

**Notes from the Assembly of Julián Carrón  
with the Equipe of Gioventù Studentesca  
Cervinia, 3 September 2016**

- *Haja o que houber*
- *Leaning on the everlasting arms*

**Alberto Bonfanti.** Thanking Julián from our heart, who is here with us and who never abandons us, I will re-read the invitation to this assembly, which came from his message to the Triuduum: “We all know from experience that it is not easy to find someone who lives at the height of his desire. In the same way, we know that without the presence of a great friend, we give up quickly in front of the demands of life.” Starting from this, we have asked ourselves: “Have you experienced in this time, after the Triduum, especially during vacation, a friend that does not abandon you?” Let’s begin the assembly.

**Julián Carrón.** Did you find an answer to this question in the Lauds we just prayed? *Silence!*

We can begin the morning without being present to what we do, and then that which we do does not serve our purpose: to look for someone at the height of his desire. Which one of you found in Lauds this morning someone at the height of his desire? No one! “I press on to take hold of Him, I who have already been taken hold of by Christ.” (Phil 3:12) Who says this? No one is responding. Saint Paul! Saint Paul had found One who had not only taken hold of him, but who had stirred up all of his desire. I press on to take hold of Him because I have been taken hold of by Christ. There is a Friend who does not cancel my desire, who does not set it aside, who does not reduce it, but who exalts it, and therefore who makes me press on to take hold of Him. What must Saint Paul have found that made him speak like this? He, who always had this tension—as he says himself in his letters: “If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” (Phil 3:4-6); he could not be content with an insignificant, a quiet life—, what could he have found that made him affirm that what happened to him had reawakened his will, had put all his desire in motion, had made him press on to take hold of Him? Without this life is flat, you guys! Sooner or later, after the fizz of adolescence, everything becomes flat. An adult said this, and all of us, younger than him, would like to have this same desire that Paul had, to press forward to take hold of Him. I say this to you because I don’t want to lose the sense of what we do, because if it is not like this, that is, if it does not lift us up when we pray Lauds, then it becomes a CL formalism that sooner or later will no longer interest us. Prayer will no longer be a going in search of someone who can put me in motion again, for whom I press on; like with Mary Magdalene: she “couldn’t wait” and so she got up before everyone else to go looking for Him. Otherwise we are already old; even if you fool yourself into thinking you are young, you are already old! Maria, are you still young or not? *I think so. This summer I went for three weeks to study English in Dublin, and there I met so many young people, especially Italians, who were in school with me. The first thing I realized was that I was a fish out of water compared to them, in the sense that I was the only Christian, the only one—at least I thought—who was not cynical, who had hope; all the rest were already...* See: “The only one who was not cynical, who had hope,” at her age, among all her classmates.

*Speaking with a girl, at a certain point, we began to talk about religion and she said to me: “I stopped believing, because I think religion is a lie that man invented because he was afraid to die and he needed a hope to go forward. I don’t have any fear of death, because then I’ll disappear; I don’t have any fear of suffering, because then I will not feel anything. I feel bad only for those who remain.” I said to her then and there: “How come? This is impossible. I want to believe that if we have the desire for things not to end, then there should be something that satisfies that desire.” Then I spent the whole summer, every day, thinking about what she had told me, and this put me absolutely into a crisis, because I realized that it seems easier, even if disappointing, and more rational, to believe that we live our life and then we disappear, rather than believing in Paradise, which seems to me a bit like a shaky, undemonstrable dream. This is the first thing: it seems that her hypothesis, which undermined my whole life as a Christian, is more believable than mine, more defensible. The second question has to do with GS...*

Then why are you here?

*I am here because of this question, to find an answer.*

Because of this question. Perfect. Already this is a good reason: because of a question.

*And the second is this: recounting this...*

Can we take up the first question? What do you have in your experience to help you answer this question? Pay attention, because you guys, not realizing what is happening, do not look in your life for the answer to the question; and so someone you meet “crushes” you with the first question they ask. And what is your temptation? To come here so that I can answer your question. But I have no desire to answer. I just want to help you find an answer. Let’s do it together; I won’t do anything to take over for you, because otherwise I would have stayed home today. Let’s make a discovery together, starting from what you said, because you already said it; the problem is that you didn’t realize it. What did you say? If you would have been aware, you would have been able to say to this friend...I already gave you an “input” when I repeated your phrase—“the only one who is not cynical, the only one with hope”—. Would you like to be cynical like her, without any hope?

*No.*

Then where did this hope come from?

*From the life that I have lived.*

So do you have something to say to this friend?

*Yes.*

Not a dream, because a dream does not give you this hope. Was it a dream that helped you not to succumb to cynicism?

*No.*

What was it?

*A concrete life.*

A fact! A fact, not a dream. A fact! But if we don’t become aware of this, we don’t see the difference. Would you like to become like the kids you met there? No. Why not? Because you are more moralistic? Because you are a bigot? Because you are afraid of death, like she said? Is this why you don’t want to become like them? No. Why? Because you don’t want to lose the best in life. Anything but fear!

*Can I ask a second question?*

Come on! My professor said: “The good bullfighters are made from facing good bulls.” I need a bull. That is why I am challenging you, otherwise I cannot give the best of myself. I need you to challenge me too!

*I thought about my life, I thought of GS and I said: I could also leave and see how I am without it, because in fact it is experience that makes me Christian.*

Certainly. And then?

*I cannot leave, I cannot, I couldn't do it. But the doubt that came to me was this: and what if GS was just a beautiful way of life that we found at a certain point in history? The doubt that came to me was that, even if I am attached to GS and can't imagine my life without it, it could be a beautiful way of life that we found, but then we disappear anyway.*

It could be. Or it could be the opposite. Leave this question open because I cannot answer this question. It's not that I don't want to answer you; the problem is that it is not useful to you if I answer for you. You need to verify it in your experience. Until now GS has been able to reawaken in you a desire for life that you don't see in other people your age. What does this make you think of? That all the others, with all they have in their heads, with all their theories, don't have a sense of the hope that you have and don't have a sense of this victory over cynicism that you have. You should come to grips with this. What was it that awakened this hope? Was it just an illusion? Was it a dream? Was it your capacity to perform, or was it something that happened in your life that made this hope emerge in you?

*It was something that happened.*

So, Father Giussani said to the kids at the beginning of the Movement, the life of GS is to verify that something has happened. And you will grow in certainty, even in front of all the objections of the people you meet along the way, like when you go to Dublin, because you are full of reasons. Because to go to Dublin and find a girl like that one, gave you more reasons than you had before. If now you realize what you said, because of the encounter with a person who asked you that question, you should thank her for the rest of your life, because she made you aware of what you have. So we understand that even those things we feel as objections, even one who puts us in crisis, is a good for us. Thank God that there is someone who puts me in crisis, because of whom I recognize what I have. Do you remember an episode in the life of Jesus in which the Apostles were in crisis and this made them understand what they had encountered? It isn't that the Apostles were fortunate because they had Jesus, while we are "unfortunate" because we don't have Him in front of us. We have all the signs that the Apostles had and all the challenges that the Apostles had. Give me an example from the Gospel where this happened. One, it's not too much, just one!

*Maybe when they are in the boat and there is a storm. Jesus is sleeping and they are afraid because they are going to sink.*

That's one.

*Jesus is sleeping and at a certain point they wake him up. He wakes up and calms the storm.*

This is an example. A time when they were truly challenged is when they remained alone with Jesus, after all the others left (just like what happened to you: you were the only fish out of water), because all the others thought: "But this guy is crazy!" After hearing Him speak about the bread of life that was His body, they exclaimed: "But this guy is out of his mind!" And everyone left. At that point, the disciples entered into a crisis, they were put in crisis, just like what happened to you. And what did Jesus do to help them face this crisis? Did He do another miracle? As if to say: "Now I will resolve your crisis with a miracle and I'll tell you who I am." But the disciples had already seen so many miracles. What would another miracle have resolved? No. If Jesus had done "Hollywood style" special effects, would it have attracted them more? Special effects wouldn't have been able to attract them. What more does Jesus do for His friends? He asked them a question: "Do you also want to leave?" (Jn 6:67) Instead of giving

them another reason to stay, Jesus challenges them even more. He doesn't resolve the crisis, as so many times the adults want to do for you guys, giving you their answers. Jesus does not act like that, he asks another question, he radicalizes the crisis of the disciples. Why? What was Jesus doing? What trust does Jesus have in His Apostles, to ask them a question without giving the answer? It is the same that I am doing with you. I am telling you that in your experience you already have the answer to your question, but you are not aware of it. How am I helping you? Asking you a question—like Jesus did: “Do you also want to leave?”—: why did you come this morning?

*To respond to this question*

You had to give reasons for being here today, because if you were knocked over by this crisis, you would have thought: “These people are out of their minds; I'm not going anymore.” Why, then, are you here? Because you have made a journey, and this crisis didn't make you sink. And this journey has given you a reason, you had to give a reason for coming here. This made you grow, made you more yourself. But not because you had a vision, or because Jesus used special effects, or because someone convinced you that those others were “out there”. No. Because it allowed you to go back over the experience you've had. And what is Jesus doing in asking His disciples that question? He make them give the reasons why they are with Him. And to give the reasons, they had to look again at the whole life they had been living with Him. Jesus causes them to unearth from the experience they have lived with Him, the awareness of why it is worth it to be with Him; and then Peter says: “But if we go away from You, where would we go?” (Jn 6:68) Just like what happened to you: if I leave here, where will I go? So the crisis is an exciting moment, if you aren't afraid of it. Jesus, instead of responding, challenged them. So often we are lazy, and we unload the question onto one who will answer for us. But a friend is the one who really believes that you are up to the task of retracing in your experience what has already happened, and therefore he challenges you and says: “Stop being lazy, take your question seriously, and go in search of an answer in your experience, because it's there, because otherwise you wouldn't be here.” Why I am convinced that you can do it? Because of what you said earlier. I can't invent something, and I can't make an act of faith in something I don't see in order to convince myself that you have the answer. I'll repeat it: one is a friend if he helps you to do this work, otherwise he's fooling around by sparing you, because it's as if he said: “Deep down, you're stupid, you can't arrive at an answer, so I'll give it to you.” No! You are not stupid; Jesus doesn't treat His disciples like their stupid. But if you let yourself be treated like you're stupid, it isn't because you are, but because you let yourself be treated like that. Don't blame the grown-ups because they do this, because you are not stupid. But you pretend to be! Do you see how in order to live you must put yourself in play? This is exciting, because then everything we do will be for this, no one can keep you from it. Because you have the answer in you. Maybe it is a question that we should return to, like you have done now, in order to help ourselves find the path again. But the road is true if it makes you discover what you already have in your experience; I shouldn't tell you something so that you fall in line. The beginning of everything is a fact that has happened to us and that we have in our experience. Thank you.

*When I received this question to work on for the Equipe, I thought right away that I had to share what happened to me this summer. The whole month of July, in fact, I went to do a study vacation in Dublin with three friends, in order to learn English. Before leaving, I had no idea what I would encounter. I was also rather scared of this new adventure, because I didn't know these friends very well. The first days, in fact, were terrible. I didn't like the family I was with*

*and I felt really alone. I couldn't wait to go back home to my friends, to my boyfriend, and to my family, and my only thoughts were about what I was missing back in my city. The reality, though, was different, because now I had to be there, and therefore the only thing I could do was to entrust myself to an Other and to accept what was given to me. I didn't really know how to do that. Entrusting myself is much easier to say than to do. But this month helped me to understand it better.*

You see? Even this month has helped you understand, because you don't understand by thinking about far away places, but by going through the circumstances.

*Everything, in fact, changed when I realized that I, in reality, don't have to do anything except be myself in front of everything I encounter. The result was truly beautiful. When you meet people from other countries, who have a life, thoughts, a religion different than yours, you are constrained to put yourself in front of them, to have a dialogue. And from the moment in which I put myself in front of those people, they recognized that there was something different in me that interested them. Without doing anything in particular, these people saw in me something true and interesting that they wanted to follow. An example of this is a beautiful friendship that was born with some Turkish kids that were in my class. Initially, they didn't speak with anyone, they were very closed and almost afraid of the others. One day my professor had me work on speaking English with two of these kids; at first I didn't know what to do, because they didn't want to talk to me. So I decided to go for it and I began to tell them about everything that had happened to me the day before. I talked for almost ten minutes without stopping when, at a certain point, it came out that, on the Sunday before, I had gone to Mass. These two Turkish kids, Muslims, suddenly raised their heads, and asked me a bunch of questions about my religion. I didn't think about what was happening, but out of this dialogue with them came a beautiful friendship. They really opened up to me and then with the rest of the class. We often spoke and compared our different religions. One day, when we were speaking about this, I saw something that really struck me. During the lesson, Omar, one of them, asked me how long I had been a Christian; without even thinking, I responded that I was a Christian from birth, even if I had encountered Christ thanks to the companionship with GS when I started high school. Those two kids were surprised by what I was saying and with eyes wide open they looked at me and said: "You see? It is this that we are missing: a true encounter, because our religion is very often imposed on us, while it is obvious that your religion is living inside you." Who would have thought? Two Turkish guys made me remember the great thing I had encountered; they made me recognize even more what I had. The rest of the month was full of encounters with people who, seeing me, were impressed by my way of being in front of the circumstances. Another beautiful example was the friendship that was born with a Sicilian guy. After we had known each other for three days, he came to me with these words: "You know, I realize that in life there is a big difference between people who exist and people who live, and you have the eyes of someone who lives. Tell me how you do it. I need to learn from you." Speaking with him, I realized how we have the same desire to live, the same need to be happy. During this month I also recognized the importance of School of Community. In fact, while being in another city, with different friends than my little group back home, we had the same need to do School of Community, even if there were only four of us. One day I invited that guy from Sicily to the School of Community, and he refused the invitation. Halfway through, he came into the room where we were, asking us if he could listen in. Right when he came in, I was telling them how much I felt loved in that time, a love that was so big that it defined the way I was facing things. At the end of School of Community, the Sicilian came to us full of desire and asked us: "But do you guys really feel*

loved? Because I want to feel like that. I want to be well like you.” These are simple examples that marked my time in Dublin. I received one gift after another. Every day there was something or someone that made me realize more and more the greatness of what I have encountered. Every day was another confirmation, even when my professor looked at me one day in the middle of a lesson and asked how come I was always so happy in class. He had never had a student who smiled so much and he realized that my smile had changed the rest of the class. The last day, when he came to say bye to me, he told me that he would remember my smile for a long time. Another professor, who was a bit strange, liked to make us speak about controversial subjects in class, like religion, gays, or gender; very often in class I found myself alone defending my opinions and that which I believed. This professor was always the first to challenge me and tried in every way to provoke me and ask me questions that I couldn’t answer. In all these dialogues, I tried not to fight anyone, but simply to be true to that which I thought and to that which I have encountered. Even this professor, the last day, came to thank me and to tell me that while he had not changed his mind, he had never met a girl who was so true in front of the things that she believed. One day a girl that we had met came to me and thanked me because I had taught her a better way of facing other people. The Turkish friends asked me to write them every day, because they needed this friendship. When we had come home, every so often the guy from Sicily wrote me because he didn’t know what to do, because there was nobody like us in his city who could help him take all his questions seriously. Then, a few days ago, he wrote me a beautiful message, telling me that he had become a Christian. A girl came up to thank me and now she is coming with us on the summer vacation. But all this happened not only with the people I met in Dublin, but also with everyone that I left behind in Rimini. When I came back, I saw that even my way of being with my parents, with my boyfriend, and with other friends had changed, and this was another confirmation for me. When you are in another city you realize that the people around you, you will only see for one month out of your whole life, and so you must ask yourself what you really want; while sometimes, when you are in your own city, there is the risk of being flattened out by the routine. In reality, it wasn’t like that for me, because when I came back, I had a different awareness inside of me. I realized that the encounter with Christ had taken over everything. I can of course not think of Him, I can fall into every human sin, I can cry because things aren’t going my way, but now this encounter has defined everything: myself, my life, my way of being in front of things. This Friend will never leave me; it’s up to me to recognize Him. Taking up again the question that was given to us for the Equipe: I am aware that I met this Friend the whole summer long; in my friends that were put at my side, whether in Dublin or in Rimini, I was not abandoned for a moment. And this is because in the people I encountered, there was a reflection of Him whom I have met.

So what did you learn from all this? What made you think of this Friend? What did you learn from the question that we asked about “a friend at the height of his desire”? What has all this you have encountered helped you to understand?

*It made me understand that often I am very paranoid.*

Perfect. Paranoid! Underline it: paranoid! We worry so much about reality and then we go with these worries as if they were reality; instead they are only worries!

*In the end, I shouldn’t make so much of these worries, because that which I have encountered is truly greater and, as we said earlier, I have already been taken hold of by Him.*

Yes, but you didn’t meet one person this summer who fell under the concept of “friend” that we have. Many would have spent the whole summer in Dublin lamenting because there weren’t friends like they have back home. Instead, what did you discover in what you told us?

*I discovered that first of all the friend is inside of me.*

How so?

*That I have Him.*

That you have Him! What does it mean to have Him? Is it something you imagine?

*No.*

What does it mean to have Him? Where was He?

*In me.*

“In me.” You need to explain it to me, because I don’t know if I’ve understood.

*It came out of me in the moment when...*

“It came out of me.” Did you invent it, did you create it, did you generate it?

*No. It was a fact.*

Explain to me how this happens.

*Simply, in the friend who says: “You have the eyes of someone who lives, in those eyes...”*

In those eyes?

*“...there is something.”*

And how did you get eyes like that?

*From an encounter with Christ.*

Let’s not lose track of how these things happen. Where have you seen Christ? What has generated these eyes that you have?

*A love that I felt...*

A love?! If you say this in public, people think that you are out of your mind. If you say it to me, you pass, but if you say it to another, he will respond: “This confirms for me that it is not worth it to be a Christian.” Therefore explain well what has happened to you, without departing for a moment from your experience. Tell me how you came to have that look in your eyes. Because this is what is missing. What road did you walk to arrive at the look in your eyes that you have now? Why is what you are saying true, that you have it on your face and inside of you, but how did it come to be inside of you? Do you have it by nature? Was it in you “by default”? And why do the others not have it? If it is present by nature, the Turkish guys, the Sicilian, the professor, all those with whom you have spoken would have it like you, but they can’t even dream of such things. So, how did it come to be in you? Did you have a vision?

*No, no.*

An apparition?

*No.*

What happened?

*I have in mind the faces of friends and of adults...*

Before they were in your mind, what must have happened? Originally they were not in your mind, you didn’t even know they existed. You guys always jump over the steps. Before you knew this gaze existed, did you know it from birth?

*No.*

Not even being educated—you said it earlier—because you guys do not realize the things you said. What is the difference that your Turkish friend observed in you? It is something that he does not have and that instead you have. You just said it. What word did you use? One word!

*An encounter.*

Perfect! An encounter with what? With something you imagined? With a feeling? With a love that gave you wings? What was it? A list of rules? An instruction manual? What was it? An encounter with flesh, with faces, with people in whom you discovered this gaze. It is so true that

even the Turkish guy grasped more than you the importance of an encounter, because he asked the question: “What is the great difference between you and me? That I am always stuck in routine,” —he actually said: an imposition, something even worse—“instead what my religion lacks is an encounter.” First step. And what happened next? You came across a different gaze, and as soon as it happened to you, you put it on. And what happened after the encounter?

*This gaze defined my way of being in front of things.*

How? Magically?

*No, no.*

Did it happen in a flash and then everything was perfect?

*No, the awareness...*

No! Tell me everything, because you guys take everything for granted and then someone says: “A love.” I don’t do this to make you waste your time on things you already know, but because when I ask you a question, you talk to me about love in the abstract. Do you understand? Instead of talking to me about an encounter with concrete faces, with people in whom you have found this look etc., etc. But how did it become yours?

*My gaze became like that.*

How did it become yours? The first day...

*I lived.*

You followed those people.

*Yes.*

And, at a certain point, you were surprised to find that you had this gaze and you weren’t aware of it. It was those others, outside of you, that made you understand the difference that you carried within you. So who were your friends this summer? Those whom you left behind in Rimini or those whom you found in Dublin, who made you aware of that which the community in your city had given you?

*Those who gave me that awareness.*

And where were the ones from your city, if they were not there with you? Why did the people you met in Dublin know that something had happened to you? Because the gaze of the people from your city was in you. You said: “I” with a “we” inside. Why? Because the we had already become yours, it had become your gaze, it had become your difference, it had become your way of being different, your smile, the look in your eyes, your way of being yourself; we were inside of you, we were with you in Dublin. And you realized this because the others were surprised by you: “But why are you like this? Why are you living like this and not just existing?”, to use the words that you used. Who makes you live like this? Who makes you live like this?! So, in everything you have said, you used one word: how was this summer helpful for your path? What word did you use? What does all this that you told us mean for you? You said it with one word!

*A confirmation.*

“A confirmation.” A confirmation. Without having gone to Dublin, without having clashed with everyone, with having met those different people—no one thought like you—you would not have become aware of the difference that you carry, of the newness that the encounter introduces into your life, and so you would not be as certain as you are now. If you had spared yourself this, saying: “No, I’m scared, I’m not going,” this confirmation would not have happened. So when Pope Francis says that it is useful for us to go out, he is not giving instructions to the all-stars to go on mission; no, he invites us to go out in order to see the confirmation in us, in our experience, of what has happened to us. Because if one doesn’t go out of her backyard, she will not have the confirmation that you’ve had. If you would have said: “It is not possible, without

my friends I cannot go anywhere,” you would have never had this confirmation. Right? So was doing this something more or something less for your life?

*Something more.*

And this does not mean that you always have to walk alone, because you have your friends within you. And you realize what they mean to you, what it means to belong to Christ in the Christian community, precisely because of this experience: you can go to the ends of the earth. Just like what happened to the disciples: they didn't stay holed up in the cenacle; at first yes, before the invasion of the Holy Spirit they were all afraid, alone, full of fear about what was outside, but after there was an explosion: they went around the world, they didn't stay licking their wounds and saying: "We are poor, Christ has left us, we are here alone." He had already entered down to their marrow and therefore they went to the ends of the earth, but not only to proclaim what they had seen, but also to live. You go to Dublin to study English, and studying English, without worrying about it, you are a missionary. Mission is not something added to life, something that we "must" do. Without making any proposition, you are a missionary by living your life. And the first one to be helped by this is you yourself. Imagine if everything we lived, if all the challenges we faced were in order to make this confirmation. This is the beautiful situation we live in, you guys: we are in a pluralistic world, as soon as we leave home we find ourselves in a globalized world where everyone thinks differently. Thank God, because finally we can be "freely" Christian, without having to rely on particular conditions; the only condition we have is what has happened to us. Just like what happened to the first ones who met Him: the whole Roman Empire was different, there was a Pantheon of gods with all the religions, and did this scare the disciples? On the contrary: they went to show, to live, the difference that they were, that they carried within them. And everyone saw it, just like with you. It wasn't because they were great, or important, or because they had a certain position of power, some level of Roman administration, because this difference of life passed through slaves, merchants, soldiers, normal people like you, who go to study English. And never again has the Church been as missionary as at the beginning. The problem is when we "must" go on mission, because this means that we have to be an "expert" on missionary work. No. The mission is for everyone who has encountered Christ. The day we "must" do it, means that we have lost something along the way. You didn't take a course on missionary work in order to go study English, you were a missionary because it is part of you Christian DNA, because of the encounter you've had. And everything acquires a new meaning. This is fascinating first of all for us, and imagine how it is for the others, who in fact cannot but desire to stay in contact with us after having met us. Imagine, after a summer like our friend has had, what a whole life lived like this could be! Decide for yourselves, friends! If you have something more interesting to do, you can leave! When you get tired of that, you can come back and we will be here—at least her and me—to live this. We'll keep the door open for you. Thank you.

*Last September, because of various situations in which I found myself, I was in a bad place. I have always had a great desire to be happy, but in that time, my desire was a nuisance, because I had this great desire, but I was never able to be happy; and what is more, I was not able to open up to others, to tell them what was going on inside, and I felt alone. What happened? One of my professors, before the Triduum this year, convinced me to write a letter to Father Pigi, to tell him what was going on in me. So I told him that, despite it being a nuisance, this desire is the greatest thing I have. Pigi simply responded that that is how it is, that this infinite desire is the only true thing in our life, that it cries out inside of us. And so after the Triduum everything*

*changed, because I understood that I need to follow the desire for fullness and happiness that I've always had and for which I have always found a correspondence in GS; thanks to the encounters I've had and the faces I have met during these years. Everything, even the sadness and the anger, this determination always to seek out that which unsettles my heart—I have found it again in a way that is even more true than before, in GS, but also and above all outside (also in what that other girl said before), in the relationship with my friends, with my parents, with the circumstances of this summer, during the vacation, where more than other years I met true friends. This search and this desire have made everything new, authentic, with a different gusto than in previous years when I participated in the gestures of GS without putting myself into everything. This desire has not left me, and I would like to describe it with a less abstract word; it is so true and concrete. For this reason, I cannot but call it "God". I wouldn't be able to explain it any other way. It is not an abstract desire that animates me; He is a friend who doesn't abandon me, because every day he stirs up my heart, to look for Him, and this desire is renewed, is reaffirmed in me every day. It was not only affirmed at the Triduum or at the vacation; it is affirmed today in sharing my experience with you, in the desire for fullness in every relationship, which I have seen happening since I became convinced of this. Then the most important thing: I don't want it only during the summer, I want it always. And for this reason the question which you asked, about the friend who never abandons us, has remained open for me, as happens with every true question. Can this friend be with me and make me true, full, and alive for ever?*

What do you say?

*What do I say? That I have to verify this.*

Perfect. Perfect! You have to verify it. And you should constantly take that risk to verify it. Because it is only this that will convince you more and more. But before, you said that this desire annoyed you.

Yes.

And because it often annoys you, because it agitates you, it pushes you, it makes you press forward, sometimes we try to get rid of it.

*I didn't know what to do with this desire.*

This is the question: so often we don't know what to do with this desire. And because we don't know what to do with it, it often annoys us, it is just a suffering, it is simply something that we would rather not have, and so we think that the only way to rid ourselves of this desire is to distract ourselves. The alternative to this annoyance seems to be distraction, but then anything that happens is enough to make this desire come back with all its force; distracting ourselves is useless! Because we always have the prodigal son in front of us: he also wanted to run away; but, at a certain moment, not even in the midst of the pigs could he avoid this desire coming back. And this is amazing, because it makes us understand that whatever we do, if it is not true, if it does not accept the truth that is in us, desire will always, always come back. So what does this teach you about yourself?

*That I am more full when I follow this desire that I have inside of me.*

That desire is a constitutive part of you, it is what constitutes you. You are this desire, you coincide with this desire. You cannot be yourself without this desire, which is much greater than you can imagine. The Mystery doesn't give you a lesson about desire, He puts this desire in you, He puts it in every fiber of your being and He gives you your entire life to understand why He gave it to you. Without this, everything is flat. You say: this search and this desire, have made you new and authentic, because without this, as Gaber says in his famous song about desire ("Il desiderio" ["Desire"], by G. Gaber and A. Luporini), life is boring. Desire can be a nuisance, but

the alternative is boredom. This is what happens to so many who renounce the nature of this desire: you see them already bored at your age. Imagine the life that is waiting for them! It is exciting just to think about it, isn't it? So, the first issue is to become aware of this. Hopefully Marta can explain it to you because...just think that Father Giussani started GS speaking about desire in a time when no one talked about it, except to squash it. It seems like nothing to start from here, but who can speak about desire? Who can look at desire? Because, as you say, we don't know what it is good for, and it annoys us. The ancient pagans were not able to stay in front of desire and so they tried to reduce it. Desire was too dangerous for them. *Hubris* was too dangerous for them. So they tried to lower the bar speaking about *aurea mediocritas*, the happy medium, because in this way they could have more control over it, because otherwise desire got loose and created a mess. Therefore it is normal that, having returned to paganism, people don't know how to be in front of desire except to distract themselves from it and try to cancel it in any way they can. There was only one who was able to be in front of man's desire without reducing it, and in fact, he exalts it; therefore I said before that we cannot skip over the words from Saint Paul that we recited in Lauds as if they were nothing. Christ did not come to distract us from desire, but to take it seriously. When Jesus found Himself with the Samaritan woman, she started to play around with the question of water, etc., etc., until Jesus tells her: "Stop it! It is not a problem about having a bucket or not, the problem is that this water does not satisfy your thirst." He begins to ask this woman about the thirst of her desire. And when she asks Him: "How can you do it if you don't have a bucket to bring up the water?", He responds: "I have a water that can satisfy your thirst," that is, the desire of the Samaritan woman. So she stops playing around with words and tells Him: "Give me this water..." (Jn 4:7-15) Only a promise like this can put an end to that woman's games. Jesus does not fixate on the clumsy attempts which she had made: five husbands. But if Jesus does not respond to the desire that made her change husbands so many times, she would look for another one, a seventh, an eighth. He wasn't interested in fixing everything in her life, because he knows that the only thing that can straighten out her life is to find the answer to her desire. What certainty Jesus must have that He is the answer, that He doesn't have to flee in front of desire, like the pagans do; and in fact not only does He not run away, He makes even bigger promises: "Whoever follows me will have a hundred times more," he will not only live, but will have a hundred times more, "I will make you even more thirsty. I did not come to crush, but to exalt your desire even more. Therefore I have put this nostalgia in your heart."

*And so this is something that can happen every day.*

Exactly, exactly! Because the problem, as the Latin American song *Razon de vivir* says, is never to lose the angel of nostalgia. Because so many times, when someone thinks he has found his beloved, the one who fulfills his desire, deep down he loses the angel of nostalgia, he doesn't have this nostalgia anymore, he thinks that the fulfillment of his desire is to flatten it out on the other. For this reason, so many people say: I don't want to lose this nostalgia, I don't want to lose this desire, so why do I get involved in a relationship, if it means that I will lose the angel of nostalgia? The problem is if there is something that, at the same time, responds to desire and exalts desire, doesn't make you lose the angel of nostalgia, because otherwise everything becomes flat again. It is this response and this exaltation that Someone has introduced into history. Therefore, a great genius like Thomas Aquinas spoke of *desiderium naturae*, which is not some banal desire that anything can satisfy, but it is the radical desire that constitutes us. For that reason, I really like this phrase from John Paul II that Father Giussani quoted: "There will be no faithfulness [...] if there is not in the heart of man a question [or a desire] to which only God

offers an answer, or better yet, for which only God is the answer.” (John Paul II, *Homily, Visit to the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and the Bahamas*, 26 January 1979), for which only Christ is the answer. If someone passing by on the street were able to respond to this desire that constitutes us, why would it be worth it to be Christian? Christianity is worth it only for this reason: because there is only One who takes our desire seriously and exalts it. A question (a desire) for which only Christ is the answer. There is one who does not flatten out our desire when He answers you, but who also exalts it by continuously answering it. Therefore you said that your search made everything new and authentic—not: to cancel, but: to exalt! Your desire was made new, exalted by God, because if there was not an Other, a You different from you, this would all be a dream.

*Yes.*

It is God who made you like this, God who put this desire in you. It is God, it's true, it is God who exalts this desire: a You different from you, a difference, something outside of you that constantly exalts your desire. For this reason we need an encounter. And so He became flesh: so that man could encounter someone who exalts your desire, like the Samaritan woman in front of Jesus, like the Apostles in front of Jesus, and like today, in a place where Jesus remains: it is called “the Church of God”. There is no question about the Church. People understand what the Church is because it remains, because the Turkish guys, the Sicilian guy, and the professor realized that you carry something in the way you live which the others, being men like us, don't have, something exalted. And so we understand that we should be thankful to Christ. And this, as you said at the end, you cannot but desire to have at all times. Therefore, there is no other way to live than to seek Him day and night, and not because we want to be who knows what, because we want to be saints according to an image of holiness that we have in our head, but saints because we don't want to lose Him—this is a saint—and so we seek Him always, day and night. Otherwise, we are content with crumbs. But, as a girl told me this summer, once one has experienced this, you cannot take it away: “I miss myself,” she said. I really like this phrase that one of the novices of the *Memores Domini* articulated. What does it mean? That Christ has brought the existence of a person who has met Him to a level of such fullness that she cannot do without it; in fact, when this experience lessens, I miss this “me” that has touched the summit. One cannot be content anymore with something less. Therefore Father Giussani said that in the end obedience is obedience to an “I” touched by Christ, which is already inside of me, as an experience, in the depths of my “I”. It has entered so deeply in me, it has exalted me so much that I know Christ through the experience of human fullness that is in me. If someone wants to be content with something less, you can decide for yourselves.

*This summer was very important for me, because I came to the GS vacation desiring to find a relationship that really left its mark on me and to meet people that were truly interesting to me.*

Why? Why is it that so often our relationships leave us with nothing?

*In fact, that was what I was going to say.*

How you began is really striking. Relationships are not enough for us, because there are so many relationships that don't touch us at all.

*Right. Before the vacation, I had spent a few days having fun, going out with friends, with companions with whom I felt good. I had fun. But, once I came home, and everything was over, I felt a bitter aftertaste, like I wasn't fully happy.*

Do you see how the “detector” works in us? We can pretend not to have the criterion with which to judge everything. What does it mean that you had a “bitter aftertaste”? What does it mean that

you find within yourself—without have Pigi there to preach to you, without having Albertino or an angel from heaven—this bitterness which gives you an indication that something is not right? We don't need anyone to come from outside. Don't make fun of me by responding: "I don't know, I'm lost." No, you are not lost at all. The problem is whether we are loyal with this bitter taste that we find in our mouth, or not. Period. The question is one of seriousness with ourselves, Don't blame others, those with whom you go to the club, those who don't remind you of Him, the friends that don't help you; you have this bitter aftertaste and you have to decide whether you are going to follow this bitterness or whether you are going to follow something that doesn't leave you bitter. And who decides this, you guys? Each one of us, but not because we will go to heaven some day, not because otherwise we'll go to hell some day, because hell begins here, and heaven begins here.

*The thing that was hardest about this bitterness was that I felt I couldn't speak about it with these friends. I felt this restlessness, but I couldn't speak about it with them, either because I didn't feel like they would understand or because they didn't really care about me, but were interested only in what was happening that night.*

But do you really think you can get away with speaking to your friends in such an abstract way? You have to show them that you have met something that can help them to understand. Did you understand that there is something other than this bitterness because someone explained it to you?

*No, because I felt curious.*

In fact, the method of Jesus is totally different. But if we don't realize this, we'll start preaching to others. But did we start preaching to you when you first met GS? Jesus—keep this firmly in your minds!—did not lose a minute with propaganda when he first met John and Andrew, not a minute! "Come and see," he told them. But so many times, not being aware of how things happened with us, we change the method and then think that in order to encounter people, we have to hold a class. God invented another method. Does He want you to understand what love is? Instead of giving you a lesson about love, He makes you fall in love, an experience through which you understand much better what it means to love and be loved. He doesn't preach, He makes something happen, and this thing that happens doesn't allow you to reduce it to an abstract discourse. You are born into a family that loves you, He gives you friends through which you understand the difference that can happen in relationships, like you said before: relationships that leave their mark on you. Everything is not equal, not every way of being together, not every family is the same, not every group of friends is equal. Everything is not equal. And God makes love happen so that we can understand what love is. Love is not an abstract word. Do you know why love happens? Because when it happens, you perceive what it means to love and be loved, and what it means to have this bitter aftertaste. It is easy. God makes it easy. The issue is that we, in order to communicate it to others, have to act like God; we cannot do it another way. Like we have seen: our friend in Dublin can find herself in front of a young Turkish guy who doesn't know what she is talking about, and how does she make him understand? Living. Living! If you don't recognize this, you say: "I am incapable of communicating it and my friends won't understand." And you start to blame them for not understanding; but they cannot understand if you "explain" it to them. The problem is that you don't realize that the one who doesn't understand is you, because you are using a method to make them understand through which it is impossible for them to understand. This is particularly interesting for me, because otherwise you guys hit a dead end, and instead of being excited that they see something different in you, you blame them because they don't understand. And then? What do we do? Should we hold a class

so that they can be prepared to understand? A time of pre-evangelization? Did John and Andrew do a pre-evangelization course, a pre-encounter? No! John and Andrew were already ready for the encounter. You were already ready for the encounter. The other is already ready for the encounter. Therefore all that needs to happen is the encounter; not for you to explain the encounter to an other, but for it to happen. Are you ready to be loved?

*Yes.*

In fact, it is enough for it to happen. Certainty, it is not taken for granted that it happens just because we want it to. But you are already ready; for you to verify this event you don't need any particular condition, except your humanity. You are already ready. The Mystery made you ready for the encounter, for every encounter in life, which is only a small reflection of that true, exalted encounter with Christ.

*With this desire I arrived at the GS vacation, where I met someone who was in the same situation as me, that is, unsatisfied with what he was living with his friends at the club, and wanting someone who respond to his need for something that would last forever, or at least for something that would last longer than a night at the club. But he had been able to understand that all this did not correspond to him, and he had distanced himself from those friendships that did not have any flavor and that didn't leave him happy. With this person, an incredible relationship was born in which effectively...*

Do you see? How did the Mystery respond to your problem?

*I met somebody.*

Perfect! This is what I wanted to say before. The Mystery became flesh, the explanation became flesh. The discourse became flesh and blood. This is how God responds. First of all, He makes you meet one for whom this has already happened.

*A relationship was born in which I felt a correspondence to my desire. He didn't only fascinate me because he gave a testimony that touched on my situation, but because he was able and is still able to reawaken in me this desire, to awaken the desire to be happy and above all to be able to be myself in front of the most urgent difficulties in my life. With this person, I experience that which I was looking for and desperately desiring: a relationship in which I could be free and in which I could feel someone's interest in me, always and in every instant, not relegated to one moment of the day, or to a night at the club. A few weeks after the GS vacation, I fell into the same error as at the beginning of the summer; I was confused again about what I truly needed, spending my days laying out on the beach, and again at night going to fancy restaurants and places with those same friends from before.*

And so? Now you choose.

*At that point, the disproportion was evident, between the great thing I had encounter and what I was living in that moment. I felt all alone, abandoned by those friends who did not correspond to me; it was a moment of infinite sadness, even in the relationship with my girlfriend. In that moment of sadness and desperation, I couldn't help but go to one person: that friend whom I met at the vacation. And again, with him, I felt like I was reborn, with just one time he reawakened in me in front of these urgent problems, and not because he solved them, but simply because he indicated to me and gave witness to a way of being in front of these difficulties with my desire for happiness.*

Thank you for describing the dynamic that you lived, because this helps us to understand that the Christian encounter is not something magical that happens once and for all, and then everything goes smoothly. One can, after having seen, go back to where he was before. "Don't you see that going on vacation did nothing for you?", we sometimes say to discourage each other, because we

measure ourselves only by the success that we have afterwards. But is it true that nothing remained after the vacation?

*No, otherwise I would have stayed with those friends.*

You were already shaped by that experience and you could not but have nostalgia for yourself, as we said earlier. You could not avoid what happened to you and you began to feel when it is missing. It is impressive, because it's not like you weren't with your friends from before, and so you said: "I was alone." Why did you say "I was alone" if you were surrounded by them? What did you learn about the nature of solitude?

*I felt alone because, while I had experienced a type of relationship in which I was continually provoked...*

But those friends also provoked you constantly...to go to the club!

*With that friend that I met on vacation, I was able to be myself.*

Ah! What makes it possible to be yourself and therefore overcome solitude? What is solitude? It is not "not having someone next to you;" you were full of that, and yet you felt alone. The solitude we are talking about, true solitude, Father Giussani says, is the lack of meaning; it is the powerlessness that I feel in front of my dissatisfaction. Therefore, I can be surrounded by people and be alone, because they are not able to respond to my powerlessness, to my incapacity to be happy. If we have more and more and more, we are not for this reason more full and less alone. Pay attention, because it can happen even in this environment: if we live GS in this way, even when we surrounded by friends, we can be alone. Because the issue is not to be surrounded by people, but whether or not these friends bring "the answer to my powerlessness, if they give me something that leaves its mark in me," as you said before, "if they give me something that responds to my need; otherwise, surrounded by people, I am alone." I am amazed that you guys hit on all the questions, for example, that you realize that you can be surrounded by people and, at the same time, be alone. This is a gift! You discover it in your experience, and I don't have to tell you. Because if I told you without you having had an experience already, you would not understand what I was saying; and instead you understand it, and not because someone had to explain it to you. Otherwise, you don't just lose friends, but you don't understand the relationship with your girlfriend, nor the closest and truest relationships that you have, those which mean the most to you. Everything crumbles in our hands. This is lethal. And it is not a problem of moralism or of eternal life, because it has to do with living now; Christ came to give us one hundred times more. Otherwise, if we don't meet someone that stops us from losing everything—you can admit to yourself or no—if you feel alone when you are with your friends, what are these friends? Nothing. How can you have affection for them? You are only superficially affectionate, because you go to the club and not because they help you to respond to your desire for happiness. Who is the true friend? The friend is the one who can help me to respond to the only thing that matters in life: to be happy. If he doesn't respond to this, he is fooling around. He is not a friend, even if I call him "friend", because we do not call our "friend" the first person we pass on the street; because we go to have a beer with him, but then he doesn't leave a mark on us. So we begin to understand what it means to be a friend, what it means to have a friend, what it means to overcome solitude, what it is to have a true relationship with a girlfriend. And when we see that everything is falling apart, we cannot help but go back, to miss that friend thanks to whom we were reborn. Do you understand why we are Christians? Not because we are good—in fact we do the same crap as everybody else—, but because something has happened to us that we cannot forget; limping, one step forward and two steps back, falling down, getting discouraged, but without ever changing the road. Why? Because it is there that I

am reborn, even from my own ashes, as you see. Don't be afraid that this discouragement can happen. The most important thing is that when the Lord makes you aware of this, you remember that friend; and then you can decide again to follow him, not to beat yourself up that you fell. Why are we surprised that weakness is weak and that you lose your way a minute later? Like Giussani says: it is not like Zacchaeus didn't fight with his wife anymore. But we have an image of holiness without any stain; here is the whole drama of life. The problem is not that we never get anything wrong. The Gospel tells us everything that Peter did, it didn't erase any of his errors, just like we shouldn't erase anything that happens to us, because it is this that makes us aware of the fact that I can mess up a hundred times, but I cannot erase the memory of the friend who made me be reborn. Now you decide! All the drama is here, in the moment when I become aware and the game starts over, the drama begins again. And all the sins that I can commit cannot stop me from returning. Therefore, if I don't return, it is not because of the errors, but because I don't want to return. No one has stopped you from coming back. Our whole life is played out in this moment, and God has made everything He has made so that we can say Yes, even after we have said No. Jesus, in fact, does not stop at what Peter has done, but asks him: "Do you love me?" And I ask you: "Do you want the life you have found? Do you want to be born again?" So go for it! No one is stopping you; no one can spare you. This is your freedom, the drama of your freedom. Because, like Péguy says, in a phrase that we quoted at the Fraternity Exercises (this bit of Péguy is stupendous!): "To that liberty, [...] I have sacrificed everything, God says / to that taste I have for being loved by free men, / freely." ("Il mistero dei santi innocenti" [The Mystery of the Holy Innocents], in Charles Péguy, *I Misteri*, Jaca Book, Milan 1997, p. 343) God does not want servants, He does not want slaves, He wants friends who love Him as free men, freely. Do you prefer to be love freely or not? And should God have less desire than you?

*Thank you for the question that you, Albertino and Father Pigi gave us. It was a provocation and an occasion to question. When at the Triduum you asked us if we had ever had an experience of a friend that never abandoned us, I, incapable of being false with myself, said: "No, I have never had a friend that did not abandon me"; everyone, sooner or later, forgot about me and hurt me even if unintentionally. No one was enough for me.*

"No one was enough." Good! No one is enough for you. But we can pass over these affirmations that we make or that we hear, without vibrating, without being exalted by them. Everyone isn't enough for us. Why do we feel that they are too little? You have to remember this: everyone is too little. Why? Why are they too little?

*Because I see that in being with my friends, even if the way we are together is true and beautiful, it does not fill me deep down...*

It doesn't fill you. Good! It doesn't fill us. So what do you desire that not even all your friends are not able to satisfy? And what does this make you understand about yourself? This is the decisive question that we have to come to grips with: what does it make you understand about yourself? If you understand it, then you won't be able to blame others for not being enough, because even if they were all with you, they would not satisfy your need. So let's stop playing our favorite game, which is to blame others for not being there for us. This is our favorite sport: there is always someone missing and so we spend our whole life blaming other because they don't live up to what we expect from them. But even if they were all there for you, they would be too little, too little for us. So stop it! This game is useless. Even if they were all there, they are

not enough. To say this means that we begin to understand what we are—not the others, but us; and, as a consequence, what the others are as well. And what does this tell you about yourself?

*That it is not the relationship with the friend himself that makes me happy.*

Why not? What does this tell you about yourself?

*That I am made of something greater, which is not the relationship with this friend; that it is not the friend who fulfills me.*

Exactly. And why? What does this tell you about what you desire? What does this tell you about what you are? This is really exciting, you guys! Who are we that nothing is enough for us? Who are we that no one is enough for us? I am struck by how Father Giussani had this awareness in his bones; it is so true that when someone says: “Now I am going to put everything in order”—which would be like saying: “Now we are all here to solve your problem,” but we cannot solve it. Why? What does that tell you about the nature of your desire? Why is this liberating for everyone—, Father Giussani responds: “What melancholy!” (“The long march to maturity,” *Traces*, n. 3/2008). When we think that the others can be enough or we ourselves think that we are enough for the others, he says: “But what melancholy just to think about it!” What an awareness Father Giussani had of the great “I” that we are, of the “Eternal mystery / of our being” (G. Leopardi, “Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna” [On the portrait of a beautiful woman], vv. 22-23, in *Cara beltà...*, BUR, Milano 1996, p. 96), as Leopardi said. It is useless to explain all this, if you don’t perceive it in yourself, if you don’t experience sometimes that no one is enough for you. In this way the Mystery makes us understand what we are, not through an explanation, but by making us vibrate in every fiber of our being. No one is enough for us. And so?

*From the beginning of the Triduum, before saying: “Yes, Jesus exists and He loves me,” my human objections came out.*

Exactly. First, because otherwise we would gloss over them.

*My human objections came out and I cried, because deep down that question awakened the desire of my heart...*

“It awakened the desire of my heart.” Good!

*...which is to find someone who truly loves me and who never abandons me, someone who fulfills me. It is the search for a “you”, and this searched has gripped me in these months, and it continually shakes me up. Who are you, you whom I miss, who can generate this emptiness in me, this piercing nostalgia? I am certain only of two things in front of this question: the only place I have found an answer to this need for meaning has been the Christian community, and second that I am undeniably a beggar, as Father Giussani says. This summer was full of encounters, of truly exceptional experiences, just like Father Gius proposes, that corresponded to the expectation of my heart, in front of which I cannot but recognize and affirm what has been given to me. Every night, though, more or less consciously, I still found myself full of desire for something missing, still missing, even after spending a week in the place I love most in the world, Scout Camp, where I rediscovered friends and met new friends, true companions on the journey, even after we went to see the sunrise over the Matterhorn, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Look, I don’t know why and I don’t understand how, but I have this constant nostalgia, this need for something more, always. I asked myself a lot in these days (having to study for a Greek exam) what it meant to have a friend that never abandons you and I prayed to meet a friend like this, a friend, even in studying, above all in studying. I can’t say that I have met Christ in studying history or the Greek authors, because that would be a bit of a lie, but I can say that there wasn’t a second that I was alone: an unexpected phone call from a friend in London, the*

*friends who are studying for their entrance exams who invited me to study with them, my mom, who can be really tough, really severe, but who embraced me tenderly and who made my bed every morning before my exams so she could help me out in some way. In these days, I have the clear perception that through the faces that I have next to me there is passing the same affection, the same authentic friendship that I am looking for, that I desire. Even if the faces of my friends are imperfect, it is undeniable that they carry a sign, a special something that fascinates me and corresponds to me. They carry something more, even if they are imperfect, marvelously imperfect. I am realizing that the friendship within this companionship does not abandon me: a message, a question given at the assembly, a smile from a friend who is driving by, a reminder; everything reminds me to ask, to be attentive, to recognize. I still don't know how to give a name to this "more" that I sense in the friendship of GS, but I know I need it. I am made for this something more, for the infinite, so I follow the companionship that walks with me, that embraces me with all my defects, that has found me and never abandons me.*

"Who are You that I miss so much?" But before this, you realized that no one is enough for you: it is this that reawakens my desire, that makes me understand the nature of my desire. So if my friends are not what I am looking for, what am I looking for? Who is it that I miss, if no one is enough for me? Who am I lacking? "Who am I missing?", you ask. Of whom do I feel a lack? "What is this lacking, lacking / heart", Mario Luzi said ("Di che è mancante...") [Of what is it lacking...], in *Sotto specie umana*, Garzanti, Milano 1999, p. 190). Do you see? We can understand the concern of the poet, of what the poets say, because we feel it vibrate in us. We try to say it and we aren't able to say it as well as Luzi, but when we read it, we recognize it: "That's it!" What is this lacking, lacking? You said it in another way. And what happened? As you said: "I found myself full of desire because something was missing and every night I found myself still missing something." This is what it means to live. I can see the Matterhorn and I can go to camp and find myself missing something. So I have a nostalgia for this something more, always. And what did you do? If no one is enough for you, if they are too little, if the Matterhorn is too little, if the vacation is too little, what do you do?

*Beg.*

Beg. Good! Prayer is born here. It is not that we are out of things to do; the problem is that, because nothing I encounter is enough to fill my desire, I pray. Prayer is born from the depths of an "I" in need; not from someone who has nothing to do, but from someone who has lived, who lives, who goes to the Matterhorn, who goes to camp, who has friends, but who is aware that all of this is not enough. Everything is little, "tiny", Leopardi says. This is the companionship that we find in the geniuses: "And to find that everything is small and tiny compared to the capacity of my soul." (G. Leopardi, "Pensieri" [Thoughts], LXVIII, in *Poesie e prose*, vol. 2, Mondadori, Milano 1980, p. 321). If everything that we have is too little, what can we do? We can only beg. Beg. Prayer is born from the depths, not from a "devout", pietistic attitude. From pietism comes only a formal prayer. The true prayer comes from the depths of the "I", from the need of the heart. So I pray and I look for the way in which an other will answer me. And how does He respond? You documented how He responded to this prayer. Each of us can make up an image, in our dreams, of how the Mystery—because we are so intelligent!—should answer us. But what intelligence when, instead of imagining it, we look for His response! It is a different method, that which Father Giussani proposed to us in the first chapter of *The Religious Sense*: "Few observations and much discussion are conducive to error: much observation and little discussion to truth." (cfr. A Carrel, in L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's, Montreal 1997, p. 3) What did you do? Much observation. You found yourself in front of facts that reawakened

you, through faces, certain faces, and you added an amazing word. What word? Do you see?! You don't even remember! "Imperfect." Instead there are those who say: "No, if people are not perfect, they cannot bring me the answer." Already Luther said this: "If they are imperfect, those people cannot bring Christ to me. They are too imperfect to carry Him. It cannot be." This is always a temptation: people are too imperfect to bring Him to me. And instead it is precisely them, despite their imperfection, who bring this something more into the world. This is amazing! The Mystery comes to us through these "imperfect" ones; since we are imperfect, the Mystery cannot come to us in any other way; if it happened differently, He would have mistaken the method. Therefore He began by choosing Abraham, who was imperfect just like everyone who God chosen after him. Even we are imperfect now, we are full of imperfections, but this does not impede God—as we sometimes think—from becoming present, it is not an obstacle to His manifestation. Because that which reaches people is not first of all our imperfection, but that "something more" that people bring through their imperfection, and which cannot be brought without it. They carry something more. When our friend told us of her surprise with the Turkish guys, it was not that she thought herself perfect, but she recognized that all her imperfections did not block those Muslims from recognizing something different in her, just like her imperfections did not block you from seeing that difference in your mom, even if sometimes she is tough. Nothing can impede Him. And this kills our objections at the root, objections to facing a companionship that is always going to be imperfect. Stop doing it! These objections only come from someone who does not start from experience. Because when we start from experience, we recognize that we are reborn, that we have been reignited through the encounter with imperfect people, like our friend said before. God uses people who are full of limits in order to make me be born again. So the problem is not that we have limits, but if I accept to be reborn when someone brings me this "something more", even in the midst of their limitations. God does not do this because He is inexperienced, but because He wants you to be able to judge correctly. When Saint Paul affirms that "we have this treasure in vessels of clay" (2 Cor 4:7), why does he say it? Couldn't God have used other vessels, not made of clay, to bring us the treasure that is Jesus? Yes. Could He not have made people who were totally perfect? He could have done it, being God. But what would have been the risk? If Pigi were perfect, the risk would be that we would confuse him for Christ. And instead no! Pigi, with all his limits, is a vessel of clay who bring Someone else. Do you know how the Mystery makes us understand this? He chooses someone in whom it is clear that this person is not the origin of what she carries: in the history of Israel, He chooses sterile women, as if to say: "I want everyone to understand that I made the birth of John the Baptist possible, therefore I choose Elizabeth and I make her give birth when it is impossible for women to give birth; and so it is easy for everyone to see that I did it." And this is a help for us. In fact, how does God become present in history? Through facts, signs through which it is absolutely clear that He is the origin. How does He make us understand that we are limited in our understanding? He chooses a way in which we, limited as we are, can understand: He makes an old woman give birth. God did this already in the beginning with Sarah, the wife of Abraham. But she, when she heard that she would give birth, laughed, laughed! "I will come back to you a year from now and then Sarah, your wife, will have a son." (Gen 18:10) And when after a year, Sarah has a son, what does that mean for Abraham? That he was so good, that he was able to make his wife give birth when she was past the age? No, Abraham realizes that the birth was God's work. How does God act? He doesn't tell us stories, tell us dreams, but gives us facts—facts!—that we can touch and see; through which we can say: "How is this possible for a sterile woman to give birth?" "It is I," says God, "do you see who I am? Do you see who is the origin of

this fact?” For the ancient people of Israel, sterility was the greatest imperfection. A sterile woman gave birth? Impossible! Therefore God says: “Instead I will show you that it is possible because I make it happen, and so you won’t be confused and think that it happened because Abraham or whoever I chose was perfect and great.” Ask yourselves: “But is this Christ?” “Is it really Christ who makes this companionship?”, we often ask ourselves. And how does Christ respond? Making you see that what you encounter in this companionship is not made possible because of our perfection, but because He does it, just like He did with Abraham and Sarah. From the beginning. “I am the protagonist of this story, and I don’t give you obscure signs, I choose a sterile woman so that it is obvious for everyone, and so this sign and this other one, all the way to Jesus, who is born of a virgin.” This is the method of God. It would be impossible to be more obvious. And even now God continues to make Himself present through imperfection. But we insist: “How come?! Can God really bring this something more to me through the imperfection of these people?” And so? Either there is imperfection, and this something more cannot be brought to us, or this something more is so obvious that not even our imperfection can deny it. There is Someone who is greater than the imperfection—mine and yours—that carries Him. Is it clear?

*I want to recount a fact that happened during charitable work, where I help children from the oratory study. We started this charitable work this year, so we didn’t know the place or anything else. The oratory was visited by kids of all ages, from twenty years down to five, with whom we study. One time I was going down to the parking lot to get the children to study together, and there were some kids who were a little older. They stopped me on the stairs because they are a little rowdy, and they wanted to fight with me, but I didn’t want to. So I said to them: “I am here because I just want to help the little kids. I am not here to fight.” It was strange, because it was always easier for me to fight back: to one who treats you with violence, you answer with violence; it is easier, at least for me it has always been a bit easier. And instead in that moment I was calm in front of them...*

How come? Because you lost the energy, because you lacked the strength to fight, or for some other reason.

*No, no, no.*

Why did you stay calm?

*I remembered Violaine. I didn’t react for the sake of the children; I wanted to be there for them and not to fight, and also because those other kids were being stupid. They said that I had looked at them funny. Fundamentally it was useless. And even after they insisted, when they were becoming violent, I stayed calm until these two girls came over...*

From where is this strength born? I don’t want to lose the significance of what you are saying. It is the same as the sterility from before. From where does it come? Why did you find yourself with something different; are you normally like that?

*No.*

Do you usually react or do you stay calm?

*I react, normally.*

You react in a big way! It’s not that you’re lacking in size! But then why did you remain calm?

*Fundamentally it is an open question. After this happened, two girls came over who intervened and separated us. Then I left together with the leader of our charitable work, who picked me up in his car and brought me home. It was really hard because the anger, responding in anger has always been a difficult area that I’ve tried to overcome; everyone, including my family, has*

*always said that this is a part of me that is not good. And they have always made me look at the negative side, that it's wrong, that one should overcome this, because it is ugly, and I also saw it like this. And even staying calm, there was still this anger there anyway.*

It is precisely this that I want to help you understand.

*When I came home, Antonella and my brother were there. In the past, I always saw that when I was angry both my brother and my parents, who know me best, they didn't want to be around me; either they ignored me or they left, and I remained behind "thus", I had to "handle" my anger by myself. Instead, that day I came home and Antonella looked at me, hugged me, and then asked me to tell her everything that happened. I told her and then she said: "You have to go there next Friday to do charitable work." I didn't want to because I thought: "This ugly side of me came out and I don't want it to happen again, for it to come out again." Instead she looked at me and said: "You have to go back there." At first, I found this annoying because I didn't want to, but then I said to myself: "Look how she is taking a risk," she wasn't telling me what I wanted to hear, but: "Yes, be calm. This happened, but we will resolve it, and you can go back to the charitable work like you did before." I saw that she was making a bet, taking a risk to tell me: "Go there," because I could have turned around and said: "You are telling me to do what I don't want to do, and I'm not going." And instead in that moment, I felt myself looked at, not only for my anger, for my annoyance, that I don't like about myself. After a few weeks, I went back to charitable work and it was hard, because every time there was a bit of fear that the same thing is going to happen. But as soon as I arrived, there were the children who waited for me, and this really struck me, because in the end it's not that I went to work very willingly, because the kids don't want to study and so you are a little unpleasant—you are not there very willingly; instead I came and the kids were waiting for me, and so the fear, the fatigue, the fact that my anger could come back, passed away; I wanted to go to them every Friday. And also when, after, I met those other guys—because we saw each other around, it wasn't that we hadn't seen each other—it was an occasion to remember what happened before at charitable work, and I had kept in my mind every day.*

And what stayed in your mind from that day?

*The fact that Antonella and my brother, with whom I had only had an okay relationship, were there, looked at me, and even looked at the one thing I didn't want to look at.*

And what allowed them to look at what you didn't want to look at? According to you? Are they stupid, do they not understand what you see and can't sense the ugliness that comes out when you are angry? Why can they look at the thing that you cannot look at, that ugliness that gets provoked in you? What do they see that you don't see? Why are they so good? "They are good, but stupid, because they don't see what I see, because even if they see, they don't feel all the ugliness that I feel." What do they see that you don't see? What makes it possible for them to see?

*After this happened, a real friendship was born with Antonella; before it was there, but...*

Don't skip the steps. How did that friendship with her arise? Friendship arises if you understand why she was able to look at that which you couldn't look at. And it is because she can look at it that also you will be able to look at it. You should start looking at yourself the way Antonella looks at you. You begin to look at yourself little by little, and the next time you'll tell me why, what happened, if you have discovered something more about why she was able to look at you like that. She has no problem looking at everything, and you discover that with her you can look at everything. We have met someone with whom it is possible to look at everything without censoring anything. Because if you censor it, you still carry all the weight of what you can't look

at. Instead you can look at everything, in order to be reconciled to everything. Why could Saint Peter look at everything? You haven't done anything compared to what Peter did, who denied Christ in front of everyone; he denied Him: "I don't know that man." (Mt 26:72-74) Someone entered history, while Peter was all worried—"Now what is He going to tell me. He's going to take me to task."—and instead of rebuking him, Christ looks at him without censoring anything; knowing what Peter had done, Jesus asks him: "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:16) Do you understand where the friendship of Peter and Jesus comes from? In the same way that your friendship with Antonella was born: from one who looks at you the way Jesus looked at Peter, the one who had betrayed Him. Jesus gave you one like Antonella to make you understand what can spark a friendship like this. And why is it so important to have someone like this? Because, being poor and full of things we don't want to face, we will be able understand the need we have, because there is someone who is not afraid to look at everything. Without this, we cannot be friends, because there is always something we don't want to look at. Therefore if Jesus had not looked at everything in us, we wouldn't be His friends, because there would always be something of which we were ashamed. With Him, we can look at everything.

**A. Bonifanti.** Thank you Julián, because we have had a real experience of a true friendship.