

YOU ONLY SEE WHAT YOU ADMIRE

**Notes from the
GS Beginning Day
with Julián Carrón
and Francesco Barberis**

*Via video link,
October 10, 2020*



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for the text by Julián Carrón

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for the text of Fernando de Haro 's interview of Mikel Azurmendi

Translated from the Italian by Marco Young and Kristin Hurd

On the cover: Pablito Calvo, Spanish actor, in the film *Marcellino Pane e Vino*
dir. L. Vajda (Spain, 1955). Thanks to Filmexport Group for permission to reprint

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Song: *The things that I see*

Francesco Barberis

“The things that I see got me laughing like a baby. The things that I see got me crying like a man.”¹ Who can experience this now? Who can laugh like a baby and cry like a man? Which of us can live with this disarming simplicity, who is so present to the present?

We have come together in many cities in Italy and across the world, students and teachers, all different from one another, to share a Beginning Day together. But the beginning of what? Why is it worth beginning, why is it worth beginning today and every morning of every day? Why? Because God, He who gives you and I life, can do nothing without our openness of heart, without our availability.

I have read so many letters in these day of students like you, often “stuck” in what is not going well, obsessed with their own errors, their own fragility and objections. I felt such tenderness thinking of each of you! If only you knew how important you are, how much you are wanted, how much you are loved!

¹R. Veras-R. Maniscalco, “The things that I see”, in *Canti*, Soc. Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan 2014, pp. 344-345.

It would suffice to have just a little of that availability, that simplicity we have seen—and which immediately won us over—in Marcellino, at the start of our meeting. To have that gaze! Such envy! In the film, Marcellino gets up to all sorts, but in him wins out a desire to “look by letting himself be attracted.”² In him, there was a constant irreducible nostalgia for his mother, who he had never met because she died in childbirth. That nostalgia became in Marcellino the incessant expectancy of an infinite love for his destiny.

This is why, if this availability and expectancy wins in us, God will show us “even more that I see”, as we just sang.

Let us sing together: *Favola*

Our companionship tells us: “Look, continue to look.” “Do not fear because there is Someone with you [...], he will never leave you / do not fear, take to the fields and go...”³ The fields are circumstances—those which are given to us, not those we imagine. And within circumstances, we are never—never!—left alone: “Someone is with you, will never leave you...”

Don Giussani said: “The companionship tells you [...] ‘Keep watching’” because in every vocational companionship there are always people, or moments in the lives of people to watch. The most important thing in our companionship is to watch people.”⁴ To recognize these people, these people that are presences, we need a deep loyalty to ourselves.

This is why, underneath everything, even today, a gratitude emerges in me, and a desire to listen to Julián Carrón, to discover what he holds dear for our journey in GS.

²L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo*, Bur, Milan 2002, p. 282.

³C. Chieffo, “Favola”, in *Canti*, op. cit., pp. 226-227.

⁴L. Giussani, “Easter Poster, 1994, Comunione e Liberazione”, in L. Giussani, *In cammino. 1992-1998*, Bur, Milan 2014, p. 366.

Julián Carrón

Hello everyone!

Unfortunately, today, we must meet over video; we cannot see each other in person: I cannot meet you, nor can you meet me, I cannot see your faces, which are always more lovely than a webcam! Yet I hope that, even through this medium, we can reach one another, that I can reach you and that you are ready to heed what I wish to tell you, so that we can accompany one another in this particularly difficult moment we are all experiencing.

School is restarting, and, with it, our everyday challenges. With many questions open. The question for everyone is how things will play out in the near future, and there are many question marks on how to best face it. Over the last few days I have been reading an interview with a French intellectual, Edgar Morin, who was defining the present time with one word: uncertainty. “We have entered the era of great uncertainties.” He adds: “We cannot know the unpredictable. [...] Life is navigating [his is 99 years long!] in an ocean of uncertainties amid islands of certainty. Even if concealed or removed, uncertainty accompanies the great adventure of humanity, the history of every nation, the life of every individual. Because every life is an uncertain adventure: we cannot know what awaits us, nor what to expect in death. We are all part of this adventure, full of ignorance, unknowns, folly, reason, mystery, dreams, joy, pain. And uncertainty.”⁵

I do not struggle to imagine what kind of chasm is produced in your souls by a situation like the one we find ourselves in, as difficult as your age already is. The current circumstances cause the simplest yet the most powerful questions to emerge: what is life? What can fill my days with zest and interest? Is there something certain which can allow us to navigate the ocean of uncertainties? I empathize with your questions, which you often carry in your facial expressions. Indeed, it is impossible to carry them within us for long, without them emerging on our faces.

At times this uncertainty, this life so full of questions, makes us rebel: would it not have been easier to have been born as one of many other

⁵ E. Morin, “Il potere dell’incertezza”, Interview by A. Ginori, *la Repubblica*, October 1, 2020.

species who live according to fixed rules? Or as those being who do not understand and are not required to “resolve” the enigma of life? Like a bird, which seems to have such perfect instinct that it does not need to face the struggles which we humans cannot avoid? Yet who would truly exchange the trepidation we feel towards a loved one for the boredom of a determined bond with the rules of physics?

It is precisely this human “sublimity of feeling” – “Human nature / if you’re merely weak and worthless, / dust and shadow, why aspire so high?” – which reveals to our consciousness the “Eternal / mystery of our being”,⁶ as Leopardi calls it, the mystery of a unique greatness, which his genius described with unparalleled beauty.

Certain questions constitute us as adults. Therefore, welcome to the world of adults, of adults conscious of themselves! You have left the protective bubble – only protective to a certain extent, to tell the truth – of the child’s world, and you are entering the open sea of life, where we must navigate uncertainly. Circumstances such as the one we are living now push us to grow in the direction of a deeper understanding. And we can truly grow, if we do not allow the opportunity that this challenge brings to escape us!

If we can face this challenge without getting lost, with a positive gaze, it is because we are accompanied by presences which, like don Giussani, encourage us to see the goodness that even such a circumstance can bring. “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”,⁷ he says in his most famous book, *The Religious Sense*.

Thus, we can see the vibration of reason in a girl who throws her astonishing hunger for meaning in the face of her teacher: “Sir, we need someone who communicates the meaning of life to us, the zest for the everyday.” She adds: “We need someone who can show us we need not be afraid of our need for meaning, for happiness.”

⁶ G. Leopardi, “Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna”, in *Canti*, translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2010, pp. 257-259.

⁷ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997, p. 100.

I am struck by the precision with which our friend expresses what she is looking for: someone who can communicate a zest for the everyday by living it themselves in the first person. Thus, she can see that there truly is no need to be afraid of our need for sense, for happiness.

Paradoxically, it is in perceiving life in all its drama—there lies its greatness—that she may discover the criteria for judgement with which to navigate the open sea of uncertainty. In fact, not just any answer is capable of standing up to the urgency she feels building up inside her. Yet when we do not heed this urgency, it is easy to succumb to confusion, everything seems the same, things are interchangeable. Instead, the more the need for an everyday which has zest emerges, the easier it is to not get confused. That girl holds within her—as we all do, but we must be aware of it and make it worthwhile—the criteria by which to identify the presences that bring what she is looking for. Life, then, becomes a question of attention, of openness of gaze.

Questions such as that “shouted” by this girl make us understand the drama playing out; it is a battle between the zest for everyday life and a lack of meaning—which grabs us from within—between being and nothingness. If we do not face this head on, we will be the next victims, if we are not already, of rampant nihilism.

To describe in succinct terms the nature of this battle, we have often used an expression from the late 19th century philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, which represents the extreme consequence of *his* nihilism: “there are no facts only interpretations.”⁸ The repercussion of this position upon us is to be thrown, in an ocean of uncertainty, among thousands of interpretations, without knowing how to discern which of them loyally adheres to facts and submits to the authority of experience. No fact “takes” us to the point that we move beyond an equivalence of interpretations. Everything seems the same. And uncertainty makes navigation even more vertiginous.

Is there something capable of challenging this axiom: “there are no facts only interpretations”?

⁸ See. F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the late notebooks (Summer 1886–Fall 1887)*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Are there facts capable of challenging the indistinct avalanche of interpretations, in which everything is interchangeable, which, in this society, drowns us in “information”? Where can that girl, or any of us, find any clue which may allow us to recognize the victory of being over nothingness, of a zest for life over the emptiness of meaningless days?

As I found myself repeating in many instances over the last months, perhaps the most emblematic example of this is the blind man healed by Christ. That morning, he had once again awoken full of uncertainty, being blind. Could he ever have imagined what was about to happen to him? Let's listen to him.

“As he [Jesus] passed by he saw a man blind from birth. [...] he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, ‘Go wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see. His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, ‘Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?’ Some said, ‘It is,’ but others said, ‘No, he just looks like him.’ He said, ‘I am.’ So they said to him, ‘(So) how were your eyes opened?’ He replied, ‘The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, *Go to Siloam and wash*. So I went there and washed and was able to see.’ And they said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I don’t know.’ They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a Sabbath. So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, ‘He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see.’ So some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath.’ (But) others said, ‘How can a sinful man do such signs?’ And there was a division among them. So they said to the blind man again, ‘What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet’ Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. They asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?’ His parents answered and said, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself.’ [...] So a second time

they called the man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner.’ He replied, ‘If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see.’ So they said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?’ They ridiculed him and said, ‘You are that man’s disciple; we are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from.’ The man answered and said to them, ‘This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything.’ They answered and said to him, ‘You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?’ Then they threw him out. When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘I do believe, Lord.’⁹

What pulled that blind man from his situation, his uncertainty? A fact. He repeats continuously: “I was blind and now I see.” As you have heard, as soon as the fact occurred, all of the possible and imaginable interpretations emerged, from neighbors, parents, Pharisees. It is amazing that, after the miracle, Jesus was not afraid to leave him alone, in the midst of all those interpretations! Yet this did not confuse the blind man—not even for a moment—he did not have the slightest doubt about what had happened to him, he was not moved even by a millimeter by the interpretations that did not respect the event. But careful: the blind man does not immediately ally himself to Jesus. First of all, he adheres to reality, allies himself to the fact, is loyal to the fact: “I was blind and now I see.” This is the evidence of truth—which finds space in him, shines in him: “I was blind and now I see” which then makes him join Jesus. But the

⁹ John 9:1-38.

blind man's choice was not an ideological decision, a choosing of sides; it was the recognition of the evidence which led him to recognize Him. We can see this from the steps he takes, as the Gospel of St. John tells us: "How were your eyes opened?" Initially he replies: "The man called Jesus." And then: "What do you have to say about him?" "He is a prophet." And finally, when he meets Jesus again, who asks him: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?", he replies in turn: "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus replies: "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he." And he says: "I do believe, Lord."

The healed blind man is not intransigent or fixated, attempting to impose his own interpretation: he is the only one who does not trample over the fact (he can now see, and this happened because of the man called Jesus, whom he then recognizes as a prophet, and ultimately in all his depth as God), a fact that all the others seek to negate in order to impose their ideology onto the evidence of reality. Ideology is the interpretation which cancels facts through force of prejudice, by having something to defend.

Our beginning can be something spectacular like the healing of blindness, or it can be something seemingly banal, such as listening to a radio program at six in the morning whilst recovering in hospital, as happened to our friend Mikel Azurmendi (noted Spanish sociologist, protagonist of a long television interview which we will watch a section of shortly). However it happens, each of us—as he says—is invited, first and foremost, to *look* at what is happening in front of our eyes, at what is happening now.

Nothing can challenge our nothingness more than the occurrence of an event, of certain facts. Only "A new, different, truer, more fulfilled, more desirable humanity [...] can open a breach in our consciousness as women and men, as contemporary women and men." It is the only fact that "that can be heard as a fascinating and liberating invitation."¹⁰

Over lockdown, one girl who attended GS events slowly began to be increasingly absent from Zoom, until she disappeared entirely at the start of the summer, when it was once again possible to see each other,

¹⁰J. Carrón, *The Radiance in Your Eyes*. HAB, 2020, p. 98.

albeit with all the necessary precautions. In a phone call she admitted to a teacher that she was staying at home with her mother and grandmother for fear of catching the disease. Empathizing with the girl's uneasiness, the teacher told her that only a great affection can be stronger than fear, and suggested she could do School of Community in her large garden, with her, and, if she wished, with a few others. The girl unexpectedly accepted, and finally left her home.

Only thus, with an event that happens now, in your history and mine, does Christ allow himself to be experienced as a hope in the present, something that triumphs in the present and fills the future with hope, challenging uncertainty. We recognized this in many testimonies over this summer.

One of you writes: "The period of quarantine and a restricted summer was decisive for many questions, in particular for friendships and my way of dealing with them. Over the last months I have realized I need specific people who I may never have considered as particularly important; I also realized how I was actually indifferent to some others. I have always enjoyed my own company. In difficult and sad moments I had got used to saying: 'What could possibly change?' Against all odds, during lockdown I began to seek out my friends as never before, as I never thought I would. I needed to see specific faces who managed to re-establish in me some of that life which I had replaced with a suffocating indifference and a cold cynicism. I felt a need for those friends who, with such simplicity, had always been there even when I did not seek them. Before restarting school, I asked some friends to hang out, and the awareness of needing to reconnect with them, spend time with them in class, was a determining factor in my days."

This contribution by one of you is echoed by that of a young Palestinian mother, who shared her experience during one of our events this summer. When I heard it, I asked myself: what must that Christian Palestinian woman have seen in that group of Italian pilgrims from the movement to decide to stay in her homeland, after having planned for years to flee and considering her birth in Palestine to be a punishment for her and her children? She experienced an encounter which changed her judgement, her gaze towards everything. Or elsewhere: what was

the experience of Xiao Ping, our friend from the movement who is seriously ill, which made her become “the beating heart of the community” in Taipei? To lead her to say: “Lately I’ve understood that my duty now isn’t so much to learn to be in front of pain or a death that approaches, but rather to use the time that remains to me to tell everyone what I have encountered.”¹¹ She understood the greatest urgency of the present moment: responding with one’s life to the question of the meaning of life, the same question posed by the girl to her professor: “we need someone who communicates the meaning of life to us, a zest for the everyday.”

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THE EMBRACE

Transcript of sections of Fernando de Haro's
television interview with **Mikel Azurmendi**,
done for the Meeting 2020 Special Edition,
on the occasion of the BUR Rizzoli publication
of the book *L'Abbraccio*.

Mikel Azurmendi. I did not expect to encounter any of this in my life. It was a big surprise. Completely out of the ordinary. I was surprised. I said to myself, “this is worth listening to, and, little by little, I slowly entered a state of admiration. [...] the surprise at a person, this surprising fact: that you find something or someone, or a book... and when you see it could be interesting for you, it becomes admiration. Admiration is that movement that carries you to identify with the thing you care about most, because you did not expect it. [...]

I decided to give an unfiltered explanation of what was happening before eyes filled with amazement. All the others do not want to see what is happening. I said to myself, “this was always under my nose; why didn’t I look at it? It needs to be explained.” Every sociologist has to explain why, at a

¹¹ “Letters”, *Traces*, n. 9/2020, p. 2.

certain point, he looked at something that was under his nose every day. You look at it only when you admire it, when you think there is something good for you there. [...]

The next object of my wonder was Prades [...] In Prades, you find a person who listens to you, asks questions... who surprises you and is himself surprised, surprised by the fact that you need to talk to him; he is surprised that you look to him, and that surprises you even more. He has a gaze that penetrates and calms you. He invited me to give a talk in Madrid, and I told my wife Irene, "I'm not going." She answered, "But you told him you would." It was true, I had said yes... I wanted to be reconciled with that man who looked at me in a special way, who understood me and listened to me. And I went to EncuentroMadrid. To go, I had to overcome myself: what did I have to do with a group of Christians? [...] At EncuentroMadrid, I encountered humanity itself; not the Festival of Humanity. I met people who were human, who were smiling, coming and going in silence. They greeted each other, hugged, listened to you and asked questions. Children running around... Smiles, joy. I was floored. I never would've imagined anything like it. [...]

Fernando de Haro. *There is a moment in The Embrace that I think is the most fascinating one: you are in front of this tribe you are studying, and at a certain moment in time you begin to think it is possible, a plausible hypothesis that everything you are seeing is a consequence, not only of God, but of an incarnate God. You do not shut down the question, asserting that these people act the way they do because they are victims of a collective neurosis or out of a sublimation of their desires. There is a moment in the book in which you affirm the plausibility of that hypothesis. How did you come to that moment?*

– You must be referring to one of the last sections, where I do a kind of calculation: "this life, which is so beautiful that I would like to live it, the lifestyle of these people made up of dedication and joy, this lifestyle, what makes it possible?" You can have a flash of inspiration. There are spectacular, beautiful people who have a kind of flash of inspiration, but then they burn out. Instead, you see these lives, I followed the story of these lives for two years; these people (in the book they are characters, but they are really people), families, and I know it is impossible without a miracle. This family is a miracle; that person is another miracle. there are miracles everywhere.

It is very mysterious. The lifestyle pushes me to ask myself, “What causes this lifestyle?” You can live a flash of inspiration for a year or two, but an entire life... But your life, the next person’s life, lives like these: they’ve been around for two thousand years. I think Christians have lived as you live for two thousand years, making humanity beautiful, bringing charity and love into blossom. Sociologists don’t talk about it because they are not interested. They don’t speak of Communion and Liberation or other Christians that I have not met but who exist, I know they exist because I have met some, in confraternities or fraternities. So, you start to wonder. You could explain one life, one life for a good bit of time—not one’s whole life—but explaining the families, the many lives, generations who do good, who embody goodness... There is only one explanation for that fact: that what they tell you is true; that the truth is really truth in action. Truth is always operative. Truth produces life. This lifestyle is produced by something: they say it is Jesus Christ. If I need that life, if it is an object of admiration for me, I have to look with admiration at the motor that animates this life. And that’s everything. Then, you understand that motor was human. God made man. That’s the only way you can understand. I was a professor of Comparative History of Religions. I want to close with this: the gods that we all study are abstractions. There was never a person who said what Jesus said, “Forgive one another, love each other, visit the sick, feed the hungry, the other is more important than you, life is not given to be saved, but to be given; if you seek to save it, you will lose it.” No one throughout all of humanity—at least I did not encounter it, and go figure if I do not know world religions; I’ve read hundreds of volumes—no one said that. And it is not just that Jesus said it, it’s that these people are the ones who are doing it. So, you put two and two together, and you say, “I have to believe in this; this is the living Jesus in whom I believe.” I would not have believed in God.

– *Why not?*

– Because God is an idea. Philosophy, first, and then religion and theology, fell into the trap of reducing God to an idea. That is the difference. We are not talking about God. We are talking about a man who was God, who teaches us where we need to go.

– *I remember the day you told us, “And if it were true that Jesus rose?” You were wrestling with the veracity of that testimony.*

- There is a moment when you are forced to ask yourself, “How can they all be wrong, at the same time?” Even His enemies knew. But they didn’t know Him. John and Andrew went with Him, but they did not know Him. “But He is the Master.” They spent two or three years with the Master. A person would really be transformed after that! That is the resurrection. We know there is a resurrection. He rose and He told us we will rise from the dead.
- *Mikel, thank you for writing the Embrace. Thank you for this conversation, and for what you have worked on over the past few years.*
- I am the one who should thank all of you.

* * *

Carrón

Before finishing, allow me a final “intrusion” in your Beginning Day to give you a final greeting.

The year that has just begun is an incredible opportunity. And, to face the uncertainties of the future, you have a great ally: your heart, hungry for a meaning worthy of life. Do not content yourselves with simply surviving, because life requires eternity, that is, everything.

Be loyal to your hearts and you will begin to find many companions on your journey—even if they are “distant”, like on our video link today—who have the audacity to navigate the ocean of uncertainties because they are on the boat of destiny with Jesus.

In a conversation with the writer Giovanni Testori in 1980, Giussani said: “I am not able to find another indicator of hope than the fact that these persons who are a presence get multiplied, and that an inevitable sympathy [...] arises between these persons.”¹² If you keep your eyes open, you will discover friends—older or younger, new or old, it does not matter—who will testify to you a “zest for life”, and will bestow on you a mad desire to live like them. If you watch them and agree to follow them, it will be a year full of surprises.

Have a good adventure, friends!

¹² L. Giussani–G. Testori, <<https://www.newyorkencounter.org/2014/theme-readings/2014/1/2/giussani-and-testori-conversation>>

