

“CHRIST, THE LIFE OF LIFE”

EXERCISES OF THE FRATERNITY
OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

2022

Friday evening, April 29

During entrance and exit:

Sergei Rachmaninoff, Diving Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, op. 31

Valerij Poljanskij–The Russian State Symphony Cappella

“Spirto Gentil” n. 21, (Claves Records) Universal

INTRODUCTORY GREETINGS

Daide Prosperi

Let us call upon the Holy Spirit to accompany us during the journey of these days, asking with all the strength and humility of which we are capable for the grace to be open to His action, so that once again we may taste the sweetness of Christ present among us and return home, reborn and recreated.

Come Holy Spirit

As our first gesture, I will read the Holy Father’s telegram to us:

“On the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation on the theme, ‘Christ, the life of life,’ the Holy Father is glad to send his cordial greetings to the participants, with the prayer that the days of spirituality will be a providential opportunity to renew your decision to follow the divine Teacher, for an ever more fruitful presence in the Church and society, in the footsteps of the charism of the Servant of God Fr. Luigi Giussani. In front of the individualism and indifference that mark our times and provoke the discarding of so many lives, the Holy Father exhorts you to consider that the Christian response is not resigned observation of today’s poverty of values or sad nostalgia for the past, but charity animated by trust in Providence, that loves one’s own time and with humility makes all things new. With these wishes, His Holiness assures you that you will be in his prayers and gladly imparts his apostolic blessing, pledge of every desired good.”

Following the Spiritual Exercises together with us in Italy are friends in 42 countries, and in the coming weeks another 48 countries will experience the Spiritual Exercises. There is simultaneous translation of the Exercises into 7 languages. This is the panorama of our gesture.

Why are we here this evening? Why are we going to stay together for these three days, some in person and some online, but in any case, together? What convinced us once again to come together, together after two years of pandemic that have led us through solitude and also the pain of the loss

of many loved ones, together after the tribulations and shakeups that have touched our Movement, together in front of the uncertainty of tomorrow, threatened by the shadow of the death and evil brought by war?

Fr. Giussani, introducing the 1992 Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity, answered this same question in this way:

“... what is truly important in this companionship here present is something that is inexorably common to us. We all have our own personality, face, heart, temperament and character, and relatively few of us know these details about each other, but even the people I have never seen before, who disappear in the dark, increased by these enormous lights that are burning my eyes, even those I have never seen before share in common with me life as a task to achieve, to carry out; a task not identified or desired by me or by them, a common, identical task for me and for the last person among us, the furthest geographically: an assigned task. What we have in common is that we want to know, we desire to know, we demand with all our hearts to know the ‘why’ of this task, and we also want to know where all our vitality, all our expressivity, all our dedication, all our living will end up, what the *purpose* of living is, with the weariness to bear, the contradictions to cope with, and the shame about ourselves to endure (‘Pray for us sinners’). These things are common to all of us, are the most important things for each of us. We gather together again only to re-examine these essential words for our lives, which are always the same and yet never so when we repeat them to each other. This is the miracle and mystery of a life that is life, that expresses itself on the level of these words that are dramatically crucial for a face that lasts forever, that is destined to last forever: the eternal face of our ‘I.’”¹

Each of us this evening is called to ask ourselves personally the question we have been educated to pose every time we gather: why am I, Davide, and you, whatever your name may be, why are we here this evening?

I am here because I had an encounter many years ago. In the beginning it was nothing more than the experience of fascination with a humanity charged with promise, the promise of meaning for life, the promise of a task, of an ideal capable of making life a hundred times fuller and greater, an ideal capable of explaining the joys and sufferings, the justice and injustice, the happiness and unhappiness that inexorably mark my life and everyone’s. This encounter plunged me into a flow of life that took on the form of our companionship, a human companionship whose greatness and power I was able to experience, a power in valorizing and nurturing the seed of good that was in me and a power that kept me from being scandalized by my own evil and wretchedness. To summarize in one word the sense of the history that led me here this evening, I would say “mercy,”

¹ L. Giussani, *Un avvenimento nella vita dell'uomo [An Event in the Life of Man]*, Bur, Milano 2020, pp. 86-87. Our translation.

because I understand that if I was able to remain faithful to this story up to today, it was possible above all through the Lord's faithfulness to my life, a faithfulness that took the shape of the faces of many travel companions He set alongside me on this journey. As Fr. Giussani taught us, mercy is such a bottomless word that it should be ripped out of the dictionary. Based on my experience, mercy means that we are not the outcome of our calculations. If someone were to have told me that one day I would be here now speaking, I certainly would have burst out laughing. But we are not the outcome of our calculations. As the Lord said to Saint Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."²

Allow me another thought. In being here this evening, what exactly are we saying "yes" to? What am I saying "yes" to? To return to the word Fr. Giussani used in the passage just quoted, what "task" are we saying "yes" to? As we begin this central gesture of the life of the Fraternity, I think it is important to indicate clearly to everyone the responsibility that the Spirit, through the authority of the Church, entrusts to us in this moment of our history. Many have asked me this in these weeks, verbally and in writing, so it is right for us to begin helping each other to look at this step.

In brief, we are asked to participate with passion and a spirit of filial obedience in the renewal of the Church in our time. In the late 1990s the Church, in the person of Saint Pope John Paul II, solemnly recognized that the lay movements have been and are a fundamental resource for the renewal of the Church and her mission in the world, above all in the context of an increasingly secularized West. On May 30, 1998, in Saint Peter's Square, as many of us well remember, almost all the founders of the best-known ecclesial movements were present. Many of them, including our dear Fr. Giussani, are no longer alive. In accompanying the movements in the delicate transition from the foundational phase to the next one—a shift that all the movements have had to face, not just our own—the leadership of the Church was able to gain an increasingly mature awareness of how precious the gifts of the charisms are for entire Church, and of how these realities need pruning in order to bear fruit. An initial outcome, certainly not definitive, of this work of reflection, a work that did not begin with Francis' pontificate but already during that of John Paul II (as you can see in the important report by then Cardinal Ratzinger on the occasion of the May 1998 World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements), was *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, the letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a document that would be worthwhile to read and reflect on. As we know, this letter was followed by the general decree *The International Associations of the Faithful*, and Pope Francis' talk last September 16. So, is the Church asking us to become something different from what we have always been? A number of us have asked or are asking this question, and I want to answer it. When I was confirmed as President of the Fraternity for the coming years, Cardinal

² 2 Cor 12:9.

Kevin Farrell told me, “Do you want to be this factor of renewal, to contribute to be this factor of renewal from within the entire ecclesial experience, bringing all that you are? This is very important, because if you become something different from what you are, it will no longer interest anyone, not you or anybody else, and consequently it will not build the Church.”

Therefore, we are being asked nothing more than to be fully ourselves, bringing our originality within the life of the whole Church, more and more, with this awareness. This is what the Church is asking us to say yes to today. This is what Fr. Giussani wrote us after the Pope’s great meeting with the movements. “Thank you my friends! What happened last Saturday, 30 May, happened because you, you too, are there, *together*. It is only togetherness that operates. Indeed, God is where unity is. For me, the meeting on Saturday with John Paul II was the greatest day of our history, made possible by the Pope’s recognition. It was the ‘cry’ that God gave us as a *testimony to unity*, to the unity of the whole Church. At least, that was the way I felt it: we are one. I said so, too, to Chiara and Kiko, who were there next to me in Saint Peter’s Square: how is it possible not to cry out our unity on such occasions? And then I perceived—more intensely than ever before—the fact that we are *for* the Church, we are a factor that builds the Church. I felt myself taken into God’s hands, Christ’s hands, those hands that mold history. These are times in which I have begun truly to understand—and all the more on Saturday—the responsibility to which God has called me. I had not understood, but on Saturday it was clear. And this responsibility is such insofar as it communicates itself to others precisely as responsibility. This is true when it is for the whole Church, and therefore for the whole movement; when it is an obedience to the fact that—as Saint Paul says—‘We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s’ (Rom. 14:7-8). It is God who is at work in what we do: ‘God is all in all.’ Our responsibility is for unity, to the point of valuing even the smallest good that is in the other.”³

I am here for this. For this same reason, Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, Abbot General of the Cistercians, accepted our invitation to be here today, for which I thank him.

“Christ, the life of life” is the title of these Spiritual Exercises, a providential one, I would say. In fact, where can our enthusiasm for the history that seized us, where can the “yes” we are called to say come from, if not from looking Christ in the face once again, if not from the renewal of the wonder that began it all, that was the beginning of our whole history, that is, the wonder of a man, Fr. Luigi Giussani, in front of the face of another man, the man Jesus of Nazareth?

³ L. Giussani. *The Work of the Movement. The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*. Società Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, 2005, pp 280-281.

I would like to add the last and perhaps most important answer to the question posed as we began. Why am I here? Why are we here? I am here for You, O Christ, the Life of life. We are here for You. We are here to know You more, to recognize You again.

Let us collect ourselves to listen, following those who are ahead of us on the journey.

INTRODUCTION

Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori

“There is need of only one thing”

The silence that listens

“To follow Christ, to love Christ in everything: this is what must be acknowledged as the principal characteristic of our journey.”⁴

Fr. Giussani’s statement in his 2002 letter to the Fraternity, reacting with emotion to Saint John Paul II’s letter for the 20th anniversary of the Fraternity itself, immediately came to mind as the simplest and most encompassing summary of the awareness that a gesture like the Spiritual Exercises calls us to reawaken together. Together! The Spiritual Exercises are not a monologue, not even if led by a monk. On the contrary. A monk should be a humble reminder of a desire for silence, an attitude of silence, a humble reminder of the awareness that silence means listening, opening “the ears of the heart,” as Saint Benedict says in the Prologue of his Rule, which he begins in this way, “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice [that is, make experience of it]. The labor of obedience will bring you back to Him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience.”⁵

Obedience is not primarily something to do. Rather, it is listening that becomes a work in the degree to which the listening is lived as an attentive and devoted openness of the heart, “attentive” as Saint Benedict says here, like a beggar asking for what is necessary for life. If the silence that listens and desires life from an Other penetrates into life and makes space for itself in life, time, the things to do, the worries, joys and sufferings of all of life, if the silence penetrates into life even just a little bit, then this listening silence becomes the broad road by which all of your life immerses itself in silence, immerses itself in listening, leans deferentially and bows to ask for and welcome Life. As expressed in the stupendous lines of Clemente Rebora, “My song is a sentiment / that from the wearied day / tired the night hours: / and asked for life.”⁶

But the silence to which we are called in these days should not tire us. Rather, it should give us rest from the disorder, the agitated searching and the exhausting anxiety of our demands and claims that muddy the purity of the profound and true desire of the heart. This simple, child-like desire

⁴ “Letter to the Fraternity, Milan, February 22, 2002,” in Id. *The Work of the Movement. The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation*, op. cit., p. 10.

⁵ Prologue, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, Editor Timothy Fry, O.S.B., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1982, p. 15.

⁶ C. Rebora, “LXXII. Son l’aratro per solcare [I am the plow to cut a furrow]”, I. *Frammenti lirici [Lyrical Fragments]* - 1913, in Id., *Le poesie [Poems]*, Garzanti, Milano 1988, p. 123. Our translation.

does not pollute the true need with our demands upon ourselves, others, the Church, those in positions of responsibility and those who are not. This pure, true and simple desire does not sully the true need we have inside, the true need of everyone and all the situations in which life and our history unfold, including the history of a Fraternity, or an Order like mine, like all the ecclesial realities.

So, first of all let us ask Our Lady for this true silence, this true desire, because her heart was free from any stain of sin, any craving due to original sin, that is, for autonomous possession of the meaning and fullness of life, a possession that is seized or grabbed rather than accepted and welcomed. Mary's heart lived this desire always, in everything. In her, it was spontaneous to ask for everything, even without words, because the entreaty, the desire of life was the constant beat of her immaculate heart. It is not so for us. We need at least a moment of awareness that it is not so, an instant of acknowledgement that the silence that listens with the desire of the heart is not there, is too distracted, too saturated with other things, too deafened by other noises. But deep down, all that is needed to create the silence that entreats, that begs, is a moment of awareness of our distraction and superficiality that is an instant of pain, confusion and humiliation like when Martha heard Jesus tell her she was too full of noise, agitation, and demands, that she was too "already knowing what was needed." Here, this is the point! We lack silence, listening and desire when the *claim that we already know what is needed* dominates in us, the claim that we already experience what is needed, what suffices for us, what suffices for me and everyone or perhaps me without everyone, or everyone without me.

Listening is the only need

Being silent does not mean resetting our life. This never happens. If at the end of times Christ asks us to give account of what we have or have not done to one of His little sisters or brothers, if even the hairs of our head are counted, if not even the gift of a glass of water will be forgotten in heaven, if every word we say will be judged, well then, not even we can be silent, forgetting life. But even agitated and disordered life enters into silence when it listens to what is needed, when it lets itself hear, as Martha did that day, that "there is need of only one thing," that there is only one "better part" that will never be taken away. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing [only one thing is needed]. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her'."⁷

We should live the silence of these days, at least in our intention, at least as our desire, the way Martha did after Jesus' correction. She stood there, saying nothing else, struck and wounded by

⁷ Lk 10:41-42.

His words. So, she returned to the hearth, the food she was cooking, the bowls she was putting on the table, the service of all those guests who came with Jesus and invaded her home. She did not return like a beaten dog. Jesus never beats anyone. Jesus announces, educates, reveals Himself and in revealing Himself reveals us to ourselves. Martha returned to the kitchen wounded, certainly, but feeling right away that the wound did her good, lanced an abscess and purged an infection that had poisoned her heart, life, relationships, even her relationship with God, with Jesus, their great friend. There was something wrong and disordered in her that had led her even to get angry with Jesus, something she never would have wanted or imagined before that evening, before that scene.

Let us seek Martha's silence and listening, allow it to enter us, this "better part" that Martha also chose that evening, maybe first with sadness, maybe wanting to cry out even more than before, to leave and slam the door. Instead, she held her tongue, and let Jesus' word enter and work inside her, like a plow that makes the earth more fertile, capable of welcoming the seed, capable of bearing fruit.

We need Martha's silence, not only individually but also as a community, as a Fraternity, as the Church. We need it so that our life, and the life of the community, the life of the Church may become fruitful, fruitful with what Christ says, what Christ wants, what Christ, the Word of God, is. We need Martha's silence in order to fully welcome the presence of Christ, who has reached us to the point of sitting there in our home talking, to the point of being there waiting to have dinner with us, waiting to share with us the food we are cooking for Him and then to the point of spending the night in our home, because He needs to rest and is our friend and loves us so much, appreciates our company so much that He chose our house, our life, our heart, as a resting place in the course of His mission of salvation of the whole world, in the course of His coming from the Father and returning to the Father, making Himself man to redeem all of humanity! He comes to rest in my home! Do you understand what a great thing this is? What an incredible thing it is?

The dwelling place of the friendship with Christ

There is a line of a Latin hymn for the memorial of Saint Martha that always reverberates inside me. It is a prayer to the saint, that she may share her friendship with Christ with us: "*Magistri felix hospita, / corda fac nostra fervent, / ut illi gratæ iugiter / sint sedes amicitiae.* (O blessed hostess of the Lord, / make our hearts ardent / so that they may constantly be for Him / a dwelling place of grateful friendship.)"⁸

In becoming flesh, the Son of God came to call our hearts to be for Him "*sedes amicitiae*,—a dwelling place of friendship," not only in the heart of Mary His Mother, but in every human heart reached by His presence and love, even the hearts of sinners like Zacchaeus. Jesus called Zacchaeus

⁸ "July. Memorial of Saints Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Hosts of the Lord—Vespers Hymn," Monastic breviary.

to welcome Him into his home, but actually Zacchaeus was welcoming Jesus into his heart, a heart that, at Christ's coming, first was filled with joy, then with repentance and finally with love that gives not only his goods to the poor and those he himself had robbed, but also grateful love for He who came precisely to him, precisely to his own home, to "seek and save what was lost."⁹

We need Martha's silence to live this experience, or better, this grace, this event of God who comes to make of our life the dwelling place of His friendship. We must observe silence in order to listen to this offering of the presence of the Master.

The core message

What does Christ tell us? I hope we will listen to Him in these days, I hope and pray, for me and for you, as I hope you too will pray for me and for all of you. This evening, as we think of the episode of Martha, let us also think of the message that she meditated on in silence, that filled her with silence and filled her silence. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."¹⁰

As I said, maybe in the beginning Martha brooded over those words, putting the accent on the reproof she perceived in them. "Martha, calm down, you're too agitated for a thousand things. Don't disturb your sister. Let yourself be educated by your sister's relationship with Me, you who always think you are, and above all, *have to* be best and most indispensable...". Maybe in the beginning she meditated on this with resentment and sadness. But this only confirmed Jesus' judgement, that is, it increased her agitation. Fixating on those things only made her more restless and agitated.

For us too, when we receive a judgment, a gaze that reveals to us an inappropriate position in our life, a judgement that corrects us, that often initially is not clear to us, it is normal that the wound hurts, and that maybe we scratch it. But it is like receiving an injection, a vaccine. There is the puncture hole and the pain in your arm, some symptoms, but the goal of the injection is not for this; the purpose of the injection is not the hole in our skin or the bruise that forms. What did Jesus inject into Martha, wounding her superficially, wounding her self-love? What wellbeing did Martha gradually perceive after that painful puncture? What words calmed and consoled her, made her feel better, gradually made her happier with a new joy that did not come from her but from the words of Jesus?

⁹ Lk 19:10.

¹⁰ Lk 10:41-42.

If we take away Jesus' words about Martha and her sister, what core message remains? "There is need of only one thing."¹¹

This is the word that Jesus wanted to penetrate into her heart so she might meditate on it and assimilate it, so it could do her good, do good to her life, heal it, save it, unify it from the dispersion. The meaning of this message is not a bit of psychological or spiritual hygiene, or an invitation to commit to bring order to her life, starting by getting her bad character under control. The meaning of this word is Christ Himself, the meaning of Christ for Martha, the gift of Christ for Martha, which is already a shared gift even before Martha becomes aware of it. The meaning of this message is that *only Jesus responds to the fundamental desire of the heart and of life*: the desire for unity, the desire to find a meaning that holds everything together, that keeps us all together, that saves communion, a unity that embraces everything and everyone, and in which we feel embraced by everything and everyone, embraced by the Everything in everything and in everyone that is God, that is the Father, that is Christ, Christ who is the incarnation of the mercy of the Father and thus the incarnation of the embrace of the good Father, the one who welcomes back with infinite joy the prodigal son who returns to Him.

A treasure that is already shared

"There is need of only one thing."

As I said, Jesus offered Martha this word that puts everything back together again in the one thing needed, which is Jesus Himself, as a gift already present and shared, as a gift that He gives everyone. Her sister Mary was already welcoming it and perhaps her brother Lazarus, and the disciples who arrived with Him and filled up her house. This gift was already shared with all those who had already received and welcomed Him, from the Virgin Mary to Martha. It was already shared with John the Baptist, Elisabeth, Joseph, the shepherds of Bethlehem, Simeon and Anna, the Magi and for some time with Andrew and John, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, Matthew the publican, and then with Mary Magdalen and the other women who were already following and serving the Lord. But not only: it was already shared with thousands of people, with pharisees and publicans, with prostitutes, the sick of all kind and the possessed. It was already shared with the children who jumped up on Jesus' knees. There was already an entire people that shared the one thing needed that Jesus was now offering Martha.

And us? You and I? When this word reaches us, when it reached us and continues to reach us always anew, always new, think of the immense people with whom we already share it. Two thousand years of Christianity, of saints and sinners, of sainted sinners. But it is not a question of

¹¹ Lk 10:42.

numbers, it suffices just two or three people who discover they share that Christ is the one answer, total and universal to the need of the human heart to fill us with wonder, with wonder that this awareness happens to us, that it happens to each of us, to me!, to us who certainly do not deserve it more than billions of other people to whom it has not yet happened. What wonder and responsibility! What gratefulness and contrition! Because if you find in your home, eating and drinking with you, sitting right there where you and your siblings sit to eat and chat every day, if you find in your home the one Reality, the one Presence that every human heart needs, that is needed in this precise moment by 8 billion hearts beating on this earth, how can you not feel a dizzying responsibility? In one way or another you become a debtor to all of humanity by the fact that you have been given freely what everyone, absolutely everyone! is awaiting expectantly.

Embrace Christ now

But we do not need to think about this now. We do not need to think about those to whom this Reality is outstretched, offered. Now we have to think about the Reality itself because He is here and if I do not open myself and welcome Him, there is no use worrying about the universal need that awaits Him. Old Simeon immediately recognized that Baby as the “salvation of all peoples..., a light to illuminate the peoples,”¹² but did so taking that Baby into his arms, holding Him close.

So then, we have to help each other understand how this word to Martha comes to save each of us now in the situation in which we find ourselves today, now, the life of each of us, the life of the community, of the Fraternity, of the Orders, of the Church and of the world.

Let's put ourselves in Martha's shoes that day, that evening. Let's think how she withdrew into herself, in front of the hearth where she was cooking something. Let's think of how she needed to go someplace quiet with this word that wounded her. As I said, probably in the beginning she needed to cool down from her rage at not being listened to and understood by Jesus. At least, it was the skin-deep, psychological, sentimental impression that invaded her at the moment and filled her with sadness. Before that evening, she could always at least blow up, and this released the energy and freed her from her bad mood and did her good. Then she would return to her work knowing full well that her outburst had changed nothing, that her sister or whoever would continue like before, like always. But at least she had had her say; she could tell herself that she had said what she thought, even if she did not always think what she said.

This time, it was as if Jesus made the deflagration implode. It had become subterranean and instead of blowing fragments and radiation over a radius of a thousand miles, the atomic energy invaded all the underground crevices of the subterranean level of her humanity.

¹² Cf. Lk 2:30-32.

In reality, Martha had begun to realize that Jesus' message revealed her to herself, not superficially, not simply saying she was an anxious person who always wanted to make a good impression and dominate every situation, including all the people involved. She knew this already and probably her sister and brother had already told her so a thousand times. No, Jesus' word revealed her heart to herself, which is something quite different, much deeper than her superficial psychology, character or temperament. For that matter, she knew Jesus liked her temperament, that He always looked at it with fondness and probably joked about it, and she pretended to be offended but took delight in being made fun of by the Lord because in this way she felt she was the object of His affection, felt understood and embraced. Otherwise, Jesus would not have come so frequently and willingly to their home, so dominated by Martha that the Gospel does not say that Jesus was hosted by Lazarus or Mary, but by her.¹³

But Jesus' message, 'Martha, Martha... there is need of only one thing,' was not a joke or a small sign of impatience at her agitation. This word revealed her heart to her, exposed its deep, essential, total need, and revealed to her that she was fooling this deep, essential and total need, was not taking care of it. Or better, she was clogging it up with things, worries, activities, judgments, fears, irritations, preconceptions and dislikes, just as we do!

The heart is need for Christ

What is the heart? When Jesus says that only one thing is necessary, we need to realize that "necessary" translates a Greek term that means "need," "poverty," and "lack." In fact, the new translation says "there is need of only one thing." When we say a thing is necessary, we think above all of the value of this thing and that it is important and at times vital to possess it. But often we do not think of the fact that the necessity of this thing is defined by *our* need, by the lack we feel or are. Our absolute need for Christ has a mysterious "definition" that is in us, that we are, our heart, our heart that needs Him, our heart that needs only Him, that lacks only Him. Without an awareness of ourselves as need, we cannot with truth welcome the gift of Christ, the encounter in which Christ reveals that He is for us, as for Martha, the Only One necessary for the heart, the only one we truly need, of whom we *are* need.

How could I not quote the great verse of Mario Luzi that we meditated at the 2015 Meeting of Rimini: "What is this lack a lack of, oh heart, of which all of a sudden you are full?"¹⁴

That evening, Martha had exactly this experience; she was filled with this question that the heart asks itself. Our heart is a question, an entreaty that questions *itself*, an entreaty that fills us with

¹³ Cf. Lk 10:38.

¹⁴ M. Luzi, "Di che è mancanza...", in Id., *Sotto specie umana*, Garzanti, Milano 1999, p. 190. See also M.-G. Lepori, *Si vive solo per morire? [Does One Live Only to Die?]*, Cantagalli, Siena 2016, pp. 117ss.

wonder first of all as entreaty, as lack. And we say to our heart, “How can this be? I give you everything. I fill you with so many things, so many cravings and anxieties, so many vanities and presumptions, so many judgements and prejudices, so many brilliant ideas and so many silly things. How can you need something else? How can anything else fill you? How can you fill yourself with a void, a lack, a need that is so imposing, so powerful that all of a sudden it sweeps everything else into a corner? As if all the other things were only an appearance, a ghost, a mirage, waste, trash. All the rest seemed so important! How is it that all of a sudden, like the blow of a sword, the desire for something else fills you?”

As we were waiting for this encounter we listened to *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, op 31*, by Sergei Rachmaninoff. In his commentary for the *Spirto gentil* CD series, Fr. Giussani highlighted the passage we listened to just before the beginning of this encounter, in which for fully eight minutes the composer repeats the expression “*Gospodi pomiluj!*—Lord, have mercy!”. Giussani wrote, “Why, brother Rachmaninoff, do you make us repeat, for eight minutes, ‘Lord, have mercy!’, *Gospodi pomiluj?* Because our time has had no meaning, it has not had the meaning it could have had, it failed to achieve that total meaning which is called Destiny, it has totally ‘lost its memory.’ Destiny has not been a presence that molded something, it has not had influence on anything; everything in us has derived from instinctive reactions, from the indolence that has kept us from moving, from the irritation or resentment that breaks through the floor and makes anger go down into our innermost being, creating a bitter whirlpool revealing that there is anger inside you, even if it is not proclaimed and expressed.”¹⁵

I think this is the awareness that Martha came to that evening. The Destiny reached her there, deep in her heart, at the “bitter whirlpool” of her heart penetrated by irritation, resentment and anger.

The encounter that reveals desire

But this question of the heart to itself, this awareness of the heart as entreaty for Christ, of the heart as a wound that only Christ can salve and heal, did not just come to Mary’s mind all of a sudden, out of nowhere, without anything happening to prompt it. This awareness was born in Martha because that evening she had encountered Jesus. Maybe she had known Him for some time, and perhaps had hosted Him many other times; she might have heard Him spoken of, perhaps by her sister who probably had met Him before her and who maybe was the sinful woman who had washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and received forgiveness of her sins for having loved greatly.¹⁶ She knew

¹⁵ L. Giussani, “So That Your Joy May Be Complete,” In *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, op. 31*, by Sergej Rachmaninov, *Spirto Gentil*, p. 1. Claves Records, 2002.

¹⁶ Cf. Lk 7:36-50.

Him; they had spent time together and appreciated each other but Martha had never *encountered* Jesus.

Fr. Giussani captured this in the passage that suggested the theme for these Spiritual Exercises, in *Giving Your Life for the Work of an Other*, page 37, “Christ, this is the name that indicates and defines a reality I have encountered in my life. I have encountered: I heard of it when I was a child, as a boy, and so on. It is possible to grow up knowing the word Christ well, but for many people He is not encountered, He is not really experienced as being present. In my case Christ bumped into my life, my life bumped into Christ, precisely so that I should learn to understand that He is the central point of everything, of the whole of my life. *Christ is the life of my life*: in Him is summed up all that I would desire, all that I look for, all that I sacrifice, all that develops in me out of love for the persons with whom He has put me, that is, out of love for you.”¹⁷

That day, that evening, Martha *encountered Christ*; *she had an encounter as event*. The Gospel describes in Martha and Jesus’ dialogue that leap of awareness that defines the true encounter with Jesus Christ. The encounter with Christ that changes your entire life happens when a man, a woman are in front of Him just as they are, with all the humanity that defines them, the good and the bad, and it does not matter whether there is more good or more bad; it does not even matter if there is only bad. The important thing is that you find yourself just as you are in front of Him, in His presence. You can be entirely pure like the Virgin Mary, or a rascal like Zacchaeus and the good thief, or a woman with a messed-up life like the Samaritan woman, or a roughneck with a heart of gold like Peter, or a fine religious intellectual like Nicodemus or a fanatic and violent pharisee like Paul, it does not matter! The encounter happens when a man, a woman, just as they are, find themselves in front of Him and in that moment Jesus manages to penetrate into the heart of this person, even if only with a whisper, maybe only with a gaze, to give the great announcement that all of life awaits expectantly, “All you need is Me! You only need Me! I am the fullness that the need of your heart thirsts for!”

And there, truly, “*Abyssus abyssum invocat*—deep calls to deep,” as Psalm 42 says,¹⁸ the deep of the mercy of God calls, responding to the deep of poverty that is the heart of the human person.

Martha encountered Christ that day because that day her heart was pierced by the consciousness of her vanity and vacuousness, and at the same time by the surprise that the fullness of that void was there, was given to her, in Jesus.

Each of us, and all of us together this evening, must start anew from there, and embrace Jesus’ word to Martha, or Jesus’ gaze on Peter: it is the same because it always and only is the event of an encounter that comes and always comes anew as the only thing the heart needs, our heart and

¹⁷ L. Giussani, *To Give One’s Life for the Work of Another*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2022, p. 37.

¹⁸ Psalm 42:8.

the heart of every person. I invite you to relive in your life, in your heart, in the awareness of your “I,” in the silence that you manage well or badly to offer, I invite you to relive this dialogue between Martha and Jesus in Luke 10:38-42. I invite all of you to go to Jesus and complain about everything you have to complain about, about yourselves, those alongside you, husband, wife, children, your work, health, community, your Fraternity, the Movement, the Church, the entire world. And then I invite you to let yourselves be looked upon by Christ, and let yourselves be told with the words you want, with the words He encountered you with one day, that your heart needs one thing alone: Him, present. Let’s allow ourselves to be called by name, like Martha, Abraham, Moses or Saul of Tarsus, with our name repeated twice, to become aware again of the attention specifically to us, precisely to me in person, with which Christ looks at us, with which He calls us. And I invite you to pay attention to what happens in you, and in you in the relationship with everything you complained about, even rightly. In other words, I invite you to discover or rediscover how life changes, all of life, in the light of His gaze and of the grace of being aware that our heart needs Him alone.

Tomorrow we will start again from there, to take up again together the journey to follow Him, reviving the awareness of the fullness of humanity to which Christ wants to lead us.

Now let us pray the *Memorare* together.

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