made, all of the expectation with which we were created, became conscious in its full extent at a certain moment in our life. Thus, if one realizes that nothing is enough for him, he realizes it because all of the heart's expectation, all of the capacity for fulfillment for which we were made, all of the greatness of his life's destiny, has definitively broadened. When one realizes this – says Fr. Giussani – this is "the moment of the Other [with a capital O], true, permanent, of which we are made, with an inexorable and faceless presence, ineffable" (L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona," op. cit.). Either we become aware of this, or we constantly substitute our parents with another presence, because we don't realize that, in that moment, who I am, the fact that I am made for this Other, was glaringly revealed. If we don't become aware of this, then we don't ever come out of our adolescence, because we never take the step

toward recognizing this Other, an ineffable Other whom I still do not know, faceless; I don't know how to identify the traits of this Other toward whom I am constantly striving, toward whom all of my *I* tends. While I was preparing this talk, a friend pointed out a recent newspaper article from *La Repubblica* where, in describing the situation of young people, it says that "adolescence seems never-ending" ("Adolescenza infinita" ["Endless Adolescence"], by Massimo Recalcati). Since we don't understand, then we constantly substitute our parents with something else. Because of this, Fr. Giussani is a great friend when he says to us: look, guys, "youth is the time of the You [with a capital Y], into which the heart sinks, powerless, as if in an abyss; it is the time of God" (L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona," op. cit.).

Without recognizing the You, without recognizing this Other for whom my life is made, we cannot have tenderness toward ourselves, affection for ourselves, and thus we get even more tangled up, ruffled, confused... Because, in this moment, the Mystery, who causes all of your desire to vibrate – as I told you in my Easter message – makes you understand how, in our life, there is an urgent mystery inside, and thus we understand that we are made for a destiny. And what does it mean that man is made for this destiny, that he senses this destiny? That you, like me, perceive yourself with a dynamic, with an irreversible drive toward a limitless horizon that you never definitively manage to reach, but that is an ideal of happiness, truth, justice, beauty, and good, whose shores we do not know how to touch; a powerful dynamism that gives me no respite, and that drives me toward an unknown end, toward a shore that lies beyond all that I see, beyond all that I touch, beyond all that I do. Because of this, even plunging into a whirlwind of things to do doesn't satisfy me. If we don't understand this, then we don't understand ourselves, and we don't understand why nothing satisfies us: because you have grown, because your *I* is bigger, because at a certain moment, as your biology and physiology – all of your being – were evolving, everything for which you were made came to the surface. It's what Jesus summed up in the Gospel phrase, "What does it matter, what



does it matter to you, if you get everything that you want, yet lose yourself?" (cf. *Mt* 16:26). This is the question that every man, everywhere, in every age of history, has to recognize in himself, because it is what best describes what we feel vibrate within us. What does it matter if I gain everything, if I throw myself into this whirlwind of things, if I do everything, but this doesn't satisfy me and makes me lose myself, makes me lose that fullness for which I am made?

Friends, what violence against everything and everyone is introduced into life if one doesn't understand this, because then I get angry first at my mom, then at my friends, then at my boyfriend or girlfriend, then at myself, and finally I am angry at everything... "Instead of affection for ourselves – says Giussani – resentment." I am resentful toward everything. It's not the best life. And so we are interested in understanding what is happening in us, because the fact that life has a destiny is too evident, as is also shown in the dialogue on the flyer advertising this event, which you all have. "Do you ever think about the future?" [Why should we think about the future? Because we can't avoid thinking about the future; the destiny for which we are made is too pressing within us. Thus the response is the one that you all have...] "Oh, yes...all the time" [I always think about destiny, about the future]. "What do you think you'd like to be when you grow up?" "Outrageously happy!"

So I understand that, when our friends from Bolzano read this *Peanuts* comic strip, they thought, "We want to be outrageously happy, too." But they immediately asked themselves, "Are we? No – they say – or better, it seems possible when we are on vacation or camping in the summer, in certain moments it seems within arm's reach, but, in thinking about school, then it appears to be a utopia. The problem is that school is something that we have to face every day – they say – and it would be beautiful to be able to have the same experience that we live on these occasions at school, too." Who wouldn't desire this? And so the question remained open, and they invited everyone – teachers, students, principals – to an assembly in which they asked this question: can one be "outrageously happy" at school?

“The most pressing urgency that I feel in this period – writes one of you – is to understand what it means that everything is vocation. Lately, at home, there are many problems in which I struggle to see the possibility of a relationship with the Mystery, although it is also true that I am sensing, precisely in this difficulty, the possibility to discover something big. Therefore, how can I not let myself be crushed by circumstances? How can I look at this evil without fear, as a possibility?” It often seems that school, problems at home, or circumstances become an obstacle to reaching that happiness to which we “outrageously” aspire. Why? Because we don’t realize that we cannot walk toward destiny, toward happiness, if not through circumstances. Circumstances introduce themselves into life, but they often seem adverse, hostile, contrary to our desire for fulfillment; because of this, it is fundamental that we understand what their meaning is. Are they really an obstacle, or are they, as this friend of ours says, a possibility?

Fr. Giussani again helps us to understand the meaning of these circumstances that we have to face on our journey to destiny, to happiness. What do circumstances have to do with our journey to destiny? Fr. Giussani starts by saying, “In the life of those He calls, God never lets anything happen unless it serves for the growth and maturation of those He has called” (L. Giussani, “The Long March to Maturity,” *Traces-Litterae Communionis*, No. 3, March 2008, p. 1). That is, God permits everything that happens so that we become mature; or rather, God doesn’t – ever! – let something happen, if not for our maturation. And the test with which we can verify whether or not we are becoming truly mature is if the capacity grows in us to see to it that every objection, every difficulty, every obstacle, even every persecution, can become the instrument, occasion, or possibility of our maturation. Because it is this struggle – which circumstances introduce into life – that keeps us awake, that reawakens us constantly, “that is, it matures our awareness of what is our consistency or our dignity, which is an Other” (L. Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose. 1979-1981 [Certain of a Few Great Things (1979-1981)]*, Bur, Milan 2007, p. 389). And so everything that hap-

pens to us in life, as we saw in the relationship with our parents, is for understanding that our consistency, our possibility of fulfillment, lies in this Other. This is self-awareness, that is – as we said before – a clear and loving perception of self, charged with awareness of one's destiny and thus capable of true affection for self.

## **2. WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF THIS SELF-AWARENESS, AND WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO DO WITH CIRCUMSTANCES?**

The Pope gave us a beautiful contribution, a reminder, in the message that he sent for this year's Rimini Meeting, which was entitled, as you all know, "By Nature, Man is Relation to the Infinite." What is the first element of this self-awareness of ours? What is the first given?

### ***a. Original dependence: "We are made."***

We are made. "Speaking of man and of his desire for the infinite means first of all – says the Pope – recognizing his constitutive relationship with the Creator. Man is a creature of God." And therefore, the "first given [that defines the identity of man] is his original and ontological dependence on the One who wanted and created us. Yet this dependence [sometimes] [...] [seems to go against modern and contemporary man, and instead it] reveals [precisely] the greatness [...] of the human being" (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 10, 2012). But we have to see how circumstances help us to become aware of the value of these things that we know, because there is nothing more evident than the fact that we do not give life to ourselves. I think it could help us to reflect on what we sang at the beginning, a song that many of us know: *Il mio volto (My Face)*. Let's look carefully at the lyrics: "My God, I look at myself and discover that I am faceless. / I look into my depths and see endless darkness." How many times has this happened to us, to really be in darkness?

For many of us, it can be an even greater occasion for confusion; instead, since we are not all right, but are uncomfortable – because man is not made for darkness – we don't resign ourselves to it. But

what do we do? Think about what you do when you are in darkness: many times, we plunge into a frenetic whirlwind of things, trying to get out of the darkness; instead, the song says, “Only when I realize that You exist [that You, with a capital Y, that You exist] / do I hear my voice again / like an echo / and I’m born again” (A. Mascagni, “Il mio volto” [“My Face”], *Canti*, Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan 2007, p. 203). And thus I discover that darkness is the occasion, if I don’t stop at appearances but look all the way into the depths of the darkness, to realize that You exist. Then you are not alone, you are not alone. A presence that constitutes us starts to rise up before our eyes in such a way that it begins to give us the possibility – when we recognize it – to be reborn, to have a true affection for ourselves, a capacity to love ourselves. In fact, only when I come to recognize that You exist, am I reborn. Ask yourselves how many times you have walked this path; and instead, how many times, when we reach darkness, do we get agitated in many different ways, trying to cling to something else. This makes me think: who could compose a song like this today? This song was written by a 17-year-old girl, many years ago.

When faced with darkness, many times, since we have not understood what happened with our mother, nor that youth is the time of the You, and that this darkness is given to me precisely so that I can become aware of this You, we are not at peace. Instead, what self-awareness, what a capacity for affection for yourself you would acquire every time if, instead of getting agitated, of going out in search of something to which you can cling, you looked into your depths, until you recognized that mysterious You who constitutes you. What a grace, to be able to recognize my original dependence on this You! So it’s as if what we know – that we do not give ourselves life, that I am a You who makes me now – had to be recovered in front of every darkness, every dissatisfaction, every discomfort, every circumstance. I don’t know how you could get by, living circumstances without doing this work, because I couldn’t do it; I am constantly faced with all of the challenges that, like you, are not spared me. But who am I? Am I what I feel now? What others say,

their attacks? Or am I, right now, You who make me? This allows man to start to build, because in order for man to be fulfilled, to live, to put up with himself, to love himself, he needs to recognize an Other. And freedom is this capacity that each of us has to adhere to the relationship that fulfills his life.

Thus one discovers that this original dependence, this first given of our self-awareness, constitutes the truth of ourselves: we are the fruit of love, of an act of love by God, and no mistake, no distraction, no circumstance, no pain, no darkness can take away the fact that I exist now. And if I exist now, then the Mystery who makes me now is crying out by the very fact of my existence, "You are an act of My love, you are made for Me now, you are made in My image and likeness." And this is the foundation of affection for ourselves, because "affection for ourselves – says Fr. Giussani – cannot be motivated by *what we are* [by what we succeed in doing (as we often think in this frenzy of doing things)]; it is motivated by the *fact that we are* (discussion with *Memores Domini*, October 8, 1983, *pro manuscripto*). Like when you discover that you are in love, and you don't want this love because of *what* the other is – no, you are happy because he or she exists, because the other exists, for the fact that he or she exists. It is the surprise of yourself and the other as a gift, as grace; it is the surprise that the other exists and that I am aware of it.

If the first thing that God does is love you, then what is the most immediate imitation of God? The imitation of God is the surprise of loving yourself, of wanting yourself; if one doesn't have love, tenderness, toward himself, then he doesn't imitate God in anything. If one doesn't imitate God in loving, then he can't imitate God in anything, because the first fundamental thing with which God reveals Himself to man is that He made him in His image and likeness. The first likeness to God is to love yourself, because the first thing that God does is to love you. Without recognizing this, we are not able to love ourselves, and so we mistreat ourselves, we beat ourselves up, we are harsh with ourselves.

"Dearest Fr. Carrón, I am writing to you with a heart full of grat-

itude because it's really true that life begins again if one is certain of being loved and wanted. I went through a very difficult time; I suffered from anorexia, which was nothing more than the manifestation of a great unease that I lived with regard to myself, and which made me incapable of being myself, even with the people whom I love most. In a moment of particular crisis, I went to talk to a friend of mine and, faced with the story of my problems, he proposed this work: to ask God, every day, for the certainty that I was loved and wanted as I was. I remember that day as if it were today, because starting then, my life was reborn. It seems almost unbelievable that, just by the fact that I recognize an Other and that I start to see this gaze toward myself, life is reborn [It's like this! Each of us can decide what to do with these things: verify them, or continue to be resentful toward himself and toward everything]. And it wasn't reborn because I never had any more problems, but because I finally had a hypothesis [look: not even the solution, but a hypothesis], a hypothesis that allowed me to stay in front of everything [this is the hypothesis that we offer you today, at the beginning of the year, so that all circumstances – from school to relationships to difficulties – can build life, so that they are not perceived by you as adverse, contrary to life – because they aren't contrary: they are made for you, for your maturation, so that you understand that one can be reborn and that everything – rather than being an obstacle – can become the brick for building yourself. Tell me where they offer you a hypothesis for living like this]. And with this hypothesis, one starts the work, and so in this daily work of begging God for that certainty of good in my life, even the problems that seemed insurmountable – she says – slowly disappeared. So I want to thank you, too, for bringing me to this very decisive point.”

But is it possible – we ask ourselves – is it possible that, desiring so much, as we do, life can really be fulfilled? It is the same question that the Pope asked in his message for the Meeting. “Is it not perhaps structurally impossible for human beings to measure up to the loftiness of their nature? [It's like we think many times: wouldn't it be better not to desire so much?] And is this longing for the infinite

that man feels, without being able to completely satisfy it, not, perhaps, a condemnation?" (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.).

Without answering this second question, it is impossible to love ourselves, it is impossible to have affection for ourselves and for life. This question brings us directly to the second element of our self-awareness.

***b. The Christian event: "We are His."***

We are His. Indeed, another fact happened to many of us; after having been created, another fact happened, which constitutes the second element of our self-awareness and responds to the question that we sometimes ask ourselves: whether or not a desire for happiness this great is impossible, a condemnation. In order to answer, the Mystery showed all of His tenderness, all of His affection toward us, because He created us for so great a happiness, because He already wanted to give it to us from the beginning; He made us with this enormous emptiness in order to be able to fill it with His presence. And, knowing this, what did the Mystery do? "[T]he Infinite One took a finite form in order to make Himself a response that the human being could experience [says the Pope]. The unbridgeable abyss between the finite and the infinite was filled from the Incarnation, from the moment in which the Word became flesh; the eternal and infinite God left His heaven and entered into time, He immersed Himself in human finiteness" (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.), so that we could experience the fact that it is not impossible to live at the height of our desire. And so – says Fr. Giussani – was the first condition for the disciples to meet Christianity to talk to them about Jesus Christ? No! It was affection for themselves, it was the desire that they had, because when they approached Him with this desire, with that hunger and that thirst (and this is why we say: blessed are those who hunger and thirst), they could recognize that, in the presence of Christ, the answer to their hunger and thirst had arrived.

And how does each of us know (I say *know* – not *feel*, not *imagine*,

not *have a vision*, but *know!*) that it really happened like this, that the Infinite One took on a finite form, that the Word became flesh? Because we, too, like John and Andrew, were taken hold of, to the point that each of us can say, could say, “Never have I been more myself than when You, Christ, happened to me in an encounter.” And thus we could experience what Christ means, before having a word, before having an explanation, because it happened, as it happens that you fall in love: first it happens, and then you realize it and you understand the magnitude of it. Maybe no one would be here, if not because, in some way, it happened to him, or he saw in others something that awakened his curiosity and that brought him here today. So, when this happens to someone, when he starts to understand that that desire can be fulfilled, that “never have I been more myself than when I met Him,” it is precisely this that permits a true affection for himself and for life. Because without perceiving the possibility of fulfillment, we cannot help but get angry at life, and think that it is a condemnation.

The content of my self-awareness, the content of what I think about life, the feeling that I have about myself, is that You, Christ, are my *I*. The One who makes me more myself is You, Christ. You are me, You are my true *I*. It’s what St. Paul summed up for all of us: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal 2:20*). And this fills the person who discovers it with a joy and a gratitude so boundless that they flood his entire life. It is – as the Pope reminded us – the same joy and gratitude that flooded the lives of the first Christians. “In fact, in early Christianity it was like this: being free from the shadow of groping along in ignorance – what am I? why am I? how should I move forward? – being made free, being in the light, in the fullness of the truth. This was the fundamental awareness. A gratitude that radiated around and united people in the Church of Jesus Christ” (Benedict XVI, *Homily of the Holy Mass Concluding the Meeting with the “Ratzinger Schülerkreis,”* Castel Gandolfo, September 2, 2012). We can find this same gratitude today, as this letter demonstrates. “I am a student in my last year of high school, and lately I’ve rediscovered the beauty of life, which be-



fore was absolutely obscured [this is gratitude, that what was obscured begins to become clear]. For several years, especially this last one, I have wandered in the dark, thinking that I was putting all of my freedom into play, but without realizing that there was nothing truly free in what I was doing. I was convinced that the more extreme experiences I had [and one goes always further into the whirlwind of things, because he says, "Maybe I haven't experienced everything, maybe I haven't done everything within my reach..." arriving even to the point of extreme experiences], the more I hoped to be able to come closer to tasting that happiness that I was so desperately seeking. [Pay attention! If we don't understand that our desire is for the infinite, that we are made for the infinite, then we think that we will get by with extreme experiences, in the hope of coming closer to happiness]. At the beginning, it seemed to work as a line of reasoning, but then, once I was on my own [when one is left alone], nothing remained but a bitterness and a profound loneliness. This summer, I lived a particularly painful experience, caused by my exaggeration. Returning home, I cried, I cried bitterly, and never before had I understood what it meant to feel your tears burn. I was in a panic because of what I had done – it wasn't me, it wasn't what I wanted for me, I had completely sold out [It's not that we don't know what the truth is; we can pretend for awhile, but when we are left alone with ourselves, we can no longer pretend. This is what saves us!]. But in that moment, His presence was more than evident in my life, as was the real need that I had. Devastated by the desperation and the shame that I felt for what I had done, I went to confession, and then I cried for joy in a way that I never had before, because if He forgave me even that act, then He must love me unconditionally [Do you understand where this affection for ourselves comes from, which no mistake can eliminate? If we don't get to this point, guys, then our affection for ourselves is extremely fragile – as soon as something happens that isn't part of our plans or our measure, or that is beyond our capacity to digest, then the affection is finished!]. I am still carrying the pain that I felt, like a burning wound. And the fact that it burns makes me realize that I am alive,

and that I am conscious of what happened. I think that I was pardoned through this suffering, and I am thankful [thankful!] that all of this happened, because otherwise I would still be groping along with no destination. Never before have I lived pain and suffering like this – as a gift – and the day of my conversion is well carved into my heart. I am thankful that He made Himself present in my life in a way that was so evident that I would define it tangible, able to be experienced. I need this companionship, and I want to follow it in order to enjoy to the utmost this life that I have fallen in love with.”

But after having seen all of this, in front of the encounter with Christ, we ask ourselves the same questions: is it possible that, with this encounter, we can face everything, as this girl says? As another one of you writes, “This summer was a summer of grace, amid encounters and unforeseeable facts, both surprising and moving. It was a summer in which the face of Christ revealed itself through old friends, but also through new friends from other cities, with whom, after a very short time, a truly surprising friendship was born, to the point in which I can’t help but say, “You did this.” And after a summer so charged with events and novelties, I find myself starting school with the fear that my daily routine will make me forget the beauty that I encountered this summer, and that the enthusiasm that I have in my heart could weaken in the face of daily struggles, giving way to the boredom of the foreseeable and predictable. Because it’s easy to recognize Christ in novelty, in surprising encounters during the GS vacation or the Meeting, and to be happy, but is it possible [this is our question] to recognize His face even in the struggle of going back to school, of studying, of dealing with difficult classmates?”

St. Paul responds to this question, because St. Paul had met Christ, and this was so clear to him that he says: everything that I believe to be a gain, a value, the fact of being “circumcised on the eighth day [that is, as soon as he was born, he belonged to the people of Israel], of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee [those who were the strictest in carrying out the law], in zeal I persecuted the Church,

in righteousness based on the law I was blameless. But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (*Phil 3:5-8*). Not even one like this is spared anything – just read about the circumstances that he had to face. "Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race [the Jews], dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers [his friends]; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (*2 Cor 11:24-28*).

But from everything that the Lord had him go through, what emerged? Why didn't the Lord spare him any of this? What emerged most powerfully in the awareness of St. Paul? That "we hold this treasure [of the encounter with Christ] in earthen vessels [that is, we are so fragile], that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. [...] Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God" (*2 Cor 4:7-10,15*).

Everything that is given to us is for us. Think of St. Paul's humanity, overflowing with gratitude, even though he was spared nothing. And why is St. Paul so happy? Because all of this led him to see how powerful Christ is, even in the midst of troubles; it led him to a certainty that he describes like this: "If God is for us [if I have seen that God is for me, in all of the difficulties that I have had to go through], who can be against us? He who did not spare [even] His own Son,

but handed Him over for us all, how will He not also give us everything else along with Him? [...] What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? [Or school? Or new classmates? You can add your own...] [...] No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through Him who loved us [St. Paul did not reach this conviction by doing mental gymnastics! No, rather it was because he was spared nothing. He saw the victory of Christ in all of these things.] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rm* 8:31-39).

Who among us would not desire at least an ounce of St. Paul’s certainty? Why? Because only with a certainty like this can we challenge any circumstance, any future, as this friend of mine says to me – that without a certainty like this, he would not have been able to respond. “I am writing to tell you that, in these first days of school, something happened to me. This year, I have a new philosophy teacher, and so, instead of a really great person who got me to love the subject, I have to deal with someone who is strongly against the Church. This led me to have little respect for him. Nevertheless, a few days ago, when faced with statements like, ‘in fact, whoever believes, believes only in a nice little story, nothing more’ [what you believe: nice little stories!], and ‘because, in reality, there is no confirmation, no proof that a God exists’ [These are the challenges that we are not spared. Either we all have to enter a convent in order not to run into someone like this, or we have to acquire a certainty that allows us to stay in front of a teacher who throws in your face, “Do you have any proof, or are they only nice little stories?” Do you understand why the Mystery does not spare us this? Because if one doesn’t have this experience, then he doesn’t know how to answer], I noticed a reaction in myself that I didn’t expect: rather than becoming the starting point for a purely ideological response, those questions became a challenge that led me to reconfirm why I believe,

because I can't do without this companionship. What I believe isn't a story, but rather a fact that continually repeats itself in life. For me, Christ is not just a name. In thinking only of this year, the winter vacation, an exhibit that we prepared, the Triduum, the summer vacation, the days in Varigotti, the Meeting, the friendships that were born, the gaze with which I am looked at every day at school, the beauty of a trip that we took to Portofino... I realized that these facts are, for me, the confirmation in reality and, in the end, the thing that struck me is that, faced with those provocations, I couldn't help but understand that I can't take for granted even my philosophy teacher."

This brings me to my last point.

### 3. LIFE AS VOCATION

The Pope, after having spoken about the Incarnation, about how the Mystery overcame this distance, says, "Nothing, therefore, is trivial or insignificant in the journey of life and of the world." What he goes on to say is amazing. "We thus discover the truest dimension of human existence to which the Servant of God Luigi Giussani ceaselessly called people: life as vocation" (Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.). What did Fr. Giussani say? "Living life as vocation means tending toward the Mystery in the circumstances [underline this: *in the circumstances*] through which the Lord has us pass, by responding to them" (L. Giussani, *Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida* [*Reality and Youth: The Challenge*], SEI, Turin 1995, pp. 49-50). It's not that, because of the circumstances, we cannot tend toward destiny, toward the Mystery, and that they are an obstacle – because if they were an obstacle that were impossible to overcome, then that would mean that we could never get there. No, no, no! We can get there, but only through circumstances. That is why the Pope says, "Everything, every relationship, every joy, as well as every difficulty, finds its ultimate reason in being an opportunity for a relationship with the Infinite, God's voice that continually calls us and invites us to look up, to discover in adherence to Him the complete fulfillment of our humanity"

(Benedict XVI, *Message for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, op. cit.).

Circumstances are the voice of God; they are the way in which the Mystery calls us to look up. They are not an obstacle, they are not adverse, but they are the way in which the Mystery calls us to recognize who He is and who we are – as we can see in the case of St. Paul, for whom all of those circumstances were not an obstacle, but the occasion to reach a certainty that, without having gone through them, he could never have imagined. Therefore, “vocation is going toward destiny, embracing all the circumstances through which destiny has us pass” (L. Giussani, *Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida*, op. cit., p. 50), because nothing is trivial or insignificant anymore, and everything acquires this possibility to recall us to the self-awareness of having been made and of being His. St. Paul’s life documents that all that is given to us, is given to us for our maturation, so that we can grow in this self-awareness.

Thus, friends, this is the time of the person, the time of each one of us, because He can call us in whatever way He wants, and each of us is compelled to respond. Not to respond is already a negative response. It is only by constantly entering into life with this hypothesis that we can see what is Christ at work. And thus we can see the victory of Christ. But – be careful – the fact that “we conquer overwhelmingly,” that we are victorious, doesn’t mean that things happen according to our ideas; victorious means seeing the victory of Christ, even if we are apparently defeated, like that boy who will perhaps not be able to convince his philosophy teacher, but the philosophy teacher is no longer victorious in him. Victorious means overflowing with His presence, being so grateful for what happened to us that no one can defeat us. In front of witnesses like St. Paul, we can see what Christ can become for us, in such a way that, even in the most pressing circumstances, the content of our self-awareness is increasingly Christ and the facts that document Him, in a way that is so obvious that they leave us speechless. “But who are You, Christ?”

The most obvious sign that Christ made Himself truly present in

life is that one is left speechless. Christian silence springs from wonder at seeing Christ at work, "and His presence fills me with silence," a silence full of the memory of Christ. It's not an empty silence, but it is a silence filled with His presence, to which we must give time; and if we don't give time to the memory of Christ, to constantly recovering the awareness of Him and of ourselves, then the powers that be have already won, because it means that the content of our awareness is determined by the powers that be, whoever they are. Therefore, we must ask and desire that our life be filled with this silence, because it is the sign that His presence is starting to become familiar in us. And thus we can enter into any battle, like the man born blind. After healing him, Jesus didn't say to the man born blind, "Now, in order not to run any risks, in order to prevent your faith from being put in danger, I'm sending you to a convent!" No. He sent him into the fray with what had happened to him, with a certainty: that before he couldn't see, and now he could. And with this, the blind man blew everyone away.

If we have this certainty – if, like the blind man healed by Christ, we have this certainty in our eyes – if we live this self-awareness, then we will be able to verify that, even in our daily life at school, we can be "outrageously happy."







