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THE CHALLENGE OF GRADUATION

**“WHAT AM I
HERE TO DO IN
THE WORLD?”**

**Notes from a meeting of Fr. Julián Carrón
and Francesco Barberis
with GS students preparing for graduation**

Milan, February 12, 2020

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Songs: *Canzone dell'ideale* [Song of the ideal]
La strada [The road]

Francesco Barberis. Good evening, everyone: students in their last two years of high school together with their teachers, gathered here in Milan and connected by video to over 80 cities in Italy, Switzerland, Portugal and the Czech Republic. We are here because your life as students is calling you: this transition time, so dramatic and exciting, highlights those questions that are fundamental, fundamental for everyone, but especially poignant at your age: “What am I here to do in the world?” “What makes life worth living?” How can I make the right choice for my future?” and “Would it be so bad to make the wrong choice?” We want to pose all these questions, and others that come up, to Fr. Julián Carrón, who is a father to us. In the end, we do not just want answers; we want to make sure we do not forget the origin of these questions. We are looking, therefore, for much more than answers; we are looking for someone who can embrace these questions, someone who makes them his own, a father who is willing to walk with each of us, to take the necessary steps with all of us to discover the answers to our questions. Because of this, we are so grateful to have Julián here, so that we can share a bit of our journey with him. Many contributions came in. I would like to read a couple to introduce the first question: “What good are all our efforts at studying?” One girl wrote, “Over these four years of intense studying, I have matured in the awareness that the deeper I go into each topic, the more I realize how much I do not know. This realization has pushed me to be even more curious, to study more. Today, though, I feel overwhelmed in the face of the complexity and wide variety of events and people that present themselves to me in my life. I have this great desire to understand (I dare not say to resolve) this fact. Is it possible to get a complete view of reality? I feel limited right from the get-go! I feel dissatisfied and no longer think of my limitations as opportunities, but rather as obstacles because the things I desire (happiness, love, justice, equality for everyone) seem like unreachable goals far from reality. So, then, how can I look at reality while still keeping my eye on those goals?” Another young man frankly confessed, “I would like to be happy, but I can’t because school and my studies keep me from doing things that I think would make me happier, like following the Bologna soccer team, the thing I care about most in the world, even in away games, but because of commitments at school I usually have to skip those dates. Or, for example, I would like to take a trip to London with my friends, but I can’t because I have to take the INVALSI exams. Basically, there have been so many times I was a prisoner and couldn’t do something that would really make me happy. How can I be happy within my circumstances, like studying and school, which right now seem to keep me from being happy?”

I have a question about graduation and the time we have left until then. I need to see that the fact I have to stay home to study is not something less than the kind of life I would like. I want to see that I am not missing out on something. For example, I had to give up going to charitable work [Editor’s Note: “Charitable work” denotes a regular weekly or biweekly time of volunteering, a charitable gesture performed in a group, guided by an adult. The goal is not to resolve personal or social needs, but to share those needs, to educate oneself to begin to conceive of all of life as something shared, which means as “charity,” according to the newness Christ brings] one Saturday because I had to study for an oral exam. The feeling I had was really that I was missing out on something. I do not want it to be that way. As we get closer and closer to graduation, and as there is, therefore, more and more to study, I really need to see in my experience that staying home to study is not

missing out, that it is not a loss. How can I? Can it really be that way? Right now, it seems like being stuck inside at home when it is a beautiful day outside.

Julián Carrón. May I ask you a question? Have you ever had a concrete, specific experience in which you did not feel like you were missing out on anything? You say, “If I have to stay home to study, I cannot go to charitable work.” When you choose something, you always leave out something else; no one has the power to be everywhere at all times. So, this is a serious problem, because today you think that way about studying, but tomorrow it will be something else. Facing this question of how to live one detail in life without losing track of everything else, is crucial for our lives, not just to pass final exams. As we have always said, to respond, we have to start with experience. Have you ever had an experience in which, living through a particular event, you had the clear impression that everything was present and that you were not missing out on anything?

A circumstance in which I still had to give up something?

Carrón. A circumstance in which, having chosen something, you didn’t worry about the fact that you were giving up something else, in which you didn’t feel that you were missing out on anything. This is the question we each have to ask ourselves. Otherwise, no matter the situation, we’ll always be stuck thinking we’re missing out on something.

At the moment, no experience like that comes to mind; I’m thinking more about the times I have to stay home to study and I say to myself, “But then I can’t go talk to my friend!”

Carrón. That is an experience we all share, isn’t it? So, if we don’t find an answer to this problem, the same thing will keep happening to us in every situation! Welcome to the human club, a place where you can begin to see what it means to live! So, the question is, “How can I live every circumstance, every tiny fragment of life, without missing out on anything crucial?” A famous Catholic theologian used this phrase: “All in a fragment.” How can you live the “all” that is present in a fragment? This is not just your question because you have issues or limitations; it is everyone’s question. Even Jesus, as a man, as God incarnate, lived this question! As the gospels document, Jesus was sent—he himself says so—to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He might have liked to go to Rome, to Athens, to Corinth. But God’s design was for everything to pass through a relationship with the people he had in front of him in Palestine. Jesus lived out this method with an all-embracing intensity. He did not complain because he was missing out; he was living every detail, every situation to the fullest. When he was invited to a wedding feast, when he went here and went there, he lived everything with an incomparable intensity. He was present to the present moment, every circumstance, every instant, was full of something that made it one-of-a-kind. This is the challenge for each of us. In certain moments, we begin to experience this—when a person falls in love, for example, he feels that shiver of being in front of the girl he loves and says “I never want to go away.” Has this ever happened to you?

Yes!

Carrón. You see? You have what we are talking about right in front of your face, but because you are distracted, you are not fully aware of the things that happen and how they happen. If you pay attention, you begin to see that there are certain moments in which a presence is so decisive that you do not feel like you are missing out on anything.

Yes, but only during the time when it’s in front of me!

Carrón. I understand, but just one of those moments is enough to break the dam; it means that you could live every moment like that, because you saw that it was possible to live one moment without losing anything. Wouldn’t you like that? Every instant a feast! So, times like this, like graduation, when life gives you such a challenge, are priceless opportunities, not to be missed but treasured, because they force you to ask yourself, “What gives fullness to the present instant?” We will always be subject to the limits of time and space; at any given moment we will never be able to bilocate. But some moments are so rich, we wouldn’t want to be anywhere else! So, the issue is paying attention: “What makes this instant so rich that I do not feel like I am missing anything?” You have a nice challenge in front of you! It is much more important than your graduation exam. Compared to that challenge, graduation is a game for kids.

Now that the end of school and graduation are getting closer and closer, in addition to being really anxious about the graduation exam, I am wondering if anything from these five years will last, and if so, what. I'm mostly speaking about school: I hate to think that after spending five years there, nothing significant has happened that I can take with me when I leave high school. With regard to my studying, despite the effort I put in, I never manage to study everything I was supposed to and as well as I'd like. I would like to study every class with the same attitude, with the same attention I have when I study science, math, and physics. I know this is possible, because it has happened to me a few times; for example, once I studied with a girl from an art-focused high school who looked at art the same way I look at the sciences. Listening to her, I understood clearly that she sees much more in art than I do. The same happened to me with one particular Italian literature teacher: when she explains a poem, everything is clear, everything is full of meaning; then I go home and reread it and it seems totally different than what came out in class. I would like to study this way always, but how can I since I can't always study with my friend and on my own it's always more difficult (or it at least takes longer)? This creates two problems for me: the first is that I am not talented enough to do everything I would like to do; sometimes I blame myself for being so slow, even though I know very well I can't do anything about it. The second follows from the first: since I can't do everything quickly, I have to find the time somewhere, so I often find myself having to give up a lot of things. I see this situation and my own limitations as a lack, a failure. It's burdensome living like this and I wouldn't want to go on like this until graduation. How can I change my outlook? And as I await that new outlook, is there something about studying that is worth all that I give up? How can not being able to do everything possibly not be a loss?

Carrón. You have already started to see in a few moments in life, that certain presences, like that of your friend or that teacher, introduce you to a way of living reality that excites you. That is the first piece of evidence. And it's crucial that you start realizing this, as you did. As you can see, you already have proof in your experience—even though “you are not talented”—that the way of living reality you desire is possible. It happened to you—otherwise you wouldn't have just told us about it. So, the issue is noticing those moments when everything is full of meaning and asking yourself what is happening in those moments. Each of us can look back and find moments like that in our experience if we are attentive. If you are, instead, distracted, you can be in front of Mont Blanc and mistake it for a little mouse. You don't see it, not because Mont Blanc isn't there or isn't imposing and beautiful, but because you're distracted. A rock does not wonder at the beauty of the mountains. The point, then, is becoming aware that you have already lived—you yourself, who do not consider yourself talented, not someone else—moments full of meaning. Then, in order for what happened to you to expand into every aspect of reality, it's important to recognize that how talented you are has nothing to do with it. And, in fact, you were able to experience moments full of meaning just as you were; your “performance” had nothing to do with it. Discovering that is freeing for everyone. What transforms a circumstance is not how talented you are; it is a *presence* that fills that moment with meaning: a teacher comes along who makes it so that the reading of a poem is full of extraordinary intensity, something you never would have accomplished alone. If you pay attention, you can start down a road, following those presences in whom you see an intensity that leaves nothing out. Then your question begins to find an answer: it is not a question of giving up things, but of living them intensely. You only have to follow that “something more” that you saw in your friend or in your teacher, and slowly this way of living reality starts to be your way, too. So, for the reading of a poem to resonate in you as it does for your teacher, what do you have to do? All you have to do is let yourself be generated by that presence, so that you will come to a certain point when, reading that poem, you can be moved the same way she was moved as she explained it in class, so that it resonates all through you! Who is keeping you from doing this? Who is stopping any of you? No one! This “letting yourself be generated,” however, is not something anyone can do for you; it is part of the journey you have to make. Sometimes we say, “All right, but that person whose presence makes things resonate is not always there; if they were, then...”, so we complain. I have been

thinking about this in the last few days after I met with a friend who was complaining that because he had just graduated college and started his new life we cannot see each other as often as when he was at the university. You are saying the same thing: “That teacher is not always there, that friend from school is not always there to study with.” I reminded my friend who was complaining about a scene from the Gospel. One day, the disciples were in a boat with Jesus and realized that they had forgotten to bring the bread. Despite the fact that they had witnessed two gigantic miracles—two multiplications of loaves as had never been seen in history—they began to argue because they had forgotten the bread. You could say, “You see? When he is missing, they complain.” But I said to my friend, “The problem is, Jesus was there, beside them, in the boat! But they kept complaining! The problem was not that they were alone, because Jesus was with them, but that it was, for them, as if He were not there. So, they argued about the fact they did not have bread! To help them see the real problem, Jesus did not perform another miracle. What good would it have done to perform another one after all they had already seen? So, what contribution does Jesus make? He asks them three questions. First, “When I broke the loaves the first time, how much was left over?” Then, “And the second time?” And, finally, “Do you still not understand?” (cf. Mk 8:19–21). Jesus does not perform another miracle, but rather educates them to make full use of their reason, that they might be able to recognize that they had the lord of the “bakery” with them. If they didn’t understand, it was because they had not learned to use their reason in order to recognize the one who was in front of them, Jesus.

If you do not do this work when you read a poem differently thanks to that teacher, if you do not let that attitude your friend has about studying art enter into you, you will not grow. Like your teacher, Jesus would also like for you to enjoy it every time you read a poem! Would you like that? Would you like for the presence of your teacher to generate in you such an enjoyment of poetry that you could never go to bed again without reading a poem? For this to happen, there needs to be an openness that is your responsibility, that you must take steps to have, but one that those presences help you to have. Following them is easy but not automatic. It happens because the resonance of your “I” thanks to that teacher was so great that you cannot live without it. In the same way, you can no longer live without enjoying a work of art or something beautiful after experiencing what your friend showed you. Letting the newness, which comes to you through them, enter into you makes you grow and develop. Instead of feeling a sense of failure, instead of giving up something, you begin to broaden your view of other things, on which, before, you looked using a narrow measure. To summarize: first you find a friend who begins to broaden your outlook, then a teacher who broadens it further, and then you, too, begin to be able to see, to enjoy everything! Think how ingenious Fr. Giussani was to have us listen to music and read poetry, to propose that we look at art when we are together, to introduce us to singing, liturgy, the beauty of nature, etc. In a companionship like ours, a person begins to broaden his or her outlook so as to be able to enjoy everything. If you were on your own, you wouldn’t be educated to all this. This something “greater” you discover in your studies makes it so that, in dedicating yourself to them, you don’t give up anything, because everything is given back to you in a new way. This is made possible by your belonging to a place, to a certain people. Belonging to a defined, historical, concrete place made up of human presences charged with a proposal of a meaning in life changes the way you relate to reality: every small thing now overflows with everything else. It is always a particular history that introduces us to totality: we too, you and I, who are wretches, who are not that talented, who do not have the same sensibility of that teacher or your friend in art school, are changed by being in a place like this. We are continually opened up to all of reality. Are you interested? Thank you!

Barberis. Some of you wrote that you were afraid of losing what you have found.

My feelings about graduation are two-fold: on the one hand, there is a desire to get through it because, attending a school focused on languages, I study four different types of literature. Over the last year I have realized that I am not interested in literature, so I would like to go to university to

study something that I really like and am passionate about. And then, hearing my friends who are older speak of the magical world of the university, I want to see how it is, too. I want to go because they seem happier than I am, often sitting in class just waiting for it to end. On the other hand, as I think is probably normal or at least common, there is a fear that keeps me from wanting to go to the university, and instead stay in high school; above all there's the fear of arriving at oral exams and not remembering all I've studied this year. Really, the biggest fear is the one described by Massimo Recalcati in his book "L'ora di lezione [Class time]," an excerpt from which our philosophy teacher had us read on our first day of class in September: "The graduation exam is a doorway that opens onto an unknown land, because it marks the end of the world as a son and student and the beginning of the choices that will lead to our destiny. We have to speak for ourselves. With the final exam, the firm ground of childhood ends and the adventurous instability of the sea begins. In every trial, there is always a risk of collapse, as well as the intoxication of freedom. Our real angst is always related to our freedom and our desire." So, I feel the fear and anxiety of having to make a choice that will determine my future, the angst that I might make a mistake and not find what I am made for, not find my vocation. I know that is part of becoming an adult, of growing up, but that doesn't take the fear away. So, my question is: How can I live graduation and the choice of a university with greater peace, as I wish were the case?

Carrón. For all of you, graduation is a test of the journey you have walked over the last few years, whether you like it or not. Most of the questions you have, in fact, are not about the graduation exam itself, but—as we just saw—about the fear of how you can live one detail without losing the totality. In other words, they are about life. Graduation is an opportunity to learn what is crucial in life; that is what makes it so valuable. A circumstance like graduation is revelatory. What does it take to face graduation with a certain—if we can put it this way—light-heartedness, a certain audacity? How would you answer that? How would you prepare for exams if the problem is fear? This is a question each of you has to ask yourself: "What will prepare me for graduation?" I'll offer you a hint: a person prepares for graduation by living the present, by discovering what enables him or her to conquer fear in the present moment. If you do not experience that victory in the present, not only will you not be prepared to face the exam, but you will just sit there fearing the future, unable to do anything. You *can* do something, then, to prepare yourself for graduation: verify what exists in the present that can keep you from succumbing to fear. And this method applies not only to graduation, or to having to buckle down and study (because you have to study, obviously): the real question is, what makes you a protagonist on the front line of life? What allows you to be in front of a circumstance with your whole self without being defined by fear? The present is all that we have: the past is gone and the future is not yet in our hands; therefore, fretting about the future is useless. It does not solve the problem of our fear. What can contribute to helping you face the future? The present! What, then, do you need when you are afraid? You begin to discover what you need right now, not tomorrow or the day of the exam. And for those of you who still have two years ahead of you, don't waste your time or you will come to the time of graduation—and then of life—full of fear! Let's get moving, guys: we take the test for graduation by living the present! So use the present and observe what gives you the peace to be able to face it; that way you will know how to be calm in facing your graduation exam as well. Is that clear?

Life is simple. You have to unmask the myth of graduation: if you perceive it as a threat, as something looming over you, it is because of a weakness in how you face the present. A few ants look like giants, not because they are, but because fear makes them seem bigger than they really are. Observe in your experience what has been capable of overcoming fear, what conquers it. The disproportionate weight some things take on, the fear they inspire, is proportional to our lack of solidity. A certain fear you are experiencing right now is not because of the graduation exam. So, if you are thinking, "Why should I have to worry about life while I am in high school? I'll just study, and who cares about the rest, because it's pointless?" let me head you off at the pass. Just studying does not solve the problem behind the fear; you need to truly live your experience. If you go through the journey of high school but do not use the time to grow, to tap into the things that

generate a solid personality—that put you in the right condition to face life’s challenges—when the graduation exam comes, despite all the “just studying” you did, you will be at the mercy of fear. A person thinks he outsmarts the system by saying, “I don’t have to worry about walking a journey these four or five years because in the end I don’t need it; right now, I’ll just study and that’s it, forget all the rest.” But that is a distortion of reality because you are more than your studies; there are defining questions inside you that go beyond your studies. They touch on your solidity, your certainty, the way you face reality and what you need to be able to live. Life is unified; therefore, it is helpful to begin to understand how to take advantage of the spectre of graduation in order to study and, at the same time, to learn to live. Otherwise, someday in the future you will find yourself in the same situation of fear and fragility when you have to begin to work or you get married, when you will have to face all the unexpected events life brings. If you grow as a person throughout your high school years, as an aware self, you will be able to face everything. Otherwise, you may be excellent students but fragile people, and just a light wind, one *puh* will knock you down. Too bad we often forget what is most necessary in life. Graduation, then, is an amazing opportunity to bring to light “the” question. It is an opportunity to look it in the eye. Start talking with each other about it: In this circumstance, what helps you the most? What conquers fear? What kept you from falling apart in the midst of tough situations? In this way, you can learn to treasure all you have seen emerge in your experience. Who’s next?

Looking at the question of what I will do next year, I am often perplexed because I don’t know what I want. Not because I don’t know how to do anything, or that I don’t have ideas, but because I feel like an average person with average passions and desires. It seems like there is nothing that corresponds so much to me as to be able to decide on what I want and dedicate my whole life to that. One teacher told me that in order to discover what I should do, the first thing I have to discover is who I am. But before the question, “Who am I?” I’m speechless, because I don’t know who I am. So, to discover what I should do, the most intelligent thing seems to be to focus on my studies, the most immediate reality in my life...

Carrón. Do you see? We skip over the question, “Who am I?” and focus on our studies, thinking we can solve the problem that way.

But the more I focus on my studies, the more confused I get; in fact, nothing really seems like it’s for me. That sends me into a total crisis because I don’t understand what my role in the world is. I don’t understand what I am called to do, to be. So, in choosing a university, what dominates in me is not the fear of making a mistake, but that of not finding my place, that there won’t be a place for me.

Carrón. What you’re saying is very interesting because it shows the value of one’s journey. I am amazed how you say such incredible things without realizing it. You notice there’s a problem because you’re perplexed about the future. And what came to mind to solve the problem? To focus on your studies. Great! You made an attempt to answer, right? But that doesn’t mean you found the right answer; in fact, you had to verify whether your attempt was sufficient. And what was the result of your verification?

It was not true; it did not correspond to me.

Carrón. You were more confused, you said. You see? Experience never deceives us: you took a few steps in one direction, and, right away, realized that it was not the right road because you were even more confused. You can say, “Why should I worry about who I am? I’ll focus on my studies, and maybe studying more will clarify things.” Instead, you saw that you just got more confused. If you hold on to that experience, instead of saying, “It sends me into a total crisis,” you can go back to the question you set aside: “Who am I?” So, when you think, “I do not understand what my role in the world is. I do not understand what I am called to do, to be; I am afraid I will not find my place,” when those questions, which emerged crystal clear in your mind, overtake you, you realize that throwing yourself into your studies is not the right way to find an answer. So again, the problem of graduation brought out—and this is advantage of facing it—the importance of what you

said in the beginning: “Facing the question posed by my teacher, ‘Who am I?,’ I was speechless. I don’t know who I am.” That’s wonderful because you recognized this, when you could have gone on for years without doing so, stumbling on looking for an answer. Then, seeing that your attempts were unsuccessful, what did you learn about yourself? What did you learn from that experience? That you are more than your studies, that you have a desire, a greatness that allows you to recognize what does not correspond to yourself. Now you know who you are; you have appeared before your own eyes. “I am more than my studies because my studies alone do not pull me out of my confusion.” Your own greatness emerged before your eyes, not in the middle of a philosophy class (with all due respect to your philosophy teacher, of course!), but in seeing the full weight of your question, “Who am I?” come out in your experience. This is priceless: you begin to recognize that you cannot reduce your life to just one aspect of it because then you just get more confused. When your “I” emerges and you begin to judge the things that happen, you begin to broaden your outlook and ask “What is my role in the world?” That is the question you can follow now, instead of surrendering to the fear of not finding your place. And are you really sure there is no place for you in the world? When you look at all these questions head- on, you realize that you are making progress on a journey. And you begin to string together the signs, the hints, that help you discover your place in the world. You will see for yourself how you discover it! Thank you.

Barberis. One of the contributions we received asked, “When is it right to turn a passion, a gift I have, into my road in life? Does responding to my vocation mean throwing myself into what seems to most spark my interest? Does choosing another, easier, and more profitable road that does not at first glance seem to correspond to my being, preclude all happiness?”

In recent days, I’ve found myself in awe, with great expectation in my heart and a trust that has never been so strong. This year is unique: I have four full years of high school behind me, and I am really recognizing right now how much the faces I’ve encountered and the things that have happened were designed for me, like a dress tailored to fit. I am becoming more and more aware that everything that has surrounded me in these years, and is still present, was made just for me; everything has helped and is still helping to make me more myself, my true self. And I realize that, when I welcome that “everything” and say yes, reality always leads me to someone great. This is how I have been looking at the choice of university in these recent months. I am increasingly sure of a concrete hypothesis that I think is right for me. For five years, I always had some inkling. At first it was, “I want to help people because it is not fair that they did not have the same opportunities I have,” and so I’ve gone from wanting to be an architect to building rehabilitation homes to being a nurse. That original inkling has become stronger and stronger, but the more time that passed, the more I understood that neither being an architect nor being a nurse would do for me for very simple reasons: for one, I do not want to study anything related to science and, two, I don’t like architecture class in school. So, I stopped analyzing that original impetus and began trying to understand the job or major it could translate into. I started looking around, looking at myself. I began to discover myself in my relationships with my classmates, at charitable work, with my nieces and nephews, and in the way I care about my friends. And, at the end of last year, I discovered the School of Education. Last summer, I decided to go to Africa for two weeks as a volunteer to verify the intuition I had formed. The truth is, I did not come back from Africa sure I wanted to be an educator, but something extraordinary happened there. In those circumstances, I answered with my second big “yes.” It was situation that challenged me; it was tedious at first until I began to see simple people who were alive and happy. I could not help but follow them, so I said yes. That “yes” made me even more myself, and at the same time, more His. That experience has accompanied me to this day. I have received a number of signs in life, in front of which the one thing I can testify to is that they brought me closer and closer to Him. Now, I am choosing education, because reality—not the idea I have of myself—seems to be pushing me there. But if my intuition turns out to be mistaken and, in a month, I have to put my choice into question again, I can do it because after all I

have lived (not without struggles, but very richly), I cannot help entrust myself once again and follow what He is giving me. One question remains, though: despite the trust I find inside me and my desire to live for Him, I ask myself how I can verify the signs and the road I am about to choose and how I can understand whether the signs are really pointing there.

Carrón. What have you learned on the path you have followed?

How to look.

Carrón. Perfect! Synthetic. You learned how to look. What did you do, at first, instead of looking?

I followed my own ideas.

Carrón. You sat thinking. Then, you moved from thinking to looking; first you thought of being an architect, then a nurse, then, “Who knows?” That made life more and more complicated. So, you started to look. What did you look at?

What was in front of me.

Carrón. In particular? Reality, as you know, is vast.

I looked at what was happening to me.

Carrón. In other words, you paid attention to the signs, in which you were able to discern a few hints of a response to the question you were asking yourself, in order to understand how what you want to do is related to the desire you have inside you, to that voice of the ideal that is calling you. The voice of the ideal is more real than our ideas, and it never leaves you. You can go as far as Africa and it stays with you, bringing everything that happens back to your attention. Therefore, to respond to your question, all you have to do is follow the method you have learned: to look. The method, as you just said, is looking: “I started looking around me and looking at myself.” In other words, you started paying attention to the signs. How can you verify the signs for the road you are about to choose? How can you understand that the signs are pointing there? It’s a question of attention. You begin to see—when you pick up on them—where they point: “Oh, I see, it’s this way, not that one.” This is why Fr. Giussani says that finding the right answer is not a matter of intelligence (first, you were using your intellect, which is not lacking, and you had various ideas) but rather of “attention.” Discovering the truth, the true road for you, the answer to your question, is like finding a treasure. Who can find it? The one who is attentive. You don’t have to invent anything: if you pay attention to the signs, at a certain point you will intuit how your desire to give yourself to others begins to take a concrete form; if you follow and verify that intuition, then you will see whether it holds up over time, whether the signs confirm that the road you chose is the right one. If you say, “I’m going to Bologna,” and along the way see road signs pointing “Turin, Turin, Turin,” reality is giving you a sign that maybe you went the wrong way! But if every time you look at the signs, they say “Bologna, Bologna, Bologna,” they confirm the choice you made to go to Bologna. It means that the confirmation of a right or wrong choice comes through experience. You just have to be attentive. It’s simple!

I find myself fulfilled and happy when I place myself at the service of others, when I feel useful for others. I discovered this doing charitable work. I always thought that the road that might be able to most fulfill my need would be studying medicine, but now I am wondering if that is just my idea, a thought I have constructed myself without really looking at what is being asked of me to do, at what my vocation really is. How can I know whether this is the case?

Carrón. As you can see, at a certain point, within your own human journey, your personal journey, a question arises: “What is my vocation? How can I place myself at the service of others?” A person cannot consider certain choices without this big question welling up inside: “How can I serve others?” a question that the girl who just spoke also mentioned. What can help us answer this question? I will not go into all the details right now, but if you pick up the little book *La voce unica dell’ideale* [The one voice of the ideal] (San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo-MI 2018), you can start to make out the road. I will summarize the suggestions I have given over the years based on Fr. Giussani. First: look at “the complex of natural inclinations and gifts” the mystery gives you to use in serving others. Second: acknowledge the “inevitable conditions or inevitable circumstances” as

“indicators of the road to follow.” Third: identify “the need of the world and of the Christian community” that you perceive is most urgent right now. To choose among things you could do in life, you ask yourself: “What is the most urgent need in today’s society and today’s church?” Fr. Giussani concludes by saying that a “judgment must flow from the complex of those factors put together” (cf. L. Giussani, in J. Carrón, *The One Voice of the Ideal*—meeting with student youth members, Rome, May 16, 2010, <https://english.clonline.org/archive/julian-carron/the-one-voice-of-the-ideal>). Once again, it is a question of attention. If you are attentive, you will be able to glimpse the road. You ask, “According to the inclinations and gifts the mystery has given me, keeping in mind the circumstances in which He has placed me and the needs of the world, how can I place all that I have received at the service of others?” You could say you have intuited—and this is really beautiful—that you cannot decide your vocation without looking at how it connects to the totality, because you could not be happy isolating yourself and just thinking of yourself, not once you have seen emerge from your humanity an awareness that you can only truly be yourself in relationship with others. Consequently, to be able to determine your vocation, you begin to look at the most critical needs in today’s world, and you do this in dialogue with friends and with adults; you speak with all those who can offer you some hint that can help you understand what the greatest needs are, which may make it more appropriate to study medicine or to do something else. Thank you.

I would like to study medicine because I am certain that relationships with people living with greater pain than I do can help me grow a lot, and that is what I most desire for my future work. In addition, every time I study the human body, I am fascinated by its perfection. At the same time, I am nervous about spending the upcoming months and the whole summer with my nose in my books, which I will have to do because passing the entrance exam is very difficult. So, I am wondering how studying for the graduation exam and entrance exams can be satisfying for me, and how I can avoid being totally dependent on the results of the exams?

Carrón. Well, who’s making you do it? If you don’t want to study, you don’t have to. So, who is making you do it?

It’s what I want!

Carrón. So what? You all have to ask yourselves these questions, or it will seem like someone is forcing you to do this or that. No one is forcing you! You don’t want to study; you don’t want to spend your summer studying? Go to the beach; what’s the problem? “Well, but I’d *like* to study medicine...” So, you do have a reason, which you become aware of as soon as I challenge you. I do not want to convince you to study; I just want to ask you a simple question, and after I do so, that “one voice of the ideal” burning inside of you pushes you to say, “It’s what I want to do!” Maybe then you can start to store up the reasons to study. In fact, if you do not have reasons to study, who can make you? You will always be complaining, “Who’s making me do this? Or that?” Maybe some adult who can impose something on you to do? No one can order you to do anything because your vocation is yours; it’s yours! The mystery has placed certain gifts inside you, he made it so that you were born with certain gifts and had a certain kind of experience, as you told me: a relationship with those who live in pain; maybe others don’t see this, but he gave you this perception of other people’s pain. You didn’t decide on them—you found those gifts and that sensitivity inside you; there are others who run away at the first sign of someone in pain, but you say, “This is important for me.” You see clues from the mystery, you hear the one voice of the ideal burning within, which does not say, “Now I command you to do x ,” in order to crush you (think how much we complain when someone wants to undermine us and stunt our creativity). The mystery brings out a certain sensitivity in you, in your experience, as if to say, “Do you realize how beautiful your life could become doing this?” He fills you with reasons, so that you can come to enjoy doing it so much you can even study in the summer. Then you have to verify for yourself. It’s interesting to see how this passion for things wells up in you. This is why I like speaking with you so much, because I learn even more than you, seeing how the mystery brings out our “I.” No one gave you a lecture on it; by simply placing yourselves in front of a question, you begin to see what

burns within you. So, enough: you have all you need to begin the journey. It's up to you to decide whether to follow that suggestion or throw it in the trash, because no one will force you. Because you do not depend on the results of your efforts, you are more than the results, so decide. Next!

Lately, I have been overcome by a flurry of emotions regarding the choice I have to make. After speaking with an adult friend, I had the courage to look what I really wanted to do in the face, without letting myself be discouraged by those around me who keep reminding me that it would be hard to get in, and that I wouldn't have time to prepare for the entrance exams. Let me give some background so it's clear: my desire is to go to a film school, where there are three rounds of selections to get through and only six spots available. My preparations started right away, so many of my other duties have to be pushed back to focus on this. Finally, I found someone and something that could fight off all the negative, pessimistic opinions and who told me why it was worth trying. This is why an urgent question has come up inside me recently: I feel destined for great things (as Etty Hillesum wrote), I feel something burning within me, but the fear of not getting into film school sometimes completely paralyzes me because I am aware that I would live for the next year regretting not being able to achieve what I feel called to do. What can I do when that fear, connected to all the disapproval of my decision, overwhelms me? I know that my place is there, but I don't know how to put this in words because it is so deep inside of me; in any case, I am not sure I will get in. How can I entrust myself completely to what I desire when the door to enter is so narrow?

Carrón. Once again, as we said before, a person can be defined by fear, disapproval, or what other people think. Right now, what frees you, what makes it so you can move again?

The fact that, in preparing for the first round of selections, I am happy...

Carrón. That's enough! Follow that, because all the difficulties you have had so far have not stopped you, and it will be reality that will tell you, through the circumstances of your life, whether it is possible to go to film school or not. Plus, regardless of whether you can go or not—pay attention: this is really important—you have already grown. Because no one said we can always get what we want; we have to accept when we are asked, “Can you swear on your life that this is the only road?”

No!

Carrón. Good! At least you have that sincerity, a sincerity that frees you. You put your whole self into it, but you cannot be absolutely certain, to the point of swearing on your life, that this is the only road. That is already freeing. You can go into the first round of selections calmly, then, because if this turns out not to be your path, it means the mystery is preparing another, better one that you haven't seen yet. If you, instead, get stuck thinking, “It's this or nothing,” it's all over. This is why I'm challenging you. I'm not here to console you by saying, “Keep doing what you're doing, be happy, what else should I say?” I raise the bar to challenge you and ask, “Can you swear on your life this is the only road?” And you, with sincerity, reply, “No, I cannot.” I am not the Eternal Father, I am not a guru with a ready response to every question, I am here with great curiosity to see how the mystery, who gave you this passion, will bring you to your destiny and how he will turn all He gave you into a good for you and for everyone. And if he is preparing something more interesting for you, are you open? How will He show you? He will do so along the path you are following, because—regardless of the outcome—you are already experiencing growth, a freedom from all kinds of external disapprovals, judgments, and opinions, to the point of confidently proceeding on your path. This makes you yourself, more and more yourself. What you desire is already happening, by which I mean that you are becoming yourself, which is much more important than the picture we form of our future; and if tomorrow something unexpected happens that you cannot even imagine right now, you can hold on to the experience you have right now, the one thing that allows you to face anything that might happen. The mystery, in his wisdom, may have prepared an even more beautiful road for you, one you have not seen, like when a person gets lost on a hike and the trail he ends up on is more beautiful than the one he planned. I could tell you what

happened to me—now it’s getting late, I’ll just summarize it—who could have imagined that someone like me, born in a little country town in Extremadura, Spain, would come to live in Milan? It was absolutely unforeseeable; I certainly could not have imagined the hike that the mystery was preparing for me. But it turned out to be much more interesting than what I had imagined. Who knows how it will be for you?

Barberis. Since one of you was not able to come today, I will read what he wrote: “Last Thursday, we had a practice for the oral graduation exam; I was scared even of the practice exam and thinking about June made it even worse. Luckily, I was not alone: I fell in love. It is incredible how just one word can change everyday life so radically and unexpectedly, both at school and at home. I even *wanted* to study, I was happy even thinking about graduation, I, who was even afraid of the practice exam. How wonderful it would be to have such motivation every day! But then on Friday, just as I was waiting for a gesture so dear to me, something changed and I no longer felt cared for in the usual, exceptional way. For the upcoming graduation, then, I want nothing more than people who love me; friends who can accompany me and care for me, so that I can always begin again. Doing anything is so beautiful with someone who loves me.” The question is: Who are my traveling companions on this adventure?

Carrón. Part of the adventure is discovering that! A person thinks it’s the person he fell in love with, but then, at a certain point, he discovers her help is not enough. So how do you find your traveling companions? It’s a question of method. Do you choose them while sitting at your desk? Does it depend on one’s tastes? On our imagination? None of that: in living, we discover which people are truly friends to us in any situation. These are the traveling companions we need, and we don’t know what opportunities the mystery has prepared for us—they can be so beautiful but different from what we imagine. The most important thing, then, is to discover these true friends. How? By verifying that they are companions on every leg of our journey, not simply in certain moments or through a fleeting sentiment that could fade any second. So, we are talking about traveling companions who constantly call us back to the ideal, who keep that fire that never dies alive in us, as we sang in the beginning. That song says it all: “I will be with you” because “I placed a hand on your heart; always with you, like a fire that never dies.”

All the best on your journey, friends!

Barberis. Thank you. I would like to ask you one more thing, Julián, about the pilgrimage to Częstochowa. Could you explain to us once again the meaning of this gesture that is proposed by the movement at the end of one’s journey in school?

Carrón. I think that all we talked about this afternoon shows us how useful a gesture like a pilgrimage on foot can be for us. One might say, “Once I’ve finished high school and passed the graduation exam, what’s the point? I will have already reached my goal.” But what came out this evening is that your true need is not just figuring out what you will go on to study, but rather discovering what allows us to face all of life’s challenges: What frees us from fear (about graduation or picking a university)? What gives solidity to our person? What can respond to our fundamental needs? All of this is brought to bear in a gesture like the pilgrimage, because it is a time, once high school is over, to store up the treasure, with greater awareness, of all we have lived. As you saw, the approach of graduation is an opportunity to begin to focus on ourselves, with all the challenges we face. The pilgrimage is a fitting gesture for this, and your older friends who took part in it last year, perceived and experienced how it responded to their need. Many other initiatives may disappoint, but this gesture will not: those who have a true interest in themselves feel that it is profoundly correspondent to them. The problem you face is not just about your studies, your vacation, or your boyfriend; it is a question of living, and the pilgrimage addresses precisely that. The pilgrimage is a gesture in which we give ourselves time to see what this ideal burning inside of us truly is.

Good-bye!

