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IS THERE HOPE?
*The fascination of the discovery**

CHAPTER 1

“EVEN WORSE THAN THIS CRISIS IS THE TRAGEDY OF SQUANDERING IT”

“Even worse than this crisis is the tragedy of squandering it by closing in on ourselves.”¹ These words of Pope Francis impel us to become more conscious of what has happened to us, of what we have experienced in this last year or so.

1. The impact with reality

From the very beginning, we have faced this challenge, which has allowed no one to remain indifferent, with a working hypothesis expressed in a line by Fr. Giussani:² “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.” Thus, following Giussani, we are invited to “live always the real intensely,”³ without negating or precluding anything. In fact, it is one thing to be unable to ignore or avoid the impact with the circumstance, but it is entirely another thing to live it, embracing the provocation it bears.

With this hypothesis to verify, even such a dangerous situation as that generated by Covid paradoxically could become an opportunity to increase our self-awareness, so often obscured, and to perceive more powerfully the energy and vibration of our reason; in other words, it could become an opportunity for the reawakening of the human, as consciousness, reason and affection.

What has happened? After more than a year, what have we seen happen in and around us?

Many people have noted two phases, two faces of our experience in front of the pandemic, corresponding to the two waves of the spread of the virus. The second wave, as Antonio Scurati observed, “caught us not less unprepared and not less immature than the first wave, but more tired, demoralized, quarrelsome, and petty,”⁴ as if we had failed to learn from what happened in the first phase and grow, failed to increase our awareness and become more substantial ourselves. This can be sensed from what emerged during the second wave: a greater sense of fragility, the spread of uncertainty and anxiety, signs that indicate, as noted by Massimo Recalcati, that “the true trauma is not in the past but in the future.” The second wave, “destroying the illusion of the renewal of life that we all had believed in, [...] extended the horizon of the nightmare. The second time of the trauma is more traumatic than the first because it shows that the evil was not spent, but is still alive among us. The hopes nourished by the summer have been dashed. Today this disappointment is the prevalent sentiment.”⁵

* In press.

¹ Francis, *Pentecost Homily*, May 31, 2020.

² Cf. J. Carrón, *Il risveglio dell’umano. Riflessioni da un tempo vertiginoso [The Reawakening of the Human. Reflections from a Vertiginous Time]*, Bur, Milano 2020. Our translation.

³ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, translated by John Zucchi, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, pp. 100, 108.

⁴ A. Scurati, “Un Natale severo (e di speranza) [A Harsh (and Hopeful) Christmas],” *Corriere della Sera*, November 20, 2020, p. 11.

⁵ M. Recalcati, “Il trauma della seconda ondata. Se cresce la paura del futuro [The Trauma of the Second Wave. Growing Fear for the Future],” *la Repubblica*, October 31, 2020, p. 28.

For a certain time we were used to living in a state of apparent safety, with the illusion of being able to dominate reality. As the virus broke onto the scene, it gave this illusion a big shove. However, after the first wave, it did not take much to convince us that we had the situation in hand again, and thus that a return to normal life was imminent. So we enjoyed the summer, some more, others less, but “you don’t know what you know, and not even what you want to know, until you’ve been put to the test.”⁶

The second wave once again crushed the dream or presumption, reminding us definitively that we do not control reality. As Cesare Cornaggia observed, “It was thought that death was a matter of chance, like a tumor or an accident, and that infectious diseases had been defeated; instead, the unknown that we do not see, and to which we do not know how to respond, kills us. This is the source of our insecurity.”⁷

Thus “insecurity about the future” grew in proportion to the “sense of the unknown.” At the beginning of the second wave, Edgar Morin also photographed the end of the illusion with the word “insecurity.” He wrote, “We have entered an era of great insecurity,” underlining “the multidimensional character of the crisis that touches the life of every single individual, of all nations and of the entire planet [...]. We are all part of this adventure, full of ignorance, the unknown, lunacy, reason, mystery, dreams, joy, and pain. And insecurity.”⁸ Notwithstanding the reassurance of certain discourses, the optimism that accompanied the discoveries of science and the initiatives of the pharmaceutical industry, anguish still lurks in our hearts, threatening.

After more than a year, we are still navigating by sight, not knowing how long this pandemic will last, though fortunately there are increasingly concrete signs of a way out. We will have to wait and see, and like everyone else hope things get better as soon as possible. However, the situation I have described, which has involved the life of people, society and the entire world so extensively, has brought forth from the inner workings of our lived experience a question that accompanies the existence of the human person: is there hope?

The title of our Spiritual Exercises, “Is there hope?”, resonated in us and others who were invited to participate, as happened in December on the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises for University Students. A classmate told a person who invited her, “You people always focus on a point that touches something inside me. This theme is crucial!”. Another person said, “The title proposed reverberated in me; it is the question that has accompanied this time.”

This question resonates from the depths of our daily struggles. A friend wrote me, “Beginning last October, with the situation of the pandemic starting to worsen once again and the spreading general violence that increasingly characterized the news, this question burned in me: ‘Do I hope that things have a good destiny?’. Unfortunately, I found myself answering, ‘I don’t know.’ Many people have died and still today, after a year, continue to die of Covid. Many friends, of myself and my husband, people dear to us, have been gravely impacted by the economic crisis. In addition, some very painful news and big difficulties I’ve been going through, in particular at work, have led me to say, ‘I’m not sure any more that things have a good destiny; everything is telling me the opposite.’ I understand that deep down this question reveals my fear that things, relationships and those dearest to me end up in nothingness. In the beginning I resisted admitting to myself that I had this question. Honestly, I was very ashamed of it. Then I remembered that in my life the most important steps began with uncomfortable, unusual and very serious questions. What most ‘encouraged’ me to look at my question was you: in fact, when I discovered you had chosen ‘Is there hope?’ as the title of the Spiritual Exercises, I thought, ‘Here’s a man who not only is unafraid to ask himself this question, but he’s also unafraid to ask it of everyone.’ I felt that you were at once a father, because you helped me not fear looking at myself and loving the questions I have. As the months have passed this question

⁶ Th. Wilder, *Idi di marzo [Ides of March]*, Mondadori, Milano 1951, p. 56. Our translation from the Italian translation.

⁷ C.M. Cornaggia, “Ansia, paura, insicurezza: ecco quel che ancora non sappiamo [Anxiety, Fear, Insecurity: What we still don’t know],” interview by Paolo Vites, *ilsussidiario.net*, November 8, 2020.

⁸ E. Morin, “Il potere dell’incertezza [Power and Uncertainty]”, *la Repubblica*, October 1, 2020, p. 27.

has burned more and more, and I'm sorry to admit I still don't know how to answer it. So, I'd like to ask you what can help me grasp it".

I'll tell you right away that the first help comes from the question itself, as many of you have written me. "The question about hope strikes me because of its power. Once again, the question frees us from our partial gaze, to open us to something else. It's up to us to choose to follow its impact or to muffle it. The question seems more pertinent than ever, and I don't want to miss this opportunity." Another person stressed, "I realize that the work on the question you proposed has already begun marking my days, making me more attentive and open to what happens." Another person observed, "The problem is to let the question impose itself, let it establish itself where it believes it best, without giving us any relief. 'Is there hope?'. It is a battle to allow this question to enter. It is a battle not to push it out of my days. It is a battle not to lie and therefore tell myself that deep down there is no hope, and then pretend that there is, because it's easier that way."

2. Attitudes in front of what has happened

Each of us is called to respond personally to the question "Is there hope?", observing ourselves in action, taking note of the way we look at and face life, which gives nobody a free ticket. So then, first of all let's review the attitudes that have emerged in ourselves or in others in response to what has happened, and that have to some degree also been ours. This will help us have a clearer awareness of the question, its pertinence to life, and the road we need to follow in order to respond to it.

a) *The temptation to remove the datum*

The cover of the December 14 issue of the famous US magazine, *Time*, featured "2020" written in black in big block numbers and crossed out with a red X, and under it in smaller letters the subtitle, "The Worst Year Ever." A symbolic X was placed over the past year as if to express the desire to eliminate it. But as everyone knows, there is no way to erase three million deaths and the economic crisis provoked by the pandemic, the worst effects of which we may not have experienced yet! "This is the story of a year you'll never want to revisit," Stephanie Zacharek wrote in the first line of her editorial.⁹

There is always the temptation to erase the things that force us to ask ourselves what gives meaning to life. A university student wrote, "For the last twenty-one days since isolation began because of Covid, every night before going to bed I've asked myself whether there's hope in my life. These have been difficult days. The illness has been pretty severe with me. For this reason, my initial answer was clearly, 'No, there is no hope.' This period was just a moment to be erased. I lived it in survivor mode, waking up, feeding myself, bathing and working, then going back to bed and repeat it all the next day. Tomorrow I'll be free, but— and it's a big but—I wonder whether twenty-one days lived in a certain way have nullified my being what I am." The experience of many was marked by a tendency to survive and, once the worst was over, to remove the moment lived, with a consequent weakening of the perception of self and suspicion about one's future.

Others did not want to close their eyes and did not try to forget, but on the contrary, wanted the circumstance not to have happened in vain. "I'll tell you right off that this year has been an opportunity for me to realize as never before how fragile and limited I am, but I can't say this sentiment's been bad for me. On the contrary, it's made me discover how much I needed, and need, to found my life on something other than myself, on a fullness I don't build myself, that does not depend on the circumstances, that does not depend on me, and that bears up!"

⁹ S. Zacharek, "2020. The Worst Year Ever," *Time*, December 14, 2020.

b) Sadness and fear

In this period many feelings have come to the surface with insistence and have been difficult to contain. Perhaps we have never truly admitted to ourselves that we feel them, or have done little to explore them, comforted by the favorable changes underway. The Spanish journalist Salvador Sostres wrote, “For the first time, I spoke with a friend about the disappointment and sadness, and for the first time we don’t know what to say or do. We’re very tired because we haven’t slept much, and we realize that up until today, we had never absolutely doubted our ability to do something with our own strength.”¹⁰

An unease has risen to the surface, one that actually was already there inside us, covered by a veil, protected by a form of life, by a social rhythm that suddenly disappeared, thus allowing it to emerge. It has spread in many people, setting down roots, with a dark sense of oneself and one’s destiny, almost a perception of nothingness, like the projection of an oppressive shadow on the future, as described well in the words of Karmelo C. Iribarren. “Now I think as I look / through the open window / at the highway, watching / how the cars flash their headlights / in the last section / before the tunnel. I think / that this is life, / and that there’s nothing else. A weak / light blink of light toward the shadow / at greater or lesser velocity.”¹¹ Therefore, is life nothing more than a journey toward darkness? Is it only the speed that changes?

The fear for oneself and one’s future, linked to the perception of the threat and the forced discovery of one’s vulnerability, has in many cases also seeped into many homes, affecting the closest relationships, as the writer and dramatist Francesco Piccolo confessed. “Before the pandemic, if anyone was afraid, it was maybe my children, fearful of me. [...] Now [...] I instinctively keep my distance from them. Sometimes my son invites a classmate home to study, and I almost always try to return home after his friend has left. [...] My daughter is in Bologna. [...] She never calls me because she’s so struck by my fear that she’s afraid I think if she phones me I’ll get infected. [...] At times, I think I’m part of a TV series. [...] I am not at all reassured by having a son at home who runs around, yells and goes out every day. This is the new contorted and unnatural tangle of sentiments that the coronavirus has created: being afraid of your own children more than of any other human being in the world.”¹²

c) The terror of death

What fear are we talking about? Not only that of being infected, but that of dying, given that the consequences of infection can be lethal. Death, which we had carefully hidden and cast out, is once again visible. Massively present in real life and the media, it is no longer considered in the collective subconscious as a mere blip along the way, a sporadic inconvenience that still happens but soon will be eradicated or at least limited. To mark this, the Italian magazine *L’Espresso* chose “Life and Death” as “person of the year, 2020.” The cover showed a “photograph” of hooded Death playing chess with a baby under an oppressive gray sky. Under it, the words “Fear of the end has overturned economic and political systems, and our daily existence.” In the editorial, we read that death, “removed by culture, [...] “has been brought “back to the center” by “the year of the pandemic.” Further on, we read that the fear of the end, paradoxically, should bring with it also a strange presentiment. “Being

¹⁰ S. Sostres, “La próxima vez que me muera,” *ABC*, September 24, 2020. Our translation from the Italian translation.

¹¹ “Lo pienso ahora que miro / por la ventana abierta / la autopista, viendo / cómo los coches parpadean / en el último tramo, / antes de túnel. Pienso / que así es la vida, / y que no hay más. Un leve / guiño de luz hacia la sombra / a mayor o menor velocidad» (K.C. Iribarren, “Hacia la sombra,” in Id., *Seguro que esta historia te suena*, Renacimiento, Salamanca 2015, p. 42). Our translation from the Italian translation.

¹² F. Piccolo, “Maledetto virus mi hai insegnato ad avere paura dei miei figli [This cursed virus that taught me to fear my own children], *la Repubblica*, February 1, 2021, pp. 12-13.

afraid of death means knowing there is something that transcends our individual existence. An End. And the Heirs.”¹³ In his article, Massimo Cacciari points out, “Leopardi was the one who taught us. [...] If life truly is worth something, that is, if it is intent on reaching something that always transcends finite existence, then one does not fear death, *one lives it*.”¹⁴ And living it, the deep questions are reawakened.

d) *The reawakening of the deep questions*

Heschel observed, “The first answer to the question ‘Who is man?’ is the following: man is a being who asks questions about himself. In asking such questions, man discovers he is a person, and their quality reveals his condition to him.”¹⁵ The human being is that level of nature in which nature asks questions about itself, its own meaning, its own origin and its own destiny. “Why am I here? What is at stake in my existence? This question does not derive from any premise: it is given together with existence.”¹⁶ But the question about the meaning of one’s own life cannot be separated from the one about the meaning of one’s own death.

Those who have let themselves be struck by the immensity of the provocation of this dramatic year have not been able to avoid seeing questions arise in themselves, in their own consciousness, that in times defined as “normal” they might have spared themselves. But this time, with the global character of the danger, our flesh or that of someone close to us has been touched more directly and insistently by vulnerability, solitude, suffering and death. The situation has reawakened everyone from the daily torpor that often reduces the density of the existential questions and makes them seem like the exaggeration of those who want to ruin the party of living for everybody else. This bubble has popped, above all with the crash of the second wave. “Suffering is an aggression that invites us to awareness,”¹⁷ Claudel reminds us.

Ignacio Carbajosa served as a priest for five weeks in a Covid-19 hospital in Madrid, and wrote in his diary about his experience as a “privileged witness” of the life and death of many people. He wrote, “What I saw fought within me. It wounded me.” What did he see? Among many things, he saw a day-old baby girl and not an hour later he saw a woman who had just died, Elena. He asked himself, “Elena? Where are you, Elena? The two extremes of life, birth and death in less than an hour. What a temptation to eliminate one of the two poles! And what courage and a challenge for reason, to keep both and open yourself to the question of ‘What is man, that you think of him?’” After a month spent assisting Covid-19 patients, he noted in his diary, “In this period, my reason and affection have been challenged by a problem of knowledge: What is pain? What is death? And consequently, what is life? Every day I have to look this question in the face, staying in front of sick people who suffer and die.”¹⁸

In these times, those who have not closed in on themselves like a hedgehog will have felt deep down inside the vibration of chords they did not know they had. Maybe some will have immediately silenced them in the attempt to return to normalcy. But they felt the reverberation nonetheless, even if for only a moment, like a miniscule seed, almost a nothing, the beginning of a reawakening of the human, as I observed before. “Precisely because of the difficulties I was not spared, for me 2020

¹³ “Persone dell’anno. La morte e la vita [People of the Year: Death and Life]”, cover title of *L’Espresso*, December 20, 2020.

¹⁴ M. Cacciari, “Per amore della Vita [For the Love of Life],” *L’Espresso*, December 20, 2020, p. 17.

¹⁵ A.J. Heschel, *Chi è l’uomo? [Who is man?]*, SE, Milano 2005, p. 42. Our translation from the Italian.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 25. Our translation from the Italian.

¹⁷ P. Claudel, *Tre figure sante per il tempo moderno [Three holy figures for the modern age]*, Paoline, Alba (Cn) 1997, p. 46. Our translation of the Italian translation.

¹⁸ I. Carbajosa, *Testimone privilegiato [Privileged Witness]*, Itaca, Castel Bolognese (Ra) 2020, pp. 16, 66, 96. Our translation.

coincided with an unexpected reawakening of my 'I'." Who knows how many people recognized it, and who knows how much time it will take for that seed to germinate?

I understand that this may seem too little in front of the vastness of the drama, but it is like a promise. In fact, the vibration of our innermost being is the sign of an expectant awaiting that is deeply rooted in us, one that coincides with ourselves: the expectant awaiting for something commensurate with life and death, the expectancy for something unforeseen that unleashes a gush of affection for ourselves and enables our desire to reawaken and fulfill itself. This vibration of our reason, the urgent need for meaning that we have perceived with evidence in some moment, places us in a more favorable condition for glimpsing the answer, if and where it happens. In this context, Giussani often repeated a line by Reinhold Niebuhr. "Nothing is more unbelievable than the answer to a question that is not asked."¹⁹ What does this mean? Today maybe we can understand it better, precisely because of the experience of the last year: the more I perceive a problem, the more a need throbs within me, the more I am attentive to any echo of a response. Any hint of an answer evokes my curiosity.²⁰

It should not be forgotten that even with all its urgency and even though it is inevitable, the question about the meaning of existence contains an invitation that can be refused. And refusal leads to the thinning of the consciousness of that question, to the point of its disappearance. "The question imposes itself, but not *attention* to the question. Thus more than one person defines it as lazy [...]. So then the query about the meaning of existence thins out and finally vanishes. As Gide said, one reaches the point of "no-longer-feeling-the-need."²¹ Those who do not run from the question instead experience the cognitive heft, the capacity for waking up again. "In this 'heretofore unknown' year, a revolution has happened for me. I no longer need to close down a line of thought quickly, offering myself answers that are perfect and impeccable, but pre-packaged. Rather, I need exactly the opposite, to keep the question alive, to accept its dramatic nature, because in this poverty that possesses nothing and is not based on acquired frameworks, rituals or safety, I experience the great possibility of perceiving what exists."

3. The criterion of judgement

Taking seriously the urgent need of the human means having in our hands the criterion for judging everything that happens around us, all the positions—ours and of others —, unmasking the deceptions and illusions, and recognizing what is of value. The ultimate and constitutive questions, these "intelligent, dramatic emotions"²² at the depths of our 'I' represent the point with which we compare every proposal, outlook and encounter.

Ungaretti wrote in one of his poems, "My heart / today / is nothing but / a beat of longing."²³ Etty Hillesum echoed his sentiment. "I always felt that painful insatiable desire, that longing for something that seemed unattainable to me."²⁴ We harbor within us a mysterious and inextinguishable longing,

¹⁹ R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. A Christian Interpretation*, vol. II, London-New York, 1943, p. 6.

²⁰ Luigi Maria Epicoco observes, "The objective of the moment is not to survive contagion, but rather to understand that, also through this experience, we can no longer postpone the great question of the meaning of life that this pandemic is energetically bringing back to attention." (L.M. Epicoco in conversation with S. Gaeta, *La speranza non è morta. Parole di fede in tempo di crisi [Hope is not dead. Words of faith in a time of crisis]*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo-Mi 2020, p. 40). Our translation.

²¹ F. Varillon, *L'umiltà di Dio [The humility of God]*, Qiqajon–Comunità di Bose, Magnano (Bi) 1999, p. 30. Our translation from the Italian.

²² L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 46.

²³ G. Ungaretti, "Oggi" in Id., *Poesie e prose liriche [Poems and lyrical prose]. 1915-1920*, Mondadori, Milano 1989, p. 40. Our translation.

²⁴ E. Hillesum, "Amsterdam, 16 marzo 1941," in Id., *Diario. Edizione integrale*, Adelphi, Milano 2012, p. 58. Our translation from the Italian.

like an invisible, unknowable background with which we compare all of life and all our relationships. Saint Augustine calls it restlessness. “For Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”²⁵ That restlessness becomes the criterion of judgement for perceiving what his heart is made for. He cannot err, because he can verify it in his experience: rest. That which responds to his restlessness, to his expectant awaiting, is recognizable by the rest he experiences when he encounters it, a rest that safeguards and exalts the expectant awaiting.²⁶

Regardless of their place of birth and the culture that welcomed them, all people come into the world with an urgent need for meaning, destiny, and the absolute; at a certain point this need emerges in them and they are forced to face it whether they like it or not, no matter what position they hold. This urgent need may have been buried under the detritus of distraction, but events like the pandemic break through the incrustations, shake us out of our torpor and make the need emerge, keeping us from settling for just any response. Challenged by what happens, we feel this urgent need intensify. The more sharply it is felt, the more the response to it leaps before our eyes as the thing that can face it and correspond to it.

So let’s try to consider the different positions that we have seen follow one after the other or intertwine in response to the challenge in which we are immersed, in which we can be present entirely or in part, and let’s sift and weigh their worth.

a) “Everything’s going to be alright”

The most common slogan during the first lockdown was “Everything’s going to be alright.” In fact, we all face life with a kind of natural hope. We saw it in action as soon as the healthcare crisis began. While doctors and nurses made great and generous efforts, risking their own lives, many people went out on their balconies to manifest their trust. We often heard these words echoing: “Everything’s going to be alright.” Has this hope, this optimism stood up to the harshness and duration of the challenge? In the second wave it was hard pressed, and we saw how fragile it was, unable to resist the tsunami that overwhelmed it.²⁷

The same thing happens in front of the various contradictions that accompany our existence. Leopardi expressed it in a masterful way. “But if a discordant / note assails the ear, / that heaven turns to nothing in an instant.”²⁸ A mere nothing, a discordant note, suffices to threaten the paradise we have built for ourselves. Just imagine what happens when instead there is Covid, with all the consequences we know so well.

The impact with a contradictory circumstance, with a hard reality, tries and questions the substance of our hope. A university student wrote me, “I’ve always been certain of the presence of a hope and the greatness of the circumstance we are living; all this was clear to me in the first lockdown and above all this summer, when I had to make up for my missed internship. And yet in the recent days a great weight has born down on my heart. My days are no longer dominated by hope, but only by great weariness, abandoned to a thousand daily thoughts and temptations. How can this be?”

²⁵ “*Fecisti nos ad te [Domine] et irrequietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*” (Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I,1,1, translated by F.J. Sheed, Seed & Ward, Inc. 1942, p. 3.

²⁶ Guardini writes, “This ‘rest’ is something much greater than simply sitting and doing nothing: it is a fullness in oneself” (R. Guardini, *Lettere sull’autoformazione [Letters on self-directed learning]*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1994, p. 136). Our translation.

²⁷ Jean Daniélou points out “Hope is not optimism. Optimism is the easy attitude by which we think that things will always work out by themselves. In a more reflective form, it considers evil as a simple disorder that will be eliminated by itself, or like growing pains. By voiding the tragic nature of evil, optimism is the worst enemy of hope.” (J. Daniélou, *Saggio sul mistero della storia [Essay on the mystery of history]*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2012, p. 370). Our translation from the Italian translation.

²⁸ G. Leopardi, “Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna [On the Portrait of a Beautiful Woman, Carved on Her Monument]” vv. 47-49, in *Canti*, A Bilingual Edition, translated by Jonathan Galassi, Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2012, p. 257

b) Solidarity

When an event is “an affair of everyone” as Camus recounted in *The Plague*, each person tries to face it as he or she can. Sooner or later the illusions with which they tried to escape it fall one after another. The cruelty of certain events shakes us so badly that even our most substantial certainties vacillate, like those of Father Paneloux, in Camus' novel, who, in front of the death of an innocent, sees the idea of retributive justice collapse. “So then, what is to be done?” writes Recalcati. “Here, the words of the priest [Paneloux] illuminate the assumption of every human experience of care. He tells how during the great plague of Marseilles, of the eighty-one religious in the Convent of Mercy, only four survived. And of these four, three fled to save their lives. But at least one was capable of remaining. This is the last word the priest gives his faithful: to be among those who remain. Knowing how to remain is effectively the first name of every practice of care. It means responding to the appeal of those who have fallen. In biblical terms it is what illuminates the expression ‘Here I am!’ that makes human care human, not abandoning anyone to the unacceptable violence of evil. Not giving meaning to evil but staying next to those who are struck by it.”²⁹

As Pope Francis said, Covid has made us more aware of being in the same boat, and this has encouraged many to roll up their sleeves and help out as best they can. Nobody can deny the incomparable value of that effort, but at the same time nobody can affirm that the care given, when it is successful and when it is not, is sufficient for facing the question that arises in the most extreme circumstances: we need not only assistance and medical care, but also something that enables us to look at suffering and death without collapsing in front of it. Here emerges the limit of every attempt, however indispensable, at solidarity, at closeness and care. The nature of the need that the situation has caused to emerge in those who have allowed themselves to be wounded by what was happening is deeper than the response of solidarity.³⁰

c) The vaccine as panacea

Welcome vaccines! Who would not rejoice, after having seen so much suffering, fear, bewilderment and death? However, we cannot ignore what Susanna Tamaro wrote in a “Letter to Baby Jesus” published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on December 22. “Forgive us for being convinced that the vaccine will be our salvation, because the vaccine is a marvelous, indispensable help, as is the science at the service of humankind, but it will not be able to dispel the fog of our unhappiness. To do this, we will need a new gaze and a purified heart that will dialogue with it.”³¹ These words uncover a question we cannot avoid. Is the vaccine enough for answering the questions reawakened by the pandemic? Is this all we need, the eradication of the disease?

And when there is no cure for a disease? A mother whose child suffers from a very grave syndrome wrote, “In this particularly wearying period my son was hospitalized in intensive care, sedated and intubated. In moments like this, I grab onto anything that makes me remember I am looked upon and loved, and so I call and message my friends, read and reread some things, seeking strength. In this pediatric ward the internet and telephone service are very poor and because of Covid restrictions I can't see anyone, so the things I usually cling to are unavailable. I remember having read a line, one

²⁹ M. Recalcati, “Ed io avrò cura di te [And I'll Take Care of You],” *la Repubblica*, October 15, 2020, p. 27.

³⁰ The same thing happens we work to respond to the needs of the other: “It is the discovery of the fact that precisely because we love them, *we are not the ones to make them happy*; and that not even the most perfect society, the most farsighted and legally solid organization, the greatest wealth, the most robust health, the purest beauty, the most civilized culture will ever be able to make them happy” (L. Giussani, *Il senso della caritativa [The Meaning of Charitable Work]*, Società Cooperativa editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milano 2006, p. 10). Our translation.

³¹ S. Tamaro, “Sotto l'albero vorrei ritrovare l'innocenza [Under the Christmas tree I want to find innocence],” *Corriere della Sera*, December 22, 2020, p. 29.

of the many ones written in the newspapers, ‘This past year should be left behind and forgotten. Let’s look ahead; the hope of a vaccine is coming.’ How can anybody think that hope lies entirely in the vaccine? I think of my son: is being healthy what gives us hope? If so, he would be a goner, and yet instead very often *he* is the one who testifies to *me* an immensely greater hope. Looking at him and looking at his body makes me conscious of the desire for good that each of us has, the desire to be happy and loved notwithstanding our defects, which are the drama that make us ask, that enable us to ask for and desire for more.”

How can we respond to the abyss that has emerged, but was not caused, by the healthcare emergency? Even before that, what abyss are we talking about? It is the abyss of our own human needs, of the thirst for life we have within. It is also the abyss of the fear of death and pain, which has become more continual, of the anguish of losing life or that life will not be fulfilled definitively. Can the “answers” we have noted fill that abyss?

4. Running away from yourself

A young doctor wrote me, “Initially my approach to the days was to hope that things would go more or less the way I had in mind. I’m a doctor; I finished my specialization in November, and in January moved to a new city to begin a new job. I was full of expectations, with the desire to achieve my vocation as doctor after years of formation. In March last year during the first lockdown, the healthcare management was on its knees; my contract lost all priority and I couldn’t stay in the hospital any more. I couldn’t even stay to give a hand. A useless doctor. In the midst of a pandemic! In the meantime I ran through all the requests for doctors on TV and sent out at least ten resumes responding to offers near and far, but I didn’t have the requisites. A useless doctor. You can imagine my anger and frustration. I’ve always shared what I heard about the value of the unforeseen, but the truth was that deep down I thought that the unforeseen had to fit into the limits I had in mind. So I felt abandoned, rejected, set aside. I said to myself, ‘Where is your God? If He exists, He has forgotten you. He probably doesn’t exist.’ The difficulties of those months left their mark. But I don’t want my “Covid crisis” to be squandered; I don’t want to miss the opportunity to explore fully the doubt about the existence of God or, on the contrary, the possibility that God exists and truly has my life at heart. Is it possible to affirm with certainty of experience that ‘even the hairs of your head are counted’? Is it possible to be so certain that you can explain it to unbelievers or more simply to yourself when you doubt?”

If we do not want to “squander” the crisis we are going through, as Pope Francis said, we cannot miss the opportunity to let ourselves be provoked by the questions that burn inside us. Not squandering the crisis means trying to respond to the doubt that so often pervades us all the way down to the heart. If we do not face it head on and fail to find an answer worthy of the question, we are forced to run away from ourselves, because we find it impossible to stay in front of the drama.

Running away from yourself is the most common road, as long as you can do so, staying far from the abyss of the heart, from the needs that are “impossible” to satisfy, that we cannot tame and that make us restless.

While fear and solidarity in some way dominated the first wave, in the second, as we have said, uncertainty about the future became prevalent, a more acute consciousness of the need for meaning and of the difficulty of staying in front of it. This is the reason for running away. We run away because we cannot stand a life that cries out the need for meaning, and so we try to go as far as possible from ourselves, almost “as if we deemed ourselves less important than all the rest”.³² The price that one

³² Nicola Cabasilas writes, “What we do, what is habitual for us, what seems right to us, all this is very important for us. It’s just that those things that are truly ours, we consider less than all the others, not reflecting on the way to safeguard them and ensure our right through them, as if we deemed ourselves less important than all the rest. If we do nothing

pays is a life cut in half, sold short. As Alessandro Baricco wrote recently, “When are we going to talk about this other death? The slithering death that we don’t see. There are no government Covid regulations that take it into account; there are no daily graphs. Officially it doesn’t exist. But every day, for a year now, it’s been there: all the life that we don’t live.”³³

Running away from ourselves, we only worsen the situation because in this way nothing is our own any more: everything becomes extraneous to us. Giussani described it with unforgettable features. “The supreme obstacle on our human journey is the ‘neglect’ of the ‘I,’ whereas the first step on a truly human journey—concern for our ‘I’—is the exact opposite of that ‘neglect.’” He continued, “It might seem obvious that one should have this interest, but in fact it is not obvious at all: just think of all those gaping voids that open up in the daily fabric of our consciousness and our frequent distraction.” If these words from 1995 seem written for us today, it is because the pandemic has brought to the fore a dynamic of experience that preceded it and will follow it. Giussani’s words make us aware of a permanent possibility of the human soul, of a temptation that accompanies us every day: neglect of oneself. “The word ‘I’ hides great confusion today and yet [...] if I neglect my ‘I,’ it will be impossible for my relationships with life to be my own, for life itself (the sky, a woman, a friend, music) to be mine.

To be able to say the word *my* in a serious way, we must have a clear perception of the constitution of our own ‘I’. Nothing is as fascinating as the discovery of the real dimensions of our own ‘I.’ Nothing is as full of surprises as the discovery of our own human face.”³⁴

In the spread of this confusion, there is also an influence external to our person. The weakening of the sense of the “I” appears as a symptom of the direction pursued by our culture and of the stall in which it finds itself. “In fact, the evolution of a civilization is such to the degree to which the emergence and clarification of the value of the individual ‘I’ is promoted.” This is the paradoxical outcome of the parabola of modernity, in which the “I” demanded centrality as the master of itself and of things, and reason appointed itself as the measure of reality. God, the Mystery, to whom reality in the final analysis irreducibly points, was expunged from the conception of life and of the world. This did not lead to a closer and more direct relationship with reality, but on the contrary, a flight from it, from its meaning, and to the reduction of human existence to a mere given fact. “In the confusion about the ultimate face of one’s own ‘I’ and of reality, today there is an extreme attempt to continue this flight from the relationship with that infinite Mystery that every reasonable person sees on the horizon and at the root of all human experience: it is necessary to negate any ultimate substance to living. If reality seems to elude man’s claim to lordship, the extreme resource of pride is to deny that reality has any substance, to arbitrarily consider everything an illusion or game. We can use the term nihilism for what reigns today in the way of thinking and looking.”³⁵

This flight is described in the Bible in entirely different terms in the first chapter of the book of the prophet Jonah. We know how the story goes. Twice the chapter repeats, “He was fleeing from the Lord.”³⁶ But this flight from God, Giussani says, coincides with “the flight from our responsibility, that is, the flight from ‘one’ life, from unity with all things, the flight from fullness, the flight from meaning and fullness.” Therefore, even if we were “decidedly devoted to a Catholic movement,” as he said in 1963 to a group of CL leaders, and even if we gave all our free time to it, the flight from the relationship with the Mystery “is an emptiness that we allow for every one of our days.”³⁷ It is a flight from oneself that can take on different forms.

else, let’s convert because of that newness that has overturned and transformed all things” (N. Cabasilas, *La vita in Cristo [Life in Christ]*, Città Nuova, Roma 1994, p. 291).

³³ A. Baricco, “Mai più, prima puntata [Never again, the first episode],” *www.ilpost.it*, March 9, 2021.

³⁴ L. Giussani, *The Neglect of the “I”*, excerpt translated from *Alla ricerca del volto umano*, Bur, Milano 2007, p. 9, available at <https://english.clonline.org/archive/altro/the-neglect-of-the-i>

³⁵ *Ibid.* *Alla Ricerca del volto umano*, pp. 10, 13. Our translation.

³⁶ Cf. Jonah 1:10.

³⁷ Fraternità di Comunione e Liberazione, *Documentazione audiovisiva [Audiovisual documentation]*, Esercizi Incaricati di GS [Spiritual Exercises for GS Leaders], Varigotti (SV), December 6-9, 1963.

a) *Activism*

We can avoid the cry that comes from the innermost depths of our humanity by throwing ourselves frenetically into action, getting so involved that we have no time for thinking about our true needs. Activity becomes like a drug. We saw how much this activism invades our life when the lockdown forced us to stop: closed in at home, we were suddenly forced to deal with ourselves. So many of us discovered themselves to be empty and disoriented, and could not bear to look at themselves! Activism is a way of operating without an adequate reason, and thus it does not open us or cause us to mature. In this way, when we are forced to pause, we feel full of insecurity and sense our own weight like a mountain on our shoulders. A young woman wrote me, “In these difficult and arid months, I’ve come to see that I cannot stay in front of certain questions and when they emerge, something that happens often, I try to bury them with a list of things to do, because I have no answer. This destroys me. When my friends ask how I’m doing, I never know what to say. I have two fantastic, healthy children. We’re all well, and haven’t suffered economically from the pandemic. I don’t have anything to complain about, but I always feel a great emptiness and solitude. I’m always angry and always see the negative side of everything. I’m almost never free with my friends because I’m afraid that if I talk about this emptiness it’ll create an embarrassing silence with no way out but a quick change of subject.”

The activism of which I speak can have many objects or spheres: normally it is work, but it can be a political party or a cultural association, volunteer work, or, as Fr. Giussani said, a “Catholic movement.” We are the first to participate in this attitude: we can avoid a serious engagement with our humanity by focusing on things to do. Even “doing things of the Movement” can be a way of running away from ourselves.

On many occasions Giussani warned us about this attitude, pointing to what is hidden at its roots. In fact, in activism, the things we do and are involved in and in which we seek satisfaction constitute the effective meaning of living and the true object of esteem: not God, Christ, the relationship with the Mystery made flesh. “Existentially, we hold other things in greater esteem than Christ.” We are bound to the Movement not for the Mystery it carries, but for the things we do, and “this does not develop the experience of our life.”³⁸ We do not consider it exaggerated to say these things. In fact, when what binds us is only the things we do, sooner or later our being together loses interest. “I abandoned the Movement thirty years ago, at the end of university: my days were full of activity and relationships, but the meaning of everything was lost, taken for granted and thus life was arid.”

b) *Distraction, to fill the emptiness with noise*

When it becomes almost inevitable to gain awareness of our own fragility, as happened in this period of provocations and trials, when we touch our own ephemeral and contingent nature, we easily turn to the weapon of distraction. When questions arise that undermine our certainties, that disturb us and that we do not know how to answer, we fill the empty lack of an answer with noise. In our free time we pursue stimuli and news, we wander here and there on internet and social networks, we find a series of new interests, we pass quickly from one thing to another without looking deeply at anything: our objective, confessed or unconfessed, is to elude the question of destiny, the urgent need we feel, to try to avoid dealing with ourselves.³⁹ We know it is destined to fail in the end, but we settle for the short term respite it allows us.

³⁸ L. Giussani, *La convenienza umana della fede [Why Faith is Humanly Worthwhile]*, Bur, Milano 2018, pp. 104 and 107. Our translation.

³⁹ As Romano Guardini notes, “distraction is the state in which man has neither a center, nor unity; his thoughts wander from one object to another, his feeling is indeterminate and his will is not master of his own possibilities” (R. Guardini, *Introduzione alla preghiera [Introduction to Prayer]*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1973, p. 23).

Distraction and the lack of reflection can characterize many of our days, and even long periods of our life. In a certain sense, they are the other face of cynicism. In fact, when activism does not work cynicism enters in as another way to close the door on the urgent need, preferring to brand everything as lacking substance and sail “along the shore of the sentiment of nothingness.”⁴⁰

Bernanos confessed, “I did not believe that what is defined with such a common word as distraction could have such a character of dissociation and crumbling.”⁴¹ Our person sinks into alienation and the mechanism; we become less and less present to ourselves. Being distracted means being ripped away from the substance of living.

c) The return to normalcy, to turn the page

“What’s ahead of us? Is the game really up? Can we get back to the life we used to live, or is it gone forever?”⁴² Orwell asked himself in 1939. The question has not lost its bite. Turn the page as soon as possible, leave behind what has happened, forget! This is the imperative that seems to be circulating, to act as if nothing had happened, as if the questions had not been reawakened, all those people had not died and the bewilderment had only been an incident that can be wiped away. This temptation is very real and present, as Vasilij Grossman wrote at the end of his life. “That everything return to the way it was before that unbearable change, that everything return to being habit, something well known, and that there remain no trace of the newness that breaks your bones and enters into your blood...”⁴³ Such an attitude will never be the wellspring for a gain for our experience. Rather, the opposite is evident.

⁴⁰ L. Giussani, *La familiarità con Cristo [Familiarity with Christ]*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Mi) 2008, p. 147.

⁴¹ G. Bernanos, *Diario di un curato di campagna [Diary of A Country Priest]*, Mondadori, Milano 1967, pp. 238-239. Our translation.

⁴² G. Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200031h.html>

⁴³ V. Grossman, *Il bene sia con voi! [Blessing to you!]*, Adelphi, Milano 2011, p. 212. Our translation.

CHAPTER 2

WE *ARE* EXPECTANT AWAITING

Activism, distraction, the demand to return to normalcy—not, let’s be clear, the understandable need to overcome the difficulties and reach a more sustainable healthcare and economic situation, but the anxiety to forget, to silence the human questions—these are all ways of running away from yourself and reality. For most people, they are habitual, and enable them not to deal with that depth of their own “I” that we can summarize with the expression already used, “expectant awaiting” for life, meaning, fullness, and fulfillment. However, as we have said, there are situations like the pandemic and all its consequences that even just for a few moments jerk us out of our distraction, stop us in our flight, and set us in front of ourselves.

Why do our efforts to achieve fulfillment or run from ourselves fail? Because “the soul exceeds the world; it is not satisfied with what the eyes see, with what I know. It cries with longing.”¹ No matter how hard or stubbornly we try, none of our attempts can achieve the fulfillment that we seek implicitly or explicitly when we rise in the morning, when we undertake our activities or organize our “evasions.” Because of the structural insufficiency of our strength and things that we may even manage to obtain, we are unable to find what we expectantly await, deep down. For this reason, Simone Weil noted acutely, “The most precious things need not be sought; we should just wait for them expectantly. In fact, people cannot find them with their own strength alone, and if they set out to seek them, they will find in their place false goods whose falseness they will not even be able to recognize.”²

1. An ineradicable fact

Thus expectant awaiting is what always remains when our attempts, including the successful ones—actually, I’d say, above all the successful ones— have proven insufficient to reach the goal, that is, self-fulfillment, fullness here and now in every moment, not tomorrow or in the next world.

One of the greatest contemporary poets, recently deceased, Adam Zagajewski, captured with these words the vastness of our expectant awaiting:

“Those brief instants
That happen so rarely –
Is this life?
Those few days
When clarity returns –
Is this life?
Those moments when music
Reacquires its own dignity –
Is this life?
Those rare hours
When love triumph –
Is this life?”³

The poem voices beautifully something that belongs to everyone’s experience. Even though the culture in which we live tries to suppress this expectancy, to discourage or change it, all its attempts

¹ P. Van der Meer, *Diario di un convertito [Diary of a Convert]*, Paoline, Alba (Cn) 1967, p. 34. Our translation.

² S. Weil, *Attesa di Dio [Waiting for God]*, Rusconi, Milano 1972, p. 76. Our translation from the Italian translation.

³ A. Zagajewski, “I brevi istanti [The fleeting moments]”, in Id., *Guarire dal silenzio*, Mondadori, Milano 2020, p. 16. Our translation from the Italian.

clash with something it cannot avoid: our human nature. Bertold Brecht acknowledges this in one of his poems:

“Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness
Passes for wisdom.
I can do none of this:
Indeed I live in the dark ages!”⁴

Not even the dark ages can uproot desire from the heart, this expectant awaiting for something that corresponds to our thirst for life. “The dominant culture,” which can have a certain self-interest in emptying life of meaning and promoting existential nihilism, “no matter how much it can occupy the mind of the individual and thus of the masses, faces a limit that forces it to stop: human nature, which is defined by the religious sense.” This nature, Giussani says, “not only will never be completely atrophied, but will always be in a more or less perceptible position of expectant awaiting.”⁵

This expectant awaiting is an ineradicable fact that each of us deals with in every moment of living, even when we run from it. “Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?”⁶ With these words Pavese identified the center of his and our “I,” something that belongs to all of us: expectant awaiting. It belongs to our original fabric: we are made as “expectant awaiting for.” Not only do we await: we *are* expectant awaiting!

A friend wrote me, “I find that my deepest ‘I’ expectantly awaits something that will give it hope and enable it to say ‘Yes, there is hope.’ In a moment when I would be led to respond, ‘Well, I’m not so sure about it,’ I become aware that I am made up of the expectancy that everything I live is ultimately positive; in other words, I’m made for hope. I know that many times both Giussani and you have told and shown us that if this expectant awaiting exists, then this already is a sign that there is something that responds to it. But it seems to me that I only repeat this in words, not experience.”

Everyone, even those who seem extraneous to this expectant awaiting, who give it no weight or do not take it seriously, caught up in distractions or censorship of their own humanity, when they come up against a presence charged with a promise, a meaning that has to do with it, do not remain indifferent: they see this expectancy kindle in themselves, and have to confess to themselves that they too secretly awaited it. This was the case for the university students who, in the interval between one lockdown and another, in a climate of almost total acquiescence, received from some fellow students the flyer entitled, “The university is not closed as long as we live.”⁷ Their face changed: expectant awaiting resurfaced in them.

Expectant awaiting is a fact, as Benedict XVI reminded us. “Expectation or waiting is a dimension that flows through our whole personal, family and social existence. Expectation is present in thousands of situations, from the smallest and most banal to the most important that involve us completely and in our depths. Among these, let us think of waiting for a child, on the part of a husband and wife; of waiting for a relative or friend who is coming from far away to visit us; let us think, for a young person, of waiting to know his results in a crucially important examination or of the outcome of a job interview; in emotional relationships, of waiting to meet the beloved, of waiting for the answer to a letter, or for the acceptance of forgiveness... One could say that man is alive as long as he waits, as long as hope is alive in his heart. And from his expectations man recognizes himself: our moral and spiritual ‘stature’ can be measured by what we wait for, by what we hope for.”⁸

Expectant awaiting is so constitutive of our “I” that not even the ugliest, most painful, most contradictory situations can eliminate it entirely; even in circumstances where there would be every reason to give up this expectancy, we have testimony of it. “My time is always full, but from the

⁴ B. Brecht, “To Posterity,” vv. 30-33. translated by H.R. Hays, <https://allpoetry.com/To-Posterity>

⁵ L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento di vita, cioè una storia*, a cura di C. Di Martino, EDIT, Roma 1993, p. 41. Our translation.

⁶ C. Pavese, *The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935-1950*, translated by A.F. Murch (New York: Walker & Company, 1961), p. 196.

⁷ <https://www.ateneostudenti.it/2020/11/01/luniversita-non-e-chiusa-finche-noi-viviamo/>

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, November 28, 2010. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20101128.html

morning to the evening, deep down, there is expectancy,”⁹ wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the Berlin prison of Tegel, where he was jailed from 1943 to 1945 and then hung, because of his opposition to the Nazi regime. He did not waste a minute, and in the background his expectancy grew.

Nothing can defeat this elementary and indestructible evidence: we are “expectant awaiting for.” Alluding to a Kafka short story, the Spanish writer Gustavo Martín Garzo spoke of our heart that awaits like “an animal that asks for things we are unable to do, but insists that we do them.”¹⁰ And Iribarren, in the same direction, writes, “And how can it be / I say to myself, watching life passing toward / the beach –, that notwithstanding / the merciless devastations that time inflicts on us / there is not the slightest attenuation / not a second’s truce / in this incessant dream of the impossible.”¹¹

2. Affection for oneself

But pay attention here, because the fact of this expectant awaiting, even while it is powerful and objective, does not have the last word. It demands to be acknowledged, accepted and made to count. Therefore it challenges our reason and freedom. This is our greatness as human beings: expectant awaiting is in our nature but as I said, we can try in all sorts of ways to live as if it did not exist, distracting ourselves, pretending that it does not exist. It exists, but it does not impose itself automatically.

We must acknowledge the evidence that we are *made of* expectant awaiting; it does not automatically impose itself. Some might view this as just one more in a long series of misfortunes. They might also view in the same light the fact that our own efforts cannot satisfy this expectant awaiting, nor can we eliminate it. But if we remain faithful to our experience, we understand that it is not in our best interests at all to rip it out of the fiber of our being, and it is fortunate that the attempt to suffocate this expectancy cannot, in the final analysis, be successful. Once again, Pavese is illuminating. “Waiting is still an occupation. It is having nothing to wait for that is terrible.”¹² Each of us can verify this when we wake in the morning and expect nothing. In those moments, you can confess to yourself whether it is better to wake up expecting something, or to open your eyes on the day without expecting anything.

Expectant awaiting, which nobody can entirely uproot from the heart, sets us each morning in front of an alternative that calls into play the thing that defines our greatness as human beings: freedom. What is the alternative? Take this expectant awaiting seriously, or give up. The decision is never a given. We are free for this. A person wrote me, “This is the first time I’ve tried to respond to the questions you ask us before the Spiritual Exercises or assemblies, because it’s the first time I’ve taken myself so seriously as to tell myself that the question ‘Is there hope?’ is aimed right at me, and that it’s not just up to the ‘others’ to respond. I’ve discovered that I am the protagonist in my life.”

The drama of our freedom, which comes into play every day, is well described by “George Gray” in the *Spoon River Anthology*:

“I have studied many times
The marble which was chiseled for me—
A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor.
In truth it pictures not my destination

⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e resa [Resistance and Surrender]*, Queriniana, Brescia 2002, p. 146. Our translation from the Italian.

¹⁰ G.M. Garzo, “Estimado Franz Kafka,” *El País*, October 25, 2020. Traduzione nostra.

¹¹ “Y cómo puede ser / –me digo, viendo pasar la vida / hacia la playa–, que, pese / a las devastaciones inclementes / que el tiempo / nos inflige, / no se amortigüe un ápice / siquiera, no nos dé tregua / un segundo, / este incesante / soñar con lo imposible” (K.C. Iribarren, “Verano cruel,” in Id., *Seguro que esta historia te sueña*, op. cit., pp. 330-331). Our translation from the Italian translation.

¹² C. Pavese, *The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935-1950*, op. cit..

But my life.
 For love was offered me and I shrank from its disillusionment;
 Sorrow knocked at my door, but I was afraid;
 Ambition called to me, but I dreaded the chances.
 Yet all the while I hungered for meaning in my life.
 And now I know that we must lift the sail
 And catch the winds of destiny
 Wherever they drive the boat.
 To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,
 But life without meaning is the torture
 Of restlessness and vague desire—
 It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.¹³

We are like a boat longing for the sea; it cannot fail to expect it because this longing is constitutive, and yet it fears it. Here, then, is the battle: either to respond to the longing for the sea, the hunger for a life full of meaning, or to withdraw, settle, and choose not to risk, out of fear of unforeseeable possibilities.

This temptation to withdraw from our humanity, to spare ourselves unforeseeable possibilities out of fear, remaining safe “at rest in a harbor” aboard a “boat with a furled sail” is what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel with His parable of the talents.

“It will be as when a man who was going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.’ [Then] the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.’ Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.’ His master said to him in reply, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.’”¹⁴

The master berates the servant who, out of fear, chose not to risk. Jesus says that only those who risk can gain life. In fact, the parable ends with the words, “For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” Jesus well knew human nature and the temptation not to risk, to pull in the oars, remaining comfortably in the harbor. But those who risk nothing in life, who do not throw themselves into life to earn meaning, will remain with nothing, empty.

¹³ E. Lee Masters, “George Gray,” in *Spoon River Anthology*, public domain, available at <https://poets.org/poem/george-gray>

¹⁴ Mt 25:14-30.

Taking seriously your need, your hunger and thirst for a full life is the first sign of affection for yourself, but this affection is not at all a given for most people. In fact, “we necessarily feel” demands or needs “and we lament with a cry of pain [...] when they are not satisfied, but normally we do not take them seriously.”¹⁵ We do not recognize their importance, or follow the direction they indicate.

What is needed in order to have this affection for yourself that enables you to take seriously your own longing, your own need? “Affection for yourself demands poverty,” Giussani said to university students in 1983. “This is why Christ said, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ or ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice,’ because [affection for yourself] is not the attachment to something that we have defined ourselves, but to something that defines us; the acknowledgment of something that defines us, without our having been able to intervene to determine the question. Thus the need for love or the need for personal realization or the need for companionship is something incomparably greater and deeper than the objects of desire we have thought up for ourselves, those we have imagined or chosen. We should listen to these needs and pay attention to them with all seriousness, a far different matter from all the furious tenacity we invest in wanting the objects of our choosing.”¹⁶

Thus affection for yourself has nothing to do with self-love: it opens us to the discovery of our constitutive demands, our original needs, in their nakedness and vastness. In fact, who are the poor in spirit? “Those who have nothing except one thing for which and by which they are made, in other words, boundless aspiration [...]; limitless expectant awaiting. It is not boundless because the heap of things expected is limitless; no [those who are poor in spirit] expect nothing [concrete, which would then disappoint], but live a boundless openness [...] [this almost seems like a contradiction]. As said in a poem by Clemente Rebora [...]: ‘I’m not expecting anyone...,’ and yet [...] it is there, stretching out toward it.”¹⁷ This is the originality of human beings, being stretched out toward something they do not yet know, but that seizes them from head to foot.

The human person is expectant awaiting. This is our nature. But expectancy for what? The human heart is expectant awaiting for the infinite, a boundless expectancy. The poor in spirit live this expectant awaiting, stretching out toward something they do not know and do not measure, but that constitutes them and attracts them irresistibly.

It is not easy to meet people who grasp the human in its totality, without reductions. I still remember how impressed I was, listening to Giussani. He looked at the human with such capacity for embracing everything of which it is made, that I wanted to embrace myself in the same way. It filled me with gratitude to know that there was someone who embraced my humanity so radically. When we meet someone with a similar gaze, it is a liberation. Giussani continued, “The seriousness of affection for yourself is the perception of your own boundless need, but, and I insist, not of your boundless need because you want a hundred thousand things and then you desire a hundred thousand and one! It is boundless because it has no pre-established image of the things it needs: ‘It is’ need!”¹⁸ It is need! Who knows what experience must be lived, to be able to say these things! Each of us “is” need, a boundless need, before and beyond any possible image.

3. “Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down”

Taking seriously this expectant awaiting does not lessen trepidation about what will fulfill it, a trepidation that is seen in ourselves and has been seen throughout history: within us we have an irreducible and unique expectancy that is boundless, and it is not in our power to imagine what will fulfill it. It is a mystery. This expectant awaiting is directed toward “something” that we do not know,

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria (1982-1983) [Men Without a Homeland]*, Bur, Milano 2008, p. 295. Our translation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

that surpasses any identification or measure. This is hard to accept, but the greatness of the human person is all here.

Since I first read it in Leopardi, I have never forgotten his affirmation that “the inability to be satisfied by any worldly thing”¹⁹ is the chief sign of the greatness of the human person. Such a gaze upon the human person is rare. For many, the inability to be satisfied by any earthly thing is a terrible misfortune, and they would do anything to reduce this expectant awaiting in order to settle for something within reach. On the contrary, Miguel de Unamuno wrote, “what is only transitory does not satisfy me, in my longing for eternity, and [...] without it I am indifferent to everything else and everything else makes no difference to me. I need it, I really do! Without it there is no more joy in life and life joys have nothing to tell me anymore. It is just too easy to say: ‘You just have to live and be content with life.’ And what about those who are not content?”²⁰

This lack of satisfaction points to something so great as to be unimaginable. “The present situation of the human person is pure expectancy of an event that cannot be prepared for in any way, and whose appearance is absolutely unforeseeable.”²¹ We do not know what it is or how it will happen, but we wait for it expectantly. In fact, it is what above all, at the bottom of everything, we await supremely, today as then, two thousand years ago.

Ernest Hello, speaking of the time of Jesus, captured it well. “During their wait, the ancient Roman world had committed enormous abominations; opposing ambitions clashed in wars, and the earth bowed to the scepter of Caesar Augustus. The earth had not yet realized the importance of what was done in her. Stunned by the noise [...] of wars and conflicts, she had not yet realized something important that was happening: it was the silence of those who waited in the deep solemnity of desire. The earth knew nothing of all this. If it were all to start again today, she would not know any more than she did then. She would not know it, with the same lack of knowledge; she would disdain it with the same disdain, if she were forced to become aware of it. The silence, I say, was the true thing that *took place* unknown to her on her surface. This silence was an authentic action. It was not a negative silence, an absence of words. It was a positive silence, active beyond any action. While Octavius and Anthony fought over the empire of the world, Simeon and Anna waited expectantly. Who among them was more active?”²²

Benedict XVI described the mystery of this expectant awaiting. “In the time before Jesus’ birth the expectation of the Messiah was very strong in Israel—that is, the expectation of an Anointed one, a descendent of King David, who would at last set the people [of Israel] free from every form of moral and political slavery and find the Kingdom of God. But no one would ever have imagined that the Messiah could be born of a humble girl like Mary, the betrothed of a righteous man, Joseph. Nor would she have ever thought of it, and yet in her heart the expectation of the Savior was so great, her faith and hope were so ardent, that he was able to find in her a worthy mother. Moreover, God himself

¹⁹ Here is the well-known passage, in its entirety: This “inability to be satisfied by any worldly thing or so to speak, by the entire world. To consider the inestimable amplitude of space, the number of worlds, and their astonishing size, then to discover that all this is small and insignificant compared to the capacity of one’s own mind; to imagine the infinite number of worlds, the infinite universe, then to feel that our mind and aspirations might be even greater than such a universe; to accuse things always of being inadequate and meaningless; to suffer want, emptiness, and hence boredom—this seems to me the chief sign of the grandeur and nobility of human nature.” (G. Leopardi, *Pensieri*, LXVIII, translated by W.S. Di Piero (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. 113.

²⁰ M. de Unamuno, *Cartas inéditas de Miguel de Unamuno y Pedro Jiménez Iñundain*, edited by H. Benítez, *Revista de la Universidad de Buenos Aires* 3 (9/1949), pp. 135, 150; quoted by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, *We proclaim to you eternal life* (1 Jn. 1:2), Second preaching for Advent, December 11, 2020. English translation by Paolo Zanna on <http://www.cantalamessa.org/?p=3901&lang=en>

²¹ J. Daniélou, *Saggio sul mistero della storia [Essay on the Mystery of History]*, op. cit., p. 216. Our translation from the Italian translation.

²² E. Hello, *Fisionomie di Santi*, “La Torre d’avorio”—Fogola, Torino 1977, pp. 58-59. Our translation from the Italian translation from the French. There is an English translation, *Studies in Saintship*, but it is not available online in digital format.

had prepared her before time. There is a mysterious correspondence between the waiting of God and that of Mary, the creature ‘full of grace,’ totally transparent to the loving plan of the Most High.”²³

The expectant awaiting found in Simeon, Anna and Maria are not only something of the past. No, in the same silence as then, far from the spotlights as then, that expectant awaiting remains in the innermost depths of our humanity, in the silence of our heart, in the intimate reaches of our “I.” And it continues to burn. A university student wrote, “My humanity is constantly expecting a Presence that fulfills it.” This is also what Rilke, the great German poet, affirmed: “always distracted by expectation, as though each moment / announced a beloved’s coming.”²⁴ The expectation that originally constitutes our heart is for a presence that responds, that saves, safeguards and fulfills our humanity.

As described in Daniele Mencarelli’s most recent autobiographic novel, “I would like to tell my mother what I really need, always the same thing, ever since my first wails when I entered the world. What I’ve wanted for so long has not been easy to say; I tried to explain it with complicated concepts. I spent these first twenty years studying the best words for describing it. I used many words, too many, then I understood that I had to proceed in the opposite direction, and so, day by day, I began to eliminate one, the least necessary, superfluous. Bit by bit I shortened, pruned, until I reached one word. One word to say what I truly want, this thing that I have carried with me since my birth, before my birth, that follows me like a shadow, always at my side. Salvation. I do not say this word to anyone else. But there it is, and with that word its meaning, greater than death. Salvation. For me. For my mother on the other end of the line. For all the children and all their mothers. And fathers. And all the siblings of all times, past and future. My sickness is called salvation. What? Who can I say this to?”²⁵

At the apex of the arduous and impassioned consciousness of existence, the cry of our humanity explodes like an entreaty that rises from the depths of the heart of people from all time, an invocation to the unfathomable Mystery. “Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down!”²⁶ This is the entreaty implicit every time we wake up and in every gesture of the day, even of those who do not know who this ‘You’ is, even though they also await Him. “That You would rend the heavens and come down!” is the entreaty of the reason and the affection of people who do not want to live in vain. For this reason, Montale, who in his way was familiar with the human, wrote “There’s greater joy in waiting.”²⁷

Since we are expectantly awaiting something without knowing how it will make itself present, the problem is not one of intelligence, but of attention. This is what we need to ask for, as Pope Francis stressed, quoting Saint Augustine: “*Timeo Iesum transeuntem*” (*Sermons*, 88, 14, 13), ‘I fear that Jesus will pass by me unnoticed.’ Caught up in our daily concerns [...] and distracted by so many vain things, we risk losing sight of what is essential. This is why today the Lord repeats: ‘*To all, I say: be watchful! (Mk. 13:37). Be watchful, attentive.*’²⁸

²³ Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, November 28, 2010.

²⁴ R.M. Rilke, “First Elegy,” vv. 31-32, in *Duino Elegies: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Edward Snow, North Point Press, New York, 2000, p. 7.

²⁵ D. Mencarelli, *Tutto chiede salvezza [Everything Asks for Salvation]*, Mondadori, Milano 2020, pp. 22-23. Our translation.

²⁶ Is 63:19.

²⁷ E. Montale, “Glory of an Expansive Noon,” in Montale, *Poems*, translated by Jonathan Galassi, Everyman’s Library, 2020.

²⁸ Francis, *Homily at the Eucharistic Concelebration with the new cardinals*, November 29, 2020.