

Assisi Study Retreat

Notes from the lesson by Fr. Paolo Prosperi

Friday, March 24, 2023

1. On the journey toward freedom

Every year during Lent the Church invites us to fix our gaze on the great epic of the Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the promised Land, the land of freedom, which is not America—the subject of the song that I had you listen to, not by chance¹—but the land of Canaan, “flowing with milk and honey.”

We could legitimately wonder why. If we have already been “freed from the yoke of evil,” as sung in a Lenten hymn familiar to many of you, why is there always need for a new exodus? Are we free or not? Each of us can answer for ourselves, partly yes, partly no, for many reasons, one of which is that many *Egypt*s keep us prisoner, not just one. There are many forms of slavery in our life, and new ones are continually emerging with changes in circumstances and in the mentality that dominates our environment, a mindset that, as the School of Community we have been doing underlines insistently, inevitably exerts a seductive power over us whether we realize it or not. Every time and every moment in history has its “invisible Egypt.” The environment is characterized by a certain dominant ideology, a certain mindset that dominates society and becomes a challenge, a temptation, and a trial for Christians, and at the same time, exactly for this reason, also offers an *opportunity* for maturation and enrichment, because temptation, if faced and overcome with the sword of discernment, to use a term dear to Pope Francis, always makes us stronger and more aware, and thus paradoxically enriches us.

It is impossible to live in a general cultural context without coming under its influence [...]. In our restless and confused spirit, the falsehood of the modern-day way of thinking is present, in which we ourselves participate, because we are children of this historical reality that is human life and we have to pass through all the hardships, the temptations, the bitter consequences, and keep that hope that is the life of life.²

So then, let us ask ourselves, “Today, what is the Egypt we are all living in, breathing its air, whether we like it or not?” We could say many things. I would like to reflect with you above all on a particular feature of this new “Egypt,” which I will describe drawing inspiration from a little book by Byung Chul Han, an interesting Germanized Korean philosopher whom a friend recently told me about. The title of his book is *The Burnout Society*, and I encourage you to read it, especially the fans of [the Italian rock star] Vasco Rossi, since Han (*relata refero!*) is one of the thinkers who influence his music. So then, let’s begin!

¹ The Bay Ridge Band, *New Creation*, from the CD *Spirituals and songs from the Stoop*, 1999, © Euro Company.

² L. GIUSSANI, *To Give One’s Life for the Work of An Other*, ed. Julian Carron, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2022, p. 44.

2. A new (or is it ancient?) slavery: the achievement society

One of the most heart-wrenching scenes in the book of Exodus is right at the beginning, where the sacred author with two brief lines describes the suffering of the children of Israel in Egypt, forced to work like beasts of burden under the whips of the slave-drivers to build Pharaoh's cities. I remember that when I was little, every time I saw Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, the part that moved me was the opening when you saw an immense crowd of men, including old men and children, working like beasts in the pyramid construction sites. I was a child, but who knows why, seeing these human beings whipped like mules moved me to tears, as if my heart sensed that those scenes actually held something that concerned me personally, though I did not know what it was.

[11] Accordingly, they set supervisors over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. Thus they had to build for Pharaoh the garrison cities of Pithom and Raamses. [...] [13] So the Egyptians reduced the Israelites to cruel slavery, [14] making life bitter for them with hard labor, at mortar and brick and all kinds of field work—cruelly oppressed in all their labor. (Ex 1:11-14)

Now, I think we can agree that this type of slavery is no longer the dominant one in today's society. If Marxism has failed, at least its classic version, it is because the dialectic of slave-master/oppressed-oppressor no longer seems to describe the reality of the neoliberal society we live in today. The average Italian, or, let's generalize, the average person in Western society, for the most part has usually been able to choose what to study (I imagine almost all of you could say this) and often even what job to do (not always, certainly). If we work, we receive awards, advance in our careers and above all earn well. The most fortunate have a profession they love, or they can change if they dislike it, or they can find another one that attracts them more. So, has slavery been overcome? Has the time come when "what your hands provide you will enjoy; you will be blessed and prosper" (Ps 128:2)?

According to our philosopher, the answer is no. Material slavery has been replaced by one that is more ambiguous and paradoxical, but no less devastating. What is this slavery? In a short expression, one we will expand later, the slavery to *achievement*.

Part of the famous change of era we are going through perhaps lies here, in the fact that, as Han expresses it, we have passed from a disciplinary society made up of obligations, duties and prohibitions imposed by the constituted order (incarnated by family, Church and state, etc.) to an *achievement society* where in theory the only obligations or duties are those of "promoting" or "raising up" oneself, which essentially means making money and gaining in prestige, demonstrating you are someone who "makes the difference." The great mantra that echoed everywhere when I was in the States was "You are the difference you make in the world. You exist and are someone to the degree to which you make a difference." It does not matter what kind of difference. The important thing is that you make it.

*Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. [...] Also, its inhabitants are no longer “obedience-subjects” but “achievement-subjects.” They are entrepreneurs of themselves.*³

So, you understand why I spoke of a *paradoxical* slavery. Something paradoxical seems contradictory but instead proves to correspond to reality. In our case, when we think of slaves, we think of people subject to others to the point that the owners can make them do whatever they want, that is, they can *exploit* them. As our Korean philosopher asserts, in the achievement society something different and “paradoxical” happens, because the entrepreneur *is* the worker: the exploiter and the exploited have become the same person. You exploit yourself in the sense that you no longer run yourself ragged to please someone else, but to obey your own need to feel that you perform, that you’re good, that you’re “great” (to put it in a nutshell), and this slavery is even more oppressive than the external one of the servant or the proletariat:

*You can exercise even greater constraint than You should. Auto-compulsion proves more fatal than allo-compulsion, because there is no way to resist oneself. The neoliberal regime conceals its compulsive structure behind the seeming freedom of the single individual, who no longer understands him-or herself as a subjugated subject (subject to) but as a project in the process of realizing itself. [You are what you make of yourself, the famous ideal of the self-made man]. That is its ruse: now, whoever fails is at fault and personally bears the guilt. No one else can be made responsible for failure.*⁴

Chul Han lays it on thicker: “Now we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. Freedom is exactly the opposite of compulsion: being free means being free of compulsion. Now, this freedom, which should be the opposite of compulsion, actually produces compulsion. The maladies such as depression or burnout are expressions of a deep crisis of freedom [exactly the freedom that seems to be the highest value of our society, according to Han, the freedom consecrated in the Statue of Liberty, the symbol of America, is actually one of the values most in crisis today], are the pathological manifestation of the fact that today freedom generally flips into compulsion.”⁵

In commenting on these lucid lines, I’d like to make two points. First, the achievement-subjects may not appear to be the slaves of anyone,⁶ but slaves they are, because their relationship with their own work

³ BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Burnout Society*, transl. Eric Butler, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2015, p. 8.

⁴ BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Agony of Eros*, transl. Eric Butler, MIT Press, 2017, p. 10.

⁵ Our translation. Cf. BYUNG CHUL HAN, *La società della stanchezza*, cit., pp. 109-110. This chapter is lacking in the English edition.

⁶ “However, the absence of external domination does not abolish the structure of compulsion. It makes freedom and compulsion coincide. The achievement-subject gives itself over to freestanding compulsion in order to maximize performance. In this way, it exploits itself. Auto-exploitation is more efficient than allo-exploitation because a deceptive feeling of freedom accompanies it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Exploitation now occurs without domination. This is what makes self-exploitation so efficient. [...] Psychic maladies such as burnout and depression, the

and in general with their own actions is entirely analogous to that of a slave⁷. Slaves live *in anguished fear of making mistakes* because they know that if they do so, if they fail to do everything demanded of them, they will be whipped. The *achievement-subjects* fear not another's whip, but that of their own "ego" (or better, *super-ego*), which tells them that if they cannot make it, they are nothings.

Again, slaves *do not enjoy working* because they usually do humiliating and exhausting tasks. In appearance, the contrary is true for achievement-subjects. They engage in activities in the pursuit of prestige and gratification. Ironically, obsessed as they are by performance anxiety, they cannot enjoy what they do, even if it is a kind of work that in and of itself they would like. "Tangled in an unattainable I-ideal,⁸ they become worn down by work just as much as a slave.⁹ This, according to the Korean philosopher,¹⁰ is the origin of depression and burnout.

"The complaint of the depressive individual, 'Nothing is possible,'" is conceivable only in a society that believes that "nothing is impossible." The "No-longer-being-able-to-be-able leads to destructive self-reproach and auto-aggression [...]."¹¹

*The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. In the process, it develops auto-aggression that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction. The project turns out to be a projectile that the achievement-subject is aiming at itself.*¹²

A recent tragic example of the aptness of this diagnosis is right in front of our eyes and in our hearts. How can we not think of that poor nineteen-year-old girl who took her own life in the bathroom of the Modern Languages University in Milan because she felt like a failure? Certainly, it is always mistaken and reductive to explain a tragedy in terms of the social or cultural context. Every human vicissitude is a unique and unrepeatable mystery, and only God's gaze can truly penetrate its depths. However, it is natural to ask how someone can feel like a failure *at the age of nineteen* when she has her whole life in front of her. Permit me to suggest that it is possible if you live in an environment where morning, noon and night you are bombarded by the one, insistent message that *you are your performance*.

Another observation: Han's mention of the ruse of the neoliberal regime cannot help but lead us to think of the greatest of all the deceivers, the Ancient Serpent (Gen 3:1ff; Rev 12:9), the "Pharaoh of Pharaohs." In effect, (neo)liberalism seems to achieve more than any other ideology that preceded it the dream of every self-respecting Pharaoh, that is, to have slaves who do not know they are slaves, and thus are slaves

exemplary maladies of the twenty-first century, all display auto-aggressive traits. Exogenous violence is replaced by self-generated violence, which is more fatal than its counterpart inasmuch as the victim of such violence considers itself free. (BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Burnout Society*, cit., pp. 47-48).

⁷ The achievement-subject's attitude to hard work as profession tends to become (or vice-versa, expresses) a totalizing spiritual and psychological posture that encompasses every sphere—moral life, family relationships, sex life, social relations, etc. See in this regard BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Agony of Eros*, transl. Erik Butler, MIT Press 2017.

⁸ *Ibid*, our translation.

⁹ In Marxist jargon, the achievement-subjects are *alienated* no less than the eighteenth-century workers, because they, too, tend to identify their own personal value in terms of the products of their activities.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that, if I am not wrong, the citizens of South Korea have the highest number of work hours per capita in the world, (or one of the highest).

¹¹ BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Burnout Society*, cit., p. 11.

¹² BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Burnout Society*, cit., p. 47.

even more so. It is no coincidence that John calls the devil the father of *lies* (Jn 8:44). In fact, the weapon of the great enemy of God and man has always been deceit, mirages, lies. Where is the center of this deceit? We have now reached the third point.

3. At the root of our malaise: the self-made man and forgetfulness of God as *all in all*

As Chesterton said, a heresy is a truth gone mad, or in other words, a half-truth, a part of the truth that is absolutized as if it were everything. It is no coincidence that the word *Devil* (from *diaballo* = *divide*) means *divider*. The Devil is the *divider* of many things, man from God, husband from wife, friend from friend, etc. But even before (just read the story of the fall in Gen 3:1-7 attentively to see it), he is the divider in the sense that he instigates the separation of the *parts* of the total truth, leading us to blow one out of proportion and *forget* the others. This is idolatry. It is not just adoration of a golden calf.¹³ Instead, it is also, or rather, above all the enlargement of a part, a part that shines and attracts your gaze and that ends up arbitrarily being identified with the everything.

Now, in our case, what part of the truth is being blown out of proportion? This is it: it is true that human beings were conceived to be able to affect reality, to improve it with their works, and it is true that humans cannot attain fulfillment, cannot rise to the “glory” (using a grandiose Biblical word) for which they were made, unless they expend themselves, working to improve reality, making use of all their genius and creativity. Fr. Giussani loved to quote Psalm 8 to explain this idea:

When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You set in place—what is man, that You are mindful of him, and a son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him little less than a god, crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of Your hands.

What is man? A speck of dust. We seem like a speck of dust, and yet the psalmist says this speck of dust is “*crowned with glory.*” Why? “*You have given him rule over the works of Your hands.*” This speck of dust is called to collaborate with the Creator of heaven and earth to *bring the reality of the world to its destiny*. To use the splendid expression of the great Tolkien, this speck of dust is called to be a *sub-creator*. Tolkien believed in this vocation with such seriousness that, using the material provided him by the “primary world,” he was driven to create an entire “secondary world” whose beauty fascinated and continues to fascinate millions of readers. Is there any greater vocation than this? The story of the creation of Adam in Genesis 2 says this symbolically, when it tells us that the Lord *Himself* first planted the garden of Eden (Gen 2:8) and then invited human beings “to cultivate and care for it” (Gen 2:15). So, the first worker, the first gardener, the first “farmer” was not Adam, but the Lord. And the flip side of

¹³ Note that according to the Bible, a distinctive feature of the idol is that it is made by the hands of those who adore it. “*At Horeb they fashioned a calf, worshiped a metal statue. They exchanged their glory for the image of a grass-eating bull*” (Psalm 106:19-20). In effect, if you think about it, this is true not only about the idol as a statue or image, but also about every other object of idolatry, for example, the woman you love, a singer, a political leader, etc. In all these examples, it is true that they are metaphorical or mental “fabrications.” But I am the one who identifies that certain person or certain thing with my god: I am the maker of the transformation of that non-divine person or thing into a divinity.

this means that cultivating and working the land is not the work of slaves, as thought by the Babylonians, the most culturally powerful enemies of Israel¹⁴. Instead, it is the most honorable of tasks, because it means imitating the Lord of Lords, the creator of heaven and earth.

But here's the rub: continuing with Tolkein's term, saying *sub*-creator means that human beings are called to work terrain that they did not originally create: it was placed in their hands by an Other. I can do nothing "with nothing" and "from nothing." My work is always applied to something that I did not make, beginning with that great something that is my own "I," as Fr. Giussani always reminded us. "I do not make myself," even if it is certainly true that it is up to me to try to improve myself every day, to be a better person.

So why is it important to keep this in mind? Why is it important to *make memory* of this, to use the very beautiful Giussanian formula? (I say very beautiful because the expression says that not forgetting is already an action, a doing, in fact, the most important work there is. What does this fellow sitting here on my right do? Management consultant? No, first of all, *memor Domini!*) This is important for several reasons, but here I will stress one: because making memory of the fact that what I have in my hands has been entrusted to me by an Other does not take away any "glory," "weight, importance"¹⁵ from me and my action. Rather, it is what enables me to perceive how great this "glory" is. In fact, what gives infinite weight to my action cannot be *what or how much I do* because what I do is always finite. Even if I am Novak Djokovic and I win 22 grand slams, it is still a finite number (after all, another fellow can come and win 27 and I'll fall into a depression!). What I do is always finite. But I am thirsty for eternal glory! And here we are at the well-known activism that never achieves gratification. "The exhausted, depressive achievement-subject grinds itself down, so to speak [...] It wears itself out *in a rat race* it runs against itself."¹⁶ Now, is there anything that can redeem my actions from finiteness? Is there anything that can give my action a truly infinite value? Yes, there is. Those of you among us who have had and who have experience of it know this. We are introduced into the *gusto* of the infinite in action, any action, even the smallest and most humble, by living it as a loving answer to the voice of the Infinite who calls me to that action. To put it simply, this means living the *memory of God*.

Now, if I see this well, the exact opposite of the *memory of God* is at the root of what we have called *the achievement-subject*: to use the powerful expression of the School of Community we have been doing, it is "*the forgetfulness of God all in all*." The keyword here is *forgetfulness* because it describes the dynamic of a negation that is not theoretical, but practical and existential. In the Bible (we said it over and over again in the responsorial psalm at Mass yesterday) forgetfulness is the first among all the sins, the father of all sins. In fact, what does it mean to forget? It does not mean forgetting that something is true, but *not thinking about it, not looking at it*, or in other words, *living as if it did not exist*. So, I can go to Mass every Sunday, or even every day, but live *as if God did not exist*, as if all my substance, my

¹⁴ In the Babylonian myths as well, men were put on the earth to work the land, but they are there as slaves who do the "dirty work" that the Gods will not stoop to doing. Instead, in the Bible everything is overturned. God plants the garden and gives it to man to enjoy. The paradox is that part of this "enjoyment" lies in being called to collaborate with the Creator to make the world an ever more beautiful garden. To explore this idea further, allow me to refer you to P. PROSPERI, *Sulla caduta degli angeli. Indagine sulle origini del male [On the fall of the angels. Inquiries into the origins of evil]*, Marcianum Press, Roma 2023, pp. 166-168.

¹⁵ In Hebrew, glory is *kabod*, which means "weight" (like when you say: that person has heft, that is, that person's presence and word has "weight").

¹⁶ BYUNG CHUL HAN, *The Burnout Society*, cit., p. 42; my italics.

glory, my *pondus*, what gives me a “name, lies only in what I have done, do and will do, and not also in what I am beyond my actions. What am I, beyond my actions? I am the “result” of a continuous, elective Act of love, *continuous* because I did not receive my being 48 years ago and now I go ahead on my own until the battery runs out. No, I am *continually* “drawn out of nothingness” by an Other who makes me, who gives me being. Well, in existential terms, forgetting the *God all in all* means living as if I make myself (here we have the *self-made man*), and not “You-who-make-me.” Ironically, forgetfulness and the loss of the *gusto in doing* are the two partners in this sad dance.

We know the consequences of this loss of *gusto*: insecurity, performance anxiety, competition, envy, jealousy (we detest it but it’s there), the inability to rejoice in the success of others (that is, genuine charity for your neighbor), a narcissism that eats away like a woodworm at our relationship with work and worse still, with others) because if my “substance” or “glory” lies *in my achievement*, then I will continually need someone who applauds and acknowledges my it, who tells me “You’re great!”. (Doesn’t this happen all too often among us, too?). The others become mirrors you continually need to look into to find confirmation of your worth, like in the myth of Narcissus. Relationships rot from the inside out; we use each other without wanting to, in fact, even against our will. You want to be gratuitous, pure, sincerely and gratuitously passionate about the good of others, and instead you find this cursed need for affirmation from others, which insinuates itself subtly into all your relationships, making them cursedly political, muddying them and making them ambiguous. “Miserable one that I am!” cried Saint Paul. “Who will deliver me from this mortal body! Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25).

4. And we saw His glory: Christ the way, the truth and the life

Anybody, even those who have not had an encounter like ours, could sense, maybe *confusedly*, but at least sense that this is not the life for which the heart was made. The heart wants something else. “Everyone confusedly conceives of a good in which the mind may be at rest, and desires it; wherefore everyone strives to attain it.”¹⁷ *In which the mind may be at rest, and desires it*, that is, find rest, peace, and true freedom. Everyone *confusedly* knows they are made for a “glory” that is different from the type of glory that the achievement society drives us to pursue in work and relationships, even in the Movement (!), through striving for roles and honors. What glory? Question of questions: what is the *glory* that the heart truly desires? The answer is simple, even if you need to “have received a great grace,” as Péguy said, for it not to be abstract: the glory that John and Andrew, Simon Peter and all the others saw shine in the flesh of that man Jesus:

*And we saw His glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth
(Jn 1:14c-d)*

In the man Jesus of Nazareth *true life, true glory*, that life and that glory that our heart has always desired, finally appeared in history. But our heart by itself could never reach that glory or even have imagined it,

¹⁷ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Purgatory*, XVII, vv. 127-128.

if it had not appeared in front of us, as it appeared in front of the eyes of John, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew.

So, let's try to say something about this glory, stuttering,

certainly, but we have to try, because in the end there are only two things worth talking about, as Fr. Giussani once said: the purpose of life and the way to get to there: the destination and the road.¹⁸ And as we are seeing in the new School of Community, the man Jesus Christ is both those things: "I am the way, the truth and the life," (Jn 14:6). "I am the life" means "I am the destination, the purpose" because the purpose for which you were made is to enter more deeply into My life, that is, into My mindset, *My point of view* on your woman, your work, everything. This is the purpose, otherwise familiarity with Christ remains a lovely castle in the sky; it remains who knows what."¹⁹

But Christ also says "I am the way." I am the way because by looking at Me, following Me, *remaining* with Me, you can enter into My life. So it was for the first followers: "and *they stayed with Him* that day" (Jn 1:39). And so it is for us. We must help each other look this Christ full in the face. We are together for this reason.

So therefore, let us try, for the nth time, to immerse ourselves in the story of John and Andrew, the first ones who encountered Him, the way Fr. Giussani taught us to do. How many times Fr. Giussani invited us to imagine what happened in that famous early afternoon that John and Andrew spent with Him, when they went to see "*where He was staying*" (Jn 1:39). Well, allow me to dare to offer a variation on Fr. Giussani's story. Let's imagine that they not only "watched Him speak," but that Jesus showed them His workshop where He had spent many hours, days, at times even nights in His early youth carving chairs, tables, hoes and whatnot in Joseph's company. Well, in effect it is improbably that He did so that afternoon (also because it is equally improbable that the house where He brought them that afternoon was in Nazareth, considering the distance). But let's imagine that He did it other times, later on, when John and Andrew were His disciples, and He had begun working miracles and was the man of the moment, sought out and revered by the crowds. Let's imagine the wonder and even unease of John, the most reflective and the deepest of the disciples, watching the Master's extreme care and meticulous patience all day long carving a chair, *one chair* (!) that He had decided to do for so-and-so, when outside there was a crowd of thousands of people waiting to see one of His miracles. "But everyone is looking for You!". Instead, He sat there, carving, carving, carving. Imagine John looking around, observing the tools one by one, and him seeing in a rapid flashback all the years Jesus had spent there in anonymity, planning tables, He who with a snap of the fingers could feed the crowd, He who with the fascination of His voice could enchant the whole world. Why?

John did not understand. At the moment he did not understand. He understood many years later, with the help of the Spirit (see Jn 16:12-15), because without the help of the Spirit (this may seem like a

¹⁸ "Speaking in ideal terms about life means identifying the purpose of life and the road for getting there, which none of us could think of or imagine, at all, but is given" (L. GIUSSANI, *L'io, il potere, le opera* [*The "I," Power, Works*], Marietti 1820, Genova 2000, p. 61).

¹⁹ "Faith opens us up to a different mentality from that into which we plunge every morning as we get up and leave home, but even at home, too. A new mentality (mentality is the point of view from which man starts off for all his activity), (...) The first effect on the life of a man who has this (...) is a new mentality, a new awareness that cannot be reduced to any law of the state or social custom; a new awareness as the source and echo of a working relationship with reality, in all the details implicit in existence." (L. GIUSSANI, *To Give One's Life for the Work of Another*, cit., pp. 58-59).

parenthesis, but it is not at all) you understand nothing of Christ, and in fact Fr. Giussani always told us that there is no prayer more important for us than *veni Sancte Spiritus, veni per Mariam*. Nothing is more important than begging the Spirit because without His help we always remain in the antechamber and never enter the heart of the question, always at the beginning and always wanting the same thing over again like children who always want the same snack even when they have the most delicious and nutritious steak in front of them. Well, what did John understand *later*? He understood that the glory that Jesus sought was not the glory sought by the Pharisees and Scribes. It was a different glory.

What glory was this? “And we saw *His glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son.*” It was the glory of the Son, the glory of one for whom all the honor, all the merit, all the satisfaction lay in responding to His Father, in giving Himself moment by moment to the task the Father gave Him, whether that be feeding 5,000 people or planing a table for Mr. X. In this sense, how beautiful is the beginning of the Our Father! “*When you pray, say Our Father who art in heaven. Who art in heaven. Why in heaven?*” Because the sky, heaven, is at the same time infinite vastness and light, the source of light that illuminates things. I don’t know if you’ve ever been in Palestine in the desert and seen how people’s profiles appear against the background of the immensity of the sky. Well, Our Father who art *in heaven* means “Father, you who are the background that envelopes each thing in light and infinity, Mary Magdalen’s face and the lepers’, the hungry crowd and the wood of the table for Mr. X.

For Him, everything held greatness, everything, even the most hidden, humble and even humiliating task, it should be said. Why? Because “the more hidden it is, the more love it is,”²⁰ as Fr. Giussani wrote in one of his most powerful letters to Angelo Majo when he was young. Precisely that task enabled Jesus to unleash “*the glory as of the Father’s only Son,*” to show *to what point* He was Son, *to what point* He loved the Father, and at the same time to show *to what point* charity, the passion for the good of every single person, erupted in Him from the peace of this Sonship. “Come on, Lord, work a good miracle in front of everyone, so the world will believe!” (cf. Jn 7:4!). But no, today no miracles. Today, carving. Why carving today? So that also Mr. X will know that he is of as much value as the 5,000, so that Mr. X will know that he is worth the day’s work of the King.

To tell the truth, Jesus’ way of doing miracles was often strange, like that time in Cana in Galilee when He changed the water into wine, His first “great” sign, as John records it, the first time that He *revealed “His glory”* (Jn 2:11). Pity that very few at the meal knew what He had done, if it is true that the headwaiter praised the groom, not Jesus, for having brought such a fine wine!²¹ A strange way to “reveal His own glory,” so strange that it is natural to ask, “What kind of glory is this?” His “*glory (...) full of*

²⁰ Love is enclosed only in the action we are doing, any action, and the more silent and limited compared to the impetuous and expansive desire of the heart, the more it is ‘love’” (L. GIUSSANI, *Lettere di fede e di amicizia ad Angelo Majo [Letters of faith and friendship to Angelo Majo]*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo-Mi 2007, p. 38) Our translation. In an earlier letter as well, the young Giussani had stressed the same idea, applying it to his studies: “So now I return to my books, and I think that from March to today [...] I’ve been bent over my books, with an intensity of study perfectly similar to when I was preparing for the final exam of classics high school, such a demanding effort. Am I tired? This limitation, this solitude, this silent and laborious renunciation of the living expansion of the impetuosity of affection that surges through my heart is truly a great sacrifice. I would do it for the rest of my life, exactly because it is pure sacrifice, very acute sacrifice, silent and unacknowledged sacrifice” (*ibid*, pp. 32-33). Our translation.

²¹ And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now.” (Jn. 2:9-10).

grace and truth,” a glory different from the one people seek, it is true. And yet, in the final analysis, the only glory truly “full of grace and truth,” the only glory that truly corresponds to the heart, to our heart. What is the glory for which the human being is made? We know that according to the Bible, the answer is to become similar to God, to be in the image of God (Gen 1:27). But what does it mean to be in the image of God? This is the true question. If Christ had not come, we would not have the vaguest idea of what this means, because “No one has ever seen God,” (Jn 1:18) as John wrote at the end of the prologue of his gospel. No one except Him, the man Jesus: “The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side,” (Jn 1:18) has seen God, knows Him, and for this reason moves like a man in the way He moves, to imitate the God that He has seen, to reflect in His every gesture and move the glory of that God whom only He has seen. What is this God like? What does only He know of God, while the Pharisees, who know the Scriptures by heart, do not know it? That God is love, *Deus caritas est*, as Saint John wrote.²² God is a *pure gift of self*,²³ as Fr. Giussani translated it. What Jesus knew and the Pharisees and scribes did not is that the glory of the true God is the glory of a God whose joy, whose life consists in nothing other than giving His own being, His own substance to an Other, to the Son. God is love, total gift of self. What does the Father delight in? The joy of the Father is entirely in giving His Son *all that is His*. This is what Jesus knows and that His adversaries do not.

At this point, one could object, “So what changes if I know or don’t know ‘what God is like’?”. Everything changes! Because, as we have said, everyone aspires to “be like God,” no two ways about it, not only the scribes and the Pharisees, but us. Consciously or not, it is what everyone desires. Is it wrong? No, it’s not wrong. God made us this way. “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26), as it says in Genesis. So the problem is a different one. Without Christ, without the grace of the encounter with Him, it is impossible to understand what it means “to be like God.” As we have said, this happens because we do not know God! Instead, Jesus knows Him, as He continually repeats in the dialogues with the Pharisees we are reading at Mass these days: “You do not know Him, but I know Him. And if I should say that I do not know Him, I would be like you a liar. But I do know Him and I keep His word” (Jn 8:55). “I know Him, believe me, I know Him! This is why I move as I move, go where I go, do what I do.” It is inasmuch as He knows the Father that Jesus seeks the glory that He seeks. What glory? The glory He finds in serving, in giving Himself totally so that John may live, Simon may live, Andrew may live, so the Father may find His glory in generating Him, in loving Him: “As the Father loves Me, so I also love you” (Jn 15:9).

For me, there is no scene in all the gospels that expresses this more heart-meltingly and powerfully (not in words so much as in actions) than the washing of the disciples’ feet, as recounted in chapter 13 of John’s gospel. So let us end by putting ourselves in this scene, which is truly the supreme icon of the new conception of work, the new *gusto* of action that Christ brought into the world and that by osmosis

²² “How do you explain God’s nature? How was it explained by Him, beyond all the images that human philosophies were able to build? As a source of being that gives itself totally. Thus the Son was generated, and in this relationship, a loving and moved energy just like theirs springs forth, which is the Holy Spirit. And, in fact, Saint John says *Deus caritas est*, God is love.” (L. GIUSSANI, p. 26. *Is it Possible to Live This Way?: An Unusual Approach to Christian Experience: volume 3: Charity*, transl. John Zucchi, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2009, p. 26.)

²³ Cf. L. GIUSSANI, *Is it Possible to Live This Way: An Unusual Approach to Christian Experience: volume 3: Charity*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2009, p. 8.

is being communicated to us bit by bit, if we have the simplicity to stay with Him, to remain attached to Him, present in our companionship:

*[2] So, during supper, [3] fully aware that **the Father had put everything into His power** and that He had come from God and was returning to God, [4] He rose from supper and took off His outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around His waist. [5] Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around His waist.*

Just a couple of brief comments on these few, but magnificent lines. First, “*During supper.*” In John, it is always through the apparently marginal details that the greater things shine forth. Here, it was not *before* supper or *after* supper that Jesus got up to wash the feet of His disciples, but *during* supper, which seems absurd, senseless. Why in the world? Why would You get up to wash their feet in the middle of the meal? “Yes, I want to do it in the middle of the meal.” Why? But it is obvious! To tell them that for him, for the man Jesus, washing their feet is a pleasure, an action He enjoys doing, the way He enjoys drinking a cup of good wine.

Second point: *Fully aware that the Father had put everything into His power* (knowing that the moment had come to take the throne that awaited Him, knowing He was destined to reign over the whole world) *and that He had come from God and was returning to God, etc. (...).*

“*Fully aware that*”: here we have one of the rare moments when John seemingly allowed himself for an instant to peek into the human heart of Christ, one whose intimate depths he, the beloved disciple, had access to more than any other. Remember that John not only was the closest to Jesus during the supper, but wrote his Gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so he was not telling tall tales. What does he say? That the Lord, at a certain point during the supper, was so dominated by the thought that His time had come, the hour when He had to bring to completion the work the Father had entrusted to Him, before returning to Him, that He could no longer stay there seated, reclining. He had to tell His disciples what He was about to do. Or, rather, more than having to speak, He had to do a gesture, a gesture that would symbolize what He was about to do, which is His greatest work, the work that will give Him power over the whole universe: His death on the cross (!). What is this gesture? “He rose from supper.” Let’s imagine this Jesus who stands up tall, totally aware of His royal mission. He rises from the table and... does what? He “took off His outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.” That’s terrible! How can we reconcile the image of Jesus who rises with the air of a sovereign about to do who knows what, *and* the gesture of a slave that he then does? They can be reconciled because for Jesus, this is what it means to have “everything in His power” (Jn 13:3): to use His hands “worthy of veneration” to wash His disciples’ feet. This is the Christian revolution, the revolution that Christ introduces into the way of conceiving not only of work understood as profession, but every action. It is all here in this change of perspective that changes an action that to the eyes of the world is humiliating and mortifying, and fills it with glory and greatness and thus a gusto, an enjoyment that is incomparably superior to the greatest professional success.

So now, to crown all we have done today, allow me to read you a letter I received yesterday from a friend in Boston, Luca, who was gravely sick with leukemia while his wife was pregnant with their third child. This is how Luca describes what he experienced and learned in the mysterious time of illness: “I want to

tell you about an experience I've had in the last two years, since, in October 2020 I was diagnosed with acute leukemia and was hospitalized for chemotherapy and bone marrow transplant, all in the arc of a couple of months when my wife was in her eighth month of pregnancy with our third son Carlo, named after the Blessed Carlo Acutis, who contributed to my healing [and who, by the way, is buried here in Assisi]. Carlo was born when I was hospitalized in absolute isolation, three days after the transplant. For many months I was so weak that I couldn't do anything, like play with Legos with Giovanni, our eldest who is now nine years old. I've often asked myself what value I had in that condition, in a world where if you can do nothing, you are nothing. Three or four months after the transplant, I was hardly able to set foot in our yard and walk a bit. Giovanni came to me and said, "Come on Dad, let's play soccer." This made me understand again who I am: for him, I was simply his father. He had no idea how weak and incapable I was. I understood that you discover your value in the way those who love you look at you, which is a sign of Christ who loves me. Only in relation with a gratuitous love do I understand my true value."