

Julián Carrón
IS THERE HOPE?
The fascination of the discovery

CHAPTER 3 THE UNEXPECTED LEAP OF THE HEART

The upheavals of the present have shaken up ways of living that we took for granted. “But that was the way with facts. They punctured every bubble of conceit, shattered theories, destroyed convictions.”¹ In the face of life and death, many have unexpectedly felt, even if only for a moment, an urgent need for an ultimate meaning, a need we can never entirely keep at bay. It is no surprise that many of the things that previously counted as sure evidence no longer form part of our basic cultural inheritance. As Morin said, uncertainty is the hallmark of our time, but it has been further intensified by the gravity and persistence of the pandemic. No matter what your starting point, it has become difficult to remain anchored to what you consider something already known, to entrust yourself with inertia to the illusion of having life in your power. Paradoxically, maybe it is actually helpful to see certain monolithic assumptions of ours crumble, to experience the beginning of a crack in the wall of our safe beliefs. In the lyrics of Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.”²

1. “Something unexpected is the only hope. But they tell me that it is foolishness to say so to yourself.”

The duel starts afresh every morning. Each of us can see it when we wake and prepare to face the journey of the day full of expectancy for fulfillment. This is described effectively in a well-known poem by Montale, *Before the Journey*.

“Before the journey you study the timetables,
the connections, the breaks, the layovers
and bookings (for rooms with a bathtub
or shower, a bed or two, or even a flat);
you check out
the Hachette guides and those for museums,
you exchange currency, you divide
francs from escudos, rubles from kopeks;
before the journey you inform
some friends or relatives, you look over
your suitcases and passports, you complete
your outfits, you buy some extra
razor blades, maybe you even
review your will, out of pure
superstition because the risk of an airplane crash
is statistically insignificant;

before
the journey you are calm but you suspect that

¹ I.B. Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p. 166.

² “There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in” (“Anthem,” lyrics and music by Leonard Cohen from the album, *The Future*, 1992, Columbia Records).

a wise person would not leave home and that the pleasure of returning costs a ridiculous amount. And then you leave and everything is O.K. and everything is for the best and useless.

.....
And now, what will be of *my* journey?
I've studied it too precisely, without learning anything about it. Something unexpected is the only hope. But they tell me that it is foolishness to say so to yourself.”³

We can prepare everything for the journey of life, of every day, of every hour, with the various appointments and yet even before knowing how it will go, we can confess to ourselves, “everything is O.K. and useless.” No matter how unaware or distracted we may be, we have some presentiment of the dimension of our expectant awaiting and feel certain in advance that all our preparations will not serve the purpose, will not be able to obtain what we are waiting for, that is, to fulfill the expectancy with which we wake in the morning or begin the journey. Our past experience has taught us this. So we understand how true it is that “something unexpected is the only hope.” Something has to happen that is not part of our plans, something that exceeds our preparations and projections.” “With all things, it is always what comes to us from outside, freely and by surprise, as a gift from heaven, without our having sought it, that brings us pure joy. In the same way, real good can only come from outside ourselves, never from our own effort. We cannot under any circumstances manufacture something which is better than ourselves.”⁴

That this unexpected thing happens is the peak of human expectant awaiting. “But they tell me / that it is foolishness to say so to yourself,” Montale concludes. On the one hand, he calls for this unexpected thing as “the only hope,” but on the other hand, he denies that it is possible. In fact, “those in the know” say only children or the naïve think this unexpected thing can really happen. We, too, often feel the grip of this temptation, and we acquiesce. “Yes, it’s foolishness to say so to yourself.” But is it true? If we challenge this affirmation, submitting reason to experience, we realize that the one true foolishness is to force reality into the narrow confines of our “already known,” thinking that we already know everything, dictating the limits to the possible, and thus not expecting anything.

“I have a sense,” Michel Houellebecq has his troubled main character say in his most recent novel, “that even when you plunge into true night, polar night—the one that lasts for six months in a row—the concept or the memory of the sun remains. I had entered an *endless night*, and yet there remained, deep within me, there remained something less than a hope, let’s say an uncertainty. One might also say that even when one has personally lost the game, when one has played one’s last card, for some people—not all, not all—the idea remains that *something in heaven* will pick up the hand, will arbitrarily decide to deal again, to throw the dice again, even when one has never at any moment in one’s life sensed the intervention or even the presence of any kind of deity, even when one is aware of not especially deserving the intervention of a favourable deity, and even when one realizes, bearing in mind the accumulation of mistakes and errors that constitute one’s life, that one deserves it less than anyone.”⁵

The one true foolishness is to deny the possibility of the event. Giussani spoke of this as a “crime against the supreme category of reason, of possibility.”⁶ Though the skeptical position may seem the most rational, it actually is a crime against reason. Nobody can claim that they know everything,

³ E. Montale, “Prima del viaggio [Before the Journey],” in Id., *Tutte le poesie*, op.cit., p. 390. Our translation.

⁴ S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Arthur Wills, Octagon Books, 1983, p. 94.

⁵ M. Houellebecq, *Serotonin*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, William Heinemann, London, 2019, pp. 270-271.

⁶ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, translated by Viviane Hewett, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1998, p. 31.

dominate everything, can foresee everything that may happen, and exclude the possibility that the unexpected of which Montale spoke might happen. This would be foolishness, indeed! The category of possibility belongs to the nature of reason. Therefore the only truly reasonable position is to leave the possibility open, not only at the beginning but always, now, in any moment of living.

Leaving open the possibility that something may happen that exceeds our capacity for foreseeing is not a renunciation of reason, but actually is living it fully, to its depths, according to its nature and original impetus, a window thrown open to reality, not the measure of the limits. Preventive skepticism toward everything that exceeds our measure is a blockage of reason, not its apex, and influences us more than we think; it enters inside almost without our realizing it.⁷

A young friend wrote me, “I’d like to tell you briefly how I’ve lived this recent period, after having read the question for these Spiritual Exercises: ‘Is there hope?’. The song that best describes these months is *Amare ancora [Continue loving]* by Chieffo: “But the bitterness, my love / seeing the things as I see.” I’ve discovered that I don’t have the same freshness of my first years at the university. I don’t have the same simplicity in my gaze: the skepticism that invades the world has invaded me, too. Very often I feel a strong resistance to saying that God is the one who gives me things and that they are a gift. I look at a beautiful landscape and I see in myself a subtle suspicion about the experience of correspondence I experience in front of that beauty. This suspicion hurts me and provokes great sadness: how *bitter* to see things in this way! I feel this bitterness because I’ve been a witness to and protagonist in another way of looking at reality: the music I study, the sky, the sea, the mountains, trees, everything was acknowledged as a sign of One who prefers me, who affirms me as a unique being, exclusive and unrepeatable in the whole universe. Also, and to my immense pain, I have this same skepticism toward Christ, to He whom I acknowledged present in this companionship. The song continues, “It would be enough just to return to being children and remembering ... / [...] that everything is given, / that everything is new and freed.” I experienced this in my first years in the CLU [the university students involved in Communion and Liberation], and truly, it was heaven on earth.” And so he asked, “Is there hope that I can return to being like a child, to looking with the same gaze as before? Is it possible to re-educate this gaze, which has become corrupted?”

There is a skepticism that invades us and with it a suspicion that ruins any beauty that presents itself on our journey.⁸ The shadow that this suspicion casts on everything beautiful that appears before our eyes is like a curse, and from the innermost depths of the sadness it causes, a question arises. “Is there hope that that I can return to being like a child, to looking with the same gaze as before? Is it possible to re-educate this gaze, which has become corrupted?” This is the same question of the elderly scribe Nicodemus, a doctor of the law. “How can a person once grown old be born again?”⁹ What a grace to be able to repeat it in a way that is not rhetorical—like a quote among the others, almost as if to paint over our poverty with a coat of culture—discovering it as it gushes from our innermost depths in all its truth! “How can a person once grown old be born again?”

We often find that we lack openness to possibility, that we are prone to closure, that we easily close and bar the door to what happens. A university student wrote, “In the months before the second wave, how many moments were thrown away! It seemed as if it had nothing to do with me. Then, in November, many things happened that opened a breach. First of all, I tested positive for Covid and so began isolation for twenty-five days in my room. Paradoxically, this was a time when I felt the most accompanied by dear faces as well as new ones. During the month of isolation I was active in the organization of university elections and they were very intense days. The companionship I

⁷ Vasilij Grossman observes, through a character in his great novel: “I’m beginning to have the sensation that here nothing is left of man, except suspicion.” (V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*, translated by Robert Chandler, Vintage Classics, 2006.

⁸ As Daniélou points out, “This is the human drama of man today. Today we live in the universe of diffidence, in a world in which we have been subjected to so many deceptions that we no longer believe in the word true, and a world of the kind is frightening.” (J. Daniélou, *La cultura tradita dagli intellettuali [Culture betrayed by intellectuals]*, Rusconi, Milano 1974, pp. 28-29). Our translation from the Italian.

⁹ “How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” (Jn. 3:4).

experienced during the month of November was something truly exceptional for me, even more so if I think of the particular circumstance in which everything happened. During the last days of quarantine there was also my birthday: while I was still in total isolation and far from friends and family, I had the opportunity to feel once again the enormous love and gratuitousness of all those special faces who in very creative ways accompanied me during the whole day. I feel truly grateful and fortunate. Azurmendi¹⁰ met the Movement through the radio, and I was hooked again while I was alone in my room, through Zoom sessions and the elections. But did I have to be diagnosed with Covid return to living things? Truly, there's nothing predictable and ordinary about the way the Mystery reaches us. So then I tell myself that the fundamental question is to ask to be open, which at times seems really difficult for me, and the more nothingness attacks my days, the more I struggle to do it."

It is already a big step forward to realize how fundamental this openness is. We often think that it is no big deal to remain open, but it is the fundamental question. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹¹ In other words, that which can fulfill the expectancy of the heart must find openness in us, the willingness to let it enter, the "crack" through which its light can enter.¹²

I was saying that it seems impossible to us. But what if it happened? What if we encountered it? What if it came looking for us? What if, as Manuel Vilas wrote in *El País*, "the beauty of heaven fell upon all the men and women of this planet?"¹³ If the unexpected happened, it would call for another moment of openness and sincerity, which is intimately connected with the exercise of reason and never in any way is a given. "The term 'reasonable' indicates those who submit their own reason to experience."¹⁴ I will never tire of repeating this line by Jean Guitton, because it is so crucial for living. When something unexpected happens, you should verify, put to the test, your willingness to submit your reason to experience. This openness is a gesture of maturity that people reach only after a long journey, if they do not have the heart of a child.¹⁵

Many situations can help us realize what kind of attitude we have. "I'm an operating room nurse but in November I was literally thrown into Covid intensive care. Given my desire to help people I thought I was up to it, but nothing could have been further from the truth! The reality I encountered was so hard that I couldn't bear it. Everything I was and thought I was, all the certainties were swept away when I crossed the threshold of that ward. I began to think I couldn't handle it and I asked to be transferred to another ward. But questions that wound you need an answer, not a change of circumstances. So I returned to the Covid ward, and noticed first of all that there were very young colleagues who had been hired for the emergency, who were so passionate about their work and did it with such gusto that I was amazed and my own desire to be there was renewed. You need someone to follow whose face clearly expresses hope. You need someone who opens up the horizon again for you."

¹⁰ Mikel Azurmendi, a Basque philosopher and anthropologist, has dealt in his long career with some of the most difficult themes of modern society, such as immigration, nationalism, jihad and the public value of the religious experience. He wrote about his encounter with Communion and Liberation in his book *El abrazo. Hacia una cultura del encuentro / L'Abbraccio. Verso una cultura dell'incontro*, published in Spain by Editorial Almuzara in 2018 and in Italy by BUR-Rizzoli in 2020. See here, p. **.

¹¹ Mt 5:3.

¹² Lewis wrote in this regard: "I cannot, by direct moral effort, give myself new motives. After the first few steps in the Christian life we realise that everything which really needs to be done in our souls can be done only by God. [...] We, at most, allow it to be done to us." (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, <https://www.dacc.edu/assets/pdfs/PCM/merechristianitylewis.pdf>, p. 41).

¹³ M. Vilas, "La poesía", *El País*, December 29 2020. Our translation.

¹⁴ J. Guitton, *Arte nuova di pensare [The New Art of Thinking]*, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1981, p. 71. Our translation.

¹⁵ Lewis observed: "Christ never meant that we were to remain children in *intelligence*: on the contrary, He told us to be not only 'as harmless as doves,' but also 'as wise as serpents.' He want's a child's heart, but a grown-up's head." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, op. cit., p. 92).

2. There are those who affirm that the unexpected has happened

“We’ve found the Messiah.”¹⁶ This news has travelled all through history: what our hearts awaited expectantly has made itself present. The unexpected of which Montale spoke has happened, in a place and in a time. This news has travelled through history since the day John and Andrew came upon Jesus of Nazareth on the shores of the Jordan River, a little more than two thousand years ago.

We who have been reached by this news find ourselves in front of the problem of its trustworthiness. Is Jesus of Nazareth truly who He says He is? Is He truly God made man? In fact, let’s consider the content of the announcement. What supposedly happened? The unknown object of our expectancy, the infinite our heart yearns for, the “boundless” became a man, made Himself present. “The Word became flesh.”¹⁷

Our calendars are still based on the date of that fact, that event. This is the year 2021 *after* the birth of Christ. But the pure verbal transmission of the news is not enough to make it believable for us; it is not sufficient for us to find it written in some religion or history book and every year on the calendar. How is the content to be verified? “How can those who encounter Jesus Christ a day, a month, a hundred, a thousand, or two thousand years [it is the same] after His disappearance from earthly horizons, be enabled to realize that he corresponds to the truth which He claims?”¹⁸

Let’s begin by saying that since it happened in history as fact, it must be perceivable as fact today as well in order to be recognized as the fulfillment of our expectant awaiting. The original features of the Christian announcement must be respected. “One who is divine became man,”¹⁹ a man you could meet on the street, a fully human presence, that requires the method of an encounter.

Two thousand years ago, a fact fulfilled the infinite longing of women and men. Today discourses or rules, or reading the story in a book may be important but they cannot suffice for us. The human heart has not changed; the need for fullness has remained identical and only a fact can correspond to it. It is like the Covid vaccine: in order to verify its efficacy it must be something real, within everyone’s reach. It is not enough to know it has been found; each person must be able to see and touch it, to discover its positive effects personally.

Thus, that “fact” of two thousand years ago must be something we can perceive today as it was for the first ones who encountered Jesus. But how can you and I, how can people today encounter this presence two thousand years later? What face, what features does it have? “Jesus Christ, that man of two thousand years ago, is concealed, becomes present, under the curtain, under the aspect of a different humanity. The encounter, the impact is with a different humanity: it is the experience of a different humanity that surprises us because it corresponds to the structural needs of the heart more than any modality of our thought or imagination. We did not expect it. We would never have dreamed it. It was impossible. It cannot be found elsewhere.”²⁰

This happened to Mikel Azurmendi, who, when he was gravely sick in the hospital, came upon something that transmitted a different humanity, a new accent compared to everything that had happened to him before. He heard a certain journalist on the radio who judged events differently than others, and Mikel recognized this as finally corresponding. When he left the hospital he met another person of the same group who looked at him in such a human way that it made Mikel experience an entirely unique correspondence to his elementary experience. Then he met another person, and another, and saw that all these people had the same accent, the same gaze; they were in reality in a

¹⁶ Jn. 1:41.

¹⁷ Jn. 1:14.

¹⁸ L. Giussani, *Why The Church*, translated by Viviane Hewitt, McGill-Queen’s University Press 2001, Montreal, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento nella vita dell’uomo [An Event in the Life of Man]*, Bur, Milano 2020, p. 201. Our translation.

different and more human way, and this attracted him, filling him with wonder and challenging him deeply.²¹

This dynamic can, or rather must happen also to those who have already had a certain encounter and live soaking in an experience like the Christian one, otherwise after the encounter you slide into the skepticism of Montale.

A young university student wrote me, “Until a few days ago it seemed that my life had lost its shine; I was beginning to wilt. One day my father received a call from work, saying that he needed to be tested for Covid as a precaution because he’d been in contact with an asymptomatic client. Two days later the result came back positive, and we all had to stay home in quarantine. The next week, after the danger had passed, I coasted on, as if just by inertia. I didn’t even have the strength to call some friends because I was convinced that in my home life there was no space for what you call an event. A few days later, fed up with this continuous floating, I tried with all my strength to throw myself into things like helping my mother with the house or cooking for the family, in order to regain some spurt or splash of true life, but it was no good, and the sense of limitation buried me even deeper. So I threw myself into studying. Time passed and I looked at the clock—it was 6:30 and I remembered that there was an online meeting of university students with you. I hesitated for a couple of minutes. Should I go? Should I skip it? Then I joined the meeting. At a certain point I heard someone say, ‘After the experience of fullness during the university elections, which for that matter ended with an unexpected and very satisfying result, I sensed a strange malaise. How can I live that experience of fullness again, now that I’ve returned to my normal routine?’ You began your answer by saying, ‘The details that leave us with a strange malaise are crucial...’. Something clicked up in me, and for the rest of the meeting I was glued to my computer waiting for other words that would restore my life to me. I left the Zoom meeting and returned to ‘real life.’ I had dinner, cleared the table, sat down to watch some television, and everything seemed normal, but when I went to bed I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about what you said, and setting aside my pride, I prayed in such a human way that now when I look back, it still moves me. The next day, I was no longer myself! I have an ‘absurd’ serenity and this has mysteriously affected my interacting with the family, cooking and studying, with an unimaginable gladness. And just think, I didn’t even want to join the meeting! I am overwhelmed with gratitude. What a wonder to live like this!”

We can recognize the truth of the announcement that reaches us today only by coming up against an event of human newness and experiencing the change that it generates in us, an “absurd” serenity (the adjective young people use today to say something is surprisingly great), an “unimaginable gladness,” because you cannot give it to yourself. As Cabasilas wrote, it is a “new life, because it has nothing in common with the old one; it is better than you could even have imagined because even while it is of human nature, it is the life of God.”²²

3. The irreducible nature of the Christian fact

Let’s take a better look at this “fact” that generates a new humanity. All of us are immersed in a history that transmits, for some a lot, for some not so much, the news of Christianity, provoking different reactions. Think once again of Azurmendi, a respected anthropologist and sociologist, who knew about Christianity, its doctrine, morality and values, but this knowledge was not what kindled his interest in Christianity when he was an older man. On the contrary, he had distanced himself years before and closed the door on it, as they say. Instead, what struck a spark in him a few years ago, such that he became curious and wanted to discover anew what Christianity is, knocking down the wall built by his previous knowledge? What challenged his mindset, his stance? A “fact” that he could not

²¹ Cf. J. Carrón, *You only see what you admire*, Beginning Day for adults and university students of Communion and Liberation, online meeting, *clonline.org*, September 26, 2020.

²² N. Cabasilas, *La vita in Cristo [Life in Christ]*, op.cit., p. 126.

explain as a scholar and as a man, that he could not fit into the categories with which he had looked at reality until then, including Christianity.

It was a “fact” that could not be subsumed or incorporated into his general outlook, something that could not be explained by the conceptual framework he used, by his usual thought patterns. The fact represented by that radio program, and then by the other encounters that happened after he left the hospital, could not be “subsumed,” that is, led into and incorporated into one of Azurmendi’s concepts or abstract universals, as Giussani said,²³ precisely because of the difference it contained. Its difference won him over. He was curious about and attracted by that fact and he became bound to it; he discovered he was glued to it. This introduced him to a new knowledge, a new way of treating everything, and it regenerated him. He became more himself. As the friend quoted before said, “The next day, I was no longer myself!” In other words, she was more herself.

Not everything can be pigeonholed into our habitual concepts, the frameworks into which we usually slot the things that happen. There are facts that cannot be reduced, that have something in them that challenges, breaks through, and exceeds the conceptual framework available. These “facts,” we have often said, are “people, or moments of people”²⁴ that carry within them a newness, a profoundly desirable human truth, without compare, that seems impossible. For this reason Saint Paul speaks of a “new creature.” “Being a new man means being a person whose whole life announces, through what is already present in him, He who comes.”²⁵ Those who come upon and let themselves be attracted by those facts, by those people, begin to experience the same newness in the way of living reality and are the first to discover “What a wonder to live like this!”

“Dear Julián, in the last six months, something has happened that has deeply marked my way of staying in front of everything. The nothingness of which we speak so much has entered my life brutally. On a day in June like any other, we received the news that my sister’s boyfriend had unexpectedly killed himself. Those were days of great pain and upheaval. I stayed home with my sister to keep her company, but it was evident that no discourses, religious and not, could save us from the anguish this fact had evoked in us, opening a wound that bled constantly. Today, for me, what holds firm? What does it mean right now to say that Christ overcame death two thousand years ago? What does it mean to say that death is not the final word, above all in the case of someone who chooses it? How can life be more life? How can I live the hundredfold here below, now?”. Everything she had been taught about the promise of Christianity trembled in that earthquake. Is all this true? “And my sister? Is there hope? I had to acknowledge that right from the beginning, the companionship of certain friends slowly began to increase my awareness that Christ became flesh for me, so that I could experience the intimacy and concreteness of the relationship with Him. I experienced what you wrote in *The Brilliance in Your Eyes*: “Christ is a contemporary presence, and recognition of this happens through the same identical experience of two thousand years ago [...], namely, the impact with a presence of different humanity that evokes a new presentiment of life. It strikes us because it corresponds as nothing else to our structural thirst for meaning and fullness. Then and now, it is the experience of an encounter that ‘encompasses all meaning, value, desirableness, justness, beauty and pleasantness’.” Christ was winning in me, in all my wounds and objections about those months, with His contemporary presence that passed through the human features of those friends in those days. His gaze generated in me the hope that nothing might be lost of that life apparently thrown away, of the intertwining of his life with my sister’s and mine. I say so not because I’m obsessed or crazy but because this is my experience: for me it’s impossible to separate the question ‘Is there hope?’ from His flesh present here and now.”

²³ “The dominant mentality [...] when judging, always tends to subsume the particulars into an abstract universal.” (L. Giussani-S. Alberto-J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, translated by J. Patrick Stevenson, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, p. 54).

²⁴ L. Giussani, Easter Poster 1992; the complete text in Italian is available in L. Giussani, *In cammino (1992-1998)*, Bur, Milano 2014, p. 366.

²⁵ P. Evdokimov, *L’amore folle di Dio [The mad love of God]*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Mi) 2015, p. 69. Our translation of the Italian translation.

The new creature is the fruit of this event. We see the vibration of the initial event now in the new subject it generates. Let's return once again to Giussani's words: the new creature has "a capacity for looking at and understanding reality that others cannot have." It is born "of the adherence to an event, from the affection for an event you have become attached to, that you have said *yes* to. This event is a particular detail in history. It has a universal claim, but it is a particular point. To take an event as a starting point for thought means first accepting that I am not the one who defines that event, but rather that the event defines me. What I really am and my conception of the world emerge in the event. This is a challenge for the dominant mentality, which, when judging, always tends to subsume the particulars into an abstract universal."²⁶

The newness of the event also brings into life the verification, the demonstration of the truth of the initial encounter. In fact, how can I know whether the particular I run up against is the event of Christ today? I can know if it demonstrates, as in the testimonies just quoted, its "universal claim," its capacity to illuminate every circumstance or situation, even the most devastating: death.

"I am realizing with growing wonder that the origin of hope is the continual re-happening of an irreducible presence that corresponds totally to the heart. I realized that I have been given some facts that are supporting me and that I cannot reduce to someone's 'being nice' or their kindly temperament. In the beginning of December my very dear friend entered the monastic life. His full humanity, in love with life, his certainty of having encountered God and 'already having everything' because of this love—so much that he was able to leave everything because 'nothing is lost'—continue to be a point of no return for my days. Simply by being in the monastery and with the very form of his life, he reminds me powerfully that the total answer to the expectant awaiting of my heart exists, and that I can encounter it. This is an enormous point of memory: I enter my days and things with a heart-thawing expectancy that makes me live a dialogue with everything. What is the connection between hope and his 'totally conquered' presence? A friend of mine discovered a few months ago that he has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. In the midst of the drama of this circumstance, I cannot forget his face, which continually arrives in the evening and tells me, 'This evening, once again, I'm going to bed happy and grateful because of what I've seen and what has happened: the Lord is fulfilling His promise.' The illness continues to worsen and he is grateful. What sustains the possibility of total happiness of his heart, even in a situation in which there is absolutely nothing he can do? I don't see what he sees, but I see him, who is given to me. At the end of the year I asked some kids with whom I share the Scouting experience to join me for an evening on the first chapter of *The Religious Sense*, with the desire to give them the instrument that I'm discovering is of the most help for living: the heart. At the end of December I asked them to share the most beautiful thing that had happened during the year, and in a year of Covid, it was possible they'd only talk about difficulties, negativity and pain. But one of them said, 'Every time there's talk about the heart in a meeting or an encounter with someone, I wonder 'do I listen to my heart? Do I manage to follow it? It's the most precious discovery of this year!'. I'm a teacher, and a few weeks ago when they closed the schools, in the initial frustration a question emerged in me: could it be that once again I'm being given an opportunity to learn to love those students who are here today and gone tomorrow? I went to Mass with this question and was moved to realize that even when we are under red zone Covid restrictions, even with school closed, Christ continues to give Himself to me. 'My heart is glad because You, Christ, live.' Here's the hope! Where do you live? In the impossible but real presence of my friend in the monastery, in the glad face of my friend who is going forward toward his destiny in his illness, in the Movement that generates me, allowing me to become aware of all this, to the point of betting on the heart of kids 'at the mercy of the waves' of the world. I'm seeing so many facts every day that make me experience the correspondence and remind me that Christ is alive and is everything! Only this sustains me. A few days ago, I brought a food package to a family as part of the charity work in which I participate. They offered me a coffee, and, full of all these facts, I decided for the first time to accept. The whole family was there in the living room, everybody properly distanced in respect of the Covid precautions.

²⁶ L. Giussani-S. Alberto-J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

One of the daughters watched me in silence, and you could see she had a question inside: ‘Why are you here? Why do you care about us?’. When Christ dwells in your heart, reality, even one that is not yours, becomes a home you can inhabit. I thank the Movement on my knees for being the custodian of this humanly living gaze that is full of hope, because it is Him present, He who makes Himself flesh in my life.”

In order to challenge the common mentality, the “fact” need not be anything clamorous. The power of the fact, of that particular detail, does not depend on its clamorous nature. It can be a mere breath of wind, but one that carries a difference that magnetizes you. Its power and uniqueness lie in the difference it bears. Azurmendi perceived it very well in the journalist he heard on the radio. In a 1980 dialogue with Giovanni Testori, Giussani indicated this fact by speaking of people who are ‘presences.’²⁷

We are often witnesses to facts like those described. However, it is not rare that instead of following them with simplicity like Azurmendi, we engulf them in our own system of thought, in the ‘already known,’ and therefore they do not tell us anything new. You can belong to the Christian story where many of these facts are seen, and yet continue to reduce Christianity to ethics or rites or stereotypes taken from the common image. However, none of these reductions can enkindle hope.

In the moment in which Christianity happens as an event and is embraced, we become aware of the difference that it introduces into life. Those who participate in Christianity as event unmask any reductive image of it. This happened to a young friend, who wrote, “A few days ago something happened that has helped me understand what has happened in my life. I was talking with my Mom about Christmas and at a certain point she said jokingly that she believes in Santa Claus because she needs to think there’s a figure who brings hope, a face she can think of and say ‘He can do everything; I’m placing my hope in him that everything will turn out ok.’ Her comment made me understand the preference I have received in the Movement. My mother is a believer; she goes to Mass every Sunday, and yet she places her hope in Santa Claus because for her he is a definite, concrete face! It was a demonstration for me that at times God is reduced to something abstract, to an idea. Instead, I encounter God every day; He is present and I can recognize Him thanks to my being part of a history. Having discovered Him in the encounter with this particular story made hope spring up in me.”

Running up against irreducible presences frees us from the condemnation of succumbing to the images taken from the common mentality. Only these presences bear within themselves, rooted in their innermost beings, the foundation of hope.

“The question ‘Is there hope?’ puts me with my back to the wall. I’m a medical student, and the healthcare situation makes the question all the more serious. In a period like this you can give theoretical answers to this question only for so long. At the end of the day, I lose sleep over these questions and they drain my strength. There must be a true answer that can stand up to the dramatic intensity of my days; a theoretical answer only makes everything harder to endure [it ends up increasing the nihilism, I would add]. Trying to answer the question ‘Is there hope in front of my father’s illness?’ the only thing that enables me to answer is looking at him. Is there hope in front of the pandemic? The thing that comes to mind right away [it seems like a breath of wind] are the enthusiastic eyes of a friend who does not pull back in the midst of the exhausting work in the hospital. As I sift and weigh all the situations that are hard for me, the one thing that enables me to say there’s some glimmer of hope is the example of people for whom this hope exists. However, here the drama intensifies and is not placated. Seeing them, I feel a great desire to be like them and be able to stay in front of life with their same eyes [as happened to Azurmendi, who said to himself, ‘How I would like to look at the world the way this journalist does!], but I realize that it can’t be my own effort, otherwise at the end of the day I’d just go to bed tired of counting every success or failure [it would be like reducing everything again to ethics]. So I ask myself, ‘what’s the use?’. Every day I’m surprised by

²⁷ “I find no other index of hope than the multiplication of these people who are presences. The multiplication of these people and an inevitable fondness [...] among these people” (L. Giussani - G. Testori, *Il senso della nascita [The Meaning of Birth]*, Bur, Milano 2013, p. 116).

someone who lives with truth, who attracts me and sets me into motion because I envy their way of looking at the same identical things that I'm already fed up with by eight in the morning. Usually this attraction fades two hours later, but sometimes it makes me get engaged myself. So I ask myself whether it is sufficient to follow them. Is it enough to stay in relationship with these real presences who like stars mark my days and, even if for just a moment, make me feel understood, with all my difficulties and crises?"

The answer to this question poses a problem of freedom. In front of presences who bear within them the foundation of hope, each person must first of all decide whether to follow the desire to be like them and be in their company, or not.

4. Experience and the criteria of the heart

How can you recognize these presences for what they are, for what they bear, for their true value, all the way to the origin of their difference? This question concerns us, and not even the apostles were spared it. In fact, they were the first ones who had to face it.

When the presence of Jesus began to impose itself and His fame started spreading because of the things He said and did, different interpretations about Him also began to circulate, with the complicity of those who felt their power and "authority" undermined, that is, the Pharisees and scribes, the intellectuals and leaders of the people. How did the first people who took up with Him understand that it was worthwhile to follow Him, to bind themselves to Him, to wager all their life on Him?

How do you recognize among the many faces, *the* face? What criterion can be used? By now, it should be familiar to us; we should have learned it from experience. The one adequate criterion for recognizing the presences that bring an adequate meaning to life is the one with which nature projects us in the universal comparison with everything we encounter: the heart, namely, that set of needs—for truth, beauty, justice, and happiness—and evidence that emerge in us when we are engaged with what we pass through. Giussani said, "In experience, the reality [...] by which [...] you are struck, shocked (*affectus*), causes the criteria of the heart to leap up; it awakens the heart that previously was confused and sleeping, therefore it awakens you to yourself. This is where your journey begins, because you are awake and critical."²⁸

These criteria that operate inside us even in spite of ourselves are objective and infallible, and they do not spare us one bit. Pavese documented this dramatically. On July 14, 1950, after he received the Strega Prize [the most prestigious Italian literary award], he wrote "Returned from Rome, quite a while ago. In Rome, apotheosis. And with this?"²⁹ It was as if the thing he himself noted in his diary years before had come true. "There is something sadder than failing your ideals: succeeding in them."³⁰ Less than a year before his death he confessed, "How many times in these last notes have you written *And then?* We've started to be in a cage, haven't we?"³¹ In fact, on June 22, 1950, when he received news of the great success, he wrote "It's a beatitude. Undoubtedly. But how many times will I enjoy it again? And then?"³² What was missing from his life, which seemed so successful in the eyes of the world? On August 17, 1950 he wrote, "Names aren't important. They're nothing more than names of chance, happenstance—if not those, others? It remains that now I know what my highest triumph is—and this triumph lacks flesh, lacks blood, lacks life."³³ Under the weight of that lack, ten days later he committed suicide!

²⁸ L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così? [Is it (really?!) possible to live this way?]*, Bur, Milano 2011, p. 83. Our translation.

²⁹ C. Pavese, "14 luglio 1950," in Id., *Il mestiere di vivere*, op. cit., p. 360. Our translation.

³⁰ C. Pavese, "18 dicembre 1937," in *Ibid.*, p. 66. Our translation.

³¹ C. Pavese, "16 ottobre 1949," in *Ibid.*, p. 340. Our translation.

³² C. Pavese, "22 giugno 1950," in *Ibid.*, p. 360. Our translation.

³³ C. Pavese, "17 agosto 1950," in *Ibid.*, p. 362. Our translation.

Camus noted a similar experience in his *Notebooks* on the day of his great success. “October 17. Nobel. Strange sensation of despondency and melancholy.”³⁴

We cannot elude the constitutive criteria of the heart, the need for meaning, justice, happiness, and love. They can be silenced or censured up to a certain point, but they cannot be uprooted. They are internal to experience. Giussani denounced our difficulty in recognizing that “the principle of judgment of experience lies in experience itself.” But, he stressed, “if it were not true that the principles with which to judge one’s own experience lie within experience itself, people would be alienated because they would have to depend on something other than themselves to judge themselves.”³⁵ These needs are not born in what people experience, but “are born in them in front of what they experience, in them engaged in what they go through,”³⁶ and these needs judge what they experience.

The criterion for judging must “emerge from within the inherent structure of the human being, the structure at the origin of the person.” This “fundamental criterion for facing things is an objective one, with which nature thrusts man into a universal comparison, endowing him with that nucleus of original needs, with that elementary experience which mothers in the *same* way provide to their children. It is only here, by affirming this common identity, that we overcome anarchy,”³⁷ subjectivism.

You cannot speak of experience simply in terms of ‘going through’ something. “The category of *experience* as we use the word has an absolutely critical value,” Giussani said. It should not be understood as “sentimental immediacy,” but as “the place where the impact with reality provokes the constitutive needs of the human heart, developing the search for an answer to the provocations of reality.” Consequently, “*Experience* is therefore the sphere in which the person is called to verify whether the fact of Christ—the true, great working hypothesis—can respond to these questions with a vision of the factors marked by an authenticity and completeness that none of the other proposals have.” He quickly added, “Therefore, the main intent of CL is its desire to rediscover and live authentically the fact that the Christian faith, as it has been maintained in the mainstream of orthodoxy, responds better than any other proposal to the deep needs of the human person.”³⁸

This is why the true disaster of today is the weakening of the consciousness of these needs, the obscuring of the awareness of one’s identity. In fact, Christ came to respond to human beings, not to “arid beings like robots.” As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, and I quoted before, “Nothing is more unbelievable than the answer to a question that is not asked.” Thus here is “the main intent of CL”: to “testify to the reasonableness of the faith, faith as *reasonable respect*, reasonable defined according to the conception of Saint Thomas—the experience of a correspondence between the proposal of faith and the structural needs of the human consciousness.”³⁹

The Christian event is different because of the experience it generates. The fact of the encounter with Jesus provoked in the disciples the experience of an incomparable correspondence. “We have found the Messiah.” All the other favorable events, which of course we wish will happen in life, including the successes we manage to achieve, do not satisfy the expectant awaiting or keep the promise, and in the end are a source of deep disappointment. In front of them, we too share Pavese’s reaction: “And now?”

Let’s return to the point. Authentic experience, as the place of knowledge and verification, cannot be identified as a simple subjective impression or a sentimental reaction. Experience is a “single, vital act in which a triple factor is at work: a) An *encounter* with an objective fact which has an origin

³⁴ A. Camus, *Taccuini. 1951-1959 [Notebooks.]*, III, Bompiani, Milano 1992, p. 223. Our translation from the Italian translation.

³⁵ L. Giussani, *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così? [Is it (truly?!) possible to live this way?]*, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁷ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, op. cit., pp. 7, 10.

³⁸ L. Giussani, “Il ragionevole ossequio della fede [The reasonable respect for faith],” interview by A. Metalli, *30Giorni*, n. 5, 1988, pp. 40-41. Our translation.

³⁹ *Ivi.*

independent of the person having the experience. [...] b) The ability to properly perceive the meaning of that encounter. [...] c) An *awareness of the correspondence* between the meaning of the Fact that we encounter and the meaning of our own existence [...]. It is the awareness of this correspondence that brings about the growth of the self, an essential component of experience.” Therefore, in an authentic experience “human self-consciousness and capacity for criticism”⁴⁰ are engaged.

This is what the prophet Isaiah said in another way. “That You would rend the heavens and come down!” or in other words, that the unexpected would happen, that God would truly respond to our expectant awaiting, “with the mountains quaking before You.”⁴¹ The sign that the promise has been fulfilled is the leap of your heart, the repercussion provoked by the event. This is what happened to Elizabeth. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb.”⁴² It is the same leap of the heart felt by John and Andrew when, after they came upon Jesus and spent the afternoon with Him, they told everyone “We have met the Messiah!” This is the leap of the heart also felt by Azurmendi. “I never expected to encounter any of all this in my life. It was a great surprise. Entirely out of the usual [...]; little by little, I entered into an emotional state of wonder.”⁴³ The leap of the heart is the sign that this event is happening again.

Therefore, I can recognize the divine present in certain presences, as Elizabeth recognized Jesus in Mary’s womb, through the correspondence to my heart, to my humanity, that I experience in the encounter with them and that manifests itself in the “leap of the heart.” And the verification of this encounter is its capacity to introduce me to the totality of reality, to make me face every situation and to challenge any circumstance. “Christ brought all newness by bringing Himself,”⁴⁴ said Saint Irenaeus. He brought the newness of each thing. What experience must the first Christians have had to describe Christ in such a way!

It happened and it continues to happen. It happened a few months ago to the barista of a café near the university, whose patrons were prevalently students.

“We CLU members are among the few students who continue going to the university to use the few study rooms that are open. Every morning we get a coffee (carry-out) from the same café and we’ve become friends with the barista. Last Friday morning my cousin was the last to enter and he asked the man, who has worked in that bar since 1982, how things were going. He replied, ‘Look, there’s not much work, but fortunately there are you guys. I know you’re in CL. You can see it a mile away, because you’re like those of thirty years ago: you’re the only ones who bring a breath of fresh air to the university zone.’ I wondered how it was possible for him to recognize that we were in CL and say that it’s the same thing as thirty years ago. Above all, how is it possible that we, including me, are defined as the only ones who bring a breath of fresh air to the university zone? The reason doesn’t lie in some ability of mine or ours. No, the issue is that I’ve had an encounter that scratched and marked my heart permanently to the point of making my way of looking at reality different from everyone else’s. So there’s no need for me to do astonishing things. I just have to be myself. Therefore I’ve grown in the awareness that in the end, either Christ exists or there is *nada*, nothing! It’s this way because in my experience so many facts have happened that they’ve become like successive “coats of glue” that made and make me stick to this companionship, so much so that I say “Far from You, where do I go?” I live in this time, and in front of the facts of the situation I’m not desperate, because of the experience I have. It’s an expansion of my faith to the future, as well. The weapon for waging my daily battle against the challenge of this situation is trust, faith. Having this certainty, without

⁴⁰ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, translated by Rosanna M. Giammanco Frongia, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2001, pp. 101-102.

⁴¹ Is 63:19.

⁴² Lk 1:41.

⁴³ “L’abbraccio [The Embrace],” transcript of the television interview with Mikel Azurmendi, done by Fernando de Haro for the Meeting 2020, in J. Carrón, *You only see what you admire*, op.cit., p. 15.

⁴⁴ “*Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens*” (Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, c. 34, n. 1. *Adversus haereses*, IV, c. 34, n.1: PG 7 pars prior, 1083).

doing anything in particular, but just being myself, I bring something more than just me. I live the present with hope.”

For the barista it was easy to recognize the difference in those young people, because of the breath of fresh air they brought to his life.