

Dearest friends,

We were to have met for the annual Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity with the question, “What saves us from nothingness?”, but a powerful and dramatic unforeseen event forced us to forego our gathering, which everyone has always looked forward to with great anticipation. But this has not eliminated the question; if anything, it has made it even more acute, because of the nature of the challenge we are facing throughout the world. Precisely the situation that has developed makes it even more urgent to grapple with this question, seeking an answer able to meet it.

*Thus we thought it necessary to continue to accompany each other in this vertiginous time in which nothingness looms so powerfully over everyone’s life. We desire to stay in front of the provocation that involves all of us, without drawing back. This will enable us to verify whether the new knowledge and the new affection of the “new creature” generated by Baptism are becoming in us the “normal consciousness [...] with which it passes through the whole web of circumstances that comprise reality” (L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2010, p. 53). Fr. Giussani offers us a precious methodological suggestion for carrying out this verification. “For the mentality to be truly new, its awareness of ‘belonging’ needs to be continually engaged in a comparison with present events.” Commitment to the comparison with present events is the method indicated to us in order for our mentality to become truly new. In fact, “if it does not enter into present experience, the new knowledge doesn’t exist—it is an abstraction. In this sense, not to judge events is to mortify the faith” (ibid. p. 54). Our journey together is made fascinating by the promise that this comparison can cause the new creature that is born in Baptism and that is awakened in the encounter with a living Christian community to blossom in us. The text that I am preparing and that we will work on together in the coming months is meant to be the instrument for this. Here below you can read the Introduction.*

Julián Carrón
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WHAT SAVES US FROM NOTHINGNESS?

by Julián Carrón

INTRODUCTION

“What is man that You are mindful of him, and a son of man that You care for him?”¹

How powerful are the words of this Psalm today, when we have become more acutely aware our nothingness, our fragility and powerlessness, because of a virus that has put the whole world with its back to the wall! This consciousness that the Coronavirus pandemic has forced upon us causes us to wonder all the more –precisely while we have experienced others distancing themselves from us because of the contagion –at the presence of Someone who cares for us, Someone who holds us dearer than the entire universe: “With age-old love I have loved you; having compassion on your nothingness”.²

How can we begin the day without being moved by the awareness of this preference for us? Even more so in this period. What is the nature of this preference? The grace of having been made participants in this good news: that we are not alone with our nothingness, that He is here, that Christ is here. In fact, His presence, a presence that remains and continues in history, is the greatest gift we have received. For this reason, every morning when we wake, we pray *Veni Sancte Spiritus. Veni per Mariam*, that this preference may vibrate in us even more and that we may more and more deeply savor and appreciate this gift, without which we would not even be able to look at our existential condition.

“What saves us from nothingness?”. This is the question that was to guide our annual Spiritual Exercises, the most important gesture of the life of the Fraternity. The coronavirus emergency forced us to forego our gathering, but it has not eliminated the question: rather, in the light of recent events, the question has taken on even greater weight. The question was sent in advance to all those who were planning to participate, in order to encourage attention to one’s experience and the maturation of a personal contribution, and provoked a powerful response and bottomless gratitude. It is the renewed proof that when something touches our humanity, with all its wounds, as happened last year³, we realize and react immediately.

“What saves us from nothingness?”. The question was perceived as pertinent to the experience of living, and as a great gesture of friendship, eliciting immediate gratitude. This also throws light on the meaning of the word friendship: we are friends to help each other not fear questions, even those that grip and disquiet us, wound and shake us. Our being together could not be friendship if we set these questions aside in some way. Having received the question proposed, one of you began a letter by saying, “Excuse me if I do not write using the [Italian] formal ‘you’ form. I would like to write you as a friend, a friend I ask for help, a friend whom I ask the impossible. And I use the informal ‘you’ form with friends.” Being friends means looking this question straight in the face together, with all our humanity, just as it is: “What saves us from nothingness?”

1. What do we mean by nothingness?

If we speak about “nothingness,” it is because the existence of contemporary women and men—that is, our personal and social existence—in an increasingly clear and forceful way, without particular proclamations or clamor, and yet not without visible effects, appears marked by nihilism. We are not alluding to a cultural current, but to an existential situation. We want to look at the essential

¹ Psalm 8:5.

² Cf. Jer 31:3.

³ At the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL, entitled “What Can Withstand the Test of Time?”, held in Rimini April 12 to 15, 2019.

features of this situation, not for the sake of merely analyzing or describing it, but with the passion of those who desire to discover a road that enables the life of each of us to move toward fulfillment, in the circumstances given, whatever they may be.

What are the characteristics of the nihilism that has wormed its way into our way of thinking and living, whether we recognize it or not, whether we see it explicitly or not?

On the one hand, it presents itself as a suspicion about the ultimate substance of reality: everything ends up in nothingness, ourselves too. “From the vertiginous perception of the ephemeral appearance of things, there develops a temptation, as concession and lying negation, to think that things are illusions and nothingness”.⁴

On the other hand, but related to the first, it is a suspicion about the positive nature of living, the possibility that our life has meaning and is useful; this suspicion normally translates into the perception of an emptiness that threatens everything we do, causing subtle desperation, even in very busy lives full of success, with schedules crammed with appointments and projects for the future.

A well-known film from the 1980s, *The Neverending Story*, alludes to this situation evocatively and effectively. Gmork, “the servant of the power behind Nothing,” tells Atreyu, the young hero called to stop the Nothing, that “People have given up hoping, and forget their own dreams. In this way, Nothing spreads.” Atreyu asks, “What is this Nothing?!”. “It is the void that surrounds us. It is the desperation that destroys the world, and I have acted to help it [...] because it is easier to dominate those who believe in nothing. And this is the surest way to achieve power.”⁵

These evocative metaphors express something of the attitude that today we identify with the word “nihilism.” We can all recognize it: the “nothingness that spreads” in life, the “desperation that destroys,” the “void that surrounds us,” that becomes a social phenomenon.

Perhaps being forced by the coronavirus pandemic to stop has caused us to reflect as we have not done for a long time, on who we are, how we live, what fuels our life, and what consciousness we have of ourselves and of things. As Tolstoy said, “If a man would just stop his activity a moment and reflect, measure the needs of his reason and his heart against the current conditions of existence, he would realize that all his life, all his actions are in continual and striking contradiction with his conscience, his reason, and his heart.”⁶

This is how a young high school student became aware of herself, stopping to reflect: “During the first week of quarantine, I believe I experienced like many others moments of great dejection. I was terrorized by the idea of staying cooped up in my house, not seeing my friends and my boyfriend or not being able to go out freely. Then, however, I made a series of calls that encouraged me, in particular, a conversation with a friend who, when I said, ‘I’m ok, but not too much,’ wanted to dig deeper. Speaking with him, I realized that for a long time I had not asked myself questions; I just let everything slide by, a bit out of fear, a bit because I didn’t want to reach uncomfortable conclusions. I realized how stupid it was not to ask myself questions, if in any case I wasn’t happy. So I began to ask myself what truly frightened me, and I realized that what made me the most anxious was silence, because it makes me think; it puts me in front of my questions. The first reason I’m scared to ask myself questions is the fact that I’m afraid I don’t have answers. This explains why I try so hard to avoid the inevitable silence that assails me before I go to sleep. In order to avoid being overwhelmed and facing myself, I do everything I can so my mind is invaded by thoughts of every kind, until sleep takes over. I’m worried about the answers to certain questions; I fear they’ll force me to deal with parts of myself I don’t want to know, or make me undertake a difficult journey. As my friend said, I prefer to live in a bubble made up of smiles and laughs, moments of despondency and sadness, all extremely devitalized and made opaque. I live in a carnival ride of emotions that bring me high one day, and dump me into the darkest despondency the next. I feel exalted while I

⁴ L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino [Man and His Destiny]*, Marietti 1820, Genova 1999, p. 13 (our translation).

⁵ *The Neverending Story (Die unendliche Geschichte, RFT 1984)*, co-written and directed by Wolfgang Petersen (our translation).

⁶ L. Tolstoj, *Il non agire [Not to Act]* in Id., *Il risveglio interiore [The Interior Awakening]*, Incontri Editrice 2010, Sassuolo 2010 (our translation).

experience that emotion, then set it all aside in the drawer of ‘beautiful experiences.’ But I realize that this is not enough for me. I want much more. I want something that must necessarily be great, because, as Kierkegaard said, ‘nothing finite, not even the whole world, can satisfy the human soul that feels the need for the eternal’.”

Late last year, *Traces* described nihilism as “a subtle enemy, difficult to grasp and decipher because it does not always exhibit clear features [...], but much more often presents the intangible aspect of a bottomless void”.⁷ It is at once intangible and very concrete. A university student articulated it in these terms: “Nothingness is much more subtle and creeping than I had imagined, the small daily nothingness that often threatens to dominate my days”.

Trying to focus as best as possible on the problem, which some may not even see or stubbornly insist on not seeing, we can say that suspicion about the ultimate substance of reality and doubt about the possibility of meaning and fulfillment for our life intertwine and reciprocally support each other in the nihilism that touches us all.

The current form of nihilism can be described as a sense of emptiness outside us (the context we find ourselves living, which can at times be the “bubble made up of smiles and laughs, moments of despondency and sadness, but all extremely devitalized and made opaque”) and within us (“I realize that this is not enough for me. I want much more”), whose consequence is a weakening of the relationship with reality, with circumstances, which in the end all seem senseless, unworthy of obtaining true assent from us. It is like a kind of torpor of the “I” that restrains involvement with what happens, even when you are absorbed in a vortex of frenetic activities, ones that suddenly and for a certain time have been interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, so that to a greater or lesser degree, we have all in some way been “forced” to think about where we are going, what we want to do with our life, and what can sustain it effectively.

C.S. Lewis adds a nuance to this description. As the senior demon Screwtape writes his nephew and “mentoree” Wormwood in one of the famous Screwtape Letters, “The Christians describe the Enemy [Christ] as one ‘without whom Nothing is strong.’ And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man’s best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them”.⁸

Torpor, dreary flickering of the mind and, as Orwell observed in his prophetic novel, *1984*, *apathy*. “It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness”.⁹ This “listlessness” is what corrodes the intimate depths of the “I” and digs a distance, a ditch between us and what happens. “There was nothing in my surroundings which I could respect and which attracted me,” wrote Dostoyevsky.¹⁰

Thus nothing seems able to truly engage the “I.” Our relationships and the things we do bore us, even those that once enthused us.

This is the face that nihilism wears today: asthenia, absence of striving, energy, a loss of the gusto in living. “Don’t talk to me about your prosperity, your riches, the rarity of famine, the rapidity of the means of transport! There is more of riches, but less of force. The idea uniting heart and soul to heart and soul exists no more. All is loose, soft, limp—we are all of us limp.”¹¹

For this reason, Pope Francis holds that “today’s serious threat [...] is the loss of the meaning of life.”¹² Cesare Pavese expresses this heart-rendingly in a poem written when he was just seventeen years: “Going along the solitary roads / tormented continually by the terror / of seeing the creations

⁷ C. Esposito, *The nihilism in the house next door*, interview by Davide Perillo, *Traces*, November 2019, p. 6.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters, Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*, Collins, April 2012. Italics ours.

⁹ Cf. G. Orwell, *1984*, *The Complete Novels of George Orwell*, Penguin, 2001, ebook.

¹⁰ F. Dostoyevskij, *Notes from the Underground*, transl. Constance Garnett, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 2009, p. 37.

¹¹ F. Dostoyevskij, *The Idiot*, transl. Constance Garnett, Bantam Classics, 1983, p. 171.

¹² Francis, *General Audience*, November 27, 2019.

long yearned for / vanish in front of my eyes; / to feel weakening within my soul / ardor, hope ... everything ... everything / and to remain thus without a love, / [...] damned to daily sadness”.¹³

Some months ago a young university student wrote me: “In this recent period, as never before, I have realized that I live moments of nothingness, moments in which the horizon of my life is characterized by the decline of desire and I disappear, I live halfway. The nothingness inside me speaks delicately, inducing me to spare myself, to spare my energy, because it is only worthwhile to do what I have in mind, without even considering other proposals, and to spare myself in relationships, because it is not worthwhile to share my difficulties. It induces me to expend the least effort possible, and I find myself increasingly arid and discontented. In these last days of November as well, it seems I’m living in a sepulchral atmosphere: in front of many beautiful opportunities, from unexpected relationships with freshmen to the graduations of my older friends, I often find myself closed in on my thoughts and difficulties. I realize that I am at the mercy of nothingness, of a malaise that I can’t explain.”

This same experience is alluded to in another letter I recently received: “Staying at home without work [because of the isolation imposed by the healthcare emergency] I’ve begun to experience firsthand this nothingness that you talk about. If this time is not filled with something that lasts, it is completely empty and I am nothing.”

But this is not all. In fact, in addition to the characteristics indicated, there is also a sensation of powerlessness to change the aspect we have taken on (“the intangible aspect of a bottomless void,” as we said) or to get up again; it seems as if our own efforts and certainly certain stimuli that reach us from outside are insufficient for getting us back on our feet, for making us perceive the heft of reality and for redeeming us from the emptiness we feel.

This painful experience is shared by many of our contemporaries. “The fact is that nothing can halt the ever-increasing recurrence of those moments when your total isolation, the sensation of an all-consuming emptiness, the foreboding that your existence is nearing a painful and definitive end all combine to plunge you into a state of real suffering.”¹⁴

We need something able to reawaken all our desire and to re-open us to the provocation of reality, of circumstances, so we can “live always the real intensely.”¹⁵ We realize that the simple happening of things does not suffice. We find ourselves in the situation of those who try to climb up a slippery slope and slide back down again, returning to the point of departure. We fall back into our nothingness. We do not see what can counter it and we do not understand where to start from. Therefore we are profoundly uneasy with ourselves.

It is the malaise that the psychoanalyst Galimberti identified in young people, though it extends to everyone. At the Beginning Day¹⁶ we quoted him: “Young people today are not well, but they don’t even understand why.”¹⁷

“Hearing that line by Galimberti at the Beginning Day” a young friend wrote me, “tore up my heart because it describes my life in this period to a T. For months now, I’ve been feeling a sort of dissatisfaction and sadness in everything I do. I see that this dissatisfaction is everywhere, as if under the mask of smiles and thousands of things to do, there is the dominion of nothingness, an absence of true meaning, an absence of true gladness. Lacking meaning, there remains only duty, a useless focus on duty that drags me further down toward the bottom. Maybe this is the nihilism of which you speak often. It is a problem that regards my existence. In fact, it is as if life now is less life. The first proof of this is that everything that does not go according to my plans is like a millstone dragging me down. It only takes a little thing that does not go as I wanted, and I collapse,

¹³ C. Pavese, “A Mario Sturani”, Monza–Turin, Jan. 13, 1926 (our translation).

¹⁴ M. Houellebecq, *Whatever*, transl. Paul Hammond, Serpent’s Tail, London, 1994, p. 11.

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 108.

¹⁶ This refers to the Beginning Day of the adults and university students of Communion and Liberation, entitled “Who Is This Man?”, held in Milan on September 29, 2019.

¹⁷ U. Galimberti, “A 18 anni via da casa: ci vuole un servizio civile di 12 mesi [Out of the House at 18: What’s Needed is 12 months of Civil Service]” interview by S. Lorenzetto, *Corriere della Sera*, September 15, 2019.

give up, and let myself go. In front of reality I am resigned and sad. In spite of the masks, the efforts to pretend there's no problem, pushing myself to go forward, I realize that deep down, in front of all the things that happen to me and that I see, I'm sad, but I don't understand why. Just a few years ago it was the opposite; difficulties were like trampolines, not millstones. Now I try not to look at the need in my heart; I pretend it's not there, that I'm fine. Nothing amazes me anymore. I need something great that can overcome the nothingness into which I've fallen. Thank you for the companionship you give me, challenging me with your questions. I ask for your help because I need to begin to be amazed again. I need to understand what happens to me during the days, because I don't want to remain in this nothingness."

We let ourselves go, focusing on banal things, without expectations, to fill in some way the time that passes. "You don't choose nothingness: you abandon yourself to nothingness,"¹⁸ because, as Malraux said, "there is no ideal for which we can sacrifice ourselves," one for which we can truly engage ourselves, "because we all know deceit, we who do not know what truth is."¹⁹

As you can see, the current nihilism is not the same as that before, which heroically inveighed against values; today's nihilism is not ambitious. It has the face of a "normal" life, but with a worm inside, because nothing seems worthwhile, nothing attracts or truly seizes us. This nihilism is lived passively; it penetrates under your skin and leads to a tiring of desire, like a marathon runner who is exhausted only just having started the race. Augusto Del Noce spoke of a "gay nihilism," "without inquietude," that drowns Augustine's "*inquietum cor meum*" in superficial pleasures.²⁰

2. Freedom is in front of a challenge

In this context, our freedom is in front of a challenge. Let's ask ourselves: can we limit ourselves to detachedly observe the spectacle of nothingness advancing in our life, as Houellebecq writes? "Stationed at the crossing of space and time, / I coldly observe the advance of nothingness".²¹

Freedom can also decide not to see, and to flee: "OK, we're at the mercy of nothingness. Pfff, who cares!", fooling ourselves that we resolve the problem simply by shifting our gaze elsewhere. In any case, we can do it. Edgar Morin, one of the most well-known living European thinkers, acutely observed, "I have understood that concealing facts that disturb us, anesthetizing and eliminating them from our mind, is a source of errors and illusions".²² It is like removing a tooth to eliminate the pain, or the idea "out of sight, out of mind". We have tried to do everything in the time of coronavirus.

If Job were alive in our era, his friend Zophar would have consoled him by saying, "In moments of isolation, you have to distract yourself! There's no better pain-killer than pleasure!".

But is it true? Can we truly succeed in the intent that Del Noce attributes to gay nihilism, that is, to suppress the heart's inquietude, or, as Morin says, eliminate from our mind the advance of nothingness? Look at your own experience and judge. Can we truly solve the problem in this way, just by turning away from it?

There are those like Andrea Momoito who have the sincerity to confess that this road is untenable. "Are you having a tough day? Don't worry, I'll send you one of those stupid one-liners that keep on circulating on WhatsApp, even if I don't really find them funny at all, even if I feel like a cynic who's trying to force a smile from others while all I want to do is watch Hospital Central [a TV series, *editor's note*]. I make videos with my colleague Andrea Liba. I think of silly gif images to

¹⁸ C. Fabro, *Libro dell'esistenza e della libertà vagabonda [Book of existence and of vagabond freedom]*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato (AL) 2000, p. 28 (our translation).

¹⁹ A. Malraux, *La tentation de l'Occident*, Bernard Grasset, Paris 1926, p. 216 (our translation).

²⁰ A. Del Noce, *Lettera a Rodolfo Quadrelli [Letter to Rodolfo Quadrelli]*, unpublished, 1984. "Today's current nihilism is a gay nihilism, without inquietude (perhaps it could be defined by the suppression of Augustine's *inquietum cor meum*)" (our translation).

²¹ M. Houellebecq, *Cahier*, La nave di Teseo, Milano 2019, p. 23 (our translation).

²² E. Morin, *Insegnare a vivere. Manifesto per cambiare l'educazione [Teaching to Live. A Manifesto for Changing Education]*, Raffaello Cortina, Milan 2015, p. 14 (our translation).

post on Instagram and then I collapse because I don't believe in anything. I need to know that my world is here, but it isn't so. [...] I have nothing more to say, except that I'm desperate, and find it hard to understand so much festivity in the atmosphere and so much optimism, so many Zoom invitations, so many text messages, so much applause and so many idiocies. [...] I have no choice but to learn to live with this anger that invades me and for which I don't know whom to blame."²³

In an equally sincere way, Sol Aguirre confesses having developed a recipe whose inconsistency she herself admits: "So here I am, talking rubbish [...] to see if by chance something I say brings a smile to a grouchy face. Once again, laughter as the antidote to a reality that is too dark. A laugh, often so distained, is always my remedy."²⁴

The fact, as Simone Weil writes, is that "nobody [...] settles purely and simply for living [...]. We want to live for something."²⁵ We want to live intensely.

"You can err in ideas, but it is impossible to err with the heart or lose your own conscience by mistake."²⁶ If it is impossible to err with the heart, what does this implicate?

3. Surprise

In front of our incapacity to find a solution for our malaise, that is, the problem of the nothingness that corrodes our days, we can decide to ignore it, removing it. But—surprise, surprise—the pain remains. And how! The heart's inquietude can be covered but not suppressed; the dissatisfaction can be hidden but not eliminated. In the final analysis, there is something in us that cannot be silenced. In spite of the masks we wear and our efforts to pretend nothing is wrong, forcing ourselves to move forward, we are sad and everything is like a millstone that crushes us. Out of sight, out of mind just doesn't work! The pain remains. Why? Because there is something inside us that lasts and holds out.

"Something was not dead within me, in the depths of my heart and conscience it would not die, and it showed itself in acute depression."²⁷

What lasts and holds out? Houellebecq described it in his letter to Bernard-Henri Lévy, which I have quoted many times in the last year because I think it provides an excellent example of the human dynamic we are describing: "More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be liked. On each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream [...]. But thought was powerless and the desire persisted—and, I have to admit, persists to this day."²⁸

So then, let's not fool ourselves or let others take us for a ride, saying that you solve the problem just by looking elsewhere. First and foremost, nihilism finds a point of resistance within ourselves. Let's pay attention to it.

In front of the challenge of the coronavirus pandemic, Isabel Coixet had to admit her powerlessness: "Everything we took for granted is gone. Opening before us is a dense fog, lacking light. I acknowledge that I don't know how to live this hour, these minutes that are becoming eternal."²⁹ The Spanish director recognizes that she does not know how to stay in front of what is happening to her and to us, and this provokes a malaise that transforms the minutes that pass into a seemingly endless nightmare.

²³ A. Momoito, *Público*, April 10, 2020 (our translation).

²⁴ S. Aguirre, *El Español*, April 3, 2020 (our translation).

²⁵ S. Weil, *L'amore di Dio [The Love of God]*, Borla, Rome 1979, p. 78 (our translation).

²⁶ F. Dostoevsky, *Lettere sulla creatività [Letters on Creativity]*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1991, p. 55 (our translation).

²⁷ F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, op. cit., available at

<http://lol-russ.umn.edu/hpgary/Russ1304/Readings/NOTES.HTM>.

²⁸ Michel Houellebecq, quoted in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 4, 2019 The "Unbalanced" Power of Christianity. Interview with Fr. Julián Carrón, by ANDREA MONDA <https://english.clonline.org/cm-files/2019/06/10/jc-osservatore-romano-040619-ing.pdf>

²⁹ I. Coixet, *ABC*, March 31, 2020.

Sol Aguirre describes her experience of isolation in these words: “During the first week of lockdown I was afraid, not just about the virus, but also about the possibility that sadness would come upon me. I refer to the unbearable and long-lasting sadness that blurs your sight and your life. I never confessed this to anyone because I knew what they would say: be happy, do projects, find solutions”.³⁰

What emerges from these reactions, these sincere and open confessions? The continued existence of the original structure of the human person: desire. It is stunning to see it in someone like Houellebecq, in that letter. “The original stance with which the human person was created,” Giussani wrote, “is that of a drive with a precise direction and end, a striving toward the mystery itself that established it, toward the infinite of God; *Fecisti nos ad Te, Domine, et irrequietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in Te [You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.]* (Saint Augustine of Hippo)”.³¹ This irreducible original structure is present even at the bottom of nihilism, which today has become a cultural way of being and a social phenomenon.

So what is the first step for those who do not want to live their lives fleeing from a problem they do not know how to solve? In this context of a lack of meaning, you have to recognize that there is something irreducible that holds out against nihilism and rationalist cynicism, as documented by the nihilist Houellebecq. What holds out and endures? My “I,” which is irreducible.

If I pay close attention, I have to acknowledge the persistence of an elementary structure of my “I,” even though I am influenced by the lack of meaning that surrounds me, because it has become the “climate,” the “culture.” The more nothingness spreads, the more the wounds and expectations of our humanity emerge with all their power, no longer covered by the cultural dialectics and collective projects that no longer have a grip on us. These wounds and expectations emerge in their most elementary form, without the armor of too many discourses.

“Something was not dead within me, in the depths of my heart and conscience it would not die,” said Dostoyevski. And Chesterton noted: “When you’re really shipwrecked, you do really find what you want.”³²

We have seen this in a surprising way with the explosion of the coronavirus pandemic. Woken from our torpor, we began to see our questions emerge again. As the Italian writer and journalist Maurizio Maggiani said in an interview for *Tracce*, “We were in an era that seemed finished there: nothing more could happen, everything had its unassailable logic. The system couldn’t be undermined. We lived as if saying: ‘What more do you want? What better could you want? And where is the more? Where is the better? It was the end of history. [...] An infinite heathland, a flat land. And instead, an earthquake has rippled this motionless expanse and made a perturbing landscape.” What was the first outcome of this earthquake? Questions. “Each of us must ask ourselves questions, because they place us in a less restricted space, take away the bars of the prison in which we were confined. [...] In the tumult, in our chaos, we can lead each other to reason, to the condition of adults. How? Precisely by asking questions.” In front of questions, “all the arrogance and pride”³³ that so often accompany us die down.

Challenged by a vertiginous circumstance, we have found that the questions have opened a breach in the comfort zone where we had taken refuge. The bubble has popped. “We have lived too long under anesthesia,” says Nuria Labari, “being part of a system too often mistaken in its foundations.”³⁴ In other words, we have experienced what Fr. Giussani affirmed in the tenth chapter

³⁰ S. Aguirre, *El Español*, April 10, 2020.

³¹ L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Rizzoli, Milano 1995, p. 231 (our translation).

³² G.K. Chesterton, *Manalive*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1912, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1718/1718-h/1718-h.htm>.

³³ M. Maggiani, “Il cambio della vita [The change of life]”, interview by Alessandra Stoppa, *Tracce-Litterae communionis*, May 2020, pp. 15-16 (our translation).

³⁴ N. Labari, *El País*, March 18, 2020 (our translation).

of *The Religious Sense*: “If an individual were to barely live the impact with reality, because, for example, he had not had to struggle, he would scarcely possess a sense of his own consciousness, would be less aware of his reason’s energy and vibration.”³⁵

There are moments when reality crashes into us so powerfully that it is very difficult to soften the impact, to elude or ignore its provocation. What has happened has, with the involvement of our freedom, reawakened our attention, setting our reason into motion, freeing the questions about meaning that express its nature. I am talking about the urgent need for meaning that constitutes us and that the impact with stark reality, which we have accepted, has brought to light in a powerful way. In this sense, we have spoken of a “reawakening of the human”.³⁶

The more nihilism advances, the more it becomes evident that it is impossible to live without meaning and the more the indestructible desire to be loved makes itself known.

This is what happened to the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke³⁷: the lower he sank, the more his longing for his father emerged surprisingly. But even those who think they have no father, like those who identify with the position described by Houellebecq, realize that the desire to be loved persists: it is irreducible.

“Our time is diffident about words and avoids dogmas. Even so, it knows the meaning of desire. It desires confusedly, without knowing what, if not the sensation of having inside an emptiness that needs to be filled.”³⁸ This desire does not lessen and is not quenched. For this reason, Checkov says that in order to grasp the person in front of you, you must look at his desire: “When I have wanted to understand somebody or myself I have considered, not the actions, [as instead we do, with moralistic fierceness against ourselves, we easily fix our gaze on our mistakes and then beat ourselves up for them] in which everything is relative, but the desires.” This is what Jesus does. What does He look at in the Samaritan woman at the well? Her thirst, her desire. He speaks to the thirst of that woman: “I have water, new water, different, the only that satisfies your thirst”.³⁹ In this sense, Checkov declares, “Tell me what you want, and I will tell you what manner of man you are.”

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All our “I” is in our desire, everything lies in what we authentically and profoundly want. What do you want now? What do you desire? “I believe that my continual reference to desire, which comes to me from my life experience [...] is one of the things that makes what I say more engaging [more interesting], because it is something evidently human, but is the thing least perceived by everyone”,⁴¹ because many would like to suffocate it, as we said shortly before, to look elsewhere, to tread it underfoot.

How should we live this situation? Where is the starting point for regaining the life we risk losing? This question expresses an existential need; it is like a thorn in the flesh. Desire is irreducible and it holds on notwithstanding the spread of nothingness; it makes life dramatic and causes the question to burn even more. For this reason we are in front of an alternative: either we resign ourselves and look elsewhere, pretending that there is no problem and fooling ourselves, or we allow all our desire to cry out, and we follow all the urgent need of our heart that nobody can extinguish. We can acknowledge reality, beginning with our unease, and cry out.

But, if in the end there is only nothingness, is it reasonable to cry out? At times we are discouraged and tired of crying out. Other times we doubt the value of crying out. The reason for this

³⁵ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 100.

³⁶ Cf. J. Carrón, *Il risveglio dell’umano, Riflessioni da un tempo vertiginoso [The Reawakening of the Human. Reflections from a Vertiginous Time]*, Bur, Milan 2020, ebook (our translation).

³⁷ Lk. 15:11-32.

³⁸ Cf. E. Varden, *La solitudine spezzata [Broken Solitude]*, Qiqajon Comunità di Bose, Magnano (Bi) 2019 (our translation.)

³⁹ Cf. Jn. 4:4-42.

⁴⁰ A. Čechov, “A Dreary Story,” excerpts available at <https://americanliterature.com/author/anton-checkhov/book/a-dreary-story/chapter-6>

⁴¹ Fraternity of Communion and Liberation (FCL), *Audiovisual documentation*, Day of Meditation for Married People, Milano, Jan. 23, 1977 (our translation).

discouragement and doubt is that we take for granted the existence of the cry of the heart, of that desire that holds out against all forms of nihilism. But the cry, the entreaty, and desire are the least predictable things in the world. In fact, if we reflect on it, we begin to marvel at their existence. So, what does the existence of the cry mean for us?

If there is a cry, there is an answer. We often find it difficult to understand such a statement because we take the cry for granted. Giussani identifies a permanent law by using reason fully, being faithful to what emerges in experience: “The idea that the very existence of the question implies the existence of an answer.”⁴² Mysterious as it may be, the answer exists. It is implicit in the question (in this direction, in the interview quoted above, Maggiani observes that the answer “is already in the question”⁴³). In fact, Giussani says, “one suppresses the question if one does not admit to the existence of an answer.”⁴⁴ The question about and the entreaty for meaning, love, and fulfillment are the implicit affirmation of a totality, of “an ultimate answer which lies *beyond* the experiential aspects of existence,” but that exists. Why do I know it exists? Because, I repeat, its existence is implicit in the very dynamism of my person, in the structure of my humanity as need. “If the hypothesis of a ‘beyond’ were to be eliminated, those needs would be unnaturally suffocated.”⁴⁵

4. A “You” who hears the cry

The entreaty for exhaustive meaning, for total love and fulfillment, constitutes and is the supreme expression of our reason. Its very presence “forces” us to affirm the existence of an answer, even though it is beyond the horizon of what we can measure.⁴⁶ Otherwise the cry would not exist; we would not be able to explain the existence of the question, the entreaty. When we abolish the category of possibility, which is the very stuff of reason, when, out of difficulty in affirming the answer, we say, “It’s not possible,” we deny reason in its very essence and squash its vital dynamism. If I were lost in a forest, the most reasonable gesture would be to cry out “Help!”. But the cry implies the possibility that there is someone to hear me. Even if there is only the remotest possibility, I can never exclude *absolutely* the possibility that someone may hear me. Otherwise it would be absurd to yell for help. Therefore, in the very moment in which, because of the difficulties I encounter, I deny the possibility that someone may hear my cry, and I suppress it, my reason is obscured. This “irrationality” (this “desperation”⁴⁷) is what strongly tempts contemporary women and men, each of us. Because of the difficulties we find along our way, we say, “It’s not possible,” and, denying the possibility of an answer, we experience the weakening of the question, the entreaty, the clouding over of reason, the enfeebling of desire. When does the entreaty rekindle? When we find in front of ourselves a presence that responds, a presence that lives up to our entreaty for totality. Therefore, it should not be difficult to imagine how forcefully and uncontrollably Bartimaeus cried out when he heard that one was approaching who responded to the deep plea for life of all people.

“As He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a sizeable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out [you cry out in front of someone. Many people must have walked past Bartimaeus, but only when he heard people talking about that man, a fellow with a first name and last name, did he begin to cry out:] [...] ‘Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.’ [You do not cry out in front of just any person. You cry out in front of someone who has a precise name]. And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, ‘Son of David, have pity on me.’ Jesus

⁴² L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 58.

⁴³ M. Maggiani, “Il cambio della vita [The Change of Life]” op cit., p. 15.

⁴⁴ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Giussani writes: “The summit of reasons’ conquest is the perception of an unknown unreachable presence, to which all human movement is destined, because it depends upon it. It is the idea of *mystery*.” (L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 117).

⁴⁷ Cf. L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

stopped and said, 'Call him.' So they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take courage; get up, He is calling you.' He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, 'What do you want Me to do for you?'"⁴⁸

Since then, since Jesus burst upon history, the horizon of life of women and men has a Presence to cry out to, Someone who, in front of the cry of each of us, asks us, "What do you want Me to do for you?". There is One who embraces our cry, a Presence that no one can erase, a Fact that happened and happens, contemporary, that remains and continues in history. The possibility of encountering Him is given to each of us. No matter what situation you are in, the aridity or weariness you feel, the inability to be seized by things or the nothingness that assails you, no matter what position you take, you cannot avoid being reached by Christ's question, hearing it resonate and rebound as addressed personally to you: "What do you want Me to do for you?". And nothing can keep you from answering like the blind Bartimaeus: "Master, I want to see".⁴⁹ I want to experience Your attraction that draws me out of nothingness.

Why are we together? Because we, too, like Bartimaeus, have been touched by the Presence capable of hearing the cry of our humanity, reawakening an ultimate, irreducible love for ourselves, an otherwise unthinkable tenderness for ourselves, and sustaining our journey so we do not slip off into nothingness. We are together to cry out like the blind man in the Gospel. Only because there is this Presence are we able to live fully; only by making space for Him in and among ourselves can we have the fullness of life.

There is a name for making space in ourselves for this Presence. What is it? Silence. "Silence [...] is not nothingness. Silence is a prayer. It is the awareness of being in front of God. [...] It is an entreaty, a prayer."⁵⁰ We waste too much time talking about things of no value, and we fail to offer each other help for living. In front of those who tell us, in the various ways in which distraction can be increased, "Don't cry out! Don't cry out! Don't cry out!", we can be like Bartimaeus, who yelled even louder, "Jesus, have pity on me!" If we have even a tiny bit of love for ourselves, this cry fills our silence. In the inevitable drama of living, we do not have to censure or succumb to our vulnerability and powerlessness, because there is a Presence who embraces us, who embraces all our confused and restless humanity, who leans down over us and our wounds, and asks us, "What do you want Me to do for you?".

⁴⁸ Mk. 10:46-51.

⁴⁹ Mk. 10:51.

⁵⁰ L. Giussani, *La convenienza umana della fede [The Human Advantageousness of Faith]*, Bur, Milano 2018, pp. 212-213 (our translation).