

**In my groups and my friendships, are there “allies” to my heart and its deepest desires?**

**Have I, like the disciples, encountered a Friendship full of a promise for life?**

**Who can accompany me, in the everyday, to become ever more aware of the value of my life?**

## **“ALIVE MEANS PRESENT”**

### **Introduction\* - 1**



Photo Luigi Ghirri, *Caserta*, 1987. From the series *Un piede nell'Eden*.  
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## **Greeting**

**By Julián Carrón**

Good evening everyone!

My friend Fr. Andrea invited me to greet you at the start of your gesture, and I happily accepted. Whilst I was thinking about what I could say, I remembered what some of you said last week (March 26, 2021) on a Zoom encounter with some GS students preparing for graduation. I was struck by the drama of existence in them. One told me that he was watching his life fading away; another told me that his initial enthusiasm had long waned; another emphasized how apathetic he felt, and how nothing attracted him; another asked how he could enjoy the things in life. We can only answer this “fading” of life, this apathy, this lack of enthusiasm, with our life. No type of reasoning or rule can offer an adequate response!

I immediately thought of John and Andrew, the first two to follow Jesus. They, too, will »

\* Greeting by Julián Carrón and Introduction by Andrea Mencarelli at the Easter Triduum of Student Youth (Gioventù Studentesca) on Holy Thursday (April 1, 2021).

» have sometimes seen their lives fading away, or experienced apathy and a lack of enthusiasm. Yet as soon as they saw One in whom life flourished, they immediately attached themselves to Him! It was easy to recognize Him; Christianity is easy, because it responds to a lack we feel in ourselves, to something our own efforts cannot answer. It is easy to find life when we are missing it! It is not necessary to attend a course in some university, because we already all have the *detector* to find out where life is!

Yet one could say: "John and Andrew were lucky...what about us? Does this continue to happen? Does that life, for which they joined Christ, remain in history?" Yes! I have encountered a man in whom I found the same impetus towards life! His name was Fr. Giussani: as soon as you heard him speak, you could tell he was no less attracted than John and Andrew. Just as for John and Andrew with Christ, I felt linked to him, to the point that I desired never to lose him, to not let him get away, for the rest of my life.

It is this life we have received which allows us to live.

This is why I invite you to pay attention—as John and Andrew did. There is no particular preparation needed; it is enough simply to be attentive to intercept life wherever it manifests itself, as soon as it appears to you. It is easy to recognize it: all we need is the cry of the heart which provokes us, and the desire not to lose it. Perhaps, in these days—if you are attentive—in some shared moments, you will be able to witness this cry in yourselves, in the same unforeseen manner in which many of you have already witnessed it in other moments (this is why you are here).

I desire nothing else so that your lives may be fulfilled, other than that you discover an answer to the fading away of life. I wish that you may encounter someone who may make you feel that cry that Jesus introduced into history. Let us all begin to ask for this now. With this first song, let us ask the Holy Spirit to be able to find Him.

*Discendi Santo Spirito* [Come Holy Spirit]<sup>1</sup>

## "I have called you friends" (John 15:15)

by **Andrea Mencarelli**

Welcome everyone! And most of all welcome to those of you joining the Triduum for the first time, not knowing exactly what it is, and finding yourselves joining it in this odd form. Rest assured, none of us have prepared for this, and we are all "first years" in that respect! So, let's enjoy tonight and the next few days. We are all in the same boat, so let's help one another to stick together, and most of all let's allow the sea to carry us. Courage!

### 1. Houston, we have a problem!

This time last year, we found ourselves in a situation we thought would have soon been over, enabling us to return to our old lives, and to do "everything we couldn't," as Alessandra Amoruso sang over the summer. Instead, we find ourselves still faced with many challenges—as Julián just reminded us in his greeting—with sacrifices and discoveries; a time for men.

One thing has struck me over these weeks which has nothing to do with the pandemic. On February 19<sup>th</sup> last year, the *Perseverance* rover arrived on Mars (I don't know if you »

<sup>1</sup> E. Galbiati, J. Schweitzer, "Discendi, Santo Spirito," in *Canti*, op. cit., p. 113.

» knew that, that has also happened!). The first images, moving to say the least, revealed an incredible landscape. Let us watch this short video together.<sup>2</sup>

These—incredible!—images reveal a rocky landscape, with furrows dug in the ground, which, according to scientists, could be the sign of the presence of liquid water several millions of years ago. This is interesting news for insiders, and for us, too, always wishing to discover new things. But if we paused a moment longer and asked ourselves what is on Mars today (not millions of years ago, today), we would obviously reply: a huge desert.

To be honest, we don't have to travel 470 million kilometers, as the rover did, to encounter a huge desert, because that is where we can find ourselves on Earth, comfortably lying on the couch, or in front of a screen for remote learning, as has happened to all of us over the last year; experiencing that same solitude of a desert.

But what is the point of the desert? What is the point of solitude? What is the meaning of my life? These are questions which constantly return to us. One day at registration, a very friendly student of mine said to me: "I wake up in the morning and I see my dog sleeping peacefully: he eats, sleeps, goes on a walk. With no issues. Sir, I am jealous of my dog." Carrón challenged us on this theme at the GS Beginning Day, when he asked: "would it not have been easier to have been born as one of many other 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?"<sup>3</sup> Looking for water in the desert is not an activity reserved only for Mars, a job for insiders, but rather a problem which affects all of us, with our urgent need to live as men, not animals; be that in a red Covid zone, in our bedroom, confined to quarantine, or even faced with the shocking news of a friend taking their own life. All of our being, our body, our reason and our heart, feels the concreteness of these questions. "Certain questions constitute us as adults. Therefore, welcome to the world of adults, of adults conscious of themselves!"<sup>4</sup> Carrón went on.

Thus, the first reminder we have to give each other tonight is that of a loyalty to ourselves. Do not worry about being different from what you are, do not cancel any of the questions which move your heart. To be clear, not because it will all be easy and free of difficulty, because some questions weigh us down like boulders, but so that we can take ourselves seriously, deep down, which is the only way to live these days as an opportunity, to enjoy them without satisfying ourselves with some lukewarm sentiment or repeating empty gestures. It is a bit like going to the dentist: you go to the dentist because you have toothache. If you went pretending not to feel pain, or to please the dentist, you would be an idiot. So, tonight, let us have a moment of tenderness towards ourselves! Let's take ourselves seriously and ask ourselves how we are doing. This might be a small step for man, but it is certainly a giant leap for the personal journey of each of us.

One of you wrote in a contribution: "Since February I have felt totally lost. School, half in person and half remote, the teachers giving us so many activities and class assignments, friendships which seem to be fading: my head is full of so much confusion. I'm not conscious of time, I feel like a 'victim' of time."

Another of you writes: "I am like a machine. They give me instructions and I follow them. I have lost my identity and my dignity. I am the same as everyone: I do the same things as them. I have the same commitments, so I carry out the same actions. I am just part of a mass group. And I am frightened. I am frightened that no one will recognize me anymore. »

<sup>2</sup> [Perseverance sees Jezero Crater rim in 360° Mars panorama.](#)

<sup>3</sup> J. Carrón, *You only see what you admire*, Notes from the GS Beginning Day with Julián Carrón and Francisco Barberis, via video link, October 10, 2020, p. 6, [clonline.org](#)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

» Frightened that I won't recognize myself in the mirror. Somewhere deep inside me I hear the orders 'do it yourself', 'go back over it', 'you have to be ready', 'don't cry because you have to show you are strong', 'there's no time to be weak'. They are my voices. My thoughts serve no purpose. Don't think about it. Don't think about it at all."

In the testimonies of these friends I heard the echo of the literary genius of some great authors who captured the human drama so well.

In one work, Paul Claudel writes: "How alone am I here! Good Lord, how alone I am here and how much I feel an outsider! Everything around me is hostile and there is no place for me. Even the objects around me do not see me, that I am not here...Reality is absent, real life is absent."<sup>5</sup>

Or the Nobel Prize winner Pär Lagerkvist: "It is a gloomy depressing time. The day drags itself painfully along until at last it is evening again."<sup>6</sup> Which of us have not "felt" the oppression of days that feel empty, so much so that going to bed seems freeing? Yet we then have to wake up. Edgar Allan Poe describes it like this: "I had not opened my eyes. [...] I longed, yet dared not, to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be *nothing* to see."<sup>7</sup> Absence and solitude, around us and within us, on Mars and on Earth. To use the expression of the astronauts in the famous film, we could say: "Houston, we have a problem!" Because confusion, apathy, fear and uncertainty (as our friends described) have been aspects of life over the last few months which we have all felt. Let us think, too, of those pounding questions (the questions that that girl heard repeatedly in her mind), the questions which have been hammered home daily by the news, in conversations and assemblies at school: how much have infections increased by today? Do the vaccines work? Will schools reopen? What about Work-School programs? Exams? Driving license?

Yet being loyal to oneself does not simply mean denouncing a strong state of mind, which may yet be a starting point, the easiest of all. It rather means going deeper into one's own experience, without stopping at superficial symptoms. You go to the dentist because you have toothache, then you sit down and he or she tries to understand, opens your mouth, uses the tube or the jet of air to see if you react, finally saying: "This is the problem, you've got a cavity!"

This year, we have all gone looking for water in the desert, for something or someone that could help us to sort out our "toothache." As one of you asks: "How can I open my eyes even in this situation? Who can support me?"

Let us listen to a song:

### *Million reasons*

"I bow down to pray / I try to make the worst seem better / Lord, show me the way / To cut through all his worn out leather / I've got a hundred million reasons to walk away / But, baby, I just need one good one to stay."<sup>8</sup> We, too, have and will have millions of reasons to allow ourselves to give up and express our struggle (as we often do); we have a million reasons to be tired and angry. But we have to ask ourselves (because of a love for ourselves) what brings us together tonight. Because there is one reason! Or a little bit at least: "*Just a little bit's enough*," Pink says in another great song, which would make an interesting dia- »

<sup>5</sup> P. Claudel, *Il pane duro* [Stale bread], Massimo, Milano 1971, p. 102. Our translation.

<sup>6</sup> P. Lagerkvist, *The Dwarf*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1945, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> E.A. Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Lady Gaga, "Million Reasons", from the album *Joanne*, Interscope Records, 2016.

» logue with that of Lady Gaga.<sup>9</sup> In fact, this year, we have not arrived at the usual Triduum, in the form we all (especially the eldest) know: we are not in the Fiera at Rimini, after a fun journey by coach, we have not spent the last hour “high-fiving” all our friends in the hotels; we have not taken over the streets of Rimini. In other words, there is nothing which made us automatically come here tonight. Everything is the opposite: everyone is in his or her own home, in front of yet another screen. Nothing other than our own “I”. It will be like this for all three days, because no one will be able to force you to do anything, like right now: whilst I am speaking, any of you could be doing anything else, making a new Instagram story, watching a TV series, surfing any internet sites you want. No one is there to say: “pay attention”, or “turn on your webcam”, as your teachers do. This is precisely why the question becomes all the more urgent than if we were in person: what was the reason you and so many other friends logged on tonight?

## 2. “I have chosen you out of the world” (John 15:19)

To answer this question there is no need to come up with elaborate answers. All we need to do is look attentively at our own journey, as Alexis Carrel would suggest: “Much observation and little discussion [are conducive to] truth.”<sup>10</sup>

One girl wrote in describing how she invited her classmates to meet a young friend who was seriously ill. Meeting him, seeing how he was facing this situation with hope and without being overcome, those classmates (from GS and not) exploded into a flurry of questions. One asked: “How can he, alone, make sense of this? Why is he grateful, despite everything, despite his illness? How is he not angry with God?” Yet more personal questions emerged too: “What fulfils *my* heart?” From this encounter, a new relationship was born between them: “Today—the girl continues—something great happened. Today I reencountered them all as if for the first time, but also as if I had known them all my life. I have never engaged with one classmate—who I have known since kindergarten—like I have in the last few weeks. And she, in tears, thanked me today because this encounter was not just an hour long, it was an encounter for life!” She concludes: “This last year, and quarantine, has been a turning point in my life. Everything that happens, every instant, feels like a miracle. This doesn’t mean everything is easy and beautiful, but that everything has been put there for me.” Where everything seems arid and empty, like in illness, or taken for granted (5 year friendships from school, or even kindergarten), something happens which regenerates the fabric of those friendships!

Even just thanks to all the huge questions which have emerged, and the events you have shared—so many like this arrived, an avalanche; so many contributions recount unexpected, unforeseen events, freely given, which have restarted the journey of many—even just thanks to this, we can be certain that this year has not been wasted. And challenge whoever tells you otherwise, saying that it is just a parenthesis: no, it’s not true! As the philosopher Emanuele Severino said, “the gaze that sees the desert encroach does not belong to the desert. It is from ‘elsewhere’.”<sup>11</sup> There is something vibrating in us, albeit often confusedly, and it is because of this vibrancy that you and I, though remotely, and even if we have never met, are here together as friends on a journey.

A vibrancy, a restlessness of the heart, a friendly face; these are the reasons for which, on another evening two thousand years ago, the disciples took part in that supper, the last supper, with Christ. They were there with Him not to fill an empty evening, to pass the time, »

<sup>9</sup> Pink and Jeff Bhasker, “Just Give Me a Reason”, from the album *The Truth About Love*, RCA Records 2012.

<sup>10</sup> A. Carrel (trans. Antonia White), *Reflections on Life*, Hawthorn Books Inc, New York 1953, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> E. Severino, *Techné. Le radici della violenza*, Rusconi, Milano 1979. Our translation.

» but in order not to lose the thread of friendship that had entered their life, and brought them together despite their differences.

There was an element which united the lives of Peter, John, Thomas, Judas, despite the differences between their personalities: none of them had produced that encounter, no one had created that friendship, but they had all been reached in some form by Jesus: the order of addends is reversed, and in this case the result changes. In fact, He said to them: "I have chosen you out of the world." "Chosen" means to "elect", "prefer". As if Christ had agreed with them: "I have taken you from wherever you were, in your desert, in your boat, atop the sycamore, healthy, sick, angry, sinful...none of this was an obstacle to me choosing you as "my friends", freely." So, if you and I are here, in the confines of our rooms over video, it is because, at least once, we too have experienced in the flesh the act of being loved freely. Not because we had proved anything, and not because we had reached a thousand *followers*, or ten thousand subscribers on Tik-Tok, but in a free, unexpected manner.

For each of the disciples, the encounter with Christ had the immediate effect of a true self rebirth, because "the 'I' is reborn in an encounter." A rebirth that expresses itself in a new unity with oneself, and with reality: no longer a solitary 'I', broken into thousands of pieces, as happens daily (school, family, friends, GS friends, other friends, driving license), but a unified 'I', present, creative, protagonist of its own choices, including its mistakes.

Within the disciples' rebirth there was, above all, a profound joy. In fact, nothing moves us and enables us to see reality as "friendly" as when our heart is joyful. Like when a girl you have been chasing for months finally says: "Yes", almost exhausted by your courtship, and it is as if you are no longer in your own skin, and you go bounding home to your mom who asks you: "Are you OK?" and you reply: "Yes, yes, mom, of course I'm fine, why are you asking?" And you even clear the table after dinner and wash the dishes, and your parents are amazed because they had begged you and threatened you, even paid you, to do something, move a glass, rinse a glass or a coffee mug, instead of leaving it in the sink, and you had never done anything. Yet then that evening comes and you do everything, a hundred times over, smiling, with a joyful heart!

That encounter, in them (the disciples) and in us, engenders an unexpected joy, like the start of something new. Something that all of us wish may grow and become ever more ours. For this reason, let us sing together "Il seme" [The Seed].<sup>12</sup>

*Il seme* [The Seed]

### 3. "Remain in me" (John 15:4)

How can the seed grow? How can the initial joy become ever more stably present, and ever more full within us? "My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete", Jesus said to His friends.

It is not that the disciples had understood all His words, as we too may not understand all the words we are given, like with the so-called "difficult" GS notices, but this always happens (not understanding right away). Sometimes, even the disciples will have found themselves repeating words He had said, without having understood their profound meaning. Yet they repeated them because they were the words of Jesus. In a relationship, it is normal to repeat. It is a bit like when we were little and learnt to swear: we may not have understood the exact meaning of what we were saying, but we repeated those words because an older friend used them. We live trying to make ours what we see in our friends. But if this is true for stupid things, such as swearing, then it is even more the case for the things that promise »

<sup>12</sup> C. Chieffo, "Il seme" ["The Seed"], in *Canti*, op. cit., p. 198.

» us life, that are like water in the desert, like hearing Christ's words was for His disciples.

There is a very famous episode in which Christ, after having multiplied the bread and the fish and having fed thousands of people, seeing that they kept coming to him for food, said: "You will eat my flesh and drink my blood." The people did not understand at all (it was a very difficult "notice"! ) and many chose to leave, uneasy and disenchanted, each to their own home, to safe harbor. This often happens to us, to follow something that initially attracts us a great deal which we then drop as soon as the enthusiasm evaporates, or is overcome by struggle or contradiction (how many are the things we have started and then stopped at the first hurdle...). Jesus, seeing this "exodus", turned to his closest friends, the disciples, and asked them: "Do you want to leave me too?" So Peter replied: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you can explain life to us, only you understand life through and through." See? It is not that Peter had to first pass a medicine exam to intelligently answer the question Jesus had asked. Like the others who had left, Peter also probably had not understood the meaning of those words: "My flesh and my blood." But staying with Christ was easy. Because life—in this case, that "special" life which is Christianity—is simple, and does not need elaborate reasonings that only some can offer: it is easy to find the difference between water and the desert. It is something we recognize, before we understand it. The disciples could see that relationship triumphed over all the other relationships of which their life was made. In fact, the disciples had links and relationships with many other people outside the twelve (because they were normal people!); colleagues, other fishermen, neighbors, parishioners at the Temple, people they met on the streets, in the squares, the annoying person they met on the corner ever morning, the parents of their children's friends, so many relationships, but the bond with Christ was for them something different, that had ignited their heart with a hope for life that was not replicable by man, that could not be found anywhere else. As Bernanos describes: "The divine gaze has found us, so tender and calm: so, in this amalgamation of instincts, of acquired or inherited habits, in flesh and in blood, something has awoken, and has moved once and for all."<sup>13</sup>

So, that evening, the disciples arrived in the "upper room" of that house to dine with Him. We mustn't imagine soldiers arriving at a parade, or a *happening*, with a red carpet reserved for "VIPs". The disciples arrived as they were: they were there to see Jesus, to spend an evening with friends, as if you were going to see a friend in a track suit, to smoke a cigarette, because it is a familiar context, and because you know that person is a friend. You don't need to be on edge, but you can go there as you are, disarmed. The disciples arrived, each with their own thoughts, their own feelings, their own questions. Some wanted to ask Jesus something or other, some had problems to bring up with Him, others simply wanted to spend a celebratory evening with him, as Easter approached. They all wanted to be with Him, because He, for them, was like a home, a "dwelling", as we learnt at School of Community. Judas was among them, too, who arrived angry that night, having decided in his heart to free himself from Jesus.

That evening, Jesus, as He usually did, spoke about life, asked, listened, spoke of the problems of the world, spoke of God. However, He used a strong tone this time, as if He knew that something important was about to happen. You know when someone speaks and you can read on their face that they have something inside unsettling them, that does not give them peace? At a certain point, Jesus did something strange, passing among the disciples and washing their feet, acting like a servant. They were left dazed. "What is He doing?" thought Peter, the most loyal friend, ready to stand alongside Jesus in life or death. Because we want to show a friend that we "are worth it", that they can count on us 100%. But Jesus later »

<sup>13</sup> P. Macchi, *Bernanos e il volto del male*, Ponte Nuovo, Bologna 1996, p. 30. Our translation.

» says to the disciples: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>14</sup>

As soon as this moment was over, He began talking to them again, hinting that He would be leaving, but would then come back. Finally, He asked them to stay with Him: Jesus does not ask for any heroic displays of loyalty, but simply: “Stay with me, stay in me.” Perhaps the disciples vaguely guessed something here, too, but one thing was clear: they would obviously stay with Him, that evening and into the next day. They could not imagine otherwise: they could not imagine a life without Him! It is incredible for us to see in that moment the difference between the disciples’ awareness, still partial, still a seed (they who were almost used to this exceptional friend) and that of Jesus, who knew everything was about to be fulfilled with His death. “To lay down one’s life for one’s friends” was not only a beautiful, heroic idea, a great ideal, but it was something that was becoming a real fact, in the flesh, with Jesus. Why? The complete happiness they were experiencing with Him, that they had begun to live by being with Him, belonging to Him, was becoming definitive and inerasable, whatever was going to happen, even a pandemic.

The Lord has given, and continues to give, a promise of happiness to us, too. Not only beautiful words, but a present experience, something that passes through material things. So let us live these days together attentively, asking to be present to ourselves, with simplicity. Let us not worry if we become distracted; let us be surprised, instead, if something happens—as Carrón reminded us earlier—that we do not produce ourselves, that is not the fruit of our efforts, but is something new that comes to reclaim us, knocking at the door of our heart.

Let us try to express our desire humbly with this song.

*Qui presso a te* [Here Near to You]<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>15</sup> “Qui presso a te,” in *Canti*, op. cit., pp. 121-122.