

“THE COURAGE TO SAY ‘I’”

Javier Prades’ speech on the title of the Rimini Meeting - August 21, 2021

INTRODUCTION

The title of the Meeting, “The courage to say ‘I,’” presents us with words from the *Diaries* of Søren Kierkegaard written in 1849, which we would like to understand in their original context.

Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard spent time reflecting on how truth is communicated. He understood that the first condition for truth to be communicated is the presence of person who can pronounce it. Truth cannot be transmitted by ventriloquism. It requires a person involved in communicating the event of comprehending that truth. Right away, we see the first sense of the value of the “I.”

Kierkegaard holds up this need in the face of a spreading rationalist-idealist line of thought, which he deeply criticized, maintaining that it was—in the worst sense of the term—an abstraction: speculation detached from real life and people’s concrete experience.

This is why Kierkegaard insisted on the need to consider and reflect on what is true in the life of a person fully alive, of an “I.” A comparison is needed, therefore, with the truth in one’s own life, and not merely an affirmation of “theoretical” truths never put to the test of daily life. Life’s task is this continual act of taking what is true and “making it our own” or reclaiming it, which engages the whole person, bringing out one’s “I.” Without engaging oneself, it is impossible to fully communicate truth to another.

The current atmosphere

If we pass from the mid-1800s to the end of the 20th century, our contemporary situation immediately raises some questions related to Kierkegaard’s words. One notable sociologist, Gilles Lipovetsky, was already affirming in the 1980s that after the upheaval produced by post-modernity though its critique of the great theoretical and political systems of the 1800s and 1900s, after the tsunami that swept away institutions and ideals, the only value still standing would be the individual and his proclaimed right to self-realization, by which is meant being enabled to seek oneself without any external reference point, seeing as the values, ideals and institutions were crumbling all around him.

To the judgment of this French professor, we can add that of the Canadian sociologist Charles Taylor, who speaks of our time as an “age of authenticity.” The mantras of our society became “be yourself,” “be authentic,” “do it your way.” This was proclaimed as the road to the fullness each person seeks so as not to lose himself: being authentic and self-referential. Illustrating the point, during the pandemic psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati insisted on criticizing this anthropological position which is closed in on itself: “I hope that there can be a change in the way we think of the ‘I,’” he said, underlining the

fact that, “we need to abandon the ‘I’-dolatry of our time, the tyranny of the self, which can bring us no good because it points us down the road of narcissistic folly.”

A recovery for education in the faith

Giussani cited Kierkegaard’s diary on various occasions. He references Kierkegaard as a “call to arms” for the person and to help us understand the difference between certain affirmations that are made, depending on whether—in making them—the I is engaged or not. You can speak the same truth, which is correct in its content, in many ways; yet some will not reach anyone, because the truth is not proposed in a personal way.

What is necessary for reflection and communication to others is also necessary in the creation of social initiatives. We clearly remember Giussani’s affirmation that, “Social initiatives are born when a person has the courage to say ‘I.’” Truth is not passed on, initiatives are not born, unless there are people who have the courage to say “I.” Fr. Julián Carrón has also, in repositing texts from Giussani, often underlined Kierkegaard’s judgment about the centrality of the subject, who must be engaged in order to communicate truth and act according to what is true.

In revisiting Kierkegaard’s affirmation, we are obliged to compare it with what we see in our world today, to try to understand it more deeply, without misunderstandings. We know another very insightful diagnosis Giussani gave, speaking of a “Chernobyl effect” no longer related to physical health, but to the supporting structures of the human person, struck by an emptying out or weakening of our cognitive and affective energies, making us incapable of going beyond the limits of our “I.”

The complexity of the problem we are facing demands that we go deeper, so as not to slip into taking the Meeting’s title for granted. What proof do we see that this need Kierkegaard formulates matches what we see today? We need to work to identify the sufficient conditions in order to be able to say “I,” and to find the courage to do so in a way that is a source of fruitfulness, rather than closing ourselves in a narcissistic folly, as Recalcati warns.

I am proposing an itinerary broken into three sections and an epilogue, with the goal of awakening a comparison with daily life. My remarks do not aim to be studious or literary, but rather to favor an attitude that can allow our “I” to affectionately and lovingly embrace reality and thereby, in it and beyond it, embrace Christ present.

FIRST SECTION: ONE, NO ONE, AND ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND

We will begin invoking a celebrated novel by Luigi Pirandello, from which I will synthetically summarize a few observations for our itinerary.

Nothing was true anymore: solitude

The questions that resonate throughout Kierkegaard’s work emerged regularly in European culture. Pirandello’s book, published in 1926, is proof of this. The protagonist of the novel is sent into crisis—about his own identity and how he relates to himself, to his wife and to others—by a seemingly insignificant experience. Vitangelo Moscarda becomes a paradigm of the life of many twentieth century men and women. How is it that his wife

sees a little flaw in him that he cannot see? As a consequence, Moscarda begins to think that there is no point in being anything to oneself. Having lost the possibility to truly know himself, he is also overtaken by suspicion regarding what other people see in him. If the knowledge I have of myself is worthless, and the suspicion creeps in that what others see in me is pure convention, then who am I? Perhaps I am the *one* I am looking at, but in reality, I am now *no one* and I may as well be, for me and for those around me, any of *one hundred thousand*. The protagonist is drawn into this madness that, after all, could actually be the ultimate lucidity in which the madman is the only one who really understands things, breaking through the conventions of bourgeois society. Anticipating postmodern culture by several decades, Moscarda seems to come out victorious because he no longer feels compelled to be “someone:” he could be *no one* or one of a *hundred thousand*; he can reject his identity and his name. He can let himself melt into the flow of life, toward the dissolution of his “I,” and live in the moment, instant by instant, without being frozen into what, at the end of the day, is merely a mask of conventions.

Looking beyond the debate about Pirandello’s nihilism, we can consider his work a novel about solitude, in a certain sense, because when a trustworthy relationship is lacking, a man has nothing left to do but to adapt to the game of appearances, locking himself in a definitive solipsism: “If I touched myself, if I rubbed my hands together, if I said ‘I’—but to whom was I saying it? For whose benefit? I was alone. And in the instantaneous shudder which now shot up to the roots of my hair, I knew eternity and all the frigidity of this infinite solitude.”

This condition characterizes the lives of many people, including anonymous ones, living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is sense of being incomplete, that it is ultimately impossible to be *someone*, to be able to say “I” in a significant and meaningful way; and therefore, a person remains alone. Immense efforts have been spent, and continue to be spent, focusing on the problem of the self, and the attempts to respond have expressed the real problems of ordinary people who live, suffer, work and keep themselves busy all day long without knowing why.

The “I,” which at the end of the 1800s in Europe seemed to be the proud recipient of an inheritance of science, technology and culture, and was exalted and absolutized as a subject who accepts no limits, fell into a deep depression at the end of the 1900s. The “I” as acting subject, as we see in academic philosophical circles but also in our general culture, is debated and questioned to the point of almost being rejected. In many moments, it seems like the only energy or power exerted by the “I” is to deny itself. It is as if the “I” were a deposing force, one that almost exists for nothing else but to say “not I,” to affirm with absolute energy—and here we see the paradoxical permanence of the “I” in existence—that a person is not (and does not want to be) *one*, is perhaps not even *no one*; that one is and is not, *one hundred thousand* others.

The Omnipotent I and the Nostalgic I

Moving to our world today, we can look at a few aspects of popular culture. The 2019 movie *Bohemian Rhapsody* brought the eighties band *Queen*’s songs back to the forefront (without any claim to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the group). Some of them exalt an image of a self who still wants to be absolute, who will not tolerate the limits of time

and space or stand to be confronted by any fact that would hinder his self-determination. A number of song titles from the movie resonate: *I Want to Break Free*, *Who Wants to Live Forever?*, *I Want It All (and I Want It Now)*, *Don't Stop Me Now*. All you have to do is listen to these songs again to recognize an "I" affirming itself with boundless presumption: "*I consider it a challenge before the human race and I ain't gonna lose (...) No time for losers 'cause we are the champions of the World.*"

Together with this boastful "I," sure of its own strength, another "I" appears today; one who does not clearly know who he or she is, or whether it is worth it to exist. It is the flipside of the coin, which reveals all the trials and complexity of something so mysterious as the free self-awareness expressed when any of us says "I." Some episodes of the TV series *Euphoria* depict this bewilderment, especially in young people. It is an emptiness found in young people who are already living without limits, who try everything but, at the same time, are also devoid of the arrogance we saw before. The main character recognizes she was defeated at the moment she was born, and also sees she is incapable of being what she would like to be.

Perhaps there remains in them the presumption of being masters of their own despair, but what appears onscreen is an immense loneliness imbued with bitterness. In the wall of the self's presumption, a crack, a dissatisfaction or melancholy different from before, was opened up, along with, perhaps, some form of entreaty (in fact *Queen* repeats the lyrics "Find Me Somebody to Love" almost obsessively). Where does the generation of *Euphoria* fit with respect to the one identified by certain themes in *Queen* songs? Does it represent an alternative phenomenon, or a consequence? This is a complex question, because human life is never black and white; it has infinite gradations that can coexist in the same society.

The "I," work, home, friends, one's hometown

The scene continues to get more complicated. To the trajectory of youth that leads from *Queen* to *Euphoria*, it is interesting to add further aspects of this contemporary difficulty in saying whether I am *one*, *no one*, or *one hundred thousand*. Let us consider a 2021 film that received many awards: *Nomadland*. In this case, the protagonists are no longer teenagers, but rather people in their 60s and 70s affected by the social and economic crisis of 2008, which decimated the savings and work opportunities of many people, and also weakened institutions. These people are anything but rebels: they are average people, workers who suffered the closing of factories and, after a lifetime of work, family life and friendship in certain cities or places, find themselves torn out of their environment.

The main character of the film, Fern, finds herself completely alone because her husband died, because the factory where she worked her whole life shut down, because her town collapsed and she no longer has a home. She has nothing left. So, she buys a van to live in, gaining herself a place in the American "on the road" movie genre with plots typical of the literary sagas by Kerouak, Steinbeck, McCarthy, etc. The movie reveals a section of American culture made up of people who are in a way forced to search on the road, because they found themselves excluded from the systems or conventions of society. The protagonist lives a solitary life with many hints of goodness, friendship, welcoming and

solidarity in the small things of life. It depicts many human encounters, but they do not last: they change with the scenery and jobs she takes.

What is depicted is not a desperate emptiness or a boundless presumption, but rather an individualism in unfulfilling solitude, in which it is as if the person is weakened, cut off from any resources. One lives alone with his past. One is also, and above all, alone at the level of meaning, so one can speak of euthanasia rather than suicide. Nature often acts as an interlocutor—landscapes filmed in a sublime way—but, in my opinion, is ultimately mute, like a presence that attracts you but says nothing. There is no trace of those things in which we can see the mystery of God. No one blasphemes; no one prays. It is a world whose common thread is a woman who is no longer bound to anyone, who is looking for something without knowing what it is, and who meets other solitary men and women who, to the “system,” are no longer anyone, who are, perhaps, one in a hundred thousand. Is what Taylor characterized as the “age of authenticity,” in the end, this life that is not only outside the conventional system, but cut off from what makes the “I” fruitful and enduring? It seems like the authentic “I” is equated with this woman who is alone. Was that the “I” left standing that Lipovetsky predicted, the I that will characterize the 21st century: men in their sixties and seventies lacking any roots? In Europe, we may not have the tradition of “on the road” movies, nor perhaps the same culture, but in our cities, in our neighborhoods—in my neighborhood—there are plenty of isolated elderly people, poor people in the streets, “ordinary” people who no longer know who to spend time with, to speak with, to whom to say “I love you,” or by whom to be called “you,” to hear “you are loved.”

To summarize, we can see an exasperated individualism that claims at times to be triumphant (themes seen in *Queen*), at the edge of an empty void (*Euphoria*), or simply numb (*Nomadland*): an individualism in solitude, incapable of stable personal ties, or of belonging to someone and generating enduring goods for oneself and for others.

The crack in the wall: the nostalgia for something beyond

All the varieties of individualism today are marked by a nostalgia—sometimes vague—for something beyond. Pirandello brings out this strange sense of waiting when he has his protagonist say we are condemned to find “a vague suspicion of something mysterious from which, though it is there present, our soul is condemned to remain distant.” Therefore, a person lives in an “undefined angst,” because if we could enter into that distant and mysterious presence whose existence we perceive, “our life would perhaps open up to who knows what kind of new sensations, so much that it would seem we are living in a whole new world.” This same intuition is reflected in the cry of many music groups, television series, or on the big screen. This opens a small breach, a way forward, because in contrast to the security experienced in other ages, people are now recognizing, in very different ways, a “vanishing point” which is this incompleteness that can be identified by an attentive and passionate observation of that “I” who is each of us, and who makes up each person we meet.

My Face

To facilitate passing on from our first section to the second, I would propose a song written by a young high school student in GS: *Il mio volto [My Face]*.

SECOND SECTION: ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE “I”

To discover you are lacking a face, the darkness at the depths of yourself, solitude, recognizing a You, the echo of a voice, being reborn from memory, being loved, being made, the stars and the heavens: so many elements—which also appear in the examples from popular culture cited above—are present in this exceptional song.

Let’s try to dig into the mystery of the “I” hinted at by Adriana, guided by the reflections of a few great 20th century authors. It will be difficult, but it is worth it...

The I: being and non-being

We will begin with an extraordinary woman, a truly great thinker, a Carmelite nun and martyr, Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), who was able to explore the mystery of the “I” with great subtlety. She wrote, “My own being, as I know it and as I know myself in it, is null and void; I do not exist by myself, and by myself I am nothing; at every moment I find myself face to face with nothingness, and from moment to moment I must be endowed with being. (...) Yet this empty existence that I am is *being*, and at every moment I am in touch with the fullness of being.”

Stein understands an undeniable fact: “my being is limited in its transience from moment to moment and thus exposed to the possibility of nothingness.” However, she also realizes this is “counterbalanced by the equally undeniable fact that despite this transience, I *am*, that from moment to moment I am *sustained in my being*, and that in my fleeting being I share in enduring being. In the knowledge that being holds me, I rest securely. This security, however, is not the self-assurance of the one who under her own power stands on firm ground, but rather the sweet and blissful security of a child that is lifted up and carried by a strong arm. And, objectively speaking, this kind of security is not less rational.”

Edith Stein did not censor a single dimension of the “I.” On the one hand, she speaks of transience, of being as in suspense, of not being nothing. She does not censor that dizziness caused by living without being the master of myself, always pushed by an unquenchable need for fullness. At the same time, she affirms that it is equally undeniable that the I is enduring, because it receives being, it is sustained in being moment by moment. What is the source of this self-awareness, which in itself opens the door to the fullness of evidence about ourselves?

Another great 20th century thinker, von Balthasar, points us in the right direction: “Not on a meditation cushion, distancing himself from everything around him, will his self become comprehensible to him—he will at best meet nothingness, and it would be a pity if he were to recognize his self in that—but only in abandoning himself to a cause or to a person. The ability to let go is the principle of all achievement and of all loving possession.” Full comprehension of one’s “I” does not come from a kind of solipsistic meditation, closed in on itself, but rather from a giving of oneself, entrusting or abandoning oneself to another, which are all essential terms in describing who we are.

How, in the history of civilization, at least in Western culture, have people reached this level of self-awareness?

Abraham: the birth of the “I”

To answer, we need to keep in mind the contributions of the Jewish roots of our Western culture. Through the Scriptures of the people of Israel incorporated in the Christian Bible, the Judeo-Christian perspective illuminates our understanding of the mystery of humanity in a definitive way. It communicates a fixed message: to be able to say “I,” a person needs to be in relationship. A “you” is needed, and not just any you, but the You with a capital “Y,” the You that is God. An “I” is generated by a relationship, and needs a relationship in which it can completely abandon itself. Without this experience, a person never takes on the dimensions of a fulfilled human “I.”

Salvation history has handed on to us a name, a precise time and place in history in the Middle East, in the history of the word: the name of Abraham. This patriarch appears as the first move in the gesture God himself used to come to meet humanity where they were, allowing what Giussani called the “birth of the I” to take place. Its generation is tied to a history. Only by entering into history can one achieve the solidity of the “I” in its fullest sense, as God himself designed it from the beginning, and therefore also reflect on it.

The man who cries out “I” with unsettling force, and at the same time is depressed because he no longer knows how he is; this man who often lives in confusion finds himself being called by name, pushed to give his response. Giussani says: man’s cry had a response; it was embraced and entered into dialogue. Using a very beautiful expression, he says: It is as if man’s cry resonated in God’s heart, inside God’s house, as if the human cry had been uttered there within.

This was the beginning of the history of that “I” which we can desire, which we can see, and which we have certainly already experienced. Abraham’s vocation is a new dawn, which begins a history within history, where the meaning of the history of the world and of the life of every person finds its communication. It begins that conversation between the cry of human searching and the answer that will make it luminous, true, fruitful, capable of entrusting itself, capable of loving and generating, capable of awakening life and becoming a protagonist in history.

God has chosen to “get involved” with us, as Sacred Scripture attests. God speaks to each of us in terms we can understand, adapted to our sensibilities, and at the same time by virtue of that concreteness, creates in us an opening to become aware of an Otherness, of an otherwise unimaginable presence. A relationship is established with that mysterious presence, intuited by Pirandello, that now shows itself and embraces all the luminous, dark, difficult and joyous dimensions of human life and brings them into an infinite perspective, the perspective of Destiny as something other than oneself without which one can never be himself. This is how the possibility to reach a true self-awareness, like that described by Edith Stein and sung about with great clarity by a girl in GS, arises in history.

What happens when God “gets involved” with Abraham? He becomes himself; he will no longer be Abram, but Abraham. With his call, he receives a name that carries within it a task. He is set on the path toward a full life for himself and for others.

When you are called by name, the path to definitive self-awareness is made possible. God’s historical method of intervening for man’s sake begins with the call of Abraham, to whom he gives a name, and with it gives an identity and a task. This begins salvation history which, through the patriarchs, Moses, the judges, prophets and kings, leads the people of Israel to mature in its expectation for the full manifestation of the divine and the human.

Before Abraham came to be, I am

The possibility so longed for by humanity, announced as unforeseeable in its form of realization, which almost seems to fail, comes about in a sudden and dumbfounding way in the figure of He who is, at the same time, the most human of all and the manifestation of the divine as we never could have imagined.

To keep to our common thread, the conception of the “I,” I would like to focus, in a few points, on that figure in history where the full affirmation of the “I” shines forth: Jesus of Nazareth. His person is so striking to his contemporaries that they continually ask, “Who is this man?” Biblical scholars explain how, “in his preaching, in the way Jesus teaches and acts, we find an exceptional awareness of self that is reflected in his authority, *exousia*, which emerges in the decisive tone of his teaching. What stands out is the expression of his “I,” the awareness of the one who is speaking, because in him is the full correspondence of everything that he says.”

We are right on the path that Kierkegaard indicated; that is, a truth that coincides, as in no other case in history, with the life of the person who speaks; an authoritativeness that flows from the correspondence between truth preached and personal life. This is seen in the direct, emphatic way in which Jesus pronounces the first-person pronoun *I*: “You have heard that it was said, but *I* say to you...,” “Amen, amen, *I* say to you...”

In many Gospel passages, Jesus contrasts the dignity and sanctity of the Law and the institutions of Israel with his “I:” a mighty I which, with powerful gestures (miracles), allows him to rule over nature and at the same time show he is full of pity and mercy; He can relate to every man and woman, feel compassion for little ones, the poor, and sinners, and bestow a power that is grace and forgiveness.

One affirmation shines forth in Jesus’ life: “I am.” “I am the light of the world;” “I am the good shepherd;” “I am the resurrection and the life;” “I am the way, the truth and the life;” “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.” In John’s Gospel, we find a number of solemn declarations that confirm this claim with a unique profundity. For example, when he says, “Amen, Amen, I say to you: before Abraham came to be, I am;” or, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am.”

I also think of that beautiful page in St. Luke when, in the face of the complaining and diffidence of the Pharisees over his welcoming sinners and eating with them, Jesus does not respond with an abstract lecture, but with three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and, above all, that splendid parable of the prodigal son. Each time he ends with the affirmation, “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one

sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.” This reading, which is in some way implicit in Luke, though still very direct, can be recognized in the very clear formulas in John’s Gospel. Jesus, after having reminded them of the power of his “I,” immediately adds, “I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me;” or “the Son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also;” “The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.” In fact, for John, Jesus is simply the Son.

Imagine how amazed and moved the Samaritan woman must have been when, talking about the Messiah who was to come, she heard Jesus tell her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” The figure of Jesus places before the eyes of all people an I that is self-aware, conscious of himself as no other person in the world has been, and that same I recognizes himself as Son of the Father, who bears the power that comes from another, from the Father, accepted by the Son.

The conception of the “I” proposed by Edith Stein and von Balthasar begins with Abraham and finds its definitive clarification in the figure of Jesus, the Son, who can say, “I am,” as only God could say in the Old Testament: “ego eimi,” which is the expression of the divine. “I am” is what God says to Moses in Exodus. Jesus can say “I am” with that same density, and at the same time testify that he is the one always being born of an Other, continuously being generated by an Other, and who therefore, in the richness of this human perspective, also makes visible the abyss of the mystery of God, who is the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Sons and daughters in the Son

As we cannot go into the profundity of the Christian conception of the mystery of God right now, we will try to follow the thread of history. Those who drew close to Jesus became, through the gift of the Spirit, sons and daughters like him, sons in the Son. They, too, gained a personality that allowed them to say “I,” to bear the burdens of life and act with the self-awareness, freedom and capacity to build that we are seeking together. They became real protagonists: what might the mother of the sons of Zebedee—completely absorbed at the time by her desire to secure a position for her two sons, James and John—have exclaimed seeing the façade of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela built in memory of her son James, a friend of the Lord?

The disciples, too, though afraid and insecure at first, spoke with authority. It’s beautiful how, after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter goes out to meet the men who are looking for him and says, “I am the one you are looking for.” The path of that “history within history” begun by Abraham generates men and women who can say “I” without excluding any factor, without taking away anything from the dizzying sense of being suspended in being, which is not our own property: that being which is received, accepted moment by moment, instant by instant, as Edith Stein observed.

Giussani insists upon this condition of the “I:” that it is the loving response to a love who calls out to it. “We have been loved and we are loved; this is why we ‘are;’” he writes, and goes on to say, “If I am loved, if I ‘am’ because I am loved, then the great problem

of my existence, of my being in the world, what makes it possible for my subject to become protagonist of a new world [this is how one says “I”], in which the eternal begins to be experienced in time, is my answer, *my answer to the You* that loves me, my correspondence, my valuing of what He created in me at my origin, precisely so that I could become aware of Him. If I am because I am loved, I have to respond (*respondeo*): this is the origin of ‘responsibility.’” Here is that beautiful word, which is perhaps not remembered often enough, to reach a true conception of the “I.”

If we feel an echo of solitude in the various modern and postmodern attempts to say “I,” now we can be struck by a different tone of humanity: that of being embraced, welcomed, loved and therefore of being in relationship, preceded by a gift and called to give our response. The alternative to solitude is not in a kind of narcissistic sentiment, always focused on oneself, in the exasperated pursuit of our own desires, but rather in welcoming an Other and responding to Him, which is to say that responsibility is the road to self-fulfillment. The authentic “I,” to use Taylor’s term, the I that is truly itself cannot help but be responsible, for itself and for others. It cannot help but receive, along with its name which is an expression of predilection, the responsibility of taking on the task which accompanies this loving embrace. Our dear friend Mikel Azurmendi discovered the radical importance of the human embrace and of the encounter with God, in order to be able to say “I.”

THIRD SECTION: THE BIRTH OF THE I AND OF A PEOPLE

To go deeper into the title of the Meeting, we spent time on the meaning of the “I” and on how you can say “I” in the fullest sense. There is still one word left to address: “courage.”

Courage springs forth from a sympathy

It is impossible, at least in Italy, to speak of courage without thinking of Don Abbondio, the character from *The Betrothed* who mutters, “Courage, if you don’t have it, is not something you can give yourself!” We can all relate somewhat to his reaction to the thought courage is a kind of energetic determination that, in reality, no one possesses or is a privilege only for a few people.

In response to this objection, it is worth clarifying right away that the determination that makes it possible to say “I” is not the effort of the will, which spurred Vittorio Alfieri to exclaim, “I wanted, I always wanted, I wanted so intensely.” That would be the kind of courage Don Abbondio does not have, just as we do not have it. Giussani, instead, says this determination and courage, “springs forth precisely from a human sympathy.” The apostles, who followed Jesus, were able to say “I” because they were bound to Jesus with a judgment that made them capable of this *decision of attachment* which is born of wonder. The courage to say “I” comes through an affective attachment that makes responsibility possible. The disciples, though scared at first, were able to respond to the point of freely laying down their lives, and thereby experienced a fruitfulness they never would have imagined.

Attachment explains, in terms of human experience, how this passage from the unique and unrepeatable figure of the Son of God to many men and women who became “sons in the Son” takes place.

An I is born, and a people is born

The step we need to look at now is how the birth of the I, beginning with an attachment, is also the birth of a people. The story of Abraham demonstrates it, because with his being chosen, the Hebrew people is born, and that people is in a way a symbol of all peoples, in that it is born from an event in history, according to the promise that his descendants would be “as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore.” Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham brought out an “I” that, by nature, finds in that relationship the origin of many relationships which, in time, lead to the birth of a people.

If the figure of Abraham is the first time we see the bond between the I and a people, the fullness of this double birth comes with Peter: Peter’s yes to Jesus is at the same time the most personal gesture of all—because it concerns his human perception of his very self in the depths of his heart—and the gesture from which a people springs forth. There is an inseparable bond between Peter’s yes and the birth of a people, between his personal response and God’s plan, which leads Peter to become responsible for that new Israel of God which is the Church, not just as ministry, but as vocation and experience of life. Thus, the Christian people was born, entrusted to the authority of Peter as the safeguard of the Church’s permanent unity.

“Feed my flock,” which is to say: take care not only of yourself, but of all the relationships generated by your relationship with Me. This mandate from God is what enables “an inexhaustible activity,” that never stops, because it can always start again and be reborn as true morality.

Spaces of action

This original perspective, which belongs to Christian revelation, makes me think of another sociologist, Ulrich Beck, who, in one of his last works expresses how perplexed he is at the world he sees on the news. He says the world has gone mad and we cannot understand anything anymore.

Seeing this world in ruin, Beck proposes a thesis (which I am interpreting very freely) to confront the difficulty we have understanding the world. He refers us to what he calls *Handlungsräume* or “spaces of action/activity:” alternative thinking, or the possibility to go beyond our usual frameworks, does not come from yet another intellectual analysis; rather, it needs a creative action that does not accept the limits of conventional ways of thinking and acting. In other words, there is an opportunity in our cosmopolitan world for those who, through their creative action—we could say: through the witness of their lived Christian experience—will be able to go further, beyond our usual frameworks.

Freedom

The courage to say “I” springs forth from the sympathy, or affection, for an Other, which gives rise to belonging. This is why a shared, communal life is so important, seeing as the fullness of human self-realization is not thought by itself, but rather the unity of thought

and action. To achieve true newness, you have to engage your freedom. Freedom is *singular* and *undeductible*, therefore it has a dynamism of its own: it is not the conclusion of reasoning, or a logical deduction starting from a general rule; it is rather the impact with a reality (a person) who attracts it, who sets it in motion to generate a bond. Without getting into further clarifications, the road that generates the “I” and at the same time generates a people is made up of reason, which leads up to affection, and of freedom. Therefore, everything that awakens the dynamism of free adhesion is needed. The witness-centric nature of the Christian experience shows us how the fullness of freedom seen in another person makes you desire the same for yourself, and therefore makes you move toward what you already see in the other and find desirable for yourself, as a good to help you be yourself, to say “I.”

Education

True education cannot simply consist in a clarification of ideas, but is the offer of a proposal, which is experienced through those bonds that allow your freedom to take a position in a new way. What a person hears will be able to mobilize the entirety of his “I” to the degree that it is experienced in a context that’s truly alive. Otherwise, at the most you can come to consider some positions more interesting than others, but a new I is not born, and a people is not regenerated in its affection, personal ties and expression in the life of society.

A people is born beginning with these relationships of human sympathy that lead to an attachment. Without these, the rest is all just indoctrination of certain ideas, no matter how correct, or of certain values that risk remaining abstract. We come back to the challenge Kierkegaard posed.

I-we: Trinity and Eucharist

The I generated in the relationship with a “you” is always, inseparably, a relationship with a “we.” Here we need to go back to the Christian perception of God the Trinity, to the Holy Spirit who was characterized by some theologians as precisely the “we.” This is a perspective proper to Christianity: “I, you and we all belong to the mystery of God; this is our monotheism, the monotheism of I, you and also we, which cannot be separated without damaging the full reality of the mystery of God who became man and therefore reveals to us, offers to us the fullness of humanity, precisely in the sacrament of the Eucharist that introduces us into the communion of the Trinitarian persons. There can be no Christian people without the Eucharist.

Dimensions in the life of a people

The dimensions of this life of a people have been described many times. Through them, we can concretely grasp how the courage to say “I” implies a willingness to educate, which is to enter into the totality of reality. Starting with an encounter that makes it possible to “live reality intensely,” it opens up in all its dimensions.

Every true education is an education to freedom, which comes into play in responsibility of action, and allows the “I” to express itself. The education on how to live in society is built on this foundation of the education to freedom: the *dignity of work* (in *Nomadland*

we saw the potential consequences of the loss of work and of the social conditions that place the I in a context of relationships), and *generating initiatives*, meaning places where, ideally, one can recognize a way of understanding work and human relationships, acting as true *Handlungsräume*.

Among all the activities in which the courage to say “I” expresses itself, it is difficult not to focus on *freedom of education*, meaning that concern inspired by our great responsibility toward those most dear to us: our children, friends, our neighbors and those in our town, whose destiny tugs at our hearts. The same goes for *justice*, which is so deeply rooted in us as an original need of our heart and also so imperfect, so inevitably fragmented in its human realization and in need of permanent conversion in order to keep from meeting its fatal end in the emptying out of every safeguard of communal life. You could say the same about the *political life*, meaning a characteristically Christian contribution to the understanding of power as a dimension of one’s service to the entire human community.

A continual recovery

The people that is born in history out of the event of Abraham’s life, and is fulfilled in the singular event that is Jesus, is tentatively ready to face all the circumstances, risks, and sacrifices required by any building of a society. It is a people ready to imitate that overabundant being which it does not possess in and of itself, but always receives—not in one moment, but in every moment—from the relationship with the Mystery. That gift is the guarantee of a continual state of recovery. Always beginning again: this is what makes man the protagonist of history. Describing this, Eliot writes, “Only the faith could have done what was good of it / Whole faith of a few / Part faith of many.” This is the Christian people, always being generated by the whole faith of some as well as the partial faith of many, built up by both. This is the only thing that allows us to “build continually.” This is the contribution of the people within a people, of the Church as a “*sui generis* ethnic identity” within the history of the world. We have a need to come across this inexhaustible energy, which has never been a self-generated energy, but always something received as a gift to which we respond.

Fratelli tutti

In completing this third section, it would be particularly interesting to look at the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* which, in chapter 6, takes up a theme very dear to Pope Francis, which he calls “Dialogue and Friendship in Society.” The Holy Father seeks to show how “social dialogue opens us to a new culture.” I highly recommend reading it.

EPILOGUE “I DID IT”

I would like to conclude by revisiting a trivial anecdote that has accompanied me for a lifetime. I was not even twenty years old and, for to the youth group I was involved in at the time, because of a sudden emergency for the group’s leader, I was put in charge of a pilgrimage of hundreds of young people: multiple buses and various logistical issues, etc. The pilgrimage started from our planned departure point. Each group was supposed to

follow another in accordance with the planned route, but at a certain point the communication lines between them broke down and many groups got lost. I thought, “This is the first time I have to lead a gesture, and it all goes wrong.” Frantic to understand what had happened, I could find no one who seemed to have actually made a mistake. It was not clear what had gone wrong. Though the lack of responsibility in everyone seemed almost normal, I still felt unsettled. When we met to judge the gesture, one of the group leaders said quite simply: “I did it. I made the mistake: I took a wrong turn, so the other groups got lost because of me.” It was the first time that I understood how the courage to say “I” by acknowledging that you made a mistake is a liberating gesture, both for yourself and for everyone. Since then, I think that one of the most impressive effects of a true relationship with the Mystery—that particular group leader had a faith much stronger than all of ours put together—is that you become capable of recognizing even your own mistakes. You know how to ask for and how to accept forgiveness.

Hannah Arendt coined the now famous expression “the banality of evil,” and we could add the *impersonal* nature of evil: evil makes us hide, erases our faces. It was no one’s fault. In relationships, at work, in the family, among friends: in the end, evil makes us hide. And this has been the case since Adam and Eve. Adam says that he was not the one who picked the fruit, and so does Eve; it was no one’s fault. Even Cain says, “I don’t know,” and has to “hide” for the rest of his life. We could continue throughout history up to present day, up to ourselves, who are also exposed to the limitations and mistakes of everyone in our family life, at work or in social interactions, and we hide.

If we come to the most extraordinary page describing the relationship of a man with the Mystery, we find Peter there before Jesus responding, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” To be able to say, “I was the one who was wrong,” to be able to say “I,” only one way of life can hold up over time: being able to say, “You know everything; you know that I love you.”

I will conclude, therefore, with the words of Fr. Giussani in St. Peter’s Square in May 1998, when he invited us to live freedom as an entreaty to the Mystery who “appears in its ultimate relationship with the creature as mercy.” He says, “The mystery of mercy shatters any image of complacency or despair; even the feeling of forgiveness lies within this mystery of Christ. This is the ultimate embrace of the Mystery, against which man—even the most distant, the most perverse or the most obscured, the most in the dark—cannot oppose anything, can make no objection. He can abandon it, but in so doing he abandons himself and his own good. The Mystery as mercy remains the last word even on all the awful possibilities of history. For this reason existence expresses itself, as ultimate ideal, in begging. The real protagonist of history is the beggar: Christ who begs for man’s heart, and man’s heart that begs for Christ.”

This is the most powerful human “I” who ever walked the earth: the I of Christ. This is the way each of us can always, even in all our limitations and our failings, continue to have the courage to say “I,” and thereby generate a people who bears witness to the presence of the living God in history.