

Spiritual exercises of the university students of Communion and Liberation

"HAS ANYONE EVER PROMISED US ANYTHING? THEN WHY SHOULD WE EXPECT ANYTHING?"

RIMINI, DECEMBER 2012

TRACES



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THEN WHY SHOULD WE EXPECT ANYTHING?”**

Spiritual Exercises of the University Students
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R I M I N I , I T A L Y , D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 2

5TRACES

INTRODUCTION | FR. JULIÁN CARRÓN

December 7th, evening

“Expectation” is the word that defines each of us. This expectation has brought us here, otherwise we would not have come. But at the same time, everyone knows how it is opposed by many worries; a thousand distractions try to detach us from this expectation that defines each of us. They want to detach us from ourselves, from the deepest truth of ourselves.

For this reason, aware of our weakness and fragility, let us ask the Spirit to make us ourselves, what we truly are: boundless expectation of fulfillment.

*Come Holy Spirit
Ballad of the Old Man¹*

I greet each and every one of you who have come here from Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and Uganda, as well as from Italy, with this cry, as we have just sung, because the more time passes, the more life goes ahead, the more we realize how needy we are, how boundless our expectation is.

This is why the title we have chosen for this year’s Spiritual Exercises has left no one indifferent. Each of us has felt provoked, because it touches a raw nerve in us, as our friend says: “When I heard the title of the Spiritual Exercises, I was a bit intimidated because it is certainly not banal: ‘Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?’ For me, the question is not just this, but it implicitly contains another one: Do I expect anything? Do I expect anything or not? In a life full of things to do, do I have to find the time to await expectantly, or do I live expecting? There’s a world of difference. In fact, if I seek only when I’m free from the rest, it means that I don’t love because, when you’re in love, the presence of the beloved permeates what you have to do. If I live expectantly awaiting, the door of my heart re-

¹ C. Chieffo, *Ballata dell’uomo vecchio [Ballad of the Old Man]*, in *Canti*, Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2007, p. 216.

mains open to the possibility that the Presence I am awaiting will enter into any circumstance, including the one I am living. The battle between these two positions is continual in me, every day."

1. This defines our being, and the poetic geniuses have grasped and expressed it exceptionally: "Closed among mortal things/ (Even the starry sky will end)/Why do I yearn for God?"², says Ungaretti. "Why do I yearn?" Don't let the word "God" distract you now: Why do I yearn so much? Why is this cry, this urge so powerful? I yearn. Yearning is desiring something intensely, passionately, almost irresistibly. The amazing thing is that we, even though we are closed among mortal things, among ephemeral things, have such a powerful, boundless desire. We realize this particularly in certain circumstances.

"In responding to the provocation of the title of the Spiritual Exercises, I can't help thinking about what has bowled over my life recently: the death of Stefano, our friend from Turin. It was the first of a series of exceptional facts before which it was surprisingly easy to recognize the presence of an Other, in the testimony of his wife and children, in the continual flowering of relationships, in the unity among us. I have come to understand how the cultural hegemony, the power of which you often speak, influences the awareness of our heart, because in these days I have rediscovered what my heart is structurally made of. My heart is expectation. These circumstances have reopened the wound that constitutes the very nature of the heart; they have thrown wide open again, in all of us, the need for meaning, happiness and truth of which *The Religious Sense* speaks. The experience of recent days has shown me with clarity that if my desire is so great, it is because there is an equally great Presence that responds, and this desire is what has begun to move me and has become entreaty." In fact, we are not capable of responding to all this desire, to all this expectancy. Often, this expectant awaiting is buried, and something has to happen to reawaken it in all its power, as we have just seen. This is seen in what some of you told me a short time ago at dinner: "The sudden death of our friend's mother (our friend couldn't be here today, therefore) has made us serious with life, in our

2 G. Ungaretti, "Dannazione" ["Damnation"], in *Vita di un uomo. Tutte le poesie [Life of a Man. All the Poems]*, Mondadori, Milan, 1992, p. 35.

way of staying together and in how we face things, and this has made us more authentically ourselves. This indicates that the expectation we speak of is not peaceful, but that it is opposed in many ways.”

2. Rilke identified well the attempt to thwart expectation that pervades the climate in which we are, in which we live our days. “And all combines to suppress us, partly as shame/ perhaps, and partly as inexpressible hope.”³ Expectation is thwarted; everything conspires to silence it, even among us, in the banality of our days, in our daily distraction, as if this conspiracy concerned us in many ways, in many moments. Who of us can fail to grant this painful and real acknowledgment?

One of you writes, “The example I bring is from today. I went home from the campus because I felt an unease that I haven’t experienced since my first year. I was not happy at all; in fact, I was particularly burned-out. I realized that since I woke this morning, I did exactly what I had in mind, fulfilled all my plans for the day, studied things I liked, went to the lessons that interested me, but a sense of emptiness remained within me. What is certain about today is that I am not happy, that I have no desire to go to sleep, and in general that the day is over and nothing has happened. It is evident that What fills me is not something I do, not something I know, and until something happens, nothing happens. The truth is that I am waiting for something.”

I await expectantly, even if I am burned-out. As another friend says, describing this battle that can be each of ours, “I spent the first year of university saying ‘no’ to everything the Movement proposed to me and to reality in general. Behind this ‘no’ was a series of prejudices that derived from comparing the university community with my previous experience in the Movement. So I fed myself these complaints, creating superficially reasonable justifications that enabled me to survive and shelter myself from the thousand concerns that came to me. This repeated and incessant ‘no’ had substantially reduced the questions I had about life, my needs, and my desire. By now, I expected nothing from reality. Having spent many years in the Movement, I had developed a bourgeois position on the Movement and life, because I thought I already knew

3 R.M. Rilke, “The Second Elegy,” in *Duino Elegies*, German text, with an English translation by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1939), p. 31.

everything and had no need to ask anything. I had reduced the experience of the Movement to an 'intellectual question,' and an 'idea about life and God,' and I had eliminated the hypothesis that it was a place for me, given to me for my maturation. Rather, the community had become a place against me. I began my second year full of perplexities and worries. I was disoriented and didn't know why I was still there, what absurd motive kept me from abandoning everything. And then something totally unexpected happened. One evening, drinking a beer with a friend, I decided to talk about all my perplexities and doubts about the community—not to complain, as if the responsibilities for my dissatisfaction fell on him, but to try to understand why, after the totalizing experience I had had before coming to the university, now I should find myself distant, and almost in disagreement on everything. In response to his dry and unarguable questions I pulled out excuses and justifications to avoid answering, skirting the problem, thinking he hadn't understood what I wanted to say, that he didn't know me well enough to understand my problem. Instead, he understood all too well. One of the questions he continually asked, and which I tried in every way not to answer, remained fixed in my mind: 'What are you looking for?' I didn't answer because from the heights of my pride and arrogance I thought that, after a life spent in the Movement, it wasn't important to answer such outdated, basic questions. The more I continued to think he hadn't understood my real problems, the more I shifted away from the question, postponed it, answered something else, because that 'what are you looking for?' was too annoying, too uncomfortable. He did nothing other than set the truth in front of me, nothing more, and the insistence with which he did so infuriated me, because he set before me the toilsome challenge of understanding what I seek and what instruments I have for seeking it clearly. There was a moment in which I had to yield; I could no longer stop the impetus of the truth. It was too strong."

Which of these two positions is right, that of Ungaretti—"Why do I yearn?"—or that described by Rilke—"Everything conspires"? Expectant awaiting or conspiracy? We have to look this alternative in the face: on the one hand, what we find ourselves yearning for, what we discover ourselves yearning for so intensely, and, on the other hand, this con-

spiracy we note around and within us, in which we are also accomplices. Who is right? It is not a problem of alignments, or of sentiments, or opinions; it is a problem of truth. Who is right?

3. Here we come to the third point of the theme of our Spiritual Exercises: “What a great thought it is that truly nothing is due to us. Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?”⁴ Why is expectation truer than the conspiracy against it? Why is it truer? Because nothing, as we have seen, can remove it, even if it can be buried under a thousand distractions, under a thousand prejudices, under a thousand objections. Why do we continue to expect something? We will carry this line of Pavese’s to our grave: “Then why should we expect anything?” Tell me if you can offer any opposition to this question. The great act of friendship one can do for another is to ask a true question: “Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?” Expectation documents the structure of our nature, the essence of our soul. We await expectantly because promise is at the origin of our makeup, of how we have been made. The One who made human beings made them as *promise*. We know this precisely because we await, expectantly.

“Structurally,” Fr. Giussani reminds us, “man waits; structurally he is a beggar; structurally life is promise.”⁵ We can say or do whatever we want—try to distract ourselves according to all the ways we know, to be accomplices with the whole conspiracy today around this expectation. Each of us can add all we know or all the strategies we use to escape from looking at it and, even when we are together, we can lack the courage to look at it, but we cannot rip away this expectancy, because it is the structure of our nature. We did not decide to have it, nor can we decide to suppress it; it doesn’t depend on us, and we can do nothing about it. We can decide to follow it or oppose it; to love it or hate it—and this is the alternative that sets itself before each of us every day.

I yearn because the substance of the “I” is expectant awaiting, and if the original structure of the human person is this, then the most terrible

4 C. Pavese, *The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935-1950*, translated by A.E. Murch (New York: Walker & Company, 1961), p. 196.

5 L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 54.

thing I can do against this nature that I am is not to expect anything. Pavese writes, "Expecting is still an occupation. What's terrible is not expecting anything."⁶ It is dramatic to expect, but it is tragic not to expect anything. Blanchot expresses this well: "The putrefaction of expectation [is] boredom."⁷ But this expectation is so resistant that, as Marcel Proust writes, "knowing that one no longer has anything to hope for does not stop one from continuing to expect."⁸ It is so structurally one thing with us, it defines us so much in every fiber of our being, that we cannot help but expect. As Rilke says, "Weren't you always/distracted by expectation, as though each moment/announced a beloved's coming?" One finds oneself "distracted" by awaiting. It's like when one is in love. "What are you thinking about?" "What do you think I'm thinking about?" "Weren't you always/distracted by expectation, as though each moment/announced a beloved's coming?"⁹

From writers to singers, the theme is the same, as we saw at the exhibit on rock'n'roll at this year's Meeting, for example in this piece by the English group Coldplay: "I don't know which way I'm going, I don't know which way I've come. Hold my head inside your hands, I need someone who understands. I need someone, someone who hears, For you, I've waited all these years. For you, I'd wait 'til kingdom come. Until my day, my day is done. And say you'll come, and set me free, Just say you'll wait, you'll wait for me."¹⁰ Expectation dominates, as in the song we sang at the beginning.

The most varied personalities attest to this expectation, and help us in one way or another to feel something that touches the fiber of our being, that defines us. Listen to this poem by Rebora:

From the taut image / I keep watch upon the instant / with imminence
of expectancy / and I expect no one: / in the lighted shadow / I spy the
bell / that scatters an imperceptible / pollen of sound – / and I expect no

6 C. Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere*, op. cit., p. 292.

7 M. Blanchot, *L'attesa, l'oblio* [*Expectation, Oblivion*], Guanda, Milan, 1978, p. 53.

8 M. Proust, *Alla ricerca del tempo perduto*, vol. II, *All'ombra delle fanciulle in fiore* [*In Search of Lost Time, In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*], BUR, Milan, 2006, p. 272.

9 R.M. Rilke, "First Elegy," vv. 31-32, in *Duino Elegies: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Edward Snow, North Point Press, New York, 2000, p. 7.

10 Coldplay, *'Til Kingdom Come*, from the CD *X&Y*, Capitol Records, 2005.

one: / within four walls / more entranced by space / than a desert / I expect no one: / but come he must, / come he will, if I hold out / blossoming unseen, / he will come suddenly, / when I am least aware: / he will come almost as forgiveness / of so much death that he causes, / he will come to make me certain / of his treasure and mine, / he will come as balm / of his sorrows and mine, / he will come, perhaps already is coming: / his whisper.¹¹ He will come.

In order to be ready for this coming, let's begin in these days to ask for expectation. Let's ask for this expectant awaiting, to recognize it, to be ourselves, to coincide with ourselves, to make us open to the answer, helping each other with the words we just sang: "Listen to me, stay here longer, repeat again your word to me. Repeat to me that word that one day you said to me, and that freed me."¹² We can be certain that He comes, because, as the Pope tells us, "God never tires of seeking us, He is faithful to the human being whom He created and redeemed, He stays close to us in our life because He loves us. This is a certainty that must accompany us every day..."¹³

As our friend says, "The first time I heard the title of these Spiritual Exercises I was almost speechless. I was almost afraid, because it struck my heart so much. I pretended that nothing was the matter, settling for registering for these Spiritual Exercises, certain that your words would somehow illuminate me. But every time I heard the title, my heart leapt, and I understood why. I can't and don't want to pretend that Pavese's question doesn't affect me. I need to answer the question of what I am expecting. The radicalism of this question is the same radicalism that has characterized my recent months. A couple of months ago, I found myself nailed to the wall, alone with my fears and my continual failures. I didn't know how to love myself, wasn't interested in what I was studying, found it hard to stay at the university, and didn't know how to love my boyfriend and my friends. I was completely crushed by anxiety. At a certain point, however, a friend began to look at me differently; he loved me just the way I was, and at the same time challenged me, with a freedom and passion for my destiny that I had never seen before. I was wanted. This

11 C. Rebora, "From the Taut Image," in *Canti anonimi*, translated from the Italian by John Zucchi, in *The Religious Sense*, op. cit.

12 C. Chieffo, *Ballata dell'uomo vecchio* [*Ballad of the Old Man*], in *Canti*, op. cit., p. 216.

13 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, November 14, 2012.

gaze slowly began to change me. First, all the reasons for believing that my life had meaning, that God had made me and made me well, were only so much fluff, and the more I repeated them, the older and staler they got. But when that friend began to look at me in that way, so true, everything changed, because the reasons were no longer a thought: they had become flesh. I could no longer think of myself without remembering that gaze, could no longer study without at least desiring to have his same passion, could no longer look at my boyfriend without desiring to love him just as he is, because he exists, and that heavy cross became my best weapon. I would lie if I said I prefer to be different, tranquil, as all the rest of the world seems to be, but I'm not lying if I tell you that today I can affirm with certainty that God did not make a mistake when He made me. I was able to do all the work, all the steps of these months because I began to look at myself as a whole. [This is the question: looking at ourselves as a whole.] My daily conversion is entering into everything starting from what I am, as a whole. I can no longer permit myself to look at things and face my days without starting from myself. I am the first place where the Mystery happens, and only because the Mystery happens can I look at myself this way. Life has become a true drama because I have discovered just how much I need the Mystery to happen, revealing the truth, revealing me to myself. I need only this; only this saves me. The Mystery that happens is the reason for my hope, nothing else."

Let's ask this Mystery to happen in these days.

LESSON | FR. JULIÁN CARRÓN

December 8th, morning

“The title of this year’s Spiritual Exercises challenged me a lot,” writes one of you. “I was taking for granted the value of my participation in this gesture, and wondering in fact if it was worth going, since it would scramble my university routine, forcing me to skip a lesson with obligatory attendance. But, as soon as I heard the title, I had no more doubts: where am I going, and what’s the use of what I do, if it doesn’t have a horizon? As often happens with me, I risk doing everything and nothing. The beauty of this title was reconfirmed for me during an assembly in which one of us explained the connection between Pavese’s sentence and affection for oneself. I really want to understand this.” What’s the use of what I do, if it doesn’t have a horizon? What does this have to do with affection for oneself? This is the first point: affection for oneself.

I. AFFECTION FOR ONESELF

Affection for oneself, says Fr. Giussani, is an “attachment full of esteem and compassion, of mercy, for oneself [...]. It’s like having for oneself a bit of that attachment that your mother had for you, especially when you were little.” Imagine the tenderness with which a mother holds her newborn in her arms, moved by the very existence of that child, aware of all the desire for happiness that will be unleashed in him, through the great destiny to which he is called. If there is not a bit of this tenderness in us, of this affection for ourselves, continues Fr. Giussani, “we lack the ground upon which to build.”¹⁴

We all know that having this affection for oneself is anything but immediate, and that often, instead of being tender, we are violent, harsh, and fierce with ourselves; instead of affection, recrimination and complaint prevail. Tenderness toward oneself is not a given. Just think of when you have looked at yourself with a bit of this tenderness in

14 L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria (1982-1983)* [*Men Without a Homeland*], Bur, Milan, 2008, p. 291.

recent times and, how often, instead, you have looked at yourself with harshness and ruthlessness, mercilessly, in a way that makes it almost unbearable to observe yourself.

To help us understand the source of this tenderness, Fr. Giussani invites us to focus on the phenomenon of our evolution, discovering in the act how it happens. "In the psychological history of a person, the source of the affective capacity is a person so acknowledged as to be welcomed and hosted."¹⁵ Your affectivity is put into effect by welcoming and hosting a person you have before you. Think of a baby: the affective source, the thing that makes all his affection surge up in him, is the presence of his mother. His affective capacity emerges in responding to the smile of his mother, to her care, to her love and presence. This presence is so decisive for the baby that, if it is lacking, the affective source remains arid, because it is not something that the child can give himself; he cannot give himself this capacity for affection. For this reason, the child is not attached first of all to himself, but to his mother. All his affectivity develops in response to that good, positive presence. To make us understand things, the Mystery does not explain them to us—He doesn't give a child a lesson on affection for himself, but He makes them happen to him. The child, therefore, first experiences and feels the affection of his mother, is attached to his mother, and then, slowly, through this, begins to become attached to himself, to actuate his affective capacity.

Fr. Giussani reminds us that, at a certain point—we all know this well, by experience—"this natural sign" that is the mother "no longer suffices,"¹⁶ not because the mother has changed her attitude toward us or is no longer present; it's all the same as before, but at a certain point, her presence no longer suffices. Why? Because each of us has evolved toward youth; our being has expanded, so to speak. Our face, all the power of our destiny, all the greatness of our desire begin to emerge, and that presence seems small compared to all that we desire. We see that it's no longer enough. How do we realize this? Again, not because someone explains it to us. One realizes it because, as Fr. Giussani says,

15 L. Giussani, "È venuto il tempo della persona" ["The Time of the Person Has Come"], edited by L. Cioni, *Litterae Communiois CL*, no. 1, January 1977, p. 12.

16 *Ibid.*

“one gets ruffled up,” begins to sense an absence of affection, as if that affection, which up to a certain point sufficed, is no longer enough. And so then one feels confused, lost, and in disarray.¹⁷ As much as the mother’s affection was decisive up to a short time before, so the lack of an affection comparable to his need now leaves the young person lost, and he says, “But if all the factors are the same, if Mom and Dad are still present, and haven’t changed their attitude toward me, why do I now feel lost and confused? Why isn’t anything right for me anymore?”

If we don’t understand what is happening here, then confusion and bewilderment prevail, and in this confusion we begin the great rush to try to fill this void in all sorts of ways; we try to take remedial action, as a high school student told me: “Recently, I have been perceiving a disproportion regarding all the things I do. Every time I do something that I like (such as an evening with friends, or a game of volleyball), I feel that, deep down, it doesn’t satisfy me; it isn’t enough, and so I throw myself into a whirl of things to do, but they only increase this cry. I wanted to ask for help in judging this thing, in staying in front of it.” If we do not understand what is happening to us at a certain moment of our life, in this evolution, we think of taking remedial action by throwing ourselves into a whirl of things to do, and then what happens? Instead of resolving the problem, we make it worse, and since what we do seems little, then we do more, to the point of exhaustion, but the only outcome is that, instead of solving the problem, it only increases the cry, the sense of emptiness. That girl realized that throwing herself into the whirl of things to do does not give an answer. We need to understand what is revealed at a certain moment of our life, truly become aware of ourselves, understand deep down what is happening to us. Otherwise, we don’t resolve the problem, we simply reproduce it in other ways. For this reason, we said that it’s a matter of becoming conscious of oneself. It is a problem of self-awareness.

What is this self-awareness? Self-awareness is a “clear and loving perception of self, charged with awareness of one’s own destiny and therefore capable of true affection for self.”¹⁸ Only if we realize who we are will we be able to have true affection for ourselves. Therefore, what

17 Cf., *ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

has happened? At a certain moment of our development, the ultimate structure of our "I" emerged. The desire and expectation of which we are made became conscious in all their importance. Why did that girl realize that nothing was enough for her? Because, in a definitive way, all the expectation of her heart grew in her; all the capacity for fulfillment for which we were created, the greatness of our destiny became clear. So then, one understands that it is "the moment of the Other [with a capital 'O'], true, permanent, of which one is constituted, of the inexorable, faceless, ineffable presence."¹⁹ If we do not realize this, we end up substituting our parents with something else, not having understood that in that evolution it has become evident who I am, that I am made for this Other. If this does not happen, we do not get past adolescence; we do not take the step toward the acknowledgment of the Other, ineffable, an Other whom I do not yet know, faceless, whose features I don't know how to trace, but toward whom I am constantly thrown, toward whom I tend with all my "I." Without this step, it seems that adolescence never ends.

Fr. Giussani is a friend to us because he helps us to read, understand, and judge this. "Youth is the time of the You [with a capital 'Y'] in which the heart sinks deeply [...], as in an abyss. It is the time of God."²⁰ Without recognizing this You, this Other for whom life is made, it is impossible to have tenderness toward ourselves, affection for oneself, and one gets into a muddle, gets ruffled up and increasingly confused. In youth, the vibration of all our desire should make us understand that within our life the Mystery urges, that we are made for a great, mysterious destiny. "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."²¹ If we do not become aware of this, we do not understand

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 J. Carrón, "We Want to be Outrageously Happy, Too"—*Life as Vocation* (notes from Fr. Julián Carrón's talk at the GS Beginning Day, Milan, October 6, 2012). *Life as Vocation*, Società Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2012, p. 7, available on <http://english.clonline.org>.

ourselves and we do not understand why nothing satisfies us, because throwing ourselves into a whirl of things to do provides no answer. As we grow, our “I” is revealed according to all its true nature, shows itself to be greater, and what we are made for emerges.

We can summarize this experience—when what we are made for becomes clear to our eyes, at a certain moment of our life—with Jesus’ statement that goes to the root of what is happening in us. “What then, will anyone gain by winning the whole world and forfeiting his life?”²² It is the question that every person, at any latitude or in any era of history, must acknowledge, because it describes more than any other thing the vibration of our being. What does it matter if I gain the whole world, if I throw myself into the whirl of things to do, and this does not satisfy me and, in fact, makes me lose myself? What violence against everything and everyone is generated in life, if one does not understand this! If one does not understand this, it is difficult to have true affection for oneself. Thus, just as before I got annoyed with my mother because her presence no longer sufficed and I got “ruffled,” now I get angry with my friends, my girlfriend, myself, and, finally, with everything and everyone. Instead of affection for oneself, as Fr. Giussani says, there is resentment. “Adolescence does not have affection for itself; it ‘resents’ itself.”²³ You have to admit that living with resentment against everything and everyone, beginning with yourself, isn’t exactly the best way to live.

But when my humanity emerges with all its power, affection for myself cannot leave out my needs, just as they have emerged. For this reason, Fr. Giussani insists, “This affection for oneself normally translates into seriousness of one’s needs, in the seriousness of the gaze upon one’s own needs,”²⁴ in loyalty with desire just as it has exploded before our eyes.

2. THE NATURE OF DESIRE

At a certain point in our evolution, therefore, there emerges powerfully in each of us the nature of our desire: it is measureless, boundless. We realize the destiny for which we are made, that we are made for the Infinite, for the Other (with a capital “O”), and that youth is the time of the Other,

22 Cf. *Mt.* 16:26.

23 L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria...*, op. cit., p. 292.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

of the You. But we do not understand all this all of a sudden. The whole dynamic of reality, as we discover it in experience, educates us to the sense of the Mystery, to the sense of the Other, of the You. It is decisive for us to hold still a moment to see how everything we live re-proposes this experience and educates us constantly to the sense of the Mystery.

In the journey on the theme of faith that Benedict XVI is helping us to make, he has focused on the human person's desire and on its dynamic in life, as a step, as a road for facing the question. “The journey of reflection that we are making together during this *Year of Faith* leads us to meditate today on a fascinating aspect of the human and the Christian experience: man carries within himself a mysterious desire for God,” as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states. “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.” The Pope continues, “Many of our contemporaries might actually object that they have no such desire for God. For large sectors of society, He is no longer the One longed for or desired.” You see it in your fellow university students. Many might say: “I don't find this desire in me,” and seem indifferent, but the Pope says, “In reality, what we have defined as ‘the desire for God’ has not entirely disappeared and it still appears today, in many ways, in the heart of man.”²⁵

So then, it is important to understand how it surfaces, because it is not by speaking abstractly about the desire for God that one discovers it within. Often you, too, say, “It's abstract,” just like your fellow students. The Pope guides us to read how, in experience, this God, this Other, surfaces in our life in the most concrete way. “Human desire always tends to certain concrete goods, often anything but spiritual, and yet it has to face the question of what is truly ‘the’ good.” In fact, if what one desires were only this concrete good, it should be enough, but instead it is not enough; thus one is driven to “the question of what is truly ‘the’ good, and thus is confronted with something other than itself, something man cannot build but he is called to recognize.”²⁶ This is anything but abstract! If “the” good is abstract, why am I not content with a concrete

25 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, November 7, 2012.

26 *Ibid.*

good, but desire something else? Why don't I stop at what is concrete and that apparently is what I desire? This is why the question the Pope asks wells up in us, "What can really satisfy man's desire?" Why do I ask myself this question? Why do you often ask yourselves this question? This desire that goes beyond—is it abstract? No, it is the most concrete thing, the most provoking thing within us! We cannot open our mouths, cannot say or do anything, without this desire clearly present: a "cry" in everything we say, in every experience we have. It is what becomes evident, for example, in love, as the Pope observes. Such a "dynamism can be found in the experience of human love, an experience that in our age is more easily perceived as a moment of ecstasy, of leaving oneself, like a place in which man feels overcome by a desire that surpasses him."²⁷ Why do you desire more? Why is it that, not when you have yet to meet your boyfriend or girlfriend, but when you already have him or her there, when he or she is already there, you desire more? You discover that your desire surpasses even this.

"I wanted to tell you about something that's changing my life, and above all my conception of myself. One afternoon several weeks ago, after days of absolute aridity, I met my boyfriend at the university and went to have a coffee with him, desirous of knowing how he was, wanting to spend some time with him, and maybe also to dump my worries on him. Before we even crossed the threshold of the bar, we started arguing because neither of us was content with anything about the other [people often talk about incompatible characters, but all that business is foolishness, because that is not the problem; even if you have extremely different temperaments, you can have a great relationship, as long as you grasp the point]. So, we were two complete strangers to each other. We started arguing about something stupid and in my usual way, I tried to preach good words to try to convert 'that rebel of a boyfriend.' When we stopped yelling at each other, I saw in his eyes and face a strange, yet familiar, sadness, but I tried to avoid it, and went back to study. In the evening, after a graduation party for two of our friends, he gave me a ride home and, at a certain point, with tears in his eyes, he told me, 'Nothing is enough for me anymore—my studies, my friends, you... You're too little for me.' Feeling a bit rebellious against this, and moved by it, I hugged him. I had never understood as much as I did

27 *Ibid.*

then that he is not mine, and that I cannot make him happy, that I can say all I want, and stuff him with all the beautiful things I live, and in good faith try to solve his life's problems for him, but his heart asks for more. Who puts all this sadness in his eyes and heart? Who can fulfill him? These questions brought about a good detachment between us: he has become something sacred, sacred because he is a sign of the good Lord who is calling him and calling me, too, now. He became a sign not by telling me the right things, not by being the perfect boyfriend, but by having in his eyes a divine sadness. I realized that I breathe only if He takes and invades my entire life, because I can't even manage to love my boyfriend, who is the person most dear to me. Acknowledging this has not been peaceful for me, because the earth is beginning to quake under my feet and every day is a battle between morbid and egotistical possession of things and the awareness that everything is from an Other. It's not easy, but it's the only thing that corresponds to me, because I am never so myself as when Christ happens to me and invades me with His presence."

So then, friends, loving another is loving that destiny, loving that desire, embracing that divine sadness. If you reduce everything to possession, in fact you do not possess the other: you possess his most ephemeral, most apparent aspect, but you do not love him, because the other is made of that sadness, that desire that makes him aware that you are too little for him. Therefore, the Pope says, through the experience of love, "one will be able to deepen gradually one's knowledge of that love initially experienced. And the mystery that it represents will become more and more defined." In fact, "not even the beloved is capable of satisfying the desire that dwells in the human heart. In fact, the more authentic one's love for the other is, the more it reveals the question of its origin and its destiny, of the possibility that it may endure forever. Therefore, the human experience of love has in itself a dynamism that refers beyond the self; it is the experience of a good that leads to being drawn out and finding oneself before the mystery that encompasses the whole of existence." There are other experiences like this fundamental one of love, and the Pope lists them: "One could make similar observation about other human experiences as well, such as friendship, encountering beauty, loving knowledge: every good experienced by man projects him toward the mystery that surrounds the human being; every desire that

springs up in the human heart echoes a fundamental desire that is never fully satisfied.”²⁸

Nothing is enough for us; nothing ever fills our heart to the brim. This experience is the same as that of the musical idols we at times envy, as John Waters described in his exhibit on rock music: “Many times, it’s only when a pop star dies that we gain an insight into how ordinary or sorrowful has been the life of someone we thought of as having everything we wanted, living in a bubble free of human concerns. In that freeze-framed moment when the body is discovered, we are afforded a glance into a life that we imagined to be complete, and find that it was anything but. ‘What happens when you have everything?’ When yet another pop star is struck down by what is called ‘excess,’ we look up and listen for clues. In a short time we come to something like the usual conclusion: ‘Ah, pop star, excessive lifestyle, prone to abusing drugs and alcohol,’ and we rarely penetrate beneath this surface analysis. Perhaps at some deep and darker level, we feel a sense of vindication: there is something to be said for being ‘normal.’ But really these explanations do nothing to allow us to understand the life of the person who has died. What the stories of ‘tragic Amy’ or ‘lonely Whitney’ omit is the extent to which the inner life of the star resembles the inner life of the rest of us. Performers like Amy or Whitney are blessed with enormous talent, which affords them fame, wealth, and opportunity that the vast majority of people can only dream of. Thrust upon them are lives in which beautiful houses, expensive cars, and hotel suites are run-of-the-mill. They live heavily protected lives, surrounded by bodyguards, high walls, and electric fences. The lives of such people, when they leave the stage and go back to their gated lives, can be quite different from what the audience member imagines on the bus home from the gig. They have everything they ever wanted, but find that, now that they have it all, it doesn’t satisfy some need that remains naggingly present [a need that we often accuse of being abstract: we say it is abstract, and think we’re geniuses in saying so!], even as the world looks upon them in awe and envy. Often, they find themselves isolated, with a distance between them and everyone around them. Nobody they meet seems to be unaffected by their wealth and fame, so they begin to mistrust people, thinking nobody loves or likes them for themselves

28 *Ibid.*

[only for what they have, or for their fame]. They become lost in a false version of reality, constructed by the industry to protect its investment. So the Talent, lacking any real support to lean on, seeks out chemical assistance. As Céline Dion put it: '...taking pills to go perform and taking pills to wake up and taking pills to go to bed.' [...] But the only real moment in the life of such a person, the only moments when she can feel that there is any reality to the life that has been thrust upon her, is when she sings on stage. Inside, the Star is defined not by the trappings of celebrity or the fruits of success, but by the same emotional forces that afflict us all."²⁹

"Undoubtedly," says the Pope, "by such a deep desire, hidden, even enigmatic, one cannot arrive directly at faith. Men and women, after all, know well what does not satisfy them, but they cannot imagine or define what the happiness they long for in their hearts would be like. [...] From this point of view, he remains a mystery: man is the seeker of the Absolute, seeking with small and hesitant steps. And yet, already the experience of desire, of a 'restless heart' as St. Augustine called it, is very meaningful. It tells us that man is, deep down, a religious being [...]. We can say it with the words of Pascal: 'Man infinitely surpasses man.'"³⁰

Thus, the Pope invites us to a "pedagogy of desire," to make a journey, to use all the things that happen to us for the purpose of throwing us open to this mystery, from the authentic joys of life, that make the desire of God emerge, to the experience of the fact that nothing satisfies us, so that we can learn to wait disarmed for that good that we cannot build or procure for ourselves, and not to let ourselves get discouraged by the toil and the obstacles that come from our evil, from our sin.

Another one of us says, "While I was studying for an exam, it happened that two acquaintances of mine died a few days apart from each other. These deaths made it impossible for me to be tranquil, and set before me two possibilities: either to think that all my study was useless, because after all, everything ends in nothingness, or to ask to be able to live everything, even my exam, in a way worthy of life and death. That first possibility which presented itself to me every morning eliminated the promise of

29 J. Waters, "Memorial Room," in *Tre accordi e il desiderio di verità. Rock 'n' roll come ricerca dell'infinito [Three Chords and the Desire for Truth: Rock 'n' Roll as Search for the Infinite]*, edited by J. Waters, Società Editrice Fiorentina, Florence, 2012, pp. 76-77.

30 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, November 7, 2012.

good that I have intuited for my life. It seemed that this promise was not strong enough to believe, and the outcome of this position was that I lived everything with superciliousness and indifference, no longer expecting anything for myself. Helped, above all, by the work on the Beginning Day, I began to give space to the hypothesis that all of reality is for me, that every experience I have [of love, of friendship, of beauty, of all these things the Pope names] is for me, for my maturation, that is, for my self awareness, so that I can realize what I am made of and what I truly desire, and I realized that I desire much more than just passing an exam, that what I want from my life is not so much a series of small successes, but fulfillment.”

But often, as the Pope mentioned, one is blocked by one’s own mistakes. “In this period,” another one of you tells me, “I see cynicism growing in me, derived not from the fact that I don’t encounter anything, but from the fact the I’ve betrayed what I’ve encountered and, having made some mistakes, I realize how my perception of myself is determined by my many mistakes and by my lack of coherence.”

Knowing this, the Pope tells us not to be discouraged by the toil and the obstacles that come from our sin, because “even after their sin,” as he wrote in the message for the Meeting of Rimini, “human beings are left with this all-consuming desire for this dialogue, almost as if the Creator Himself had branded their soul and their flesh with it. [...] ‘O God, You are my God, I seek You, my soul thirsts for You; my flesh faints for You, as in a dry and weary land where no water is.’” No evil, no mistake can erase this; “not only my soul but every fiber of my flesh is made to find its peace, its fulfillment, in God. And this aspiration in the human heart is indelible: even when God is rejected or denied, the thirst for the infinite that dwells in men and women is not slaked. [...] The thirst of the soul and the longing of the flesh the Psalmist speaks of cannot be eliminated.”³¹ This is the sign of how the desire for God is not defined by our evil, how the Mystery still cares about us. Otherwise, God would have already wiped us from the face of the earth.

The desire remains. “This is not, then, about suffocating the longing that dwells in the heart of man, but about freeing it, so that it can reach its true height. When, in desire, one opens the window to God, this is

31 Benedict XVI, *Message for the XXXIII Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 10, 2012.

already a sign of the presence of faith in the soul, faith that is a grace of God. St. Augustine always says: 'So God, by deferring our hope, stretched our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious.'³² Here one understands just how false it is to reject as abstract the affirmation that we are relationship with the infinite.

"This evening, I realized that I'm really good at talking; theoretically, I have understood everything, but then in daily life I never let what I have encountered become the criterion of my days, of the choices I make, and so, rather than being more serene in doing the things I have to do, a kind of skepticism grows in me. For example, when you said we are made for the infinite, it irritated me, because it seemed very abstract. I thought about my apartment, where I have trouble with one of my housemates, and I said, I'm sorry, but in dealing with her, the fact that we are relationship with the infinite just doesn't stand up; it's abstract." But does the fact that you are angry with your housemate show that our being "relationship with the infinite" is abstract, or does it demonstrate the opposite, that our being relationship with the infinite is the one true concrete thing? Why aren't you satisfied with just any relationship with your housemate? Why does she make you angry? Just because of your temperament, or because you desire something other in your relationship with her as well? Our friend continues: "I thought that the other day I had put into practice exactly this reasoning of mine when I said that I was very angry and I left the apartment to go get some fresh air. Right away, though, I realized that even after having run off and done what I wanted to, I was not happy." So then the problem is not the other people, because even when we run away we are not happy. "Thinking that she was in the wrong and that's all there was to it, and running off, did not make me freer—only more alienated. Then, in the following days, I spoke with another friend and it's not that my reasonable anger disappeared, but I thought, 'Well, who am I to reduce the other to her errors when nobody looks at me this way? If Jesus doesn't focus on our errors, why should we do so?' And I must confess that it wasn't abstract or intellectual to acknowledge that we are greater than the reductions that we make, and that this doesn't mean that the errors are not our concern, but that we can stay before them without running away. I am happier to live this way. I have come to realize that I

32 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, November 7, 2012.

am not made for running away, but for being all there, in all of my life.”

When we see the size of our desire, when we see such boundless greatness, we wonder whether it is an advantage or a condemnation. Is it not perhaps a condemnation to desire so much? The Pope referred precisely to this objection that arises in us, this sort of rebellion that comes upon us. “At this point, however, a question arises. Is it not perhaps structurally impossible for human beings to measure up to the loftiness of their nature? Is it not perhaps a condemnation to live this yearning for the infinite that they sense, without ever being able to totally satisfy it?”³³ How many times have we objected that maybe it would be better to settle for less? Wouldn’t it have been better if I hadn’t encountered anything or anybody that had reawakened this desire for the infinite? At times, we would like that there had not been that event that awakened it in us; we would prefer to return to the onions of Egypt, like the people of Israel (they were slaves, but at least they had onions!). Why desire so much?

“This question brings us directly” as powerfully and dramatically as one senses the expectation, says the Pope, “to the heart of Christianity.”³⁴ It is the last point of our journey, which I draw from Péguy: “To hope... one must have received a great grace.”³⁵

3. THE PRESENCE THAT ENABLES ME TO LOVE MYSELF NOW

“In fact,” says the Pope, “the Infinite One took a finite form in order to make Himself a response that the human being could experience. The unbridgeable abyss between the finite and the infinite was filled by 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”³⁶ to answer our desire for the infinite.

Before news of this kind, how can we be certain; how can we know with certainty that what Christianity announced really happened? Those

33 Benedict XVI, *Message to the XXXIII Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 10, 2012.

34 *Ibid.*

35 C. Péguy, *The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*. Dorothy Brown Aspinwall (trans.), Metuchen, Scarecrow Press, 1970, p. 12.

36 Benedict XVI, *Message to the XXXIII Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 10, 2012.

who encountered Christ recognized Him through His ability to know the human heart. "Only the divine can 'save' man. The true and essential dimensions of humanity and its destiny can only be preserved by He who is their ultimate meaning—which is to say, recognized, acclaimed, defended." In fact, Jesus, the divine become flesh, the infinite become finite, "in His life, demonstrates a passion for the individual, an urgent desire for his happiness. This leads us to consider the value of the human person as something incommensurable, irreducible." For Him, the "problem of the world's existence is the happiness of each single person"³⁷—mine and yours. This is what we discover in every page of the Gospel.

"Now, as He approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging, and hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' He shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!' The people walking in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent [everything conspires together to silence that cry], but he kept calling out all the more, 'Son of David, have pity on me!' [This is the battle unleashed in each of us, between those who tell us, 'Be quiet, stop disturbing!' and our cry. The man born blind called out even louder; nobody can fight this battle in our place: what corresponds more, being silent or crying out? Only to the person who has the courage to cry out can happen what happened to that blind man.] Then Jesus stopped and ordered that he be brought to Him [with this gesture, Jesus expresses all His passion for the individual person; nobody cares a fig about him; they just want to make him shut up—and often our 'friends' are the ones who say: 'Don't disturb!'—but there is One who cares for all his desire: He stops and orders them to bring him to Him.]; and when he came near, Jesus asked him, 'What do you want Me to do for you?' He replied, 'Lord, please let me see.' Jesus told him, 'Have sight; your faith has saved you.'"³⁸ Two thousand years have passed since this happened, but we can no longer erase it from the face of the earth—certainly, we can ignore it, care nothing for it, or instead we can open ourselves to the possibility. Passion for oneself is needed in order to grasp in Jesus' gesture all the promise that He represents for the life of a person who desires everything, like

37 L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, Mc-Gill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 1998, pp. 83-84.

38 Lk 18:35-42.

that blind man. In fact, “The greatest miracle, which left a deep imprint on the disciples every day, was not the healing of crippled legs, the cleansing of diseased skin, or the restoration of sight to the blind. The greatest miracle of all was that truly human gaze which revealed man to himself and was impossible to evade. Nothing is more convincing to man than a gaze which takes hold of him and recognizes what he is, which reveals man to himself.”³⁹

This happened to that woman of Samaria. Just reading it brings a chill up the spine: “So He came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, tired from His journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’ (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.’ [Jesus could have continued with these games—Jew, non-Jew, Samaritan—but He cuts it short: ‘If you knew who is asking you for a drink...’ Whatever the starting point of the conversation, the difference is evident; speaking of what everyone speaks of, Jesus goes right to the heart of the issue, and that woman, as if she hadn’t even heard, continues:] ‘Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?’ Jesus answered [He challenges her again; He doesn’t draw back] and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ [So now the woman stops playing games; she is so deeply taken, that fact is so corresponding to what she desires, that it changes her arrogance into entreaty:] The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’ Jesus said to her [giving her a sign], ‘Go call your husband and come back.’ The woman answered and said to him, ‘I do not have

39 L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, op. cit., p. 53.

a husband.' Jesus answered her, 'You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. '[Not even five husbands could quench that woman's thirst; you can add what you want, but that woman was thirstier than before]. The woman said to him, 'Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. [...] I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when He comes, He will tell us everything.' Jesus said to her, 'I am He, the one who is speaking with you.' At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman [...]. The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, 'Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could He possibly be the Messiah?' They went out of the town and came to Him. [...] Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me everything I have done.' When the Samaritans came to Him, they invited Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in Him because of His word, and they said to the woman, 'We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'"⁴⁰

Commenting on this text, the Pope observes: "There is no man or woman who, in one's life, would not find oneself like the woman of Samaria beside a well with an empty bucket, with the hope of finding the fulfillment of the heart's most profound desire, that which alone could give full meaning to life. Today, many wells offer themselves up in order to quench humanity's thirst, but we must discern in order to avoid polluted waters. We must orient the search properly, so as not to fall prey to disappointment, which can be damaging. Like Jesus at the well of Sychar, the Church also feels the need to sit beside today's men and women. She wants to render the Lord present in their lives so that they can encounter Him because His Spirit alone is the water that gives true and eternal life. Only Jesus can read the depths of our heart and reveal the truth about ourselves: 'He told me everything I have done' [...]. This word of proclamation is united to the question that opens up to faith: 'Could he possibly be the Messiah?' It shows that whoever receives new life from

40 Jn 4:5-42.

encountering Jesus cannot but proclaim truth and hope to others.”⁴¹

This is beautiful, but does it happen today? It was the question my students asked. “It’s very beautiful, and we, too, are moved just by reading the pages of the Gospel. We can imagine being there! It’s very beautiful, but does it happen today?”

Let’s listen to this story from one of you: “About a month ago, my life finally had a turning point. Finally, after days and months of total apathy, I encountered something so beautiful and great that I could no longer remain in the place I was before. Where was I before? I had spent my days hoping they would pass quickly, without the least cognition of what was happening around me, but above all, within me. I lived through September with anxiety and anguish, terrorized about starting university, not knowing that the greatest discovery awaited me, the rediscovery of myself, the true me, that had fallen asleep and that I had forgotten. Thanks to a high school classmate, in September I arrived at the university and Someone, I am sure, wanted to give me a gift, the unexpected gift for which I am grateful, one that changed my life: it was the opportunity to attend the presentation of my degree program by some university students on September 20th (I remember even the date with certainty) and to meet some of them afterwards in the atrium. Those people left me with a sensation that still moves me. They struck me before I knew anything about them, the Movement, Fr. Giussani, or Fr. Carrón; I understood that there was something different, that the familiarity among them was special. I returned home happy about the experience and a bit more convinced about my choice of university. During the first week of lessons, my classmates said, ‘We’re going to School of Community. Do you want to come with us?’ I instinctively went with them, out of curiosity. For the first time, I saw what it means to live something so profound and true together. I have vivid memories of School of Community, but above all of how I felt when it ended—the only words I could say were: ‘How beautiful! I’ve never seen or experienced anything like this!’ That evening, I wondered why, among all the people at the university, I should have met precisely these members of the Movement. Was it only by chance, or does Someone want something from me? I peppered everyone with questions,

41 Benedict XVI, *Message to the People of God at the Conclusion of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, October 7-28, 2012.

sometimes simple, elementary ones. I read the notes from the Beginning Day, and began the journey from zero, from the point of pure beginner. Since I have started university, my parents have been happy to see me so happy, even though they are not in the Movement. They looked me in the eyes and simply asked me to tell them what has happened to me. To all those who criticize, to the friends with whom I had to compare ideas and who at the beginning didn't understand (many are still skeptical) I can only say, thank you, thank you because if they had not opposed me with their reasons, I wouldn't have found mine, I wouldn't have pursued things deep down. The dialectic between us forced me to reason, to compare my ideas with theirs, explaining what I had found to myself and to them. What I truly cannot do without are the people I have encountered, their gaze upon me daily, the infinite attention they give me daily and that I cannot explain. Why, with all the people there are, with all the problems each of us has, do they also have the time to dedicate to me? How is it possible? To my mind, this is the most tangible sign of the presence of Christ. It's not so much the discussions that one can have on the subject, but the beauty that shines through the people I have encountered in this month."

"The meaning of our life," says Fr. Giussani, "has been revealed to us and is revealed to us, strikes our existence, accompanies and helps our existence within a time and a space, that is, within a physically perceptible human reality," like that our friend has encountered. The meaning of our life reaches us within a human reality, "and this physically perceptible human reality, as companionship to the maturation of our search for destiny, in our adhesion and in our expectation, reveals totally the meaning of our life; this form, this piece of time and space is not chosen by us, but is found, is recognized (not chosen, but recognized): it is that piece of time and space that shakes us up. It is the encounter, it is that encounter and, thus, that percussion of our conscience that is without equal [as the girl wrote: 'I've never seen or experienced anything of this kind.']. Even if it is confused, flickering, barely, barely hinted, it bears within an unmistakable accent of promise, of hope, and of opportunity."⁴²

This is what another friend recounts: "I met two new friends with whom I spend a lot of time at the university, and right away in the first

42 L. Giussani, *Dall'utopia alla presenza*.(1975-1978) [*From Utopia to Presence*.(1975-1978)], BUR, Milano 2006, pp. 381-382.

days I introduced them to a person who has been very meaningful for me, a very important witness. Returning in the car, one of the two told me, ‘Nobody has ever treated me this way.’”

“Faith,” states Fr. Giussani, “is acknowledgment of the divine present. As it happened two thousand years ago to Simon, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, and Zacchaeus, you, too, were struck—maybe according to an apparently more fragile and tangential form—by the intuition of this Presence, or by this Presence as an intuition of a different life, as the intuition of a promise of life. Otherwise, you would not be here today! Becoming aware of this, looking this in the face, saying, ‘You’ to this, how this makes you embrace differently and with a truth, how this makes you look with truth, how this makes you bear every thing with truth!”⁴³ It is the intuition of a promise of life—because Jesus not only promises, but fulfills.

“Dear Fr. Julián: Last week, a dear friend of mine told me that a year ago she began the novitiate in the *Memores Domini* and that soon she will go live in a *Memores Domini* household. You should have seen her love-struck face. She told me how this decision was born and deepened, and her eyes were full of such love, such affection for Christ, as if He had been her life companion in flesh and blood in these recent years. I watched her the whole evening, amazed at how she could be so changed and how she could be so happy. Truly, in that moment I found myself thinking that either she was crazy or that only Christ, present now, could correspond so much to the desire of a person’s heart as to make her decide to donate her whole life. There were about 15 of us friends at that dinner. As she spoke, there were often long moments of silence, but it wasn’t an embarrassing silence, when you don’t know what to say because everything seems inadequate; rather, it was a silence charged with moved emotion, charged with a powerful Presence, a Presence so powerful and real as to have changed and conquered the life of my friend, a Presence that, through her change, was returning in that moment to conquer me, too. Nothing makes my heart vibrate so much, to the point of moving me, like the recognition of Christ present now through a changed humanity. For me, this has become ever clearer because the same experience has happened to me, just hearing you talk at the last School of Community,

43 L. Giussani, *Qui e ora (1984-1985) [Here and Now]*, Bur, Milan, 2009, pp. 434-435.

or reading the letter by Bizzo's parents⁴⁴ a year after his death, or that of Francesca.⁴⁵ When this happens, I discover I am free, above all, to be able to look at myself without being scandalized by my limits, and free to propose to others what I have encountered. In the face of this, though, I am unable to remain tranquil, and in these days I am even more restless than before. I begin my day and desire nothing more than to be able to return to see the traces of His face in the reality of things before me, in the encounters I have, because if this does not happen, I come to the end of the day having done all sorts of things (the hospital ward, lessons, study, encounters, appointments of the Movement) and yet with an infinite longing deep down in my heart that makes me ask, 'What's the use of all I've done today, if today I couldn't encounter You?' This is why I am here at these Spiritual Exercises, grateful for being preferred, and desirous to continue walking to be educated to the simplicity of acknowledging every day that 'I strive in the race to grasp Him, I who have already been grasped by Christ.'

For this reason, Péguy is so right when he says, "To hope, one must have received a great grace"! What is this grace? This grace is Him, His presence, not first of all His gifts, but Him, because without Him I cannot love myself now, I cannot have this affection for myself now. "One cannot remain in the love of one's self," Fr. Giussani reminds us once again, "without Christ being a presence, as a mother is a presence for her child, who does not know how to do things, who whimpers because he has wet his pants. Without Christ being here now—now!—I cannot love myself now, and I cannot love you now. If Christ is not risen, I am finished, even if I have all His words, even if I have all His Gospels. At best, with the texts of the Gospels I could even kill myself, but with the presence of Christ, no, with the acknowledged presence of Christ, no!"⁴⁶

Christ is risen; that is, He is contemporaneous in time and history through those faces in whom now He proposes His promise to me. As many of you say, telling me about encounters among yourselves, "When I go around in the halls and encounter the gaze of one of them, I feel happy and at home; when I don't see them, I want to look for them because I

44 Cf., "Preferiti, anche dentro il dolore" (lettera di Flavio ed Ester Bizzozero) ["Preferred, even in the midst of pain" (letter of Flavio and Ester Bizzozero)], November 2, 2012, *Tracce.it*.

45 Cf., D. Perillo, "With Their Very Lives," *Traces*, Vol. 14, No. 9 (October) 2012.

46 L. Giussani, *Qui e ora...*, op. cit., p. 77.

want to be with them. But have they ever promised me anything? I realize that none of them has ever promised me anything, but in truth they have promised me everything. They are the promise, with their way of living, of being together, of looking at people in such a way that they feel loved, that they lack nothing. They are the promise.” Another one of you says, “Has anyone promised you anything today? I have to acknowledge that there is a promise: your faces.”

“The community,” writes Fr. Giussani, “is the place of the continuity of the event, literally of the continuity of the event of Christ two thousand years ago, that of the encounter with the Samaritan woman [...]. The community is the place of the continuity of the touch, of that touch, of that accent, that gave you an intuition of new life, a hinted promise, the hint of a promise of truer life, of life, that made you join us. The community is the place of the continuity of Christ, the continuity of the event of Christ, and of the event of Christ that has touched you. It is through a contingency, through a casuality of circumstances, the casuality of circumstantial relationships that Christ, that the event that Christ was for Simon or for the Samaritan woman, has become event for you. Christ has become the event of life for you through a casuality of relationships. If you rip yourself away from this apparent casuality of relationships, of circumstances, of circumstantial relationships, you lose not those relationships but what struck you in those relationships.”⁴⁷

What struck you in those relationships? Him, the Mystery made flesh, Christ. Saint John Chrysostom phrased it as if Jesus were speaking: “It is not in this way only that I have shown My love to you [...]. I left My Father and came to you, who dost hate Me, and turn from Me, and art loath to hear My Name. I pursued you, I ran after you, that I might overtake you. I united and joined you to Myself, eat Me, drink Me, I said. Above I hold you, and below I embrace you. Is it not enough for you that I have your First-fruits above? Does not this satisfy your affection? I descended below: I not only am mingled with you, I am entwined in you,”⁴⁸ so that you could have affection for yourself.

47 *Ibid*, p. 438.

48 CE., Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the First Letter to Timothy, Homily XI*, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230615.html>.

ASSEMBLY | FR. JULIÁN CARRÓN

December 8th, afternoon

Julián Carrón: We received a great number of questions, and as always, in order to avoid repetition, among the questions that recur most frequently we have chosen the ones that expressed the issue most clearly. So then, let's start.

Contribution: I realize that saying that things are not enough carries the risk of disinterest in reality, disengagement from it. For example, it is true that singing a song well (I'm in the choir) doesn't fill my heart's desire for the infinite but, at the same time, I need to do it well to recognize the unmistakable traces of He who, instead, *can* fill my heart. So, I wanted to ask you, in the face of reality, the heart finds that nothing is sufficient deep down, but how does this fit together with the fact that reality is a road? Why should I need something that ultimately is not enough for me?

Carrón: I am very grateful to you for this question because, as always, I am the first to learn. In fact, reflecting on this I came to a greater realization of the genius of the Mystery, because truly this method is brilliant. Imagine the Mystery, so content, so happy that, as happens when two people are happy (imagine two married people: they want to share their fullness, and so from that gladness comes forth the desire to communicate it to a child), there is the desire to communicate this happiness. Creation was born this way, from this explosion of happiness that God experienced in that unique, mysterious relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; thus, He wanted to create women and men to be able to share His happiness. What method did He use to bring them this happiness? Right off, we wonder why, if God wanted to share this happiness with us, He didn't just create us directly in heaven. Why didn't He give us everything right from the start, and spare us the journey? But if you begin to look at things a bit more calmly, you ask: if the Mystery had done so, what would He have eliminated? Freedom, because we would've

been forced to live this way from the beginning, without the chance of adhering freely. But would a salvation that wasn't free be human? I have already recounted the dialogue I had with a "theologian" taxi driver in Milan, how he was amazed, almost scandalized by the fact that God let certain things happen in history without intervening; deep down, he was scandalized by freedom (because in the end this is the point: the scandal of freedom). To help me understand, I asked him, "But would you like your wife to love you because of a mechanism that kept her from making mistakes, or would you prefer that your wife loved you freely?" And the taxi driver said right away, "I would prefer her to love me freely." "Do you see? The Mystery, who certainly gets no less enjoyment from love than you—instead of creating other stars that shine mechanically, other beings that orbit in perfect timing according to a fixed law—preferred, wanted to run the risk of freedom."

When we begin looking at things more carefully, we see that the only possibility for the design of God to be fulfilled was different than what we would imagine. Then we begin to understand why the Mystery made us with boundless desire, with unlimited desire: to share with us His fullness. But this desire had to be constantly reawakened, constantly educated. And how could the Mystery continually throw our desire wide open, educate us to come out with all our urgent need for fullness? The only way was to use concrete reality; a discourse was not enough, because a discourse does not seize us enough, does not expand us, throw us wide open. He set before us concrete things that attracted us, that opened us, that threw wide open all our capacity for reason and affection, all the unbounded desire we have and that continually needs to be reawakened. This could happen only through something concrete that, at the same time, did not satisfy us fully. Only this method, so real, so concrete, so precise, that takes us and broadens our reason, could at the same time respect our freedom, because in the face of what happens, we can throw ourselves wide open, we can open ourselves to something that goes beyond, or we can refuse to do so, as when one receives some flowers (this is the example we often give): the flowers are something concrete (they can wither) but they are something concrete that points beyond, a sign, as we say. We can decide to enjoy them until they wither, as we often do with things and people (we possess them until they fade away and then we are alone) or we can follow that to which they point, as a sign, and then this opens us. This method is

consonant with the nature of reason: it throws us wide open to reality, and respects freedom. This is so true that the sacramental method, this method of the sign, by which something provokes us, opens us, broadens us, is the one Jesus also used. In fact, Jesus, binding people to Himself, opened them to an even more mysterious dialogue with the Father, educating them constantly to the Mystery. Fr. Giussani says that the fundamental thing that Christ does, from the educative point of view, is to educate our religious sense; the whole fierce struggle that Jesus has with His disciples, when they want to reduce Him to their measure, is to open them to the Mystery. The disciples, or the people, want to bind themselves to Him, and nothing more; they want to make Him king: "What more do you want? We acknowledge You. You multiplied the loaves. We acknowledge You. How is this seen? By the fact that we want to make You king; we acknowledge Your greatness." But Jesus never yields; He is so aware of how we are made, of our make-up, of the fabric of our being, and, on the other hand, of His own nature, His own mission, that He says, "No, no, no, reducing Me to king reduces what I am and would not be enough for you," and He broadens the measure to the point of scandalizing us: "If you do not drink My blood and eat My flesh, you will not be happy." Jesus acts by increasingly broadening our desire. Why? Because He doesn't love us? Only a superficial way of seeing things would answer that He doesn't love us. Actually, He loves us so much that He desires to fill us more and more. This dissatisfaction that remains, in every thing or relationship, is the modality by which He says to us, "But don't you miss Me?" This is why I was so struck by a line I read of Fr. Giussani, and have repeated many times since: in every dissatisfaction that any experience of reality leaves us with, it is as if the Mystery said to us, "I'm the One you miss in everything that you enjoy: I'm the One!" And here again, freedom is key. I can say, "Bah!" or I can yield to the attraction I feel. It is a dramatic alternative because it's always free. This drama is never decided; it happens over and over. One must truly love oneself, have a true affection for self that does not settle for something less than what the heart desires, to be open, not to be scandalized by this method God uses to educate us, to attract and fill us more and more, to constantly broaden our heart and be able to fill it more and more and more. This is so different from our image of "bourgeois happiness"! But we'll come back to this later.

Contribution: How can the mere recognition of my restless heart be an evident sign of the presence of the response? I understand that my restless heart is like an open door, but I don't see how merely recognizing this can already be an evident sign of the presence of the answer.

Carrón: Can I ask you a question? If you proposed this question, you have to be open to the unexpected. Have you ever been in love?

Contribution: Yes.

Carrón: And have you ever felt longing for the person you love?

Contribution: Yes.

Carrón: And why did you feel this longing for her? Why did you miss her?

Contribution: Because first I had seen her, and so then I missed her.

Carrón: You missed her. If she were present, you wouldn't miss her. Is this missing her the sign of the fact that you had met her, or not?

Contribution: Yes.

Carrón: Is that clear?

Contribution: Yes, fairly.

Carrón: Often this is precisely what we don't understand: you feel longing because you miss someone. You ask, why, if I have desire, if I feel longing, is this an unequivocal sign that the other for whom I long actually exists? Precisely, because otherwise you wouldn't feel longing. We apply this reasoning so clearly to the longing for the beloved, because if you hadn't met her you wouldn't feel longing, but why don't we apply it to the desire we feel within? The reasoning is equally applicable, because I have this desire, this expectation, as Pavese says, precisely because of

the promise it contains. For this reason, last night, drawing on Pavese's sentence, I insisted on the question of why we should expect anything. If nobody promised us anything, why do we expect? We struggle to understand this: it seems that expecting is inevitable. Instead, all the great geniuses like Pavese recognize that in this expectation there is something mysterious that is already the sign of the answer, and they understand that someone is needed to constantly reawaken this desire. We do not realize that the fact of having the desire is not inevitable at all. This is why Ungaretti, whom we quoted yesterday, asked why is it that I, who am always in the midst of mortals and among mortal things, that die and decay, why do I, always in the midst of finite things, have this desire for the infinite? "Why do I yearn for God?" With all their poetic energy, these lines express who we are better than any others, but to us they seem empty questions because in order to understand the importance of the question, you have to have experience of life, you have to have understood what you have lived. Why do I begin by speaking about longing? Because it is the experience that you have at your fingertips to understand what the poets say, which we said this morning in another way. The experience of longing enables you to understand: if you miss someone, it is already the sign that she or he exists. Not that she doesn't exist, but that she exists! If she didn't exist, there'd be no longing. Imagine how our gaze would change if every time we were sad, every time we were alone, every time we felt dissatisfied, we behaved the way we do when we feel longing: in fact, we don't take it as a pretext for starting to doubt the existence of our girlfriend, but we recognize it as the most powerful call to the memory of that girl, to the acknowledgment that she exists. If it is the opposite for us, it is because we lack familiarity with the human, with the fabric of the human, and so we interpret everything backwards. This makes life truly burdensome. Someone gives you a gift and you think he's making fun of you. He's doing something positive for you, and you perceive it as a negation. It's as if we can't find the key for understanding reality, for understanding what happens in life, and this confuses us. The fact that the question exists is already the clearest sign that there is an answer, because otherwise there wouldn't even be the question (the true question, the question that constitutes us): why, since I am here among finite things, do I desire the infinite? Why? If nobody

promised us anything, why do we expect? Why, living among mortal things, do I yearn for God? Only by beginning to look at these questions without taking them for granted, living with them, will we slowly begin to understand, will we want to understand, will a breach open. Imagine if each of us read every reality, every human experience according to what Fr. Giussani says: “I’m the one you’re missing in everything you enjoy.” The lack you feel is the clearest sign that you miss *Me*—that you miss the Presence for whom you are made. It’s as if your girlfriend said, “Don’t you realize that it’s me that you miss?” We understand this very well. Instead, when it’s a matter of the fundamental experiences of life, we get confused.

Contribution. Why does expectation become gladness for you? For me, instead, it always remains an uneasiness. And then the second question I wanted to ask you is....

Carrón: Have you already understood something of what I said up to now?

Contribution: Yes.

Carrón: How can what for you is mere restlessness be gladness for me? Because if you begin to look at longing... You love your boyfriend, but would you like it if you didn’t feel any longing for him? Would you like it if you overcame this phase?

Contribution: No.

Carrón: No. Do you understand why there is gladness when you feel longing?

Contribution: Because it is precisely in my relationship with my boyfriend that I experience this thing most dramatically, because precisely with him I realize that I am need of an Other, and it is dramatic. This makes me uneasy.

Carrón: Precisely this, the fact that in your relationship with each

other, both of you are redirected toward the Only One who can fulfill you, makes life dramatic. Why? Because of what we said earlier, because of the genius of the Mystery in opening us and expanding our heart, throwing our heart wide open through something real, present, and concrete. What seizes our heart more than all the rest, throwing it wide open to the maximum? The relationship of love, because other things can grasp you, but not in every fiber of your being. The more it grasps you, the more you open up wide. This is highly dramatic, because one thinks that the other should provide fulfillment. But if the other were enough, then life would be over. In fact, what would life be, then? Our image of fulfillment is the issue here. But precisely starting from the example of longing, we are called to realize that the more a person grasps and seizes you, the more he causes you to look beyond, precisely because you are made for something other, because both of you are made for a greatness that is infinitely greater. As we heard this morning, when a guy tells his girlfriend that she is no longer able to fulfill him, she could feel discouraged—"So then, if I am not the one who fulfills you..." Instead, that is the most crucial moment, because you can truly realize what the beloved is, and what you are; no other human experience makes you grasp better what the other is and what you are. It's dramatic, because we dream that the love relationship is the apex of our fulfillment, while instead it is great because it opens us. The Pope even says in *Deus caritas est* that it is the closest thing to the divine. But if you don't understand that the relationship is such because it opens you to something other, then the fact that you awaken all the desire in the other seems like an injustice because you reawaken it in him and then you can't fulfill him. You might want to say: If I reawaken desire and then I can't fulfill it in him, it's better not to reawaken it at all because I only make him more unhappy. Instead, the fact that you reawaken it in him and that you're certain that there is an Other who fulfills him, this is happiness. You are decisive for the person you love, because the other, only by the fact that you are there, can discover what he is made for. In the same way, only because the other exists can you discover what you are made for, that both of you walk together toward the One who fulfills life. This is what makes the vocation of marriage a road to the Mystery. Why is it worth marrying, if not for this? Otherwise, it would be a deception, something

that distracts; instead of being part of the road to destiny it would become a stumbling block. If it is lived for what it is, the relationship is what, more than any other thing, directs you toward destiny, because nothing like the presence of the beloved directs us back to what we are made for. If we don't understand it, the relationship becomes a grave, as unfortunately happens often in our culture: having reduced the other to he who can fulfill me, when he doesn't fulfill, since I soon realize that he doesn't fulfill me, I end up in the grave. Often now we go straight to the grave, because our culture has already opened the door to it through divorce. But more or less quickly, we all come to the grave if we don't recognize that the other is the sign of the Only One who can fulfill us, and not the fulfillment. When we seek other roads to escape the suffocation, the same mechanism is only reproduced indefinitely, to the point that instead of getting married, you buy a dog, which doesn't protest, and so the circle is closed.

Contribution. This morning, in the third point, you defined faith as acknowledgment of the divine present, and you identified the Christian community as the space, but also the instrument for the verification of the Christian claim. My question is: What are the unmistakable signs of the contemporaneity of Christ today?

Carrón: The most manifest sign of the contemporaneity of Christ is the experience of an impossible correspondence. This morning we read the letter of our friend who said, "I've never seen anything like this," because what seemed impossible happened before her eyes. It holds true for her and for us. This was the clear sign of His presence, as it was for the Samaritan woman and Zacchaeus when they ran into Jesus: in the encounter with that man, they felt an unimaginable, never-before-experienced correspondence with their hearts. Running up against the answer to the needs of the heart should be the most normal thing but, instead, since nothing ever corresponds truly, it is something absolutely exceptional. Thus, when they found themselves before that man, they experienced a correspondence so impossible to generate by itself that they said, "It's Him, it's really Him." And here once again the Mystery stoops over (stoops over!) our human experience. How do you

recognize that he or she is the beloved? Through that repercussion of correspondence, of a certain correspondence, that you find when you run into him or her. Fr. Giussani tells us that this is the experience of the Gospel: they recognized Him because He was the only one who saved all the dimensions of the human. Only the divine saves all the dimensions of the human. So then, the clearest sign, the most unmistakable feature of the contemporaneousness of Christ is that I experience a correspondence: I run into a reality through which I experience correspondence to the needs of the heart that seemed impossible, a different, exceptional reality precisely because it corresponds to me. This is the most irrefutable, indisputable sign of all, because it is the thing that we are least able to create ourselves, so much so that when it happens, yes, it is the thing we most desire, but it is also the most unexpected, as the disciples said, "We've never seen anything equal; we've never perceived an experience like it. A gaze like this (as Matthew would say) we've never seen before; a tenderness like this, never seen before." You need to read the Gospel to see, to discover this experience in action, in every passage, in every story. The man born blind got up that morning, like so many other mornings, saying, "It has never happened that a man born blind received sight," and what seemed impossible happened to him. This correspondence, the first feature, the first sign of the contemporaneousness of Christ, never happens in my thoughts, but (second feature) when I run up against a different human reality, a human reality outside of me. This responds to our worry that we ourselves invent faith. Try to invent it, try to generate it with your thought! The blind man couldn't invent it for himself; he ran into it, bumped up against One who gave him the sight he didn't have. It is the impact with something different, not something I generate with my thought. Try to generate an instant of gladness with your thought, and you will understand how silly it is when we say that we generate faith. Think of when you fall in love; think if you are able to give yourself an instant of that gladness, if you are capable of generating it with your thought, or with your imagination or with your creativity, no matter how brilliant. By yourselves, you can't generate even an instant of gladness! So let's stop it—we can continue saying certain things only through disloyalty with experience, because faith happens only when we bump up against a different humanity, outside of me, not generated

by me. For this reason, the Pope says, “Faith is not a creation, it is an acknowledgment.” And this reality, a human reality, is unmistakable, different; it is made of people like the others, but different from all the others. Our friend encountered some companions at the university and says, “They struck me, because there was something different in them.” She didn’t meet Martians there; they weren’t dressed in any particular way. No, they were like the others, women and men, but their difference didn’t elude her. And since we have the detector, the heart, to grasp this difference, she immediately perceived the difference in the way they related with her. This difference is a friendship, a gladness, a gratuitousness that is impossible for the human person alone, so much so that you ask why they’re this way. You run up against a human difference that makes you ask the same question asked two thousand years ago, now, not as memory of the past, not reading the Gospel like something past. No, now, running up against a different human reality, you ask the same question the disciples asked Jesus: “Why in the world are you this way? How is it that you are this way?” How many times have we been asked these questions by people who see how we played, how we went on outings, how we observed silence or sang, that is, running into us while we were doing simple, human things, because we need nothing else to show this difference. As Fr. Giussani says, we don’t need anything more than eating, drinking, living, and dying, because the way we eat shows the difference; the way we sing shows the difference; the way we are friends shows the difference; we don’t need anything else. Very human things but, within, they have the unmistakable signs of an Other that do not elude those with a simple heart.

Contribution: Today you told us, “The meaning of our life arrives within a physically perceptible human companionship.” But how do you make the passage from the recognition of an exceptional companionship to the fact that Christ is present in it? And a letter said, “The promise is there. It’s your faces.” But if they are people like me, not even they can respond to my need for fulfillment.

Carrón: Let’s listen to another way of expressing the same question.

Contribution: Often in the community, I see the enjoyment of being together as the center of the friendship, instead of Christ as the center. The first gets boring. How do my friends and I return to the central point?

Carrón: Let's begin with the first. How do you make the passage from an exceptional companionship to the fact that Christ is present in it? It seems to me that what we said in the previous response helps us understand why the Christian community is the sign of His contemporaneity. This difference, the recognition of this difference in a human reality like the others, prompts the question: "Why in the world are you this way? Where is the source of this difference?"—which is the same question that they asked about Jesus: "Isn't He the son of the carpenter? How in the world does He do these things?" How in the world, since we are like the others, do these things happen? So then the point of departure to answer this question is to look there, look, look, look. Fr. Giussani helps us in this: "In our experience, there is something that comes from beyond it: unforeseeable, mysterious, but within our experience."⁴⁹ Looking at this experience, within this experience, we detect something real, mysterious, that awakens our question, that challenges our reason—we are called to explain the difference we detect in our experience; otherwise, we censure it. "Faith is a form of knowledge that is beyond the limit of reason. Why is it beyond the limit of reason? Because it grasps something that reason cannot grasp: reason cannot perceive 'the presence of Jesus among us,' 'Christ is here now,' the way it perceives that you are here. [...] [that this glass of water is here]. Yet, it cannot *not* admit that He is here: Why? Because there is a factor within, a factor that decides about this companionship, certain outcomes of this companionship, certain resonances of this companionship, a factor so surprising that if I don't affirm something else [if I don't acknowledge something other] I don't give reason to the experience, because reason is to affirm experiential reality according to all the factors that make it up, all of the factors. There can be a constitutive factor, of which we only feel a reverberation, of which we feel the fruit, of which we even

49 L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way? Hope*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2008, p. 103.

see the consequences, but we aren't able to see this factor directly. If I say: [since I don't see] 'So it doesn't exist,' I am mistaken, because [in saying that it doesn't exist] I eliminate something of the experience—[and] this is no longer reasonable."⁵⁰ It is a type of knowledge that is in action in many occasions of life. You see certain results, certain signs of the relationship your mother has with you and that she doesn't have with other people. If you don't give credit to them, if you don't ask why they exist, what those gestures mean, and if someone tells you, "Those signs exist because your mother loves you," and you reply, "Well, I don't see this because I only see the signs," you are irrational. The signs testify to something other, so much so that the person who doesn't love you doesn't do them, doesn't show a certain attitude toward you, doesn't do certain things for you. You would have to erase certain things from your experience in order not to accept that within them is something other, that you have to recognize, which is the love of your mother. You would have to be irrational to say that you don't see them, that you only see signs. In this way, we see the signs of a certain way of our companionship, a certain friendship, a certain difference, but it is precisely this difference that cries out the presence of an Other. Try to come up with another suitable explanation that isn't Christ. Jesus challenged His disciples: "And you, who do you say that I am?" He challenged their reason. What did they have in hand for responding to that question? The closest experience was that of the prophets, yet right away they said, "But this man is more than a prophet." They couldn't find an adequate reason for that difference. When Jesus told them (you've all read in *School of Community* about the story of the king of Portugal)⁵¹: "I am the Mystery you expect," they responded, "Ah!" because this explained all the signs they had seen better than any other answer. But once again, it is an offering to our reason and our freedom. See if you find a more suitable explanation for that difference you discover among yourselves, an explanation other than this difference; these signs that make your companionship different are the clearest documentation of the contemporaneousness of Christ, because it is impossible for us to generate them. See if what people discover in us and that brings others

50 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

51 Cf., L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

to ask, "But who are you?" depends only on the fact that we are more congenial or more coherent or nicer than others. Try. It is clear that all our limits put together do not produce what amazes the others. The only adequate reason is Christ, He who makes possible all these things among us, who makes us capable of a different friendship, who makes us capable of singing differently, who makes us capable of living our studies differently, according to that difference that He introduced into history. And when we see this and recognize it, we understand that there is a way of living together that helps us recognize Christ. The second question said, "But sometimes we reduce this friendship to enjoying being together, rather than recognizing Christ." I ask you, when we settle for the enjoyment of being together, do we miss something? What is the first sign that we settle for the enjoyment of being together? You yourself said it: "I get bored." It seems like nothing, but instead it is the signal that we have forgotten Him. Without recognizing Christ, we get bored, as in the relationship with your girlfriend or boyfriend, according to what you yourselves said, "Not even you are enough for me." Why do you get fed up, if Christ is so abstract? If He is something abstract, as you always tell me, why is it that if you remove Him and limit yourselves to "enjoying being together," you get bored? Don't you say that Jesus is abstract? The first sign that we have reduced our staying together is that we get fed up. The first sign that we have eliminated Christ from our relationship with our boyfriend or girlfriend is precisely the fact that we get bored. For this reason, just as there are the unmistakable features of His presence, so there are equally unmistakable signs of His absence; you have to get this into your heads. His presence or His absence isn't nominal—we detect it in experience! When we recognize Him, we are not inventing it. It is the recognition of something that is present, and when we don't detect Him, it's not because He isn't there. The first sign of the elimination of Christ is that everything bores us: we enjoyed being together, it's not that the dinner went badly, it's not that everyone wasn't there, but we got fed up! Instead, the same dinner, another time, is so filled with a presence that we return home moved—if we recognize Him! This is anything but abstract, folks! You ask me, "How do we return to the central point?" Tell me first of all why you should return to the central point. If you miss something, return; if you don't, why should we

make problems for ourselves? Blunder around in your boredom. Why should we trouble ourselves with Christ and faith, if we are perfectly well off without Him? If we return to Him it is because, without Him, we get fed up, understand? What you hold to be abstract—Christ—is so concrete that when He isn't there we get bored, and when He's there, He makes us so glad that the desire increases. Do we miss anything when He isn't there? Do we miss anything when we settle for enjoying each other's company? Do we miss Him or not? This is often the point: we don't miss Him! For this reason, our sin doesn't only involve the things we do badly, the things we do mistakenly. Our errors would be nothing; the problem is that we don't miss Christ.

Contribution: In this morning's lesson you described me completely, above all these recent months, to the point...

Carrón: He didn't tell me anything.

Contribution: Until you quoted the Pope answering the question of whether deep down this desire is a bum deal. And the Pope said, "The infinite took on a finite form." Then I got angry, because I have no examples of this.

Carrón: Instead of being glad, we get angry at good news. They give us a gift and we get angry.

Contribution: And I got even angrier when you said that Jesus not only promises, but fulfills, because if I think of myself I say, great things happen, but I am always sad, and so I ask myself, "What does it mean that Christ fulfills me today?"

Carrón: What does "fulfill" mean? We are often confused because for us fulfillment means the nullification of desire, that I no longer desire. In fact, if I no longer desired I wouldn't be sad, because sadness, as Saint Thomas said, is the perception of an absent good. I am sad because I lack something. So then, how do we imagine fulfillment? As a state in which we lack nothing. This would be for us the "peak" of fulfillment, a sort of "Buddhist" fulfillment (using the broad sense of

the expression): to nullify desire. On the other hand, there is "bourgeois fulfillment": I fill myself so much that I no longer desire anything. Imagine for a moment that you were so full that you desired nothing more; what would life be? Endless boredom. For this reason, Fr. Giussani says something very beautiful about final fulfillment: "It's not like someone who is thirsty and goes to drink and after having drunk no longer thirsts [this is our image: I drink, and so I'm no longer thirsty]; rather, it's like someone who is thirsty and submerges his face in flowing spring water and drinks, and the more he drinks the more he thirsts, where drinking means continually satisfying a continual thirst."⁵² Would you like it if you stopped feeling longing for your boyfriend? If you no longer felt thirst? Is that what you desire? It would be the grave of your love. The day when you no longer "thirst" to see your boyfriend, it means he no longer interests you. Often, we think that fulfillment is like the nullification of desire, that I don't feel need, longing, or sadness anymore. But this would be inhuman. What you want is to desire your boyfriend more and more, to see him more and more, for his presence to continually fill your thirst, constantly renewing it. This is what you desire, not that your thirst should stop. If we don't understand this, we leave an image of fulfillment as the nullification of desire. Therefore, Fr. Giussani describes Paradise as a continual satisfaction of a continual thirst. If it weren't so, what would it be? Infinite boredom. Imagine all of eternity without desiring anything. It's terrible just to think of it. Thank goodness it's not the way we think. Instead, Paradise is when I am before His presence and increasingly desirous of staying before it: the more I am in relationship with Christ, the more I long for Him and desire to stay with Him! His presence constantly renews my thirst. Without this it would be infinite boredom. This is what Christ introduced. Christ did not come to eliminate the drama, so that at a certain point you no longer need the relationship with Him. Christ came to heighten that drama. It's like you with your boyfriend. In fact, ever since you fell in love, the drama has heightened. Weren't you calmer before? Yes or no? So then, do you prefer not to fall in love? Is this what you prefer? Is this why you got angry this morning? Now, if we talk about your boyfriend, you find

52 L. Giussani, *Avenimento di libertà. Conversazioni con giovani universitari [Event of Freedom. Conversations with Young University Students]*, Marietti 1820, Genoa, 2002, p. 20.

an example in your life that makes you understand what didn't convince you this morning: the fulfillment we truly desire is the opposite of what was implicated in your reaction this morning, which was, we can say, "intellectual," the fruit of a way of using reason detached from your experience, because in your experience the opposite of what you said happens. If you don't start from your experience in trying to understand things, you err, and complicate life and begin to get...what did you say?

Contribution: Angry.

Carrón: Angry. You don't have to get angry! We get angry at He who comes to save us! We're doing great here! This is why, as Fr. Giussani always taught us, it's very important to begin speaking about things starting from experience, not from our images, from what would apparently be logical according to a certain way of thinking, which is the opposite of what experience says. Reality makes itself transparent in experience; it is in experience that you learn what reality is, not in your thoughts. But since we are detached from experience, we begin to get angry. Christ came to heighten the drama, not to end it. The "new creature" is a heightening of reason and affection: neither one nor the other is nullified. If there were a nullification, Christ would not save us, He would bury us. It wouldn't be fulfillment; it would be the grave.

Contribution: How is it possible to look at oneself with tenderness? When I see my sin, the first time I say, "I shouldn't get discouraged," and the second time, "It's my limit; I shouldn't be shocked." The third time, I say, "I'm made badly." When I realize that Christ is present, I end up saying, "You are very good with me, but I continue to sin," and I am always back to the starting point...

Carrón: It's like you're saying to Jesus, "You are very good with me, but You're a bit naïve and You don't understand me well, because I'm made badly." It's as if a misunderstanding had happened in the relationship between you and Christ.

Contribution: The fact that I ask myself...

Carrón: So then, Jesus is good, but naïve.

Contribution: No, but... well, in part, yes, because at this point I wonder why He chose me. What design does He have for me? Because I am still here, and continue sinning, and never manage to do right, and so I ask myself again how one can love oneself. How does the journey not become anxiety about perfection, and how does the intuition become substance?

Carrón: Thank you for this question, because it helps us understand other decisive things as well. As we were saying before, we identify fulfillment with the nullification of desire, thinking that being happy means being without limits, and when Jesus does not eliminate our limits right away, we go into crisis, thinking that He is good and merciful, but deep down He doesn't understand that "we are made badly." We think being Christian means never sinning again, making no more mistakes. Certainly, Jesus wants to reach this point, but according to a journey, a design that is not ours. For this reason, Christ was not shocked or amazed at how many times Peter didn't understand, how often Peter was mistaken (to give an example that helps you). He could have "steamrolled and asphalted him over," sent him away. How could He choose people who didn't understand and who continued to make mistakes? Was Jesus a bit naïve, and thus chose poor men like Peter, or did He have an image of what He wanted to do with them that is different from our image? He chose you, so full of limits, as He chose me, so full of limits (which does not mean that we are badly made) because He wants to introduce us to a new experience. What is the first sign that, for Him, the fact that we make mistakes is not as decisive as you think? That He continues to give us life. This could give you a first indicator of the fact that He cares more about you than your sinfulness would make you think.

And so it was with Peter: He doesn't tell him that he did well. No, He corrects him, scolds him, reads him the riot act, but continues to be his friend. In this way, He creates a relationship with Peter that slowly but surely shifts him. Let's read how Fr. Giussani describes the

dialogue with Peter after he made the greatest mistake, denying Jesus in front of everyone on the eve of the Passion. He meets Peter after the Resurrection, on the lakeshore. They were fishing and they see someone on the lakeshore. John says, "It's the Lord!" Peter could have thought, "No! Now I'll hide, as if I weren't here," but no, Peter throws himself into the water right away, to reach Him more quickly. Then the others arrive. Imagine what Simon Peter must have thought: "Simon, whose many errors had made him humbler than all the others, sat down, too, before the food prepared by the Master. He looks to see who is next to him and is terrified to see that it is Jesus Himself. He turns his gaze away from Him and sits there, all embarrassed. But Jesus speaks to him. Peter thinks in his heart, 'My God, [...] what a dressing-down I deserve! Now He is going to ask me, Why did you betray Me?' The betrayal had been the last great error he had made [Peter had made], but, in spite of his familiarity with the Master, his whole life had been a stormy one, because of his impetuous character, his instinctive stubbornness, his tendency to act on impulse. He now saw himself in the light of all his defects [like you: when you see your latest mistake, it's like seeing the film of your life with the sequence of all your mistakes]. That betrayal had made him more aware of all his other errors, of the fact that he was worthless, weak, miserably weak [like you and me: miserably weak]. 'Simon'—who knows how he must have trembled as that word sounded in his ears and touched his heart?—'Simon [...] do you love Me?' Who on earth would have expected that question? Who would have expected those words? [...] 'Simon, do you love Me?' 'Yes, Lord, I love you.' How could he say such a thing after all he had done? That *yes* was an affirmation acknowledging a supreme excellence, an undeniable excellence, a sympathy that overwhelmed all others. Everything remained inscribed in that look. Coherence or incoherence seemed to fall into second place behind the faithfulness that felt like flesh of his flesh, behind the form of life which that encounter had molded." "Yes, I love you." "When he says this, what is Simon saying?" Listen to how Fr. Giussani expresses it: "All my human preference is for You, all the preference of my mind, all the preference of my heart [is for You, Christ]; You are the extreme preference of life, the supreme excellence of things. I don't know, I don't know, I don't know how to say it and I don't know how it can be but,

in spite of all I have done, in spite of all I can still do, I love You"⁵³—that is, all my human preference is for you, Christ. The true question is whether this relationship prevails, whether all my human attraction, even within my error, is for You, O Christ. If this prevails, my dearest friends, if this slowly but surely prevails in our life, in spite of all our limits, ours will be a journey full of tenderness and mercy, a journey in which the affection of Jesus crosses through all our error, all our evil, our humanity, and every fiber of our being clings to Jesus. Then, you will begin to understand that you are made well, but that to fulfill you, a journey is necessary, along which Jesus is not shocked by your errors. If you want to be loved the way Peter is loved, then His attraction and your human preference for Him will take the upper hand.

Contribution: I have a question regarding the girl's letter, when she speaks about her relationship with her boyfriend, and her realization that not even he is hers, but belongs to an Other. Comparing that with my experience, I don't understand my role; when you realize that your friend or boyfriend is not yours, what are you for him?

Carrón: Good. Do you see? Either we are everything for the other, and so we both prepare for disaster, or the day we realize we are not everything, because the destiny of the other is greater, we no longer know what our role is in that relationship. When I said to the young man who wanted to get married, "You don't seriously think that you will make her happy?" he answered, "Well, of course, otherwise, why should I marry her?" And I said, "That's a good question. You'd better ask yourself, the sooner the better!" What is our role? We are not the fulfillment of the other; we are companionship toward destiny, and the destiny of both is Christ. Your role is to reawaken in the other all his desire, all his desire of the infinite, the desire of Christ, and the role of the other is to reawaken the same desire in you. So then, you love this person because he is the one the Mystery has given you to reawaken in you, and vice versa, all the desire and all the longing for Jesus. This is a decisive role. You are the one who, more than any other, makes him look beyond; who, more than any

53 L. Giussani, S. Alberto, J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2010, pp. 59-60.

other. reawakens all his desire for the infinite, but at the same time you can't fulfill it. You might cry the day you realize that you can't fulfill him, but having met Jesus, we know why He had us meet: to make us look beyond, to help each other journey toward the One who fulfills, Christ. This is our role, becoming a true companionship toward destiny. This would resolve so much of our anger, so much of the violence between us, precisely because the other can't fulfill our life: the desire of which we are made is far greater than what the other can fulfill. Thus, discovering our role is fundamental to understanding why you will marry, because the Mystery has given us the other, this other who is so decisive for the journey toward destiny.

SUMMARY | FR. JULIÁN CARRÓN

December 9th, morning

Julián Carrón: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky, that Jesus the Saviour should come for to die, for poor hungry people like you and like I."⁵⁴

"God is always the beginning," the Pope told us at the Synod. "Only God's precedence makes our journey possible [...]. The true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only by begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become—with Him and in Him – evangelizers [new creatures]. God is always the beginning."⁵⁵ And only those who let themselves be taken hold of by God, who become close in Christ, can respond to the challenges we face. What we want to look at together now is the road, to try to insert ourselves into this initiative of God.

In the letter after the Synod, I recalled Fr. Giussani's line that speaks precisely of God's initiative: "The Movement was born out of a presence that imposed itself and brought to people's lives the provocation of a promise to follow." This presence that imposes itself will always be the beginning, as you yourselves bear witness. "In this period, I've been living everything in a way that up to now I'd thought impossible for me. Very shortly after arriving at the university, I met some CLU students and became fond of them right away. I was struck by their way of interacting, their commitment to their studies and life at the university, and saw how beautiful it was to live this way, and so I began to desire to be like them. I discovered that it's not a question of capacity; I didn't learn that way of living and acting from attending some kind of lessons, but by following them. I began to desire no less than what in reality I desire, and to realize when it isn't this way [a presence that imposes itself sets our desire into motion, because of a promise]."

Another of you writes, "Some things that happen to me every day have

⁵⁴ *I Wonder*, in *Canti*, op. cit., p. 283.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, *Meditation During the First General Congregation of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, October 8, 2012.

exactly the same importance as the first encounter with the Movement.” [She quotes:] ‘It brought to people’s lives the provocation of a promise to follow,’ as you said in the letter. These things that happened promise life, true life. It’s worth my while, and so I desire to follow these people.” This is the same thing that has happened these days, as Nick said yesterday at dinner, the same thing that has led many of you to follow the Movement.

Nick: Yesterday I was very struck by the assembly and as I was leaving I reflected that I understood once again why I am in the Movement, why I am here, and why I want to stay here. As you answered questions, recounting how Jesus challenged His disciples and the people He encountered, I thought to myself that here, now, in this instant, we are seeing the same thing: we are in front of the same spectacle. And if I look back over all these years, as I think it is for many of us, I can’t deny that I’ve seen “the gaze” that reveals the human. We have seen it. That impossible correspondence is an experience I have had. We have been challenged this way, as Jesus challenged His disciples; I have found myself before someone who loved my freedom more than my formal membership. I left the assembly more grateful than ever for this story, with clear evidence that what you say is really true, that the distance of all these years of history that separate us from that fact is eliminated by the re-happening now of the same thing; and when it happens, you know it.

Carrón: You know it because it corresponds; nobody has to explain it. It is “a fact of life,” as Fr. Giussani says, a fact of life that takes hold of us today. Precisely because it is a fact of life, it is impossible to remain indifferent, as another one of you says. “Lately, a great number of things have happened to me, from the most beautiful and easy to understand and accept, to things that are difficult and hard to understand. Within all this, however, I am coming to the realization that I can’t remain indifferent to a fullness of life that, within a daily work, is born in everything that happens and has as a point of origin the cry of my heart. The increasingly evident fact is that this cry is fulfilled in every instant in the relationship with Christ and is expressed in my following of the companionship of the Movement.” It is decisive for us to realize this.

Fr. Giussani is such a friend to us that he told us to be careful, because in the face of what was the origin—a presence that imposed itself and brought to people's lives the provocation of a promise to follow, such that one desired that fullness, and didn't want to remain indifferent—we run the risk of changing the method. "But then," says Fr. Giussani, "we entrusted the continuity of this beginning to speeches and to projects undertaken, to meetings and to things that we had to do. But what we have not done is entrusted, handed over, our lives; in this way, the beginning very quickly ceased to be the truth offered to our person, and instead has become the starting point for an association, for a reality upon which we can shrug off the responsibility of our own work, and from which we demand the resolution of things. What was supposed to be the open-armed welcoming of a provocation, and thus a following that is alive, has become an obedience to the organization."⁵⁶ As one of you writes, this temptation is always imminent. "After the letter you wrote to *Reppublica*, I found I had to judge all over again my experience in all these years with CLU. It was very painful to acknowledge how many times I had reduced the encounter to a series of initiatives (beautiful ones, certainly) and things to do and say, but, deep down, I was absent [we shrug off our responsibility on an organization from which we demand the resolution of things: 'I was absent!']. In fact, I had admitted I was afraid of my freedom and my desire in the face of things, and often I let someone else's judgment suffice. When I realized this, at first I was very angry, and then very pained. The only reason I could look deep down at my evil and not collapse was that I recognized that, in spite of everything, I exist and am loved. This judgment brought an unthinkable liberation with a consequent willingness and desire to look at everything again, trying to understand what was for me, attempting to not remain bound to all my mental frameworks and to a position to defend. It became a truly enjoyable, albeit difficult, work in which I am slowly recovering and discovering myself [Does this interest you? Otherwise, go look for some other association—there are a lot in the world—where you pay your dues and belong to the club]. All this would have been impossible for me without following the Movement, you and

56 L. Giussani, *Il rischio educativo. Come Creazione di Personalita' e di Storia* [*The Risk of Education: As Creation of Personality and History*], Sei, Torino 1995, p. 63.

all those who are given to me to follow in my daily life.” There is always the temptation to reduce everything to a mechanism, as another letter says. They are all testimonies of how we can get stuck a moment after the beginning; it’s not that nothing happened—otherwise, we wouldn’t be here talking, wouldn’t remain here listening—but the temptation to reduce is continuous. It is fundamental to have clear ideas about the “but then...” that changes the method, in order to help each other not lose the fascination and the freshness of the beginning. “In September, I began an advanced degree at another university. My arrival and the impact with a very different reality and many other difficulties made me afraid I couldn’t make it—I don’t know exactly why. At a certain point, a survival mechanism kicked in and I thought to myself, ‘I have to concentrate on myself, try to manage myself,’ but I ended up increasingly alone. When I decided to make myself by myself, I actually lost myself, because I lost the truth of myself.” At a certain moment I thought I could make it on my own: I already understand, I have in hand the things I’ve learned. I don’t need to follow. I can manage myself, and so I lost the truth of myself. The letter continues: “Then I ran into a friend and she made me understand once more how Christ stooped over me and called me by name, not leaving me to my lack of substance and my pain. That day I truly understood, after years of life in the Movement, what the Movement truly is.” The Movement isn’t an association, an organization, a club: it is called “Church,” the place where Christ remains present to continue to save us. If we don’t understand this, we don’t have the adequate reason for staying here. Immediately—immediately!—we see what happens when we think we can make it on our own, as if the Movement were valid only for adolescents who later, once they’ve grown, can do without it, thinking, “That’s fine, but only for a certain phase of life.” This is the way the rationalists imagined the Church: she contributed to the education of humanity, which, having reached adulthood, must do without her. Today, we see the outcome. There is always this temptation, as we see among us; it is the temptation of our autonomy. Why do I need to depend? We are so poor that we need another to be ourselves; belonging keeps us from losing ourselves. We depend. The letter continues further, “This is the place where I am continually called by name. So then, following begins to be understood

in its true profundity. It is not a slavery. It doesn't take anything away. It's not the membership fee to pay an association. Fr. Giussani says, 'Following in a lively way, with my full involvement, restores me and my life to myself, time after time. For this reason, my only desire at this moment is to always have the loyalty to follow.'

Fr. Giussani (what a grace has happened to us!) helps us to understand the true nature of following. In fact, many, even those who reduce the Movement to initiatives, an organization, a mechanism, can use the word "follow" and can say, "I am following," precisely while they are doing what Fr. Giussani warns against: "But then we entrusted the continuity [...] to projects undertaken, [...] to things that we had to do." Even if they said, "I'm following," Giussani says, "No!" Why is Giussani right? What Giussani says is true not because he says so, otherwise we would be treating him like a guru. It's right because that reduced following doesn't correspond to the needs of the heart, because we observe that something is interrupted in us, that we lose our way. We have in our experience the confirmation of the truth of what Fr. Giussani says.

So, we have to return home from these days with more clarity about what it means to follow. I spoke of it in the letter after the Synod: "Following is the desire to relive the *experience* of the person who has provoked you, and who still provokes you, with his presence in the life of the community [...]; it is the desire to participate in the life of that person, in whom something from an Other has been brought to you. And it is precisely this Other to whom you are so devoted, toward which you aspire, to whom you wish to adhere, all within this common journey."⁵⁷

Fr. Giussani left us this description of what following means so that we can compare it with what we live every day. In fact, we can call many things following, when instead they are only a reduction of it. We often think we follow because we repeat the right discourse, what we have learned, but if we make the comparison, we see the difference immediately. Fr. Giussani doesn't say that following means repeating what we already know; it means reliving the experience of the person who struck you. It means reliving an experience, not repeating a discourse, no matter how right it may be. It's very different! Following

57 *Ibid*, p. 64.

doesn't mean just participating in certain initiatives, however right they may be, but reliving the experience of the person who struck you. Following is not a sentimental and personalistic attachment to one person or another, the boss of the moment, because you can be attached to someone and not live his or her experience. Following is reliving the experience of the person who provoked you, which is what one desires from the beginning. You find something and say, "I began to desire to be like them, to participate in that experience." Giussani gives voice to what one desires; he is one who adheres more than any of us to what happens to everyone. He is loyal to what emerges in us, and does not separate himself from reality. What does it mean to participate in the experience of the other? What does the experience of the other, not reduced, mean? Look how Fr. Giussani answers. "It is the desire to participate in the life of that person, in whom something from an Other has been brought to you."⁵⁸ If we don't reach this Other, if we remain attached to the person without following her or him to this Other, we don't live the experience of the person who struck us. In fact, this person struck us not because she or he is necessarily a genius, or particularly good, or especially sharp, but because of this Other, because she or he brings this Other to our life. What strikes the others when they see us is this Other whom we carry in the fragility of our faces. If we don't let ourselves be introduced into the relationship with this Other, we don't have the same experience; we aren't following the experience of the other. Fr. Giussani said of himself, "Hundreds and hundreds of people can be bound to my person [*he said this!*], but among them, nothing happens"⁵⁹ because they don't have his same experience, because what unites is that each person learns, that is, has the same experience. Fr. Giussani was such a friend to us that he did not settle for having many individuals bound to his person as such, because this was not enough. Jesus did not settle for the fact that people were drawn to His person; He multiplied the loaves, and everyone was bound to His person to the point of wanting to make Him king, but Jesus eluded them: "This is not the point." And He went further: "If you do not understand that you have to eat My body and drink My blood,

58 *Ibid.*

59 Consiglio Nazionale di CL [CL National Council], Idice, San Lazzaro di Savena (BO), March 1-2, 1980.

you cannot have life within you." When He invited them to have His same experience, they got angry and left. It seemed that they wanted to follow Him, that they were bound to His person (they wanted to make Him king!) but they weren't willing to follow His same experience, and so they abandoned Him.

We can read the whole Gospel in this light. "Peter, who do the people say that I am?" "You? The Messiah." "Very good, Peter." He is bound, but Jesus continues, "Now we are going to Jerusalem because I must die." "No, heaven forbid!" Peter is bound to Jesus, but doesn't want to have His same experience and so introduces his measure: "No, no, no, don't even think of it!" But Jesus doesn't give in: "Then, get away from me, Satan, because you think like men, and not like God." Peter doesn't want to have the experience of God that Jesus has! Do you understand the difference between Peter's idea of following and Jesus'? Jesus blows them away constantly, as we've seen in School of Community. They arrive at the Mount of Olives, they come to seize Him, and Peter, not having understood Jesus' earlier reproach, charges again, draws his sword, and cuts the ear off a Roman soldier. "Peter, don't you understand? Are you so dense that you don't understand that My Father has legions of angels? Or do you think that He is asleep or distracted? Don't you understand that what is happening now is His plan, that I yield to the design of an Other? And if you want to be with Me, if you want to have My experience, you too have to enter into the design of an Other, because if you don't enter, when things don't go as you want, you will always be the victim. But I want to introduce you to the relationship with My Father in heaven, to make you see what life is, to make you experience the victory that is your same bond with the Father: when you see this victory in me, you will understand that this bond is more powerful than death, more powerful than any defeat. I want to bring you to understand that the true issue is the bond with the Mystery who makes us. Following is following Me to this point, because that bond gives life such substance that no matter what happens, you are fully there. This bond is more powerful than any evil, any wound, any defeat, any circumstance. Are you interested in this or not? If not, we've already lost the battle."

Do you understand Jesus' passion for our life? I understand then that before such a man, anyone can desire to follow Him, to live His same

experience. “As I was re-reading your talk from the Beginning Day, this line jumped out at me: ‘Indeed, there is a battle that lasts my whole life: that in living, I keep Jesus present! Our friendship promises us this: help in growing, in advancing, in walking behind this memory’ in any battle. With the beginning of the school year, which for me was and continues to be very toilsome, I discovered I felt a greater need for someone to follow, someone with whom I could compare myself with truth. The first day at the university, I went to Mass and met an older friend who invited me to lunch. We got into an intense dialogue with another friend of ours, who told us, discouraged, about her difficulties at work and in her apartment life. He asked, in the face of all her problems, ‘Was there at least one moment in which you experienced freedom?’ So the conversation took an entirely different direction because this simple question hit the point right on target. ‘In all that happens to you, do you recognize something that makes you free, that keeps you from collapsing, even if everything around you seems against you?’ This question was the first of many provocations that ensued in the relationship with this friend, and I realized that I wanted to have his same freedom and gladness, and I’ve decided to follow him. In doing this, I’ve realized that he is this way because he in turn follows without discounts this companionship, always going to the origin. In doing so, he also provokes me to this acknowledgment. In fact, every time I tell him something, it’s impossible to remain in my partiality, because he asks me the reasons for everything. This has provoked the beginning of a work, which is to ask, ‘Who are You, who attracts a man so much that You make him so alive and so free?’ [This other in front of you brings you to an Other. Who are You, Christ, who attracts a man so much that You make him so alive and free? This is why you are struck, because of this Other]. I found myself asking, ‘Make me recognize You too; make me like him,’ and I had a growing desire to experience this conscious and certain relationship with that Presence that he always has in mind. I wanted to have his same experience, which seems too far and abstract to me at times, because I lack self-awareness, and because I failed to do a work previously. This doesn’t scandalize me like it did before. Above all, I am grateful for this encounter. I ask you to help me in this work of recognition and following.”

Why is it decisive to reach this Other? Because only if one brings you to this Other, does he bring you to that to which you aspire, that which you await expectantly. For this reason, Fr. Giussani says, "And it is precisely this Other to whom you are so devoted, toward which you aspire, to whom you wish to adhere, all within this common journey."⁶⁰ If we do not reach this Other, we don't find what our hearts await expectantly. Therefore, Jesus did not settle, "Look, if you don't eat My flesh and drink My blood, you will not have life in you. If I don't bring you to the origin of My life, you will not be able to be truly devoted, won't be seized, won't be able to have this experience of correspondence that is the aspiration of every person." A friend told me some time ago that after beginning to experience this Other, he was surprised by a song he'd heard many times: "My soul thirsts for the living God: when shall I see Your face?" He felt all the same heart-thawing yearning and the desire to see His face expressed in the song. At a certain moment, travelling this road, if we don't reduce following to our measure, we discover we desire something that only a few years ago, as he told me, we would never have dreamed. It's not that he hadn't heard the song before, but that he was able to rediscover its value because of what he was living. If we do not make a journey, we lose the best. Instead, when we make a journey, things begin to speak to us, begin to have an intensity, a warmth, a something more, that makes life different, and not because spectacular things happen, no. A song that I've heard a thousand times at a certain point acquires a weight, a warmth, an intensity I never perceived before. The same is true for seeing the face of a friend or eating together or playing soccer. To experience the newness promised by Christ, we need nothing more than eating, drinking, spending time together, studying....

Lewis writes, "What I like about experience [that is, of this experience of correspondence I find within] is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself [for years], but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it."⁶¹

60 L. Giussani, *Il rischio educativo. Come Creazione di Personalita' e di Storia* [*The Risk of Education: As Creation of Personality and History*], op. cit, p. 64.

61 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy. The Shape of My Early Life*, Collins, London, 2012, p. 205.

The true question is whether we want to follow, whether we are willing to follow a teacher as proposed to us. What Fr. Giussani proposes to us is nothing more than what we see testified to in the Gospel in Jesus' relationship with His disciples: He never yielded to another type of following that was not following the design of an Other. Jesus knew better than all His disciples the make-up of the human heart. He made it. He made it for the infinite, and knew that if they didn't reach this Other, they wouldn't be seized. Many can propose to you other modalities of following. If you settle for less than what we have said, go if you like, but it will never be the same, because we don't decide what corresponds to us, nor do you, nor do they: experience is honest. It's not a problem of opinions, or alignments, or interpretations, as many think. It's not any of these. It's a problem of correspondence. You have to decide whether you want to grow to the point of following the correspondence, or whether you want to listen to one or another of the opinions in circulation. It is the time of the person, and each of you has the detector for discovering whether what is proposed to you is true or not: it's called "correspondence."

Only if we follow can we contribute to what the Pope asks of us for the upcoming World Youth Day: "Dear friends, never forget that the first act of love that you can do for others is to share the source of our hope. If we do not give them God, we give them too little!"⁶² We can offer our university friends and our companions the grace that has happened to us. It happened to us for the world, for mission, to be able to share with everyone what has been given to us. We have seen it: because someone said *yes*, many of those who wrote letters were able to find a fact of life that renewed their hope. Any other thing would have been too small. We must lead people to encounter the living God: "Be yourselves the heart and arms of Jesus! [says the Pope]. Go forth and bear witness to His love! Be a new generation of missionaries, impelled by love and openness to all!"⁶³

Be the heart and arms of Jesus. "But," as we said in the letter after the

⁶² Benedict XVI, *Message for the XXVIII World Youth Day, 2013*, Vatican City, October 18, 2012, p. 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Synod, “in order to be able to offer a fact of life to our fellow men, there must mature in each of us a self-awareness of our original dependence, to the point that it allows us to be reborn in any darkness; and it is necessary to be so taken hold of by the event of Christ that His memory dominates our days, because never am I more myself than when You, Christ, happen to me and flood me with Your presence.”⁶⁴ A friend says, “There are not many CLU members here [she lives in a small town], but I have come to realize that when you say that it is ‘the time of the person,’ the move is truly personal. I’ll try to explain. You wrote in the letter to the Fraternity, ‘Our contribution can only be inserted into the dynamism set in motion by God Himself through His Spirit.’ It’s really true; it happens this way. I’ll tell you about two small facts. During a School of Community, a fellow came in the room and asked, ‘Is this CL?’ and one of us [there was just a small group of us] said, ‘Yes, this is CL.’ He said, ‘Can I stay on?’ [a fact of life is not a problem of dimensions, but of difference]. I had the certainty that I don’t need to worry about anything except following the one who embraces my life, allowing me in every moment to return to the origin. Who is so attentive to my life and has the charity to open me continually to that mysterious relationship that generates me? Only the one who follows, because this is what changes history.” Another student writes, “What can change history is not so much what one manages to do, but only an ‘I’ who begins to change. I often think of the answer Jesus gave when asked what is needed to do the works of God. He said, ‘This is the work of God: believing in Him whom He has sent.’”

Our contribution to the world and to our fellow women and men is faith, the acknowledgment of Christ who seizes us and in this makes His presence shine in our faces. This is what the Pope says, and we will conclude with this: “New evangelizers [new witnesses] are like that: people who have had the experience of being healed by God, through Jesus Christ. And characteristic of them all is a joyful heart....”⁶⁵ It seems like very little as a sign, but everything is there: the joy of the heart, shining in our faces.

64 J. Carrón, *Letter to the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*, November 1, 2012.

65 Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Holy Mass for the Closing of the Synod of Bishops*, October 28, 2012.

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