



A PROCESS OF GAZING

Gathering of the Young People of CL

Assisi, 23–26 November 2023

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Thursday 23 November

INTRODUCTION

Francesco Cassese

Good evening everyone and thank you for coming to this second meeting in Assisi. We have come from all over Italy and, on this occasion, we also welcome guests from abroad: thirty friends who have come from various parts of Europe. I also bring you the greetings of Davide Prospero, who is very sorry that he cannot be here with us, but in these days he is in Argentina to meet our communities there.

I will take up again the main points from the lesson and the synthesis of Father Paolo Prospero at the first gathering last March: the society of burnout characterized by performance as the measure of our value, the image of the self-made man who makes us suffocate within a cage, and “letting our feet be washed” like Peter’s were by Jesus, which is the path to liberation.

We want to pick up again the topics that emerged in the first meeting and also try to take steps forward, illuminated by what we are all doing together with the movement. I am referring to the journey of the School of Community, and in particular the Beginning Day, titled “Faith, the Fulfillment of Reason.” Let us try to go deeper into this passage from natural experience to Christian experience.

In these days, let us take the time to look each other in the face. We have made a long journey, some more, some less, to arrive here in Assisi. Why not just connect online? What does the fact of living these days together add? We are here to accompany each other for part of our journey, to taste the companionship that mystery offers us through our faces. This means making space once again so that Christ can attract us to Himself. I wouldn’t be able to take one step on this path without this attraction that is proposed to me again.

We want to walk together. We only learn how to walk together by walking together.

As emerged clearly last March, ours is, as Davide said, a “vocational companionship, which means a companionship that implicates us, in so far as it generates experience and is generated by the experience in which the charism has touched us.” These are days that we build together starting from all that is happening among us. In this sense, you will see that tomorrow evening and the next evening will be prepared and planned by you, from the testimonies to the songs.

Around 150 people here today did not participate in the gathering in March, but saw in the months since then the wave that has reached, through concentric circles, so many others. The content of the Assisi booklet was discussed on the summer vacations; there were also initiatives that repropounded the provocation of Father Paolo’s lesson. Davide, at the conclusion of the gesture in March, told us: “I did not invite you here to give you the ‘line of the movement’ but rather to share a friendship. And in sharing this friendship we understand also a little more what is the content of the proposal that the movement is making to us, clarifying the task that has been entrusted to us.” This is truly what happened, and it was a precious help for entering more deeply into the content of the proposal of the movement. The “zoom in” on the experience of work and the burden of performing helped us to understand the step that this companionship is proposing to us.

Davide continued: “Because, as I always say, when one is the object of a preference it is either an injustice (think about your friends that were not able to come here because unfortunately there was not enough space for everyone) or this preference indicates a task.” I don’t think anybody claimed that this preference was a belonging to some exclusive club. The truth of how much we have lived has brought with itself the desire to embrace and to share what has happened: “Or rather, that through each of us this preference may expand, may become our own responsibility. Pay attention, this responsibility does not translate into a role: let us brush aside immediately this error from the horizon of our expectations.... I mean to

say: to be here does not mean that starting tomorrow you are part of every diaconia on the globe.” All of us have lived this responsibility out within our communities, desiring more to build than to have a role. In some cases, initiatives were born; in others we simply entered with greater energy into the life of our communities.

I am focusing on these elements because for us it is important, fundamental, to be able to verify the fruit of a proposal. Everything started from a gamble: we knew what we were betting on, but we did not know where this bet would take us. Even today we do not know where this bet will take us, but we want to verify the goodness and fruitfulness of it.

I want to say one last thing: the posture that we have in front of the proposal that has reached us is decisive in these days, in the dialogues among us, at table, in the moments of listening and of prayer. We are interested in living these days in a true way, in an authentic way. Listen to what Father Giussani says: “‘It is neither activism nor moralism... that creates true situations.’ So what did create them? ‘My conversion.’ And what was conversion? ‘To recognize what He placed at the root of my being, recognize that I am a new creature, I am You.’ Here, Giussani addressed himself directly to this ‘You,’ almost in prayer: ‘Show yourself a bit, come up, come into the foreground. Come into my limbs, my arms and my hands, my head, my thoughts, my feelings, my eyes, my mouth. Invest, because You are a leaven, and my mass is so very heavy. I understand that it takes an entire life for this work to mysteriously come about.’” (Alberto Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, trans. Mariangela Sullivan and Christopher Bacich, [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015], 468.)

Let us pray for His presence in these days: “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Friday 24 November

PASSAGES FROM THE FIRST ASSEMBLY

Francesco Cassese (Camu). This morning we are here for the assembly, which aims to be a moment of verification of the path that we have walked in these months. Like I said yesterday, it is the occasion to share the experience that we are living: the questions, the discoveries, and the testimonies that have helped us live. To prepare ourselves, we shared this question: “What experience is generating in us and in the life of our communities the proposal of the movement? What questions are emerging?”

As we told you before in the email, in these days we desire to reflect on these words of Father Giussani, taken from the prologue of the Statute of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, which describes the core identity of the adult subject in our companionship.

“The profound meaning of the movement is a call to remember Christ, living this memory every day in the circumstances of life, and the specific nature of its charism can be described as follows:

- insistence on the memory of Christ as the affirmation of the factors at the source of the Christian experience, because these are the origin of man’s true image;*

- insistence on the fact that the memory of Christ cannot be generated except in the immanence of a fully lived communionality;*

- insistence on the fact that the memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a communionality that is visible in and offers proposals to society.”*

Before starting the assembly, I want to read a text of Giussani that explains, responding to a question, the type of work that is expected of us. “Excuse me, I will allow myself to insist that an assembly is not in the fact that one speaks after another. If what one has said is not clear in you, you must persist, because then we apply ourselves to what was just said, we go deeper into the question and we learn. I

am certain that most of you have not yet understood what was said in the last contribution; I can see it in your faces. God save us if one of you has the courage or simply the intelligence to say: ‘Excuse me, please repeat that, give an example!’ Otherwise it becomes more of a labor, the assembly tends to become something formal, something to do: the one is speaking is there, nervous about his contribution and doesn’t listen, doesn’t learn anything, but also the rest are there, ready for their great work, which is to spend the assembly in the hope that maybe something beautiful will suddenly happen. This is not a real endeavor. The question I am raising cuts to the root the great majority of the attitude that we use. So many times, I think, it is even worse than what I just said, because we have an assembly just to have an assembly, we do a public initiative just to do a public initiative. And we are careful not to ask too loud those around us, ‘Did it go well? Did it go badly?’ We censure the question in this way: ‘We did it! It happened!’ What has been said is the application of a principle that so many times we have repeated....: man learns from experience and experience is something that happens, something we do, judged in the light of the ideal. Judged! Here we ask ourselves: Where are we lacking? Where is the point in which we should cut in or penetrate or make the criterion more exact? In short, it is a work on what we have done or what we are doing.”¹

For this reason, this morning will be a series of testimonies and questions, but within a dialogue; that is, with the possibility of establishing a few points and making a judgment.

Simone. Ever since we went to see the pope on 15 October 2022, I have been carrying a question because he reminded us of the fact that the charism belongs to everyone. The thing that always struck me about Giussani (others told me about him and I read him, so indirectly, but it is an experience of faith and it is as if I had experienced it myself) is that everything that he did he did “anew,” that is, in a creative way. The thing I always ask myself is how I can allow the charism to become

¹ Luigi Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose (1979–1981)* [Certain of a few great things] (Milan: BUR, 2007), 288–89 (translation ours).

creative in me. By “creative,” I don’t mean as my effort, something “I do,” but rather: How can I let myself be used by the Holy Spirit (because we speak like this about a gift given to Giussani for us) so that He can make everything new? At work, how can I be in front of patients in a human way? Or, when I return home, how can I be with my kids as if Jesus were there? This has always struck me about the movement, that Christianity is a social fact and therefore there is no longer any aspect of reality that does not have to do with Jesus. So, how can I also look at money, at friendships, at everything, as Jesus looks at them? I will recount an indirect experience—this is something that happened to my wife, but it was also my experience because we lived it together. Last year, she presented a project at school dedicated to Vasily Grossman on “truth and freedom” with students from an ordinary school, from a school in the jail, and from a night school. She made an exhibit that also won a national prize from the Ministry of Instruction. It was a beautiful exhibit. She always said: “I am a Christian,” but she never spoke about Jesus, above all to the inmates. She taught in a maximum-security prison, where the people had committed heinous crimes. At the end of the project, when she was leaving, the inmates said to her: “Professor, you made us truly free, even if we are here inside the prison.” This was the same phrase that in *The Religious Sense* podcast a student said to Giussani, that Giussani had made them truly free even if they were in class. I understand that someone begging so much for a position of the heart—“Come, Lord Jesus”—can, within the path of the movement, be truly an instrument of creativity. It seems like a sugar-coated thing, but why would a man in jail be led to say, “Now I understand what it means to be truly free”? This is the synthesis of the third chapter of *The Religious Sense*: “To love the truth more than yourself.” Grossman, who was an avatar of Communist writing, began to speak the truth as the result of a series of facts, a series of encounters (the death of his mother, a visit to the Sistine Madonna). He said, “I am less of a man if I do not speak the truth.” Grossman was an atheist; he was not a Christian, and still Giussani quotes him as an authentic example of the religious sense, like Leopardi. And so, How can I be an instrument of this creativity? I have had this question in me and I saw the beginning of an answer in this experience of my wife.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Exactly. Can you give me just one example?

Simone. Sure. It was a year in which my wife worked a whole lot and I was at home more with the children. The fact of sharing this experience, of seeing her grow in her relationship with her students... the first time she went in there, she said: "I want to escape," and when she left she said: "I don't want to leave them, because they are a part of me." So, to see an "I" that matures like that, so much—and because she shares it I also mature, because her experience becomes mine—is a possibility for the creativity of the charism to no longer be abstract for me.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. I understood this. My question is different though. You ask: "What is the path?"; that is, "How can the charism become creative in me?" And the answer that you are proposing is... I have not understood well what it is.

Simone. I look at those who have had an experience. For me it was looking at the experience of my wife, which, like we said at the Beginning Day, has all the factors of an experience of faith, and one brings it into a place, that is the School of Community, the church, and, speaking of it there, makes us see people who grow.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. You have said many things. I hope that others can also speak to the question that you have put on the table. For now I will say that your question is beautiful and the example you gave is also beautiful. In my opinion, though, the question of the judgment that you are carrying from all that you have told us remains open; that is, the precise answer, or the beginning of an answer to the question about how the charism becomes creative in you and in me.

Simone. As prayer. This much I can tell you.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Yes, you said this.

Simone. *Prayer and a sincere relationship with the faces that Jesus put in front of me, a judgment. So I would say: prayer and judgment.*

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Thank you. We will come back to this.

Stefano. *I want to recount a little of what the first gathering in Assisi generated in me and in my friends over the ensuing months. The first great fruit of the meeting is that now we have started a Fraternity group with some of them. Before, I had enrolled in the Fraternity but had never understood what it meant ultimately. Here it was as if a spark had shot out, and I understood the decisiveness of it; it was truly the vocation to holiness in adult life. So, I returned home with the desire to tell this to my friends and to challenge them. The thing that amazed me is that, speaking on the telephone with a friend, we said: "But we are already living something like this"; that is, we had not given it the "form," but there was already a friendship at this level. It was an immediate recognition that there was already something given to us, not as an effort to organize or something like that, and for which there is no need to put ourselves together "intellectually" to understand the criterion by which we would invite people, but it was instead to look at the work of the mystery already in act. We began with five and now we are a dozen. I do not say this because it is a question of numbers, but to affirm how this preferential friendship is beginning to radiate out and be for everyone; even this is a sign of the work of Another. I will recount some facts. We have a small group of School of Community, and it happened that one day the leader could not be there. That evening there was also the assembly for those who had recently enrolled in the Fraternity, so I said to my five friends of the Fraternity: "Let's meet, let's do the School of Community first, let's eat dinner together and watch the meeting because this life is something new for us." Some friends then spoke up, for example, my wife: "But why don't we invite our friends from the School of Community to this meeting also? Because it is for everyone." So the proposal expanded: we had this moment of School of Community and then proposed to the others that "afterwards, we will watch this meeting. Whoever wants to can stay." And some of*

them stayed. That assembly answered so many of the questions we had. I was impressed that, at dinnertime, some of them began to speak about the things in their lives that were urgent for them, things that I had never heard before, and, when we finished the evening, someone hugged me with tears in his eyes: "Thank you." It struck me because I thought: "Wow, so many times I think I know the need of the other, and instead something else happens and I understand that his need was different." Another great fruit from the first Assisi meeting that happened in me relates to the question of the washing of the feet, of the "loving invasion" of these friends, which is generating a freedom in correcting ourselves and letting ourselves be corrected and which is bringing me to a docility and a capacity to grasp aspects of reality that I had not seen before. I will share two brief facts. I teach in a middle school. Some students had been manifesting for some time a desire for a friendship with me. I had not paid much attention to this desire. After Assisi, I spoke about these students to my friends, who challenged me: "Look, something is happening: Why not look at it and take it seriously?" Provoked by this, we organized a simple day together with these kids (games, songs) and I asked my friends: "Give me a hand, don't leave me alone. You gave me this thing, so let's look at it together." They were all there. The day was beautiful. The weather was terrible, but those kids really wanted to be there. There were about twenty of them. We had a final assembly and one girl said: "Today I was really happy to be with my friends in a way like never before; I feel united to them, and this was possible because I saw your friendship, the way you look at each other and love each other." This strikes me because it is the sign of a unity that is impossible for us because of all our differences, because we are very different people, but it was evident that the communion among us was the gift of Another and that that girl caught it right away; it was super clear to her. Second fact. I wanted to introduce these kids from GS to one of my former students who was interested. I organized a moment to meet, but a few days before the meeting, he said to me, "Prof, I am going to the gym, I can't come"; I was upset—"We organized this thing for you and you aren't going to be there?!" My wife pushed me: "Let's see what happens. Leave the question alone

for a moment, don't act out of instinct." The next day, I related what happened to a friend, who said to me: "Look, I met the movement through a priest, and he never forced me to do anything, he always left me free to follow, he never said to me: 'Come to School of Community, do this...' I was interested by the fact that he looked at me like this and so I followed him." This correction in the end gave me a great peace, and so I wrote a message to the kid: "Don't worry, do what is most useful for you and feel free in this." He answered me: "Prof, I don't want to miss the possibility of a relationship with you and your friends. I will do everything I can to be there." And then he freed up his schedule and came. In challenging his freedom, loving his freedom, he was able to verify the experience, to understand what truly corresponded to his heart.

Francesco Cassese. Thank you for this beautiful testimony.

Martina. In these recent months, I was a witness to and a protagonist of a creativity like we were speaking about before. In the school where I teach, since February we have started an experience of GS that was not there before. I grew up in a family of the movement, but I was always a bit behind the scenes. Instead, this year, thanks to the provocation of the Holy Father at the audience for the centenary of Father Giussani and seeing so many things that were happening with the students, I, together with a few of my colleague friends, desired to say to the kids that this beauty that is happening among us and them comes from the Christian experience, and that it is possible to live it in the same way we received it. It is beautiful because now a community is being born; there are kids who are encountering Jesus through us. One of them, a few weeks ago, told me: "I like coming to GS, because usually I would not even ask one question, and instead when I come here I recognize that there are within me a ton of questions and this makes me look at everything." And this is what happens in me, too. This creativity has its root in the friendship that I am living with my colleagues and in my community of the movement and also with my friends who are here. It is a friendship that radiates out, that radiated from us to these kids.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. I understood it like this: you are telling us that the root of the creativity—if you look at the experience you are living—“is in the friendship that I am living, in the beauty of the experience that I am living with my friends.” Am I understanding right that you wanted to say this?

Martina. Yes. I have lived this friendship for so long. I don't know why this year it became so radiant.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. On the other hand, if I am not wrong, you also said something else before that has to do with the “newness” that happened this year. You said that what began to happen in your relationship with the kids, that lit in you a spark...

Martina. Something was already happening with the kids and we said: “We want to give a name to what is happening. And this name is: Christ. Where does our way of being with them come from? From the Christian experience that we live in the movement.” So we wanted to go deeper into this, also with respect to the provocation of the pope: “There are many men and many women who have not yet had that encounter with the Lord that has changed your life and made it beautiful!” (15 October 2022) I am getting to the question. Also re-reading the lesson that Father Paolo gave in March on performance, I recognized that, in some way, this mentality enters diabolically also into the things of the movement: I can start to judge what I told you before and then skip over to “look how great we are that we created a community!” And this ruins things because it is born from a truth gone crazy. It struck me when you spoke about error as a truth gone crazy because it is true that I am putting in my whole self-effort, time, money; this is my engagement. But if, then, the reading of the facts is that I am no longer a subcreator but the creator, this is false. How can we help each other to live a virginity with respect to the things that happen, with the awareness that it is God who creates them through us?

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Thank you. This question is really beautiful. And in fact, as you will see, in the meditation this afternoon I will dedicate quite a lot of space to the theme that you put on the table; that is, the theme of virginity as the form of acting and the form of relationships, virginity as the new orientation of our actions and source of a new gaze on the people that are entrusted to us. We will return to this.

Francesco. I want to take up again one of the three points you proposed: that the memory of Christ cannot be generated except in the immanence of a lived communality. Here is something that really moved me; this point, in my opinion, helps us to judge what happened. At the beginning of the summer, my wife and I discovered that we were expecting our third child and right away we decided to communicate the good news to all our friends in the community. My wife said to me, “But what if something happens?” And I answered a bit offhandedly, “It would mean that a lot of people would be praying.” The fact of conceiving ourselves from the beginning as in communion when everything was going well helped us to share with our friends what came later: already at the ultrasound of the first trimester, the doctors observed many significant malformations, probably a genetic syndrome, but still we did not understand whether the baby would or would not be able to live. The next ultrasound was unbearable because the gynecologist listed for three quarters of an hour all the things that were not working: the heart was malformed, the feet turned... to the point that, boiling inside, I asked her: “But do you know anything about the sex of the baby?” in order to affirm that for me that little ball was already a child. And from there was born in me and my wife the need to be helped to look at this child with a gaze that was not the gaze of the world—we first of all needed to be looked at in a true way. At the suggestion of a few friends who saw this need of ours even more than we did, we turned to the friends of the “Giacomo Protocol” in Bologna to have them follow the pregnancy from a clinical point of view. From the first report, we recognized the difference in the way they treated us: they looked at our child not as an error of nature, but with the gaze of God, even

in keeping my wife company, telling her, for example, to be at peace because the child in the womb was not suffering. Then we heard the proposal of Father Antonio Sangalli (the Carmelite who married us, to whom our community is very connected) to say a novena with all of our community, and we chose to ask for the intercession of Enzo Piccinini. The word spread and every evening we got online to say the novena from various cities, even from America. In front of this trial, my wife and I felt little, with a faith that was certainly not great like that of the centurion, but the presence of God was strong in front of our friends who had been changed by Christ. The day after the end of the novena, we had a checkup and discovered that our child was now in heaven. In facing this news, two great desires rose up in me, which caused me to feel a bit betrayed by the good God: I wanted to see the face of this child and I wanted to give him what, a bit tentatively, my wife and I were seeking to give to our other two children, the life of the movement and of the church. Precisely within the communionality lived even in the intimate details of the drama of our married life, the ultimate connection of the meaning of these two desires was revealed to me. One of my friends from the community, correcting me, said: "You are already seeing the face of your boy. It is the face of the One who gave him to you and you are seeing it in all of us who are praying for him and for you." And then Father Sangalli, in a call that he wanted to have with all those who had made the novena, told us: "Your child is our first fruits in heaven and we need to pray so that he can intercede for us. Even if he didn't have eyes yet, now he is looking at God." There we understood that we were already giving this child what we have received: a place, a companionship where you can experience the measure of the love of God. Our son was the object of this gaze in the gaze of our friends toward us, and so reflexively toward him, and he now has become part of that "cloud of witnesses," whose faith in this circumstance also informed our marriage, making us say again our yes in front of so much grace. When we got married, Father Sangalli told us: "You do not know what awaits you." But I understand that this yes outside of a communion, even as it relates to an affective relationship, risks becoming weaker over time. As we heard at the Beginning Day, it was decisive for me and my wife that

we “accept that Another introduces Himself between me and reality and makes my relationship with it possible.” And this Other becomes immanent in a lived communality, so that the more it is lived even with respect to personal and intimate questions, the more it makes possible the memory of Christ and the experience of the hundredfold. I see that this communality takes on all the aspects of life; it makes a relationship with Christ immanent for you, giving you a nexus of meaning. A last brief example: the Food Collection. We decided to have a party for the whole community, proposed by those who live the experience of GS, together with a few adults. I was involved with the high school kids, and it happened that a girl told us something incredible. We had changed the words of “*Mattone su mattone*” to “*Cartone su cartone [box on box]... half of my shopping I give to you.*” And she said: “Let’s replace ‘I give it to you’ with ‘to make me happy.’ Because I am happier when I do this.” It is within this communion, even with these young people, that a greater gusto in doing things reveals itself.

Francesco Cassese. Many themes have emerged, and these also relate to the other contributions concerning creativity, memory, and communion. Father Paolo, can you help us go deeper into this? Help us to explore the connections.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Very good, I will respond off the cuff. Then maybe, in preparing the synthesis, I will put together a more organic idea.

The first insight is inspired by the question about creativity that Simone asked at the beginning. The theme seems important to me for many reasons, not least of all because of the fact that, if you notice, it is as if it put together the provocation that the pope gave to us on 15 October, when he invited us to make the charism that we have received bear fruit *creatively*, with the provocation that we laid out here in March, when in proposing the topic of work, we underlined that the temptation to make an idol out of performance depends on the fact that in effect there is in us a desire to be creative—creativity is a party of our vocation—as Martina said very

well in her contribution. We are not made *only* to contemplate, to gaze in wonder at the beauty of God's works and that's it. No, we are made also to collaborate with the creator in perfecting reality; we are made to generate beauty (in March we said, quoting Tolkien, that we are made to be subcreators).²

Good, so, in attempting to go deeper into this question, I would like to take as a starting point a question that may seem banal, while to me it seems decisive (it is a question that brings us, to tell the truth, to what was already said in the lesson on work): What is the difference between my creativity, between our creativity, and that of God? The word "creativity," in effect, is ambiguous. (It is not by chance that this word took on such importance in the imagination of Western man only with Romanticism.) It is ambiguous because it is easy to interpret this aspiration, this desire for creativity that moves within us—which means that just as there is in us an indelible need for beauty and truth, so also there is in us an indelible need for creativity, which is the objectivity of the heart!—as obliterating, so to speak, an inexorable factor of reality (while reason is an openness to reality according to the *totality* of its factors, as we know). What factor? We said it in March: the fact that I cannot create anything. Everything I make starts from a receiving—I am first of all a "receiver," a receptacle. Only by opening myself to receiving can I also become generative, creative. And it is this that characterizes the difference between me and God. Only God—says theology—creates "from nothing." It is this that distinguishes me from God, the creature from the creator. Moreover, to tell the truth, there is a sense in which even for God, what is true for us is true for Him. In fact, if we consider that God is one but also Trinity, a communion of persons, then we realize that neither does God create alone. Even God's creating, God who is the only one who creates "from nothing," is in reality the overflowing or the "irradiation," to use the term that Martina used before, of a "friendship," of a reciprocal

² Cf. *You Have Given Him Rule Over the Works of Your Hands*, Gathering of the Young People of CL, Assisi, 23–26 March 2023, section 3, "At the root of our malaise: the *self-made man* and forgetfulness of God as *all and in all*," 17–21, english.clonline.org.

love, of that play of “giving and receiving” that is constitutive of the love between persons. We can say that God is the first paradigm of this “structure,” of this “mechanism” of creativity, or better—to use an even more beautiful term—of *generativity*.

So, what implications does all of this have, all of this that maybe seems to some to be only like “abstract” theology (while in truth it is not abstract), from the existential point of view? What repercussions does this have in our experience, in our life? There is a beautiful passage of the *Tischrede* entitled “Being Children,” which you can find in *L'autocoscienza del cosmo*³ [The self-awareness of the cosmos]—in which Giussani responds in his own unique way to this question. He does it in a paradoxical way; that is, in a way that on first reading seems to contradict the idea that it is right that we desire to be creative, while in reality it is not a contradiction. It is rather an indication of the true path to creativity, to fruitfulness. He says: “One should not worry about how to express himself, he should worry about how to deepen wonder, because to deepen wonder leads to the adequate expression of self; while, if one spends himself looking for an expression of the self, he will find more and more dispersion of the self.... We are not asked to seek out our expressivity, we are asked to deepen the wonder from which expressivity is born. Expressivity, that is, fruitfulness, is born from a love, and love is the wonder at a present that is welcomed and embraced, is recognized and accepted.”⁴

How beautiful: “You do not have to worry about being creative, expressive. You have to worry about deepening wonder.” Why? Because creativity is in reality proportional, so to say, to the loving wonder that you live; that is, to the action on you of the beauty that you drink in. It is not the product of your effort. What is the difference between a *fruit* and a *product*?⁵ The product is the application of

³ Luigi Giussani, *L'autocoscienza del cosmo* [The self-awareness of the cosmos] (Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 2000), 199–212 (translation ours).

⁴ Giussani, 204–5 (translation ours).

⁵ It is not by chance that Saint Paul prefers to speak about the fruit of the Holy Spirit when he talks about the action of grace in us, while he speaks of the works of the flesh when he refers to sin; that is, to a kind of work that begins only from the self: “Now the works of

a technique to obtain a certain goal (you are the one who dominates, gestures toward, manipulates things to make them go where you like). The fruit, instead, is spontaneous and in some cases unforeseeable, the unimaginable effect of opening yourself to a gift—of the impression that beauty leaves in you, that you see and that “takes you to itself.” We think about the dynamic of human maternity: a woman generates a child (this at least is the natural dynamic, what I believe most corresponds to the heart of all the mothers here present) in the abandonment of love toward the man she loves. When the dynamic is not this, we perceive (perhaps without knowing how to say why) that there is something that grates, that does not sound right. Why in the case of artificial insemination is there something that grates? Is it only because it violates “natural law”? No, or rather yes, but in the sense that in this natural law is inscribed something much greater and deeper than a biological fact: the fact is that, whether we want it or not, leaving aside our intentions, with artificial insemination we transform what should be the *mysterious fruit* of a reciprocal love into a technical product; that is, into a product of our *act of will*, which technology gives us the means to satisfy. But this means exactly to cancel that “to be the fruit of love” that instead should belong to the genetic memory of every human person. It means to take for ourselves the true nature of fecundity, as Giussani described it in the passage above. It means ceding to the mentality of the self-made man, about whom we spoke in March, *whether you want to or not*. Am I clear? True generativity, instead (this is the first thought I want to insist on) is the fruit of the fact that I let myself be reattracted continually by a “present,” says Giussani, that continually makes me fruitful. What “present”? What presence? The presence of Christ. You generate in the measure in which you drink continually from the fountain of wonder, that is, from Christ present.

the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:19–22).

And so we begin to glimpse the connection that exists between, on the one hand, generativity and memory, and, on the other, between generativity and communion. The connection between generativity (or expressivity, it is the same) and memory coincides in fact with the connection between expressivity and loving wonder because the function of memory in our lives is exactly to nourish and deepen wonder. But memory, says Giussani in the second point of the prologue to the Statute, finds its essential nourishment in communion, in a lived friendship, as Martina said well before.

This makes a bit more clear, at least in my opinion, the connection between the three words that Camu asked me to discuss more fully. The central key of the question is found in that phrase of Giussani that I already quoted; that is, in the nexus of wonder and expressivity, of receptivity and fruitfulness.

I become generative—let us synthesize—in the measure that I let myself be drawn into the whirl of *a friendship I enjoy*. So, I only become truly generative even before my wonder, I would say, before what I do: What *first of all* conquered me in the encounter with Father Giussani? I will return to this in the lesson, but I want to anticipate it: his amazed eyes. The first way that Father Giussani “generated” me was through the witness of his wonder, of his eyes fixed upon Another, full of Another.

Now in order to avoid any sentimental or too “mystical” interpretation of what I just said, it seems important to point out that this law, even before the life of faith, is true already at a human level, is at least a little true in every field in which our reason, affection, and imagination are put in play. This is what Simone’s story witnesses.

It is clear that the idea to work on Grossman with the incarcerated flashed into the head of Simone’s wife not first of all because she planned it out and said, “Let’s see, now I will run through all the books of the month in the history of CL and find something that I can use to impress these guys.” The dynamic—Simone, correct me if I’m wrong—was probably different: your wife thought about Grossman, simply because she *first of all*, in reading Grossman, had been struck, fascinated, edified. She thought about Grossman because the reading of Grossman had *nourished her*. Do we understand? We, in-

stead, so many times (and I say this as both a teacher and a priest) run the risk of reversing the order of the factors, so to say; for example, because I have to preach, I have to prepare this or that homily, this or that retreat, then I read the gospel and the scriptures, meditate on the texts I meditate on, only from an urge to find things to say to others, points that will allow me to preach well, to give a good lesson. This dynamic is inevitable (and it is a duty of charity to prepare well). But if a priest reads the gospel *only* for this reason, or an Italian teacher reads Manzoni and Leopardi *only* with this aim, then he will lose two “birds” with one “stone”: first he loses the taste, the nourishment that only a peaceful reading, for the *pure, gratuitous* taste for learning, can give; second, he will also preach badly, because in the end what you say can touch the heart of others only if it is born from your personal wonder, from your personal, “unbiased” love for what you are speaking about. How do I become full of wonder, if what you are commenting on is a page that you read in a hurry, with the anxiety of finding something to say?

From here comes the importance of what we priests call *remote preparation*. What does *remote preparation* mean? It means that in silence one should always seek to maintain, if it is possible (because sometimes it is impossible!) a space dedicated to reading things that you do not read for pastoral ends (that is, because you are preparing this or that talk) but rather for the pure taste of learning something new; that is, precisely with the aim of “deepening wonder.” The more you do this, the more, over time, you recognize that this kind of reading, engaged in gratuitously for the purpose of deepening wonder, spending time that seems “lost”—what a divine irony!—reveals itself in the end to have been the most productive time because of all the richness of what you learned during hours and hours of “gratuitous study” (*studium* in Latin means “passion”); at a certain point this time comes back to you and goes out to fertilize your preaching, all the talks you have to give, in the most surprising (and fun!) ways.

In short, the first point on which I wanted to insist is this: we become fruitful not by worrying about being fruitful; we become fruitful by deepening wonder. How true this is also with respect to

the responsibility that some of us have in the movement! I think also about an experience that is well known to many. Someone leaves this gathering, perhaps, dominated by gratitude for the encounter that she has had, full of enthusiasm like a child. But then, over time, it is as if the responsibility that she has (I say in the movement, but it is true also with children) and then the preoccupation with “being able to communicate,” engulfs, eats away, at the initial wonder, that first reception of wonder, which is in fact the secret of true fruitfulness—that is, of a communication that is not just a repetition of a speech from memory, but is the overflowing of a “living” water that always runs new in you because you always touch its wellspring.

Let us pass on to the second insight that for me was inspired by the contribution of Martina (in truth, I already anticipated it before, when I interrupted her). It is true, as Martina was saying, that fruitfulness is the radiance of a friendship that fills your life. There is, though, at least in my opinion, another side to the coin. Where does the capacity of originality in the proposal we make come from? The answer that we have given up to now comes from the fact that one continues to touch the origin. It is not only this, though. The fact that someone must go to China is not enough to deepen wonder. You have to learn Chinese too, right? The question is this: Where does the capacity to “translate” the gift of the charism into a *language* adapted to the context in which one finds herself, which maybe is a context very different from the one in which Father Giussani or Enzo Piccinini worked, come from? The answer seems clear to me: from listening to the context, the environment, from a humble and courageous listening to the voices that fill the environment in which one is called to live and witness to the faith.

Let us think of the previously unknown cultural challenge that we find ourselves facing today: it is not the same as in the 1950s and 60s when Father Giussani taught at Berchet in Milan. Father Giussani, for example, never specifically discussed affectivity (despite talking about it and saying very deep things about it); he never focused specifically on the relationship between men and women (let alone that today we cannot take for granted that a romantic relationship

is between a man and a woman). From here comes the adage that I have heard so many times (and that in a context like that of fifty, forty, or even thirty years ago made perfect sense, let us understand): it is a waste of time to talk about these things, it is moralism, it is speaking about secondary things, about moral consequences. Giussani instead educated us to put the essential at the center; to place at the center the religious sense and the announcement of the event of Christ. The rest is a corollary. Far be it from me to go against this. The primacy of the essential belongs to the DNA of our charism. On the other hand, we just have to open our eyes a little to realize that the theme of affectivity has a different weight today than it did fifty years ago because what is up for discussion today is the ontology of the human person—*the being of the person*, not “morality,” not “rules.” What does it mean *to be a man* and *to be a woman*? We have to admit that this is not a question only for “others” outside but that even for our own kids it is not so simple to answer it. Let us think about the whole polemic that in these days was unleashed following the death of poor Giulia Cecchetti. In a context in which the powers that be hammer into the heads of young people a precise interpretation of the difference (or rather the *nondifference!*) of man and woman, we cannot assume anything—we cannot think about educating as if this problem did not exist. Does our going into these matters betray the charism? I don’t think so. It means instead accepting the challenge that the present throws at us. The charism, as the pope insisted, is not something detached from space and time—an unchangeable and supratemporal doctrine, a discourse that is identical in everything and for everyone. We need to do a work of continual rereading, of creative appropriation. For example, How does the experience of faith that we live help us to offer an original judgment on gender, on the right use of new technologies? It is not enough to repeat always and only what Father Giussani already said. We need the enthusiasm, the patience, and the courage to ask ourselves what light the charism that we have received throws on the new questions that present themselves to us.

Now, in what, concretely, does this work of creative appropriation consist?

Synthetically, I would underline two aspects: first, in helping each other—because we are dealing with an endeavor that we are called to do together—to make the essential, the *indispensable* core of the charism, always clearer. If I do not know what is *essential*, I will not be free to “translate” it into a new form, abandoning forms that are not essential. When I had to move from Russia to America, I had to choose which books to bring with me and which books to leave because I couldn’t bring them all. It would involved an unsustainable cost. This circumstance, which was somewhat sad (my books and my CDs!), forced me, though, to clarify for myself which of my books were the most important, and which instead I could let go of. The same is true, I think, with respect to the charism. The change of circumstances, putting us into crisis, is always an occasion for growth because it obliges us to become more clearly aware (*krisis* in Greek means judgment!) of what is truly essential, giving us at the same time the necessary freedom to “die” in order to be “reborn” in the new situation.

A second aspect (which I have already mentioned) is that this rebirth depends also on listening to the new circumstances; that is, on the humility and passion with which, for example, I allow myself to be wounded and interrogated by the questions of the kids I meet at school (if I am a teacher). It is not enough (even if it is the *first* thing!) that I listen to what generates me in order for me to be creative. To this first “receptivity” must be associated a second: listening to the environment that surrounds me in the *present*. Let us imagine that Simone’s wife, in front of the incapacity of those incarcerated people to understand something of Grossman, became stubborn in explaining to them Grossman in the way she had thought to do it in the beginning. No one is paying any attention, and she goes ahead, goes ahead undeterred, without changing anything in her way of explaining. The problem of our friend, in this case, would not be a lack of passion for Grossman, but rather a lack of attention to the incarcerated people!

Elena. I have a question that I will summarize with this question: What is the connection between virtuous success in work and vocation?

By “virtuous success” I mean the ability to solve problems, to contribute to the construction of a place of work where you are and not to its destruction. Last year, from the point of view of work, for me it was truly difficult. I have a job that I like and I would not change it for anything in the world. I teach literature at a high school. But I went through a very difficult year, so much so that at a certain point I said to myself: “I want to solve problems, not create them.” And with respect to the place where I work, which is a real project, I want to build it. At a certain point, something happened that turned everything upside down: one of my dear friends from the Memores Domini, who has worked with me from the beginning, said to me: “I met Rose Busingye, who was here in Italy. I had a conversation with her and she asked me this question: ‘Do you, with everything you are, want to deepen your vocation?’” When he told me this, I said: “And so?” And he said: “I told her yes. I am going to work in Uganda at the Luigi Giussani High School.” This interaction, together with all the months that followed, was the thing that most turned the position I had upside down—he had shifted my focus. I also asked myself that question: Do I, with everything I am, want, through my work, to deepen my vocation, that is, my personal relationship with Christ? This literally overturned my position because...

Fr. Paolo Prospero. This is interesting. Why?

Elena. Because I began to desire a resolution to the problem. When I was unable to resolve the problems, I didn’t go somewhere else, to work at another place, but I remained there, convinced, and I began to look at the problem from another point of view. But I realized in time that the point from which I had looked at the problem at the beginning was by asking, How can I resolve this situation? What is the right solution? What can we do to make this or that better? Now instead, after what happened, the point from which I start is with another question: Am I interested in deepening my personal relationship with Christ, that is, my vocation, through what I am doing?

Fr. Paolo Prospero. And why do you set these things in opposition? Why isn’t trying to resolve problems a deepening of your

vocation? Help me to understand better the added or critical value of the second thing with respect to the first.

Elena. I sense that they are not in opposition. I discovered that in my experience they are not in opposition; this is so true that I am at peace and joyful where I am. I sense that this thing too has something to do with my vocation, that is, with the precise point in life where I find myself. But at a certain point, since last year until today, because of what happened to me, I became aware that at times I move the focal point to what, through my virtuous actions, I am able to attain, to the result... that is, to an image I have of a construction that is good and even positive.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. And so, she says, she asks: What is the connection between this search for the perfection of action, of doing well (and thus of giving herself to this action, of spending time, this whole dynamic) and the question of Rose, that the scope of the action is the deepening of my relationship with Christ? What do these two things have to do with each other? What is their relationship? In what way does the second serve to bring about something new within the first? Right? Do I understand?

Elena. Very well. Because I do not want to live work like everyone else; that is not interesting to me.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. I would keep this question open because I hope that there can emerge from the lesson some hints toward an answer to this. If not, we will return to it.

Davide. I will start from the central question of creativity, especially with respect to what Father Paolo said—“What contribution does Christ make?”—by sharing a little bit of the story of my work. I graduated in engineering and architecture. I began working right away in a firm founded by my father. I have always been aware since I was a little kid that I had a humanistic vocation, but for various reasons I pursued engineering. Life was a train and I got on it: I always had

in the back of my mind, almost automatically, the idea that I would pursue the work of my father. But my passion for poetry, for literature, for art, never went away—it remained. And so I always lived this strong internal contradiction, which I thought of like this: “Okay, in the end you do engineering to live and then you cultivate what you are, your passion, in some other way, in your spare time.” But a subtle distress always remained that then emerged more and more strongly because you are there at the firm eight hours a day and are integrally engaged in something that ultimately does not correspond to you. So I often repeated to myself: “If the Lord gives me this, I should stay here,” which was theoretically true, but I realize today that this was above all a way of not looking deeply at my distress. The thing that I have always loved about the movement and that keeps me in love with it today is the way Giussani—through the people I met—always looked at my humanity, not as an obstacle, but as a value, as a path (that is: the way you are made is a contribution, not a fluke). And, at the same time, how he looked at reality (that is: God calls you not abstractly, but within things, even those that you would not immediately choose). What happened? Something else that I always saw in myself, parallel to this humanistic “vocation,” was a curiosity, a fascination for a relationship with young people. So I said: “Let’s begin to verify this. Is it only a dream? Is it only an error of the system?” Because of the course of studies I took, I could teach art history, so I took the public exam, and this year I am teaching [applause]. I discovered that the creativity that Christ generates in me is the way I can look at my humanity with the tenderness of someone who says to you: “You are not wrong.” And on the other hand, there is the possibility of not fleeing from reality, but being there even when it does not correspond; and so I do not flee from work, but I make attempts, trying to discern the answer that the Lord was giving me. How was this creativity generated in me? As an unexpected fruit. I did only one thing: I remained attached, with all my limits, to a place where this gaze on my humanity is continually given to me again: “No, at 38 years old, you are not crazy, you can change jobs, maybe the Lord is calling you to something, because your humanity, the way you are made, is a contribution.”

Francesco Cassese. This is an interesting topic: above all it is important not to disregard this “contradiction,” this possible tension between two poles—on the one hand, a reality that asks you to go in a certain direction and, on the other hand, the needs that remain in time and continue to matter. This tension opens you to a relationship. Therefore, without eliminating any emerging factor, our initiative can become a kind of “enticement”; that is, we verify a new hypothesis, we value it in obedience to the conditions that emerge little by little. This is called *realism*. But this realism is not a photograph—it is an affective relationship. The episode that Pier Paolo Bellini recounted here in Assisi comes to my mind: “Finally I graduate in Composition. But in May my friend Enzo Piccinini dies in a car accident. Everything began with him. For him I decide to write a piece for choir on the text of the Psalm that he loved. I have Gius listen to it: ‘Yes. It is very beautiful! Very beautiful!’ ‘Listen, Father Giussani, I have to ask you a question. I worked for ten years to become, let’s say it like this, Mozart. I became capable of writing music and I like it. But the world is not looking for composers and my family is growing. What do you think?’ He looks at me with those eyes so full of life: ‘Widmer (this is what he called me), I want to try to help you, first of all to understand. In life there are two types of events: opportunities and necessities. The world thinks that it finds fulfillment in taking advantage of the first. We instead think that it is above all through the second that people can find their fulfillment. Therefore, I will line things up for you, so it will be easier to make your decisions. First: your family and its needs. Second: your responsibilities toward the church and toward the world. Third: what is left over.’ What an order! There was also the possibility and the desire to try what I desired. But the phrase with which he left me becomes the pinnacle of art and freedom: ‘Those first two things must become music.’”

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Ed de hoc satis. [And from this you are satisfied.]

Matilde. I was born into a family of the movement. My parents were friends of Giussani’s, and I, as long as I was at home, breathed

in the fullness of what the movement is. I had a beautiful life: six siblings, a full house, the possibility of studying. I got married before I graduated and was given the gift of three children. I received everything from life. Everything means everything, and I was always happy. Then, suddenly, everything was taken from me: at age four, my second daughter got sick with an incurable disease. From one day to the next, all that the good God had given me was taken from me. And my husband and I had to begin to live again, to learn to live again, starting from scratch, coming to terms with all the demands that this new situation asked and is asking of us. I felt like I was lacking everything. I was lacking everything. Now we are about to reach the third year of the sickness, which for my daughter has been a continual weakening of the body. But I want to say this: I thought I had all the instruments I needed to know how to live; I thought that I had managed to hold everything (with the instruments of the movement, of being Christian, of being loved, of loving), but instead when I felt myself die, God took the initiative with me. I was not always able to say yes; for me it is difficult to say yes in front of so much pain and so much grace, but if we live within His initiative, every day that He takes something from my daughter, and takes it also from me, we are illuminated by a peace that at least allows us to stand in front of Him.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Good. On the one hand, I would like just to be silent after having heard your contribution. On the other, it is the only contribution on which I want to speak. Both things are true; I say this to you sincerely.

So I will say this. Knowing a little bit of your story, even though indirectly, I want first of all to tell you that what really struck me was the way you spoke in front of us about your suffering. It struck me because it corresponds fully to the paradoxical experience of pain and suffering, just as (certainly in a smaller way) it was also given to me to live, as a path to the truth, which passes, though, through a dispossession lived to its depths, without shortcuts.

Entering into detail: the first thing that struck me about what you said is this expression to which you (I think not by chance) returned in an almost pounding way: “Everything was given to me

and everything was taken from me.” I would like to tell you why this struck me. It struck me because—I am speaking above all for those who have not lived something similar to what you lived and are living—the first objection to your words that could rise up in the mind of someone listening to you is: “How so? Everything was not taken from you. You have other children, other consolations.” Understand me well: I agree with you (if someone has the right to “agree” with someone who speaks about what you have spoken about). But this objection seems important to consider, because it makes emerge the mysterious greatness, the mysterious depth of the experience that you spoke to us about, which I will try to describe like this: in front of a God, or anyway in front of a reality (whose ultimate origin is God) that takes something from you, something that you love profoundly—something truly sacred like a daughter—it is not only that particular good that you lose, that seems to be taken. It is truly as if everything has been taken. Why? Why has “everything” been taken from you? Because the fact that your child is taken from you—what is more, the fact that your innocent child has to suffer—seems to be an intolerable injustice. It seems like something that makes no sense. But if I am not able to find the sense of *this* thing, then the sense of the *justice* of everything is taken from me; that is, the perception that God is a good Father, the perception that God loves me and that all of life, all of reality, has a good and beautiful meaning. Dostoevsky said it well in *The Brothers Karamazov*: just one tear from one innocent child is enough to put in doubt the meaning of the universe. The pain even of just one child is enough to topple the certainty that the world has meaning, that life has a meaning. And it is for this reason that all the things we are reading about in the news in these days about the story of Giulia come up short, are so tremendously reductive, without wanting to deny, please, the gravity of the phenomenon of femicide or of anything. If it were true that the tragic death of Giulia could be imputed to the plague of the patriarchy and the typical machismo of our backward country (something I don’t believe), what changes? Is it enough to say this to make sense of the death of Giulia? Even if her death set loose a movement that brings

femicide in Italy to an end, something in itself that we very much hope for, would this be enough to justify what she suffered? Clearly no. And so, it is right, it is human, it is natural, and in the end—if I may be allowed—very Giussani-like, this motion toward rebellion that you, Matilde, described—this motion that brought you *almost to the threshold* of blasphemy. This is not irreligiosity, paradoxically (the Psalms teem with cries to God that are apparently irreverent). It is instead the sign of a reason that looks all the factors of reality in the face without denying any of them. Of a reason, that is, that begins from the certainty that God is good because “He has given me everything” (therefore a reasonable certainty, because founded on an experience), and then is forced to face something in reality that seems to contradict this judgment, provoking a kind of short-circuit: the pieces of the puzzle don’t fit together; there is a piece that doesn’t fit. It doesn’t fit and there is nothing we can do about it! From this comes the rebellion. On the other hand, we can and, in my opinion, we must consider the question also from the other side in order to grasp the great mystery of it. Pay attention: the rebellion is not born *simply* from the fact that something terrible happens to me. If one didn’t expect anything good, if one didn’t presuppose that she had the right to expect good from the One who is at the origin of reality, she would not rebel if evils fell on her, because she would not see any injustice. And so, you, Matilde, rebel in front of the sickness of your daughter because this fact clashes with all the good and beautiful things that you have seen in your life, which have brought you to believe in a good God. Now, what is the truly human position, the position that entirely embraces the stature of the human, in a situation like this? You gave witness to it. The most human position, that is, the most reasonable, is that of the one who in front of a situation so jarring does not give up on looking all of reality in the face, does not deny any of its factors. It is the position of one who has a strong stomach, one who does not close her eyes to any aspect of reality, but looks it in the face in all of its totality, which is what you have done: “I do not deny all the good that I have seen and that I have lived,” you told us, “but I cannot soften or defend myself from the pain of this mysterious

and terrible fact that provokes me, from the rebellion that is rising up within me. I find myself in front of these two ‘pieces of reality’—everything was given to me and everything was taken from me—which I do not know how to join into a unity by myself. I do not know how to manage this contrast, I do not know how to arrive at a synthesis, I cannot get there on my own.”

Now, what is the action that gives rise to—that must give rise to!—a use of reason that is so loyal and courageous, as what you witnessed to us? It is called a *cry*. It is called a cry, a supplication or cry. And, in fact, the cry up to heaven, to the divine mystery that is at the depth of all things, is the ultimate figure of what in my opinion is the highest and most moving expression of pre-Christian poetry in the world—Greek tragedy. In what is the greatness of Greek tragedy? It is precisely in documenting the trajectory, the path of reason that we have described and that Matilde has witnessed to us: on the one hand, the Greek man sees a world full of light, order, beauty, rationality that makes him say, with a heart full of admiration, yes, there is the imprint of Good within reality. On the other hand, he also sees the reality of death and of pain—above all the incomprehensible reality of innocent pain. The innocent ones die. Why? Mitya Karamazov will also make his own the same cry in the famous dream of the burning village: Why is that child crying? Why?! I do not know! But I cannot deny the good because there is also evil. And so I cry out. I cry out! The answer to this cry—which is the same cry of Jesus on the cross: Why? Why have you abandoned me?—can come only from the Most High, from Another. I cannot fabricate it myself. I can only beg, crying out. And so we understand in what sense a pain so big can truly become a path to the truth. A path not in the sense—as Matilde said very well—that one hurries, as one would plug up or dam the pain, to call pain a “grace.” How easy it is to give way to the temptation to call too soon a pain like this a “grace,” only because ultimately you are afraid of looking in the face “the horrid, immense abyss”—to say it with our friend Leopardi—in front of which certain trials have the power (and maybe the aim?) of putting us. While instead, if the Lord permits something so terrible to happen to us, maybe it is in order

to help me find at such a point that is devoid of answers, at such a lost point, that I cannot do anything other than cry out night and day for Him. It is so easy to use the name of Jesus to resist subtly the way in which Jesus attracts us to Himself (an ironic paradox)—that is to defend ourselves from that pain, from that wound that can become the most powerful motor of a relationship with Him that is finally true, finally burning—a relationship that penetrates to our flesh and blood in the course of minutes, hours, days. “We have to suffer,” said the great Mounier, “so that the truth will not be crystallized in a doctrine, but born of flesh.”

It is first of all in this sense, it seems to me, that we have the right to call such terrible experiences like those of Matilde “grace.” Then, at a certain point, when God wants, it happens that you realize that God is not really deaf to your cries. You realize—little by little or one beautiful morning, all of a sudden—that your gaze on the pain of your daughter is changing. You recognize that you are able, you don’t even know how, to see her pain as a mysterious association with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (these are the eyes of faith about which Jone spoke at the Beginning Day). But this seeing is a *true experience* (and not a form of consolatory auto-suggestion), only when it flourishes in us like a miracle; that is, like an answer of the Spirit to the cry of the heart, to the tears of a heart that begs in truth, that struggles with the mystery over hours and days. Faith is not the renunciation of reason. It is rather a flower of grace—as Father Giussani said—that “sprouts” at the extreme limit of reason, Okay, enough, I have already spoken too much.

Matteo. I will ask only one question because the work of this morning struck me so much, above all the insistence on creativity. I will try not to give an example but if it does not make sense I will give one. When we are dealing with taking a risk, I recognize that so many times I get stuck on the fact that the awareness of being made by Another, the awareness of depending on Another to whom I am responding (as we said in March), instead of making me feel free, burdens my attempt with a fear of failing.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. By Another with a capital “A”?

Matteo. Yes, Another with a capital “A.”

Francesco Cassese. Give us an example.

Matteo. Okay, perfect. I was really struck by the announcement about education at the Beginning Day because while over the years I have seen around me a great confusion, I said to myself: “The announcement is talking also about ‘universities.’ But it is not that I can decide to be a ‘teacher in a university.’” That is, the reality is that it does not depend only on my will to do this. There are a bunch of circumstances on which the fact of doing it or not depend. So, I asked myself: What does this announcement of the movement mean with respect to my vocation and to my attempt to have a university career? I cannot simply say, “I will do it or not do it,” because you have to enter the “lottery” of the university, and then you don’t know how it is going to turn out. Two weeks later, though, I was speaking with my professor—I am trying to finish my thesis, but I still need another year—and she at a certain point said to me: “Matteo, if you want to rise to that level you have to begin to do something yourself. I can’t do everything. Come up with something yourself.”

Francesco Cassese. Well, she is not entirely wrong. [laughter]

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Perfect, perfect.

Matteo. My question was born from this—keeping in mind all the work I did last year, when the professor told me this, it was like getting hit in the face. I said to myself: “Crap, I have been working like crazy and now she throws that out and pushes me to commit myself more!” Thinking about it again, though, I realized that in reality she was loving me; that is, she wanted me to be more of an adult with respect to what I am doing; she wanted me to be more responsible, more of a protagonist. Now, in the attempt to respond to this call from my professor, I realize that a weak point is the fact that when

I make this attempt, I am lacking that naïve boldness about which Giussani always spoke.

Fr. Paolo Prospero. The boldness to risk.

Matteo. Yes, but Giussani always underlines that in this risk there is a childlikeness at the bottom of it that I realize I don't have. My question is about this.

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Look, dear Matteo, one of the points I will tackle in the lesson this afternoon will be this exactly: What frees us from the fear of failing, of not being up to the challenge? What makes us more bold, more free in our actions, in our attempts? I want, though, to say something now. And I want to look at your question from a particular angle, if you will allow me, an angle that may seem to have little to do with your question, and instead touches, in my opinion, on a hidden but important presupposition of your question (given that I have understood well the thread of your reasoning, which may not be the case). You ask: What can free me from this timidity—from the feeling of disproportion and of skepticism that I experience in front of a challenge that puts me to the test? What can help me to live this challenge with the naïve boldness about which Giussani speaks?

Instinctively, I would like to answer you by connecting to the second point of the Statute we quoted before: two things help you, *memory* and *lived communiality*. Except that, if I tell you only this, the relationship of these two words with the concrete drama you describe runs the risk of remaining unclear, or better, the meaning and motive for which these two words have to do with the drama that you describe. We are talking about understanding, at least in my opinion, in what sense *lived communiality* and *memory* collaborate together to change you, to change the way you are in front of reality.

I will try to explain myself. As you know—as all of you know, if you reflect on the program—in the first two points of the description of the charism that we took from the old Statute of the Frater-

nity, Father Giussani essentially says two things: first, that the new subject, the new man, is born from the lived memory of Christ (I am paraphrasing). Second, that the memory of Christ cannot be generated if it is not in the “immanence of a fully lived communionality.” So, where does this naïve boldness that you desire come from, Matteo? The first response of Giussani seems to be: from the lived memory of Christ. Except that, this memory, which is what should allow you to see things in a different way, to be freer in front of the challenge that you have in front of you, is not generated or sustained automatically. It is nourished through the immanence of a lived communionality. Why? In what sense?

It is here that the experience that is shared can become extremely instructive for all of us.

It seems to me, in fact, that we often risk (and I include myself in this, above all if I think about when I was Matteo’s age) giving way to a subtle temptation. What temptation? The temptation to interpret reductively, in a minimalistic way, the meaning of these words. “Why do I need the communion of my friends of the movement to live my personal relationship with Christ?” The minimalistic answer sounds like this: “Yes, of course, I need the witness, the example of others to ‘wake’ me from sleep, but in the end my personal relationship with Christ is mine; everything is played out in my heart.” In other words, the function of the ecclesial companionship, the function of the “cloud of witnesses,” is just that of reawakening in me the memory of something or Someone that I already know perfectly, with respect to which I only need to re-experience again the irruption, the making present, of this Someone or something. Okay, so where is the problem? Why do I say that this vision is reductive?

I will try to say it with an example, in order then to explain how all this touches on Matteo’s question (at least in my opinion). A few days ago, quite a few days ago, my nephew, who lives in Milan (I found myself in Milan, even though I live in Rome), invites me to dinner with a group of his friends from CLU. These friends—four or five guys with whom a certain connection has been born because often when I go to Milan my nephew organizes these dinners—know that, among various other things, I study the gospels (above all the fourth)

and so they often ask me questions about the gospel. And so, the last time, one of these guys—a very nice kid, a provocateur even though he is a humble guy—quotes a passage of the gospel for me (I don't remember which one) and says to me: "Anyway look, the experience that I am having of Christ led me to the conviction that hell does not exist." I looked at him a few seconds, to understand if he was egging me on or if he was serious, and in the end, having concluded that he was serious (at least a little), I said to him: "Excuse me, because of the experience you are having of Christ, you arrived at the conviction that hell does not exist? Maybe you should have added: because of the experience that you are having of *your idea* of Christ, not because of your experience of Christ." And he: "No, why do you say this? No, no, it is really the experience of Christ, I am certain." So I allowed myself to answer him: "Excuse me, *because of what* are you certain about this? I am sorry, but *the reality* of Jesus Christ is not reducible to the idea that you create for yourself on the basis of your experience—whatever you mean by this term. In fact—whether you like it or not—no one has spoken so much about hell as Jesus. Jesus spoke about the devil and about hell much more than all the Old Testament did (which, I noted, is much bigger than the New). Read the four gospels. The criterion for saying that something is according to Christ is... Jesus Christ, not your experience. In the same way, if you were to tell me that today the idea of the indissolubility of marriage has been superseded, and that Jesus—merciful as He was—would say different things today (because another guy, "stirred up" by a conference at the State University, also raised this problem), you would have the right to think like this, but the fact remains that Jesus said something else, even if you do not understand it, even if it seems not to correspond to you. And you know (I told him) that at the time of Jesus, the possibility of divorce was the norm, not the exception, as is demonstrated by the reaction of Peter to the words of Jesus: 'If this is how it is, then it is *better* not to marry' (this is what he said!). If you want, let us speak about why the position of Jesus can be correspond to us and let us also speak about the right way of understanding the words of Jesus about hell. But you cannot say that these ideas should be removed from the gospel because they are not essential. This is

what you say, but you are not the criterion that establishes what is according to Christ and what is not..." (Obviously, our friend has now come over to my side... at least this is what he says!).

Why do I recount this fact? What does it have to do with the problem that Matteo put on the table? And what does it have to do with the relationship between *memory* and *communion*? I think it is very pertinent. It belongs because we can, in effect, live a relationship with the mystery thinking that we have a clear idea of His face, while maybe, ultimately, this is not really so. For example, one can repeat the word "Christ," but continue to have within himself, for a thousand different reasons, an idea of God, of the mystery, that does not correspond to the God of Jesus Christ—for example, the idea of God as judge, who is there to examine you, to see if you have succeeded or not. In effect, if we rewind and return to the beginning of Matteo's contribution, we will realize that he began precisely by saying something of this type: "When I think about my action as a *response to the mystery*, I do not feel lightened by this act of memory. On the contrary, I get even more anxious—because I think about the fear of disappointing His (the mystery's!) expectation."

Now, what does this strange fact depend on (a fact that is not really strange at all—you don't know how much I understand you!)? It does not depend on the fact that Matteo has not had a true encounter with Christ. Not at all! Maybe he has had an encounter that is more powerful than all of ours put together. But it is as if there were a "deep layer" of his I—the psychologists would call it the subconscious—that maybe has not been fully "baptized" yet; that is, illuminated by the grace of Christ, and therefore it is as if within him there lived together different images of the face of the mystery—one that is the reflection of the encounter, and another that instead comes from the old man, from the leftovers of the old man who is in all of us. For example, a leftover from the relationship that one had with his parents. Let me not hide my cards: as some of you know, I lost my father when I was four years old. And so, it is clear that this fact has had certain weighty consequences, even in the way I "picture" the face of the Father with a capital "F." In fact, I remember that when I was little I imagined God (without even

knowing why!), as One who was there to see if I had failed, a distant God that if I was not good would abandon me. It was difficult for me to feel Him as a Father, close and merciful.

Now, how did I come to understand not only with my head, *but also with my heart*, so to say, that this image of God was wrong, false? Not by reading theology books (even if I have read many of them), but rather through the grace of my encounter with Father Giussani and with my friends of the movement, which passed on to me, as if by osmosis, over time, a *new image* of God—an image that contrasted with that old one and replaced it, little by little, in the depth of my I, with the true image. I learned what it really means that God is Father much more from the unbounded, childlike positivity coming from the face of Father Giussani when he spoke about God, and then from the way he loved me, than from the many books I had read on the paternity of God. I could say the same, even if to a different degree, about my relationship with many friends who have been companions on the journey over all these years. So, without the immanence within a “lived communionality,” it is not only that I would have had less of the memory of Christ; it is even more than this—it is that *the content of my memory* would never have become what it is now—I would have probably remained chained to my God like Ibsen, to the God of the Scandinavian Lutherans, to whom historically my psyche was strangely “attached.”

But in your opinion, why has the church, for the last two thousand years, had us pray the Psalms? Wouldn't it be better for each person to pray by “digging deep”—with words that arise from his heart? Why does the church ask me to turn to God with the words of others, words that I did not choose?! The answer is simple: it is because the church knows, in her millennial wisdom, that the words with which we turn to God, the names by which we invoke Him—Merciful, Immense, Rock, Cliff, etc.—if prayed with “heart in hand,” little by little become deposited in the memory of our “deep hardware,” of the “fixed disk” of our I. This is the face of the true God—the God who revealed Himself in history, the God of Abraham and Jesus—such that the image of this face little by little *supplants* the whole accumulation of confused images that we have

within. Our heart, left to itself, can only make for itself an image of the face of God that is vague, deformed. And so, we have the Psalms: “a granite dam for the bitter waters of our love,” as the abbot says in *Miguel Mañara*: these poems, which, because they are inspired by God, because they are handed on to us by God, have the power to “get us back on the road” to Him, toward His true face, better than any words of our own.

Here we are: something analogous it seems can and should be said about the vocational companionship of our life. But to go deeper into the encounter—that is, the progressive evangelization of my I, in the sense we have described it—we need the immanence in time of a lived communality; we need to be introduced through others into an ever-greater familiarity with Christ, with the concrete face of God revealed in history.

That’s enough for now.

Friday 24 November

LESSON

Fr. Paolo Prosperi

“A Process of Gazing”⁶

The target of the lesson this afternoon, I will say right away to avoid any doubt, is not to propose some new topic. The aim we give for ourselves is rather to try to make a further step in the path of reflection that we began back in March—and to try to make it in the light of the step that the movement is proposing to everyone (I am thinking above all of the Beginning Day). I am in fact persuaded that between the topic here and the topic of Christian experience, or if you want, of the *new eyes* that faith gives (the central theme of the Beginning Day), there is a closer connection than there might seem. So let us begin.

⁶The title of this lesson—“A process of gazing”—takes up an expression of Ignace de la Potterie that was very dear to Father Giussani: “It is in finding a certain presence that the person begins to understand himself, to understand his destiny, to understand how to walk to his destiny and with what energy to walk. The encounter with a presence does not constitute ontologically the person in his subjectivity: the encounter reawakens something that was obscure, something that was existentially unthought and unthinkable. The event is therefore the method with which the I recognizes itself. The solid I is the I that recognizes itself. Therefore, the event is a method, a path, an experience. The great biblical theologian Ignace de la Potterie said: ‘The Christian faith is a process of gazing.’ This is not a poetic or abstract phrase: it is the exact, factual description of a *method*. The gaze first glimpses, then begins to have the perception of the most distinct factors and only eventually begins to come upon the possibility of a meaning. Expanding its attention on this meaning, it understands that it is true.” Luigi Giussani, *L'avvenimento cristiano* [The Christian event] (Milan: BUR, 2003), 59 (translation ours).

1. “Surely we are not also blind, are we?” (John 9:40)⁷: an illness of the eyes

I begin from a consideration that I have heard from many over the course of many conversations on the contents of our last Assisi meeting, conversations in which I participated this summer, traveling around for the vacations of the CL communities.

The consideration is this: the mentality of the self-made man; that is, that interior disposition by which our value is made to consist in our capacity for performance, does not just have to do with the sphere of work.⁸ It has to do also with a mentality that tends to insinuate itself into our relationships with everything—wife or husband, children, friends, moral life, and so on and so forth.⁹

Now, if this is true, the question becomes even more urgent—this also came up a lot on the summer vacations—*How* do we get out of this cage? *How* do we get out of the cage of the performing *ego* in order to enter into the *point of view* of Christ?¹⁰ “It is a beautiful im-

⁷The question, as I note, is what the Pharisees asked Jesus, soon after he ironically acknowledged the fact that, while a man born blind was able to believe in Him at first sight (!), those who had always seen well seem incapable of reading correctly what they see. As if to say: the awareness of being blind, of needing new eyes, is the condition for being able to receive them as a gift from the Lord, while the one who believes that he already sees perfectly will only with difficulty allow himself to be introduced by Him into a new and deeper vision of reality (in this case the reality of Jesus Himself). It is good to quote the whole passage: “Then Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not also blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains” (John 9:39–41).

⁸As many of you noticed, phenomena like the great resignation and quiet quitting would seem to signal the end of the society of performance and the crisis of the anthropological model that lies underneath it. If that is in part true, we have also, on the other hand, to say that the same phenomena can and in my opinion should be read as a sign of the pervasive domination of the anthropological paradigm, given that every urge to avoid work presupposes the feeling of being in prison. The fact that the “anxiety of performance” tends to invade environments that have little or nothing to do with our professions (I think above all about the field of affectivity), as many of you witnessed to this summer, would seem to confirm that, in reality, the anthropological model of the self-made man is anything but “surpassed.” The question, then, goes deeper into what we attempted to illustrate earlier. Cf. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 17–21.

⁹Even as early as the first lesson of Assisi we remarked on this, if only in the note. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 16n7.

¹⁰Cf. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 21–28, 65–66.

age, that of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples all happy”—one of you told me—“but I am not Jesus—I do not see the heavenly Father in the background when I have in front of me the face of my boss at work. How do I enter, then, into the *point of view* of Christ?”

It is right here, in my opinion, that the theme of the Beginning Day comes to help us. We read in paragraphs 18 and 22 of *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis’s encyclical on faith:

*Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, **with his own eyes**: it is a participation in his way of seeing.... Christ’s life, his way of knowing the Father and living in complete and constant relationship with him, opens up new and inviting vistas for human experience.... Far from divorcing us from reality, our faith in the Son of God made man in Jesus of Nazareth enables us to grasp reality’s deepest meaning... [and] a new way of seeing opens up.¹¹*

Faith, the pope tells us, is not just a form of contact with Jesus. Faith introduces us into a new way of seeing all of reality. I like to say it like this: understood in its full potentiality, faith is a little like those glasses they give you at the movie theater when you go to see a 3D film. Without the glasses you see everything flat and out of focus. When you put on the glasses, all of a sudden everything appears clear and three-dimensional—so three-dimensional, that in certain moments it seems like the objects come out of the screen and fall on top of you. And so, faith does something similar: it does not change the *surface* of what I see—whether it is a face, a circumstance, or a thing I have to do. But it makes me see it from a new point of view—a point of view from which I am able to perceive better the “thickness,” the *pondus*. Remember that in March we said that in Hebrew the word *kabod* (*pondus*, weight) also means glory; that is, something great, important, dense with meaning. Which means: to see in something a depth of meaning otherwise impossible.¹²

¹¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* (June 29, 2013), 18, 22.

¹² Cf. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 20n15.

The answer to the question-objection is thus: *faith*. It is faith that causes us to enter into the point of view of Christ, which is thus the truest point of view.

All this presupposes (it is the other side of the coin) that the point of view from which we look at reality is often partial; that is, not necessarily wrong, but rather less penetrating.

In effect, is it not this deficit of the visual faculty on which the alienation that we spoke about in March depends? As Benedict XVI loved to say, the sickness that most afflicts man today (and therefore also us!) is not a sickness of the will but rather of the eyes:

*Contemporary man [Pope Ratzinger said this in a message sent to the newly born school where I now teach] is stuck at positivism...He does not seem able anymore to perceive the depth of reality that our eyes see and touch, whether it is a flower or a human face.*¹³

Here the famous description of the positivist gaze that Giussani provides in *The Religious Sense* is once again useful:

The positivist is like someone who acts as if he were near-sighted, and within a centimeter of a painting, fixes his gaze upon a certain point, exclaiming: "What a dot here!" And, because the painting is rather large, this person could scan it all, centimeter by centimeter, exclaiming at every point, "What a dot here!" The painting would appear as

¹³ An emblematic example of this "atrophy" of the visual faculty, it seems to me, is the diffusion of the stain of gender ideology (at least in Western society—the phenomenon is, significantly, irrelevant in Africa and Asia). Without entering into specifics, it is interesting to observe how the various gender theories, while different from each other, are all founded on an unquestionable premise: the human body does not reveal anything profound about its meaning and its purpose. We can say that the body is here conceived of more or less at the level of a machine, of which, thanks to various sciences (understood in a modern way), we can know better and better its functional laws but nothing more. Whether there is a language, a music, inscribed by the creator (or by nature, to use a more secular grammar) on the human body—a music full of meaning, beauty, and intrinsic goodness—has become unclear to an increasing number of men and women.

*a meaningless collection of dots. But if he were to back off three meters, he would see the painting in its unity, in its entire perspective.*¹⁴

Spontaneously, the mind turns to the man born blind, and to the focus of the Beginning Day. Let us try to identify ourselves with this man, who had never seen a human face, who had never seen his own face reflected in a mirror. Is not the situation of this man ultimately fitting, a moving symbol of the condition of the contemporary *homo positivisticus* described by Ratzinger and Giussani?

I have always been struck by the strange gesture by which Jesus heals our man. Why does he spread mud (made with his spit!) on his eyes (John 9:6)? Why does he heal him with such a bizarre gesture? As Irenaeus of Lyon already understood,¹⁵ the gesture of Jesus reminds us of the creation of Adam narrated in Genesis: “The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground.”¹⁶ With this gesture, Jesus is therefore saying: “I have come to re-create you, O man, I have come to make you a new creature” (Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17). And what does this mean, above all? In order to give you new eyes—eyes capable of seeing everything—I start from your own humanity in its true splendor: “*So he went and washed, and came back able to see.*”¹⁷

Now, what concretely is it that these new eyes that faith gives, and that memory, which is nothing other than a lived faith,¹⁸ allow us to develop?

¹⁴Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 129.

¹⁵Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*, 5.15.2.

¹⁶Genesis 2:7.

¹⁷John 9:7.

¹⁸I identify lived faith and memory because the word “memory,” as Father Giussani uses it, indicates precisely faith insofar as it tends to permeate everything that enters into the ray of our experience. To understand how much memory is central in Giussani's understanding of the life of faith, it is enough to look at the prologue of the Statute of the Fraternity, in which we read, among other things: “The profound meaning of the movement is a call to remember Christ, living this memory every day in the circumstances of life.” Luigi Giussani, *The Work of the Movement: The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation* (Milan: Societa Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, 2005), 237.

In what follows of this meditation, I would like to try to offer the beginning of an answer to this question. In order to do this, I have decided to take as a figure of reference the same evangelical personality on which we fixed our gaze at the end of our first meeting, in the synthesis in March. I am obviously speaking about good old Simon Peter. In fact, as some of you will remember, it is precisely in speaking about him and his rebellion against the “strange” initiative that Jesus took at the Last Supper, that already in March there emerged the theme of the necessary path for entering into the *point of view* of Jesus:¹⁹ just as the faith of Simon Peter in Jesus, while sincere from the beginning, did not allow him *all at once* to “understand Jesus,” so it is for us.²⁰ That said, I want now to enter a little more into the matter of this passage from the old to the new “point of view.” In what exactly does this new point of view consist? And in what sense does faith make it possible? Last but not least: What role does our companionship play in this dynamic? In order to attempt to open up hints of an answer to these important questions, I will avail myself of a page of the Gospel of John that is very dear to our history: John 21. This chapter presents us in fact with a Peter who is very different from the one Jesus spoke to in the ce-

¹⁹ “‘What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will understand later,’ Jesus responds. Which means: ‘It is not my gesture that is crazy. You are the one who does not yet understand.’ And why does Peter not understand? ... because if Peter had understood *all at once*, then he would not have needed to follow behind Jesus, in order to enter into a new *point of view* on reality—that new point of view... is the point of view that Christ came to introduce to us. In order to enter into the point of view of another, to see the world with the eyes of another, I have to move, I have to change my starting position... to assume the point of observation of this other... This requires a path... a journey.” *You Have Given Him Rule*, “Synthesis,” 65–66.

²⁰ “If there was someone who could be said to have had an encounter, it was Peter.... And yet that same man, Jesus of Nazareth, that man who by then was the center of his life, Simon did not understand. He didn’t understand Jesus! Or better: he only understood in part. He understood that Jesus was the Messiah... and yet—it drove him crazy—he understood that he did not understand Him. What did he not understand? He did not understand what it really meant to say that He was the Messiah, he did not understand where Jesus was going with that logic that was so different from everyone else, to such an extent that His way of moving was so different from everyone.... ‘What I am doing now you do not understand, but you will understand later.’ As it was for Peter, so it is for us. We cannot enter into the point of view of Christ violently. We recognize it violently, but we enter into His point of view little by little and never without a struggle.” *You Have Given Him Rule*, 69.

nacle: “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but *you will understand later*”;²¹ a Peter who has finally begun to understand, above all thanks to what happened to irreversibly change his eyes: the revelation, in the great hour of Easter, of the love of the Lord in all its glory (cf. John 13:1).²²

Let us begin.

2. And he dove into the sea: the “breaking forth” of the new man

The first point on which I want to pause is the change of *the gaze on oneself* that faith gives.

Let us start again from the self-made man. One of the connotations of the subject of performance, we said in March, is the *fear of failing*. If in fact I consist of what I am able to do, it is normal that I live in a state of permanent anxiety about succeeding, which in the negative means: *the fear of not succeeding*. From here comes the paradoxical “spirit of slaves”²³ about which we spoke—given that the slave is by definition one who lives and acts in a regime of fear.²⁴

Now, in what sense does faith break open the bars of this prison of anxiety and fear? Saint Paul says it well:

For you [you who are baptized in Christ] did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, “Abba, Father!”
(Romans 8:15)

“A spirit of adoption.” Do you remember from the lesson in March the passage from the condition of being a slave to the condition of a being child? Faith frees me from fear first of all because it gives

²¹ John 13:7.

²² For the importance of this crucial point, on which I will not pause now, see below, page 95: “*Synthesis*, 1. We would like to see Jesus.”

²³ Romans 8:15.

²⁴ “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.” *You Have Given Him Rule*, 16; cf. 12–17).

me a “spirit of adoption”; that is, it changes the content of what I see when I look at myself in the mirror: no longer an I that has to win a name for itself (that is, a consistency, a real existence) by its performance; but an I that knows itself to be a child, loved “gratis,” before and regardless of the outcome of his or her attempts;²⁵ and for this reason is enabled and led to give itself in its turn in gratuity, with a light heart, a heart that reflects the gratuitous love of which it has been the object.

And so, right there in John 21 there is a scene that I think shows better than any other this change of perspective in action—a scene that is the dramatic anticipation of the famous conversation between Jesus and Peter that Father Giussani taught us to love (to which I will return). It is the scene in which Simon, knowing that the man on the shore is the Lord, dives into the water toward Him, leaving behind the boat, the nets, and everything else.

I will recall briefly the antecedents. The Lord Jesus has now risen. He has already appeared two times to the twelve gathered in the upper room (Cf. John 20:19ff.). In John 21, He appears to them for the third and last time, and He does so at the first light of the dawn, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, at the end of a night that Peter and the other six disciples spent in the boat fishing. At a certain point, the Beloved Disciple, sharper and more awake than the others, recognizes the Lord and tells Simon Peter (John 21:7). And what does Peter do?

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad [in Greek it is gymnos, which means “naked”: under it he was naked!!], and jumped into the sea (John 21:7).

²⁵ The idea is put magnificently into words by Claudel in his *The Tidings Brought to Mary*, through the mouth of Anne Vercors. By now the farmer is about to depart for the Holy Land and he turns to his daughter Violaine: “A Father’s love / Asks no return, and the child has no need either to win it or merit it: / As it was his before the beginning, so it remains / His blessing and his inheritance, his help, his honor, his right, his justification!... Only know, O my child, that I am thy father!” Paul Claudel, *The Tidings Brought to Mary*, trans. Louise Morgan Sill (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 48–49.

Let us pay attention to the details, because it is within the most material details, as we saw already in March, that John hides the deepest nuances of meaning. Just as here: Why does John tell us that Peter *tucks in his garment before diving in*?

First of all, to have us note the strangeness of this fact: normally when one dives into the water, he takes off clothes; he doesn't dress himself! And yet Peter here does the opposite. Why? John does not say; he invites us to guess. So, the first answer is quite obvious: our Simon does not want to present himself *naked* before Jesus (with reason!). But is that all? No, that is not all. There is another character in the Bible who, long before Simon, girded himself to cover his own nakedness—Adam, who after having committed the first sin in human history, girded himself with fig leaves to hide the dirtiness that sin had left in him and thus not to feel shame.²⁶

So we can understand the deep sense, the so-called “subliminal” sense of Simon's gesture. Like Adam, so also Simon is full of shame because of what he has done: how the memory of that triple denial burns again....

But here is the beautiful thing. *At the appearance of the Lord in the garden at the cool time of the day*, Adam, overcome by an impetus of fear, hid himself among the trees:

*When they heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God then called to the man and asked him, “Where are you?” He answered, “**I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself.**”* (Genesis 3:8–10)

At the appearance of the Risen One at dawn on the bank of the Sea of Galilee, Peter does the opposite: he dives in quickly toward the Lord, as if incapable of containing his affection:

²⁶“So they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Genesis 3:7).

The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. (John 21:8)

How beautiful is this additional detail: why does John have us underline the fact that “they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards”? To help us perceive the hurry, the uncontrollable desire of Simon to reach Jesus, so that Simon could be pierced again by the gaze of the Lord. Couldn’t he have waited a minute, given that they were only a few yards from the shore? No, he couldn’t wait, because of an impatience that is the sure sign of love, when it is intense and also empty of inhibition, like the love of children. Children act like this, when all of a sudden someone appears whom they really love; they run to meet him joyfully, without shame.

How is this possible? How is it possible that Peter reacts in this way at the moment he had every reason to feel more “wrong” than ever?

Here it is crucial to note another contrast. To tell the truth, this is not the first miraculous catch of fish that Jesus worked in the presence of Peter. If we go from John to the Gospel of Luke, we realize that Jesus had already performed an almost identical sign at the beginning, before Simon had left everything to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11).²⁷ But the reaction of Peter then had been different. It had been equivalent to Adam’s reaction at the appearance of the Lord in the garden:

²⁷ “After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.’ Simon said in reply, ‘Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, ‘*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*’ For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’ *When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him*” (Luke 5:4–11).

They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

In front of the manifestation of the power of the Lord, right in that place where Peter felt himself most competent (fishing was "his" thing; how many times does the same thing happen to us when we receive help, and we are almost upset not to have done it with our own strength), Simon's reaction had arisen from a feeling of disproportion, of inadequacy, almost as if the revelation of the greatness of Jesus made clear Peter's smallness. And for this reason he had felt the impulse to follow after Jesus.

And so, why then does Simon, who now had every right to feel himself even more unworthy, to crouch down in the back of the boat behind all the others, instead throw himself toward Him without fear? The fact is that Peter is no longer the same. He has changed. And he has changed not in the sense that the shame about his littleness has magically disappeared. So many times we imagine mercy as a kind of eraser that resets our memory. Instead, mercy is something much greater and more amazing than this. As we have seen, Peter's shame for what he did *is not taken away*. But it is as if it could *no longer conquer him*. And why does it no longer conquer him? Because Peter is no longer centered on himself, on his merits, but on the certainty of a love that precedes and exceeds all merit. We understand then why I first said that the scene of Peter's dive is truly the anticipation in dramatic form of what the yes of Peter expresses in words. How many times did Father Giussani invite us to identify ourselves with this man who heard Jesus ask him—him who had just denied Jesus three times—"Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And he, rather than drowning in shame, hears himself instead respond, as if pushed by an overwhelming impulse: "Yes, Lord, you know it, you know that I love you—and if you asked me a thousand times, a thousand times I would say: yes, yes, yes..."²⁸

²⁸ "Let us try to identify ourselves with the soul of that blunt and rough man: in front of the

Here is the *new freedom* that is born from faith. A freedom that is not laxness or disengagement. Rather, it is an engagement that has a new “*motor*”: no longer the anxiety to obtain who knows what “result,” but the desire to respond with all of ourselves to the love without measure that pours out from that face—the face that asks you only one thing: “Do you love me?”²⁹

Returning to Simon’s dive, there is another small detail that says this in a subtler and yet great way. As we have noted, soon after having narrated the dive, John writes:

The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. (John 21:8)

Also here: why does John, with a sudden change of perspective, like in a movie, draw our attention to this detail?

The fact is that it had been Peter’s initiative to go fishing: “I am going fishing!”³⁰—he had said. Fishing was his career, and the boat was certainly his, as well as the nets. And yet, now, just after realizing that the

Lord his soul was totally full of the memory of his betrayal. His betrayal was, though, simply the epiphany, the epiphenomenon, the manifestation in a moment of something that he had within him; that is, of a coarseness, of a lack of generosity, of a stubbornness, of a fear, of a shyness, of a cowardice, of a meanness, that was him—him! His soul was full of this and in front of that question it all came to light. The betrayal was like a revelatory point: his misery, all his misery came out.... Simon felt all his littleness, pusillanimity, meanness as a man. ‘Simon, do you love me more than the others love me?’ When he answered: ‘Lord, sure, I love you’; when he said: ‘Lord, you know everything: despite all appearances, despite all appearances of me to myself, you know that I love you, that I want you’—because ‘I love you’ means ‘I want you,’ and ‘I want you’ means ‘I affirm you, I recognize what you are, I recognize what you are for me and for everyone’—this was the overturning of moralism and of a justice made by our own hands. That man there was in fact a poor sinner like me and like you, he was a poor sinner who had just betrayed, among other things, in an indecent way, as in our memory—maybe—no one had ever done so shamelessly. He was full of error, and yet he loved; he could have made a hundred thousand other errors, and yet he loved; he could say: ‘Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.’ So the Lord told him: ‘I make you my witness in the world.’ He entrusted His testimony, he entrusted His kingdom in the world to that poor sinner.” Luigi Giussani, *La verità nasce dalla carne* [The truth is born from the flesh] (Milan: BUR, 2019), 135–36 (translation ours).

²⁹ Cf. John 21:15–17.

³⁰ John 21:3.

man on the shore is the Lord, he leaves the boat, nets, and fish in the hands of others, and throws himself into the water toward the Lord.

Is John suggesting to us that our love for Christ leads us to despise the goods, many or few, that are entrusted to us? Is he suggesting that love for Christ leads us to forget everything else, as if He were a kind of drug that makes us free, sure, but in the sense of *indifferent* to everything and everyone? Clearly not. What John is suggesting is something more paradoxical. But to understand what he is getting at, we have to move on to the next scene.

The disciples are now all there on the shore, where Jesus was waiting for them, around a charcoal fire with fish and bread on it. At a certain point Jesus says to them: “Bring some of the fish you just caught.” And yet again Peter anticipates everyone:

So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. (John 21:11)

Beautiful: the same Simon Peter, who in the impulse of his love for Jesus was uninterested in the nets and fish, demonstrates himself capable of dragging *by himself* a net full of 153 large fish to the shore (close to 100 kilograms of fish, according to estimates)³¹ *when it is Jesus who asks him for them*. All of this to say: loving Christ to the point of “forgetting” his net full of fish is ironically what gives Peter the strength to haul more fish than the most experienced and robust fisherman. Which, turning to ourselves, means: the more we begin to love Christ more than the things and persons that are entrusted to us, the more we love those things and persons; that is, taking care of things and persons stops being a source of stress and becomes, to use a beautiful expression of Jesus, “an easy yoke and a light burden” (cf. Matthew 11:30).

³¹ Rather than breaking our heads over the allegorical significance of the number 153, as many (legitimately) do, we should, in my opinion, first of all ask, in homage to the Johannine way of weaving symbols and narration: Why does John, beyond telling us that there were 153 fish, specify that they were *large*? The answer is clear: because what counts for John is *first of all* to make us understand that the net *weighed a lot!*

3. Possession in detachment: toward the hundredfold

And so we come to the second aspect of that new vision of things that faith introduces into our experience. The memory of Christ not only changes our way of looking at ourselves, but it also transforms our gaze on what is *in front of us*, beginning with the people and things we are called to take care of. In what sense?

We have already given the answer, describing this Peter who first, out of love for Christ, forgets his net, and then, *still out of love for Christ*, brings it to shore by himself.

Thus, the memory of Christ achieves in us the same paradoxical effect. *In appearance*, it is as if you had detached yourself from your work or from the face of your wife, because if you look Christ in the face you cannot look at the face of your wife. *In reality*, though, in this “diving in toward Christ,”³² you do not detach yourself. Rather, you are led within, into the intimacy of the face of your wife; you are led to the point of view from which you are able to see her truly, in her “entire truth.”³³ Which means: no longer as a sum of traits that you like and traits that you don’t like (as more time passes, the more the second category grows), but as this “lamb” which the Lord entrusts to you:

³² Incidentally, it is beautiful that in the *throwing himself toward* Jesus, Peter ends up *immersing himself totally in the water*. The allusion to baptism (*baptisma=immersion*) is evident. As if to say: lived memory “rebaptizes” us, *regenerates us every time*, which also means that it “washes” our eyes, our hands, etc.

³³ It is worth observing that this dynamic is nothing but the deepening and, so to say, expansion of ourselves through faith; it is a dynamic that, according to Giussani, is already valid at the level of natural, contemplative awareness: “To know a painting we don’t have to look with our eyes a millimeter away. Then we would say: ‘What dots there are here!’ and moving: ‘What a dot!’ In a day and a half, breaking your back, you make everything move... but: dot and dot and dot and dot... all that you’ve seen are dots, you can’t enjoy it. If somebody comes and takes you by the collar and pulls you back a meter: you see the painting! Without this detachment you can’t know it, and thus you can’t use it, nor can you enjoy it.” Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way*, vol. 2, *Hope* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 100). It is suggestive to note that the word that in Russian designates both chastity and temperance is *celomudrie* (cf. the Greek *sophrosyne*)—a term that, to do justice to the etymology, would be translated: “science or wisdom (*mudrost’*) of the entirety, of the totality (*celo*=entire, total).” As if to say: without a certain *distance*, there cannot be *penetration* into the depth of the thing, nor, which is the same, perception of it as an entirety, full of meaning.

Do you love me, Simon son of John? ... Feed my sheep.

As Saint Augustine noted,³⁴ Jesus does not say to Simon “feed *your* sheep,” but rather feed *my* sheep. Which means: only if you recognize that these sheep are not yours but *mine*—only then can you truly feed them, first of all because you begin to see them for what they really are.³⁵

So, the memory of Christ is the continual reigniting in us of this awareness—the awareness that this woman who is *my* wife, these children who are *my* children, are not first of all mine. They belong to Another who entrusts them to me, and precisely in this way makes Himself a beggar for my life, “puts Himself in dependence,” as Péguy³⁶ would say: “*Do you love me? ... Feed my lambs.*”³⁷

³⁴ “Those who have this purpose in feeding the flock of Christ, that they may have them as their own, and not as Christ’s, are convicted of loving themselves, and not Christ, from the desire either of boasting, or wielding power, or acquiring gain, and not from the love of obeying, serving, and pleasing God. Against such, therefore, there stands as a wakeful sentinel this thrice inculcated utterance of Christ, of whom the apostle complains that they seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ’s (Cf. Philippians 2:21). For what else mean the words, *Do you love me? Feed my sheep*, than if it were said, If you love me, think not of feeding yourself, but feed my sheep as mine, and not as your own; seek my glory in them, and not your own... my dominion, and not yours; my gain, and not yours.” Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 123, 5, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701123.htm>; cf. also Sermon 147A, 2.

³⁵ It is interesting in this sense to note that one of the many ways Father Giussani describes virginity, understood as a spiritual experience, is *to relate to things according to their truth* (it is impossible for me to offer a precise reference, insofar as the definition is treated in writings that are still not published and accessible only *pro manuscripto*).

³⁶ “He who loves places himself, by loving / By that very act, from then on, into dependence / ... He becomes dependent on the one he loves. / And yet it’s this very situation, my child, that God made for himself, in loving us. / God deigned to hope in us, because he wanted to hope for us, wait for us” Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David L. Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 81.

³⁷ Augustine says again: “*Do you love me?* he asked. *Lord, you know that I love you.* And Jesus: *Feed my lambs.* This one time, this a second, this a third; as if Peter had no other way of demonstrating his love for Christ than by being a faithful shepherd under the Prince of all shepherds. *Do you love me? I love you.* And what will be the response of your loving me? What will you, a man, offer to me your creator? What proof will you give of your love, you, the redeemed, to your redeemer, you who at most are a soldier, to your king? What will you give? I demand only this: *Feed my sheep.*” Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 147A, 1 (translation ours).

With a crucial, ironic *nota bene*: the fact that in this apparent expropriation, in this detachment that seems to expropriate me, *the one who gains* is me, because the fruit of this “restitution” is an enjoyment one hundred times more than my relationship with wife and children—it is a love full of a gratuity, of an attention, of a patience, and of a fruitfulness otherwise impossible.

*If your answer to grace is: “I accept you. Yes, Lord, I love you.” “Guide my people in history—Jesus answered him—feed my lambs.” “Guide my people in history”: this is nothing more than the hundredfold! Thus, he says to you: “If you make the sacrifice of a love to me without return, you will be decisive for all the people who are walking, journeying toward their destiny, all the people that you do not know.”*³⁸

So the answer to the beautiful question that one of you asked today—How can I have a gaze that is not possessive in the face of the young people that are entrusted to me?—is this: memory. But memory is not first of all a remedy for fear: “Oh God, I am afraid of being possessive, so I have to remember that these kids are not mine”; rather, it is memory understood as the door that introduces me into a truer, purer, but also more intense, possession.

Father Giussani, as many of you know, gave the name *virginity* to this experience of possession in detachment that the memory of Christ causes to take root in us. Which means, among other things: that virginity, understood in a Giussani–like way, is not something that can be experienced only by those who are called to virginity *in the strict sense*, in the vocational sense of the term. No, there is a sense in which virginity is the ideal of everyone, even of those who are called to have a family—if we understand what has been said about virginity.³⁹ Which is that it is not first of all a state of

³⁸ Luigi Giussani, *Vivendo nella carne* [Living in the flesh] (Milan: BUR, 1998), 213–14 (translation ours).

³⁹ “One begins to understand that he cannot love—love!—the person of the girl with whom he enters into an affective relationship, he cannot respect the dignity of that being, if he does not look at her in a certain way, with a certain detachment within, if he does not live the

life, but a way of being in relationship with reality that opens us to a fuller *possession of reality*⁴⁰—a possession that is a taste of the way in which Jesus saw things and people, the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, the face of John and that of the Samaritan woman.

What way is that? The Lord Himself told us, in His last great prayer to the Father: “*They belonged to you, and you gave them to me.*”⁴¹

What did Jesus see when he looked into the eyes of that woman who joined Him at the well with the jar on her head and questioned Him? In the depth of the “deep well”⁴² of those eyes, full of poorly concealed melancholy, Jesus saw the face of the Father, who

relationship with her with a detachment within, with a respect within, that costs a tearing, a waiting, a sacrifice, a cut, the courage of a holding back, fostering the emergence of a more global perspective in which the embrace of the being he loves involves the universe. You feel the universe that presses at your elbows while you embrace her because the task that you have toward that being is a task for the universe, and if you don’t have a task toward that being, then you want simply to dominate that being, to possess her and that’s it.” Luigi Giussani, “La fede è un cammino dello sguardo” [Faith is a process of gazing], *30 Giorni*, no. 9 (1995), 45 (translation ours).

⁴⁰On the other hand, an attentive reading of the (published) texts in which Father Giussani speaks about this topic (see above all the volumes of the *Quasi Tischreden*), demonstrates how the bold language of Giussani does not try to diminish or in any way thin out the aspect of sacrifice that *both* the conditions of the celibate life *and* matrimony lived in a Christian way bring with them. The thought of Giussani, in substance, reflects rather—in perfect fidelity to the most genuine spirit of the gospels and Saint Paul—the paschal logic, according to which *losing* and *letting go* are for the Christian ordered to “receiving again multiplied”—mortification leads to resurrection: “The more one has a preference, the more he needs to base it on sacrifice, to base that preference on the eternal, who is the Jesus of John and Andrew. Because the eternal entered the world through that which I see with preference. He entered the world with John and Andrew, with Our Lady, with Joseph, in the way that the gospel describes. The more one loves, the more one prefers, the more one has a strange necessity to sacrifice. Which is not *for* Jesus! The sacrifice is not for Jesus but for the reality of this world, so that the world may be true! And so, now that I have said a beautiful thing, this is the first time I am saying it: the more one loves, the more he has a preference, the more he has a strange need to sacrifice so that what comes ‘first’ in the relationship can emerge. And thus the relation is, becomes, true, always truer, and no longer goes away, that is, it becomes eternal. And the eternal that enters into the relationship, into the beloved, makes the beloved a sign, but a sign that this time is real, a sign that is closer by analogy to the sacrament; that is, a sign that carries within it its truth.... The more we love a person (or a thing, which is analogous), the more we need to sacrifice, so that the person we love may become true; that is, may leave a space in which the presence that has happened—the presence of the Jesus of John and Andrew—may enter.” Luigi Giussani, *L’attrattiva Gesù* [The attraction of Jesus] (Milan: BUR, 2001), 29, 33 (translation ours).

⁴¹John 17:6.

⁴²John 4:11.

was entrusting that woman to Him: “*They belonged to you and you gave them to me.*”⁴³ From here comes the startle, the emotion, the wonder that filled His eyes while He looked at her: an emotion and a wonder that she had never seen before in the eyes of any of the men who had loved her—a wonder that penetrated to her heart, as if it soothed her thirst, as if it quenched her thirst, even without giving her “anything” (cf. John 4:10).⁴⁴ Moreover, not “as if”; if it is true that the woman “left her water jar”⁴⁵ and ran to the town to tell everyone what had happened, as if forgetting the thirst that had brought her to the well, then He had quenched her thirst in actual effect (as He promised: John 4:14!).⁴⁶ As Giussani observed:

*Jesus was like a child in front of people: he was amazed by the flowers, he wondered at the grasses, in front of the birds, in front of children playing, he was moved in front of a woman who was crying, he was pained for those who did wrong. And it was certainly because of the way He looked at Mary Magdalene that she followed after Him: she depended on the way He looked at her. He looked at things according to how they truly were: a thing is seen for what it truly is when we see it as God sees it.*⁴⁷

Elsewhere he adds:

*Where can the eternal be experienced in the here and now?
In how it makes you see your father, how it makes you see*

⁴³ “I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word” (John 17:6).

⁴⁴ “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water’” (John 14:10).

⁴⁵ John 4:28.

⁴⁶ “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’” (John 4:13–15).

⁴⁷ Giussani, *L'autocoscienza del cosmo*, 205–6 (translation ours).

your mother, how it makes you see the woman you love, how it makes you see the man you love! There is a price: a sacrifice within, an abandonment within; it seems like an abandonment, and instead it is a deeper grasp that gives a more imposing result.... "A hundred times more" means an experience that is more intense. To look at an object with respect—with respect that shows you out of the corner of your eye the presence of Christ—makes you look at, makes you love the object, "pounce on" the object while staying at the right distance, and use the object a hundred times better. Anyone who hasn't had this experience does not know what Christianity is! Because Christianity, as Saint Paul said [Galatians 2:20] is this: "Insofar as I now live in the flesh [living in the flesh means father, mother, man, woman, child, friends...], I live by faith in the Son of God [I look at, I listen to, I use the thing as Christ looked at it, listened to it, used it]." This brings a utilization of the thing, an enrichment of the thing, a light on the thing, a warmth of the thing, a calm of the thing, a peace in the thing that is a hundred times greater than what everyone else has had and what I would have had.⁴⁸

I imagine most of you never had the occasion of meeting Father Giussani in person and directly experiencing his gaze, the way he looked at you—the way he looked at everything. I think, though, that almost all of you have heard him speak. Well, if I had to say what most *amazed* me, I would say that it was *his amazement*—excuse the play on words: the amazement with which he looked at you, with which he looked at everything. The famous example of the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense*—imagine that you are opening your eyes for the first time with the awareness you have now—is in reality a bit of a self-portrait of Father Gius. The words with which Péguy describes Victor Hugo come to mind:

⁴⁸ Giussani, *Vivendo nella carne*, 187–88 (translation ours).

All the strength of his genius comes almost completely from this: he saw the world not as an object known, with a habitual gaze, but as the first object of a first gaze.⁴⁹

I do not think I am the first or the only one you have heard speak about how Father Giussani, in looking at you, knew how to communicate to you the sensation of being in his eyes, which was the most interesting and mysterious thing in the world—yours was the first and only face that he had ever seen. Except that it is too easy just to stop ourselves at the mere shock of that fact, to limit ourselves to attributing its origin to the “*extraordinary*” charisma that Gius was given by God. Undoubtedly that is in part true. And still, as he himself told me once, almost in a huff, it has to do with an experience that can allow anyone to live memory seriously⁵⁰—that is, in looking your woman in the face, rather than stopping at the surface of her “beautiful little face,” you penetrate to the deepest roots from which that face breaks forth in every moment as an always-new event.

A famous anecdote says all of this in a wonderful way. It is the story of the encounter that Gius had, still as a young priest, with a cynical ex-seminarian, who after leaving the seminary fell in love and got married. Allow me to read you one of the stories of this episode that Father Giussani left us:

Do you remember my friend from Saronno? There was a seminarian who was a cynic and a skeptic (we were already in high school); he had on his cheeks, like two pieces of ice, a sardonic smile with which he made fun of everything, from the rector to the last classmate. The only

⁴⁹ Charles Péguy, *Veronique: Dialogo della storia e dell'anima carnale* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2002), 26 (translation ours).

⁵⁰ “In fact, the word sacrifice does not necessarily indicate struggle or pain or—better—renunciation, struggle as renunciation. It does not necessarily mean this. It means to make the memory of Christ penetrate into what you love; then what you love becomes more true, because it is penetrated by the eternal.” Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesu*, 33–34 (translation ours).

person he spoke to within those gates was me. Anyway, in the third year of high school he left, he went away, rightly. Twenty years later, I was in Saronno, at the train station in Saronno.... The train arrives and, as the train arrives, I feel a hand slap me on the back. I turn around: it was him. After twenty years, with a smile that was a little more tolerable: "Good morning, professor, where are you going?" "I have to go to Milan." "Listen, I had to go to Varese, but I'll come to Milan with you, so we can chat for a bit." And he came to Milan with me.... He was there, he looked out the window and I observed that his silhouette was different than it was back then. And, in fact, he begins exactly like that: "I have to tell you that you were right (I had told him that 'you will change when you fall in love with a girl' and he had burst out laughing when I told him that in the seminary)—you were right: I fell in love with a girl and I was really fond of her for a few years, and we had two children; in short, what you said happened: I changed." But, as soon as he said that—bam!—the skeptical mask comes right back on his cheeks (all of a sudden, because he had become different) and he says: "But there is something that, when it happens, I tell myself: 'But maybe I was right.' Because when I am there with my wife and I repeat certain words to her: 'I adore you forever, I love no one more than you, you are the most beautiful in the world,' I start to laugh, I start to laugh because it is a lie! It is a lie: you were not right; I do not know how to resist what you say, but it is not true because it is a lie—there are moments when it appears to be a lie!" And I was a bit awkward at first. Then, soon after, I answered him apologetically like this: "Imagine that the face of your wife is like a vanishing point opened up within the scene of the universe, and from that hole you glimpse the light from which everything comes, that illuminates everything and where the breath that gives form to everything comes from. That is, you look at your

*wife as a sign of the mystery, the sign of something else.
That is the way you sustain the feeling.*⁵¹

We can thus understand better why for Giussani the drama of freedom was in play, first and more than anything else, in the dynamic of knowledge, as the third chapter of *The Religious Sense* has recently caused us to appreciate again.⁵² Which does not mean at all, as a careless reading of our texts might suggest, that Giussani did not have at heart the ethical change of the person. It means, rather, that he understood that the deepest drama of freedom is always situated—and in today’s man more than ever—in the act itself of knowledge and seeing; that is, at the level of that which gives us (or does not give us) the possibility of *coming to see*. From here comes the fact that asceticism, for Giussani, has to do first of all with the eyes—it is a path of refining the gaze.⁵³ The rest is a consequence.⁵⁴

4. “A new hearth”: the vocational companionship

Last step. “Father Paolo, all these things are beautiful and desirable”—one of you said to me, when we were at dinner a little while ago—“but then, when I find myself at work in front of my boss, or

⁵¹ Luigi Giussani, *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così?* [(Is it really?!) possible to live this way?] (Milan: BUR, 2020), 556–57 (translation ours).

⁵² Cf. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 24–34.

⁵³ “In order to love the truth more than ourselves, in order to love the truth of the object more than our set image of it, to acquire a poverty of spirit, to have eyes that face reality and truth wide open, like the eyes of children, there must be a process and *work*. Here, as well, the painful process is called *asceticism*.” Giussani, 34.

⁵⁴ I do not think it is by chance that the hyper-technological and frenetic life typical of contemporary Western society, whether seen in the light of a pan-sexualism proportionate to the poverty of education in silence or in the art of contemplation. In effect, chastity is comprehensible only to one who has the taste for contemplation, because it is only in having this type of experience that one learns to *feel* detachment as the means of penetration into the depth of things and faces, rather than as a mere abstention; as a way to enjoyable possession rather than to bitter privation. And vice versa: the value of virginity cannot but remain hazy to one who has never been initiated into this experience by anyone. For a deepening of this topic, I allow myself to refer to Paolo Prosperi, “Do Not Hold Me: Ascending the Ladder of Love,” *Communio*: ICR 45 no. 2 (Summer 2018).

simply in the middle of my day, *alone* in front of the circumstances, they seem abstract, impossible to live.” At this point, I allowed myself to stop her, in order not to let her lose along the way the importance of what she had just said: “You are right—I told her—alone you cannot go anywhere.” And in fact, if we read the prologue of the Statute of the Fraternity, which we have also put into the program for this meeting, what do we read there? What is the goal of the Fraternity of CL?

The specific nature of...the charism [of CL] can be described like this: [first]—insistence on the memory of Christ as the affirmation of the factors at the source of the Christian experience, because these are the origin of man’s true image [and about this it seems we have already spoken a lot]; [second]—insistence on the fact that the memory of Christ cannot be generated except in the immanence of a fully lived communiality.

So: the new eyes that we have spoken about are not refined by watching a tutorial on YouTube or attending the self-coaching course of this or that guru. The memory of Christ, which is the true moving force that changes our mentality, “cannot be generated”—says Father Giussani—“except in the immanence of a fully lived communiality” (with all the specifications we have described in the assembly).⁵⁵ Pay attention though: Father Giussani does not say that lived communiality generates the faith. The faith is given to us by grace, by an event of grace that happens as and when God wills and that is called, objectively, baptism.⁵⁶ Giussani says rather that the immanence of a lived communiality is necessary in order to generate in us memory—and this is, as we have said, faith

⁵⁵ Giussani, *The Work of the Movement*, 237.

⁵⁶ Not by chance does the man born blind reacquire his sight only after washing himself at the pool of Siloam (John notes that this word means “sent”: an allusion to the one sent by the Father, or Jesus?). Jesus “said to him, ‘Go wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see” (John 9:7). As commentators have consistently noted, there is a clear allusion here to the rite of baptism.

insofar as it is the principle of a new way of being in reality.

It is only within a lived communiality, in short, that memory finds the nourishment and sustenance necessary to inform life.

Let us return to “Peter’s dive.” It is significant that Peter recognizes Jesus, who draws him to the shore, not by himself, but after a prompt from the beloved disciple.

How beautiful: the one who on an impulse dives in as a man in love who all of a sudden sees his beloved in the crowd, is Simon. The act of memory, the passion of the heart, is always personal: it is *mine and yours*. And yet, it apparently cannot be activated without the help of so many Johns that the Lord puts next to us as companions on the journey.

Another passage from the fourth Gospel, again with Peter as the protagonist, illustrates this point even better. It is the famous scene of the triple denial.⁵⁷ Among the details of this story, I invite you to pay attention above all to the fire near to where Peter finds himself when he denies Jesus:

Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter, “You are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the slaves and the guards were standing around a charcoal fire that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves. Peter was also standing there keeping warm. (John 18:17–18)

Also in this case, which is typical, it is good and right to ask ourselves: why does John, after having told us about the first two denials, spend an entire verse informing us that the servants and the guards were gathered around a fire *because it was cold*, and also that Peter was there with them *keeping warm*? Why does this matter?

It is clear that this has to do with more than just a pure love of journalism. No, John is once again inviting us to read between the lines

⁵⁷ John curiously splits the story of this episode in two (I will not go into why here). We will focus on the first “clip.”

(with the *eyes of faith!*). Let us ask ourselves, therefore: What does fire (or more precisely the hearth, that is, a fire lit by man) represent in antiquity? The answer, for us moderns, is less immediate: the hearth is for ancient man synonymous with the home. Where there is a house there is a hearth, there is a fire. But the house is also the place where man lives with his family, with others. The fire, then, immediately moves to symbolizing that shelter, that source of security that each individual finds in his clan. The true home, the true hearth of man are those bonds. Man is relationship, he is a “social animal,” as Aristotle said.⁵⁸ Which in the negative means: when you find yourself *alone against everyone*, when you do not have the support of “*yours*,” even while having a place around the hearth, you find yourself, without even realizing it, ready to deny even your mother. Because by yourself you cannot manage; it is too cold. And the cold not only takes the wind out of your sails: it also clouds your sight.

Allow me a brief autobiographical *excursus* before I close. As some of you know, before going to America, I spent five years in Russia. It always amazed me, in listening to the stories of my old professor of Russian about the Stalin years, that even the people of standing—men of letters, philosophers, scientists—had to be able to demonstrate the same enthusiasm for Stalin and his regime as everyone else. Of course we cannot generalize. And yet, the idea that I had then was that at least some of these illustrious personalities in that time were acting in good faith. Some of them, for sure, just recited their part out of fear, but some, it seems, were sincere. How do we explain this? In my opinion, it is explained by the fact that when you are surrounded by people who *all together* think in a certain way, who repeat to you from morning to evening that green is orange, you end up convincing yourself that you are the one who is wrong and that green really is orange, “very orange”! At such a point not only is the instinct of preservation strong in us, but also the need for communion.

We understand thus the vital necessity of what Giussani calls the “immanence of a fully lived communionality.” In a world where everything conspires to convince us that we “are the crazy ones,” to use a

⁵⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1.

line from the great De Gregori,⁵⁹ it is in fact impossible not to end up adjusting ourselves and living like everyone else unless we have an “alternative hearth” that is capable of warming our hearts with its flame to the point of making us burn with love for Christ, cost what it may, capable of brightening our minds with its light, minds that otherwise are so easily liable to fall in line with “every wind of teaching.”⁶⁰

Not by chance, there is only one other hearth in all of the Gospel of John other than the one around which Simon denies Jesus. It is the hearth where the seven disciples gather together, invited by the Risen One.⁶¹ As if to say: what transforms Simon from a vile denier into a brilliant witness of the Lord, capable of giving his life for him (cf. John 21:18), is not only “his” individual faith in the Lord, it is also his remaining in that ecclesial communion, which is the concrete place where this faith is continually reactualized—the concrete place where Christ continually makes Himself present, until the day of His return.

As you may have noted, the third of the three pillars of the charism that were in the program has not been addressed. Therefore I would like to throw out a provocation and a challenge (something to meditate on) in preparation for the assembly. I will limit myself to reading it and entrusting it to your reflection and maybe to our conversation, until the assembly tomorrow. It would be beautiful if some spark emerged from this as well. This third pillar helps us see the other side of the coin of our second point. The second point was that memory generates communion. The third is the insistence on the fact that the memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a communionality that is visible and offers proposals to society; which is to say, communion generates memory and memory in turn generates communion.

⁵⁹ “‘But I’m not there anymore,’ and you are the crazy ones / Everyone thought behind their hats / ‘The husband went crazy or just started drinking.’” Francesco De Gregori, “Alice,” from the album *Alice non lo sa* [Alice doesn’t know], 1973–It, ©Universal Music Publishing Group (translation ours).

⁶⁰ Ephesians 4:14.

⁶¹ “When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread.... Jesus said to them, ‘Come, have breakfast.’ And none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they realized it was the Lord” (John 21:9, 12).

Saturday 25 November

PASSAGES FROM THE SECOND ASSEMBLY

Giovanni. *I wanted to talk about three things with respect to what emerged yesterday in the assembly and the lesson. Two years ago my son was born: Matteo Enzo. He was born in desperate conditions because my wife, in the eighth month, suffered a complete detachment of the placenta. By a miracle, she was saved, but for Matteo the situation was very grave. I remember when I arrived in intensive care, when I saw him in the little bed, so beautiful, and my first reaction was: "What a theft has been committed against you!" When the doctor showed me the encephalogram, I understood the situation a little and said to him: "What an injustice has been done to you!" That evening, given that we didn't know how the situation was going to evolve, we instructed the head physician: "If it gets worse, baptize him." He was an atheist and kept on saying: "I do not believe, but I respect your wishes. Okay, okay." The next morning, we were able to baptize him, and it was something a little exceptional because we were in the second wave of COVID. A priest of San Carlo came, Father Luca Montini, to baptize him. While he was performing the rite, I looked at the electric encephalogram and said: "Come on, make a miracle. Come on!" In that moment the testimony that I had heard back in university came to my mind: a girl who, speaking about her mother with a tumor, said that she prayed for a miracle of healing, but then had recognized that the true miracle was how her mother had stood in front of sickness and death. So, there, I prayed not to lose anything, to see everything that was happening. The grace was this: I became aware of my wife's eyes that were shining (she saw her baby for the first time), of all the friends that had invaded the ward, of my son who that evening when we greeted him (the day after that we were going to have to take him off the machines) had put my finger in his hand and squeezed it, and I was so happy. Everyone looked at me like I was a fool, and I said: "My son just squeezed*

my finger!” This presence (our presence, our friends’ presence) was so strong that I learned that the atheist doctor, when there is a family in our situation, now proposes baptism himself. The second thing is that when one throws himself into the love of Christ, the burden is light. This year we discovered that we were expecting a baby, Manuel. The pregnancy was very complicated right away; one week away from extra-uterine viability, my wife contracted an infection of the uterus and therefore a decision was made to take it out because otherwise she would have been dead in half an hour. I remember that I began to walk around the house that night, forward and backward, the whole time: I thought about her, about Manuel, about our four-year-old son Paolo.... But one thing struck me—in the most absolute pain I still wanted to be happy and I wasn’t able, in the dizziness of that circumstance, to explain it to myself until I looked at my son Paolo. My wife was stuck in bed for five months, and they were five heavy months for Paolo. We asked for so many sacrifices of him, but we tried every way to show that these sacrifices were for him and not against him. I realized that God had done the identical thing with me when I looked at our friends of the movement that kept us company, kept company with parents who had already lost a child, knowing that losing another is not easy. And yet, this group of friends, Memores Domini and priests, was created; they asked us to come over for dinner with a group or just us. And at those dinners we did not speak about our situation, but my wife and I at the end of the evening would say, “We are breathing.” They were all people who were looking at the same thing, they in their own vocation and I in my own. My vocation as a father and a husband is in communion with theirs. When they told us that they had to operate on my wife, she, who was almost clinically dying, got up on her elbows in front of the gynecologist who had followed her and had operated on her just recently, and with the awareness that the child she had in her womb would die, she thanked him and said to him: “We decided to give him Diego as his middle name because of the companionship you have given us.” To see this was for me a sign that God conquers death. The last thing is what you said about the cry. Our son Paolo, when my wife came home to recover, in the first twenty minutes, told her about all the beautiful things he

had done while she was away, then he looked at her stomach and said: “Was my little brother born?” And she: “Yes, but he went home to Jesus.” And then it was as if someone had smacked him, because after the death of Matteo he was waiting to be an older brother. For a month he was full of anger (the cry): he began to kick things; he came and said: “Tell me that I am bad!” “But you are not bad.” “I need someone to tell me that I am bad so that at least I would know why I am so angry.” And he went to others and said: “Jesus did a bad thing: he took my brother.” This kind of thing occurred even to the point that, one time, he was on the couch with my wife and requested: “Mamma, ask Jesus to give me another brother.” And she: “Look, mama’s stomach can’t have any more little brothers.” And He: “Well, He’ll find a way.” So my wife said to him: “Why don’t you ask Him?” “I am watching cartoons, I’m busy.” But, as if the question didn’t leave him alone, two days later when she was bringing him to bed, he said: “Mamma, stay here.” He went to our bed, where there is the image of the Holy Family, and my wife heard him say: “Jesus, it’s okay that you took my brother, it’s okay, but I ask you for another brother. You decide the time and the way.” Then he stopped and said: “And thank you for bringing my mom home.” It was amazing for me because my son had a clarity in his relationship with God, the clarity of a familiarity, of a paternity, to which I looked because it often happens that we hide ourselves and say: “Yes, okay, he went to the Lord,” as if we were trying to deaden the pain. Instead my son has this freedom to get angry within a relationship of sonship, which led to him say the truth: “You decide” and “Thank you that my mom is home.”

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Thank you, Giovanni. Children, what a mystery children are! I would like to meet your son. When I was a child I also fought like this with Jesus.

Belen. Yesterday you left us with a question for this assembly on the third point of the Statute of the Fraternity: “The insistence on the fact that the memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a communionality that is visible in and offers proposals to society.” My reaction was: “I don’t have anything to say because it seems to me that I

do not generate anything in society.” But this left me with a bitterness and a question. To think about society and the world for me means first of all to think about the place where I work: an investment fund that develops projects in renewable energy. It is a job that I really like, but it is a world where everything is performance and money. In the morning I always say: “God, here are my hands so that they can know You.” It is only because of the gaze of Christ that I have received and that I continue to receive, that every day I recognize that I am not there to earn money, but for the happiness of men and women. And this gives birth to a new gaze on people; for example, it makes me share what I know with others so that they can learn the job, something that is not usual. Truly, a new gaze is born from the memory of Christ. But it seems to me that you don’t change anything in others and do not at all generate a community that is “visible and offers proposals.” What is this “visible and proposing community” in the reality where each of us finds ourselves? And what is the connection of this with mission?

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Wonderful question. Thank you, Belen. I think this is a question that many feel.

Angelo. Yesterday we said that the memory of Christ cannot be generated except in the immanence of a lived communion. We need therefore a communion in order to live memory. This for me is so true and above all in two points: in my relationship with my wife and with my Fraternity group. It seems, though, that often our communion does not generate a visible and present proposal in the environment, as we said before. So, what is missing? I ask this question because I think that the question of a “presence in the environment” is one of the dimensions of our charism that we have to seek out much more. On this aspect, I wanted to read a passage from Giussani taken from the book that you quoted at the beginning, *Certi di alcune grandi cose* [Certain of a few great things], that I think is a revolutionary description of what it means to be present: “The presence arises as a changed humanity: the presence is something that disturbs the situation through a disturbance present in our life.

It is because something disturbs me that I change, and this change disturbs the situation in which I find myself.” And then it is beautiful how he concludes, a few pages further on: “The presence is the gusto with which we live our experience of faith” (p. 10). It strikes me that, in a way that is different than our usual mentality, the presence is not an activity, but a passivity. And this is related, I think, to the adverb “inevitably” in the third point of the introduction (the memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a communionality that is visible in and offers proposals to society).

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Excuse me, but I am a big fan of the Catholic “both/and.” And so, when I hear “it is not” an activity, I start to lose my temper right away (forgive me: I am not upset with you, it is only the way you express yourself that has me...). Why is it not an activity? Rather, it is *also* an activity! It is not only passivity if we are not Lutherans, but instead Catholics. It is *primarily* passivity, certainly, but it is *also* activity. Better: it is an active passivity, an actively making ourselves passive. What yesterday we called “receptivity,” is, in effect, precisely this: an active allowing of space in myself for the action of Another—where the adjective *active* underlines that there is freedom in the mix, an *energy* of freedom. What is faith—what is hope *above all*—if not an active making space in me for Another? Is hope passive? Yes and no! But this “letting be” is active. Sometimes, in fact, it is very difficult! Or am I wrong? In short, a woman in order to receive the seed that makes her fruitful, is not at all simply passive. She is active (we hope!) in this receiving. *Both/and*: it is a synergy of grace and freedom. God allows us to put ourselves in (and even this is a gift). Maybe we will return to this.

Michela (made-up name). *Before coming here to Assisi something happened at work that moved me, and the lesson yesterday brought it back to my mind. I work in close contact with a judge. In these two years, after he saw the seriousness with which I work, he poured himself into his relationship with me and from a professional respect there was born a human respect, which led me to invite him to a meeting of our cultural center. Not only did he come, but he also in-*

vited other colleagues. During this time, he came to understand that I am a Christian. He is as far as one can be from Christianity and from any type of social life. The other day I took the day off to come here and on Thursday (which is the day of my audience with the judge, when he really wants me to be there), in the middle of the afternoon, I had to go. He found out and asked me to lunch, together with an intern. He asked me where I disappeared to for two days and I told him that I went to a gathering of young people from all over Italy. The intern said: "Yes, she is going with the people from Communion and Liberation." So he, as a person who is rather asocial, said: "But how can you go with all those people? I would go crazy!" I said to him: "Look, I am going because for me that place, the companionship of the movement, my friends, help me to really taste life." So he asked me to tell him what happened in March and I began to tell him in general. He stopped me: "No, no, in detail. What did you all speak about?" I tried to tell him about the topic of work, beginning from slavery in Egypt to the slavery of today, the society of performance, the self-made man.... At a certain point he said to me: "But this describes me, and this not only has to do with work, but with every environment, with relationships, with my conception of myself, with my relationship with my colleagues." And then he added: So, how does one free himself from this slavery?" I began to mumble...

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Come and see!

Michela. I began to mumble something. Then at a certain point, an episode that happened at work and that involved the office and even him came to my mind. I told him about what had helped me widen my gaze in my relationship with a colleague and to gradually reclaim, day after day, an enthusiasm about going to work. I told him about this companionship, about my friends, and about the work that we help each other do and live. He exclaimed: "Wow, I would like to be like you!" And the intern, who until one second earlier seemed like she just wanted to get me in trouble, said to me: "Me too." So the judge continued: "But I understand this about you because you are...." and the intern said: "She is optimistic." And the judge: "No, she is not

optimistic, she is something more; it is the position she takes in front of life. But this thing here for someone like me is impossible.” I tried to tell him: “Look, it is not my own capacity, it is not an effort of positivity,” but he ended the dialogue like this: “I am prone to evil.” So: this thing is beautiful for you, but it has nothing to do with me. We go back to the office, and ten seconds later I heard the judge yell out my name. I went to his office and he told me about a work problem that had just happened: “I am pissed off. So, thinking about the lunch we just had and of the position you have, now tell me how I should be in front of this.” This thing moved me for a number of reasons. My first reaction was: “What we have encountered is really for everyone, because even you, who until a second ago said that it wasn’t for you, when faced with a concrete problem, couldn’t help but turn to a place where you glimpsed a desirable and attractive position.” The day after was Thursday, and in the middle of the audience I said bye to him and he looked seriously at me: “Have a good time in Assisi.” This had a certain effect on me. He turned around and said to me: “You have to tell me how it goes.” This moves me because you realize even more that what you have encountered is really for everyone, has a truly infinite scope. And I am also moved by gratitude for the place where I belong. This fact has given me the desire to come here again. The true beauty, again, of this place is a new desire. And I think it has to do with the fact of the community, because this community generates in me an ever-greater freedom to be who I am. It seems to me that this is the biggest fruit of it and that I see it growing over time. And through this freedom, there is someone who becomes a presence and proposal for everyone.

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Just a brief comment. Obviously, I do not want to diminish our reaction to the beauty of what Michela has told us. The first response that is right to have in front of a fact that is so beautiful is to look at it with wonder. There is, however, in what she said also the description of a dynamic that in my opinion helps to shed light on the question Belen posed.

I’ll explain. One, after having heard Belen’s contribution and this one, I could say: “Okay, Michela is fortunate, Belen a little less. It

went well for Michela but not for Belen. Everything depends somewhat on the circumstances, and somewhat on the inscrutable will of the mystery in using us. Period.” But is that all there is to say? Or is there in the question also the playing out of our freedom, and if so, in what sense? Obviously, it is clear that we are not the ones who are able to produce an event like the one that happened to Michela. The question, then, is something else. The question is whether our freedom can collaborate with grace, “creating” the conditions for a something like this to happen (we return to the Catholic “both/add”!). Now it seems to me that in what Michela recounted there is not only the story of a “little miracle” (there is this of course), but also an interesting indication of method. In fact, the first step: What put into motion this whole escalation? What put in motion the escalation is the fact that Michela decided to come to Assisi, to leave work for two days to come here. This is what provoked an inevitable “disturbance” in Michela’s work environment, to use the expression of our friend from before. The disturbance is that here is a “career” girl, an aspiring magistrate, who takes off and leaves, taking the risk of exposing herself to the incomprehension of her boss. Okay, the second step: What made it possible to take this risk? What makes something like this possible? She said it herself: what freed her from fear and led her to risk is her *respect for the place*, the attachment to a place that she recognizes as precious for her life—so precious in fact that she decided to take one or two days of vacation to come here: “The first experience of Assisi was such a source of newness for me—Michela said herself—that I understand that going there is right. It is not time taken from work. I need to go to Assisi in order to be more myself here at work. Therefore, I am going, and that’s that.”

Third step: What does this have to do with the phrase from Giussani on which Belen’s question hinged? It has everything to do with it because in that phrase Giussani is not only speaking about two distinct fruits of *memory*, but he also puts them in order. First he says that the memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a *visible communiality*, and then he says that this *visible communiality* offer *proposals in society*. The adjectives are in succession: first he

says “visible” and then he says “propositional.” And so: the contribution of Michela in a way documents in act the progression and relationship of “cause and effect”; so to say, it brings the two aspects of the communionality generated by memory together. The *memory* of the gathering in March (first moment) made Michela decide to come here, to affirm *visibly* her belonging to our communion (second moment); and this affirmation, without her even wanting it to, was spontaneously translated into a proposal, into a “disturbance” of her workplace. The proposal, therefore, was not initially something added to her visible affirmation of an attachment, but rather was the spontaneous fruit of her “confession,” so to say, of this attachment. “I am going away” – Michela said at her office. And then: “And where are you going?” And then she begins to tell her story.

And here there is a second point I would like to underline, because this struck me as well. Why does Michela begin to tell her story? Why does she not limit herself to inventing some kind of excuse? And most of all, why does her story strike those who are listening? It is for the same reason Michela decided to come to Assisi: she is certain of the value of what she lived and heard in our first gathering, so much so that she starts speaking about the “washing of the feet” to her boss, who if I understood well is not even Catholic.

We thus return to the question of the relationship between wonder and generativity. We become witnesses in proportion to the wonder that fills us. There is nothing to do – it is simple: “The mouth speaks from the fullness of the heart,” said Jesus.

Anyway, what I wanted to underline is that the “proposal” is not first of all a doing of things, inventing some sort of initiative (without diminishing the importance of initiatives; it is better if we have plenty!). The first way of offering a proposal is to affirm with courage our belonging, what we are attached to. In a world dominated by individualism and calculation, is not this courage perhaps the most disruptive witness?

Francesco Cassese. I didn’t understand whether you were underlining the affection or the being ready to leave work for...

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Isn't one the flip side of the other? Why does Peter leave his boat, nets, and fish? Because Jesus is there on the shore. It is affection for Christ that leads Simon to leave the boat. Which does not mean that the boat does not interest him. It means that Christ interests him more because Christ is the one who saves and gives meaning to everything, including what he does when he is on the boat. Which allows me to return to the point about the relationship between activity and passivity, that we left behind a little bit ago: "It is not only passivity but also activity," we said. Well, the lived experience of Michela throws an interesting light on this relationship, on this interweaving of passivity and activity that is the story of our relationship with Christ. In fact, what was at the beginning of Michela's decision to come to Assisi? There is an invitation received, and together the memory of having been struck by what she had experienced in March. At the beginning, there is therefore a "passivity." But at this point the play of freedom enters, the active energy of freedom: Michela could also have decided not to come. She could have said to herself: "It would be beautiful to go, but this time it is better to remain at the office, given the way the winds are blowing." And instead she didn't do this. She decided otherwise, while knowing that her decision could have unpleasant consequences. Her boss, in fact, prompted by the colleague, could have said to her: "We're not here to play around..."

Therefore, passivity and activity are not opposed to each other. Rather, the one "incites" the other. Wonder generates affection and affection gives wings to freedom and the desire to take a risk, without necessarily forcing someone to take flight. The decision of freedom remains a decision of freedom. One says yes, another says no. One says yes one day and the next day she says no. It is the drama of freedom.

Salvatore. *First fact. Recently, work has been a mess, in the sense that I have to finish a series of construction sites within a definite time and I have found myself forced to take on new people, including immigrants. I realized in looking at the other site managers that there is a different way of looking at these newly hired people: since the task*

is to finish the work, they could become cannon fodder: "You have to work. It doesn't matter how, you have to work." And yet I discover continually something that grates on me: in front of these new people, I have to have the patience to teach them Italian, or even to teach them the job. For me the immigrant is not cannon fodder, but someone who is given to me, and all of this is the fruit of an education I receive continually in the story of the movement. Second fact. We did the Food Collection and there was a presentation in which the president of the Food Bank of our region read us a letter of a volunteer who last year had been really struck by the encounter that she had with a foreign man outside the supermarket. At the end of the day that man, moved by the gaze of this volunteer, first hugged her and then offered her something for the collection. I also went on Saturday to do the collection and I met a foreign woman who was there asking for alms. Basically she was a bother for me... But instead, this time I experienced a desire to ask her what her name was and where she was from, even inviting her to the collection. These for me are two facts that are really banal, but I realize that the essential point that I am discovering this year is the theme of belonging, of responding continually to the question "Who do I belong to?" And when I say "I belong to..." I have in mind the example that Father Paolo gave yesterday with respect to Peter, who dives in and leaves behind his nets. I am continuously forced to ask myself: "What am I running toward, leaving everything else behind?" This is the theme of my days, and for this reason I have come to say that the whole experience I have had in the movement is the proposal of an increased affection for the One who really gives me back my person and my heart again. Then something very interesting comes out in me, so much so that it implicates me in the facts of reality. It seems to me that the theme—even in these days—is not the experience of community, but the experience of communion. We are not asked to have a certain level of group dynamic, but rather the experience of communion, which does not come about from the fact that you and I are together, but from the fact that we find ourselves put together. This for me is liberating because in front of my workers, and in front of that woman who is asking for alms, I am there. But what allows me to act like this if not communion? This

experience of communion opens me to the discovery that reality is something given to me, through which a relationship with the instant becomes a relationship with the mystery through the face of the circumstances.

Federica. *On the vacation, provoked by a conversation with my father, who had told me: “No one beats God in generosity,” I asked Father Paolo, “If this is true, then why does it not happen in the place where I am?” The question was born from the fact that in order to pursue the career that I had undertaken I could spend very little time at home, which made family life and career incompatible. In answering my question, after having referred to the episode recounted by Piero Paolo Bellini, Father Paolo urged me to live what was given to me: “The priority is the family; therefore this sacrifice is asked of you. You start from there, then if the Lord wants, He will give you the opportunity to return to the work you love.” At the beginning I was mad about this response because it was not what I was looking for. Clearly, he did not resolve the question for me, but the position of anger I had maintained throughout the whole year certainly did not help me live. Therefore I decided to look at this possibility that Father Paolo had suggested to me and began to engage myself again even more in what I had to do; that is, taking care of the house. One day, busy with many different things, I was pierced by a thought: two years ago I lived and worked abroad, I was at the center of the world, and now I was in the humility of small daily things. This really struck me, because it put me in front of my capacity to be humble, something that I did not think I had in me. And so, maybe for the first time, the fact that I do not consist in what I do was strengthened in me and paradoxically a “non-career” was giving me back to myself more than a job could do. Then I remembered the witness of two friends who told us on vacation that in their married life, which included the illness of their daughter and the difficulties of their work, at the end of the day they asked themselves: “Where did you meet Him today?” They asked this in order to help each other, in the marriage and in their struggles, to catch sight of His sustenance. And so I tried the same thing. When my husband got back from work I asked him the same question. My*

husband runs his family's agricultural business, so he was quite tired when he got home, and he really surprised me because he answered by pointing at me with his head. In that moment, I grasped the signs of my conversion: through a crumbling of my ego, but not of my I, I realized the greatness of the grace that was happening to me. I recognized that I am capable of being humble (in the Franciscan sense of the word) and that to love is to serve. At dinner with some friends I felt the need to talk about this. They asked my husband what he thought about all this, and he, who is truly a man of few words (furthermore, he only recently came closer to Christianity, as a result of our marriage), answered: "What is divinity if not someone who waits for you and prepares things for you?" This wound related to work (which is not without pain; it is always there, alive and burning) is becoming the possibility of a relationship, something that previously tormented me and that was all; now it gives me the possibility not to just curse the circumstances: it is a cry directed to Someone.

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Thank you.

Michele. I want to tell you about an experience that seems to have something to do with the fact that the memory of Christ, and the resulting renewed awareness of being a son, by putting me in the position about which Father Paolo spoke yesterday of vulnerability and humble receptivity to listening, leads to a form of presence. I am a family doctor. I work in a small town and all my patients speak German as their first language. This year I went to sing at the funeral of one of them, and I recognize that what occurred was a simple following of what was happening. The man was a patient I had been seeing for very simple monitoring, but his tumor got worse, and in the last two months of his life I was at his house almost every week giving him palliative care. On one occasion, it was the Tuesday before Easter, I went to his house because I had to change his catheter, something I had done many times. On this occasion, however, I tried many times and he began to bleed, so I said: "Wait, I will call a nurse to help me." While I was waiting for this nurse, I suddenly had the desire to sing something for him. After having asked his permission, I sang him

“Se tu sapessi” by Father Anastasio. The nurse arrived, I changed the catheter, I went home, and it was is over. The Tuesday after Easter, I went back to work and the nurses told me that he had died. That same morning a patient came and told me: “I am a good friend of his wife. She told me that you sang for him and that you have a beautiful voice.” On the way home, I called my wife and said to her: “I would like to propose to the family that we sing a song at the funeral.” The next day at the School of Community I spoke with a friend and asked a guitarist if he could play accompaniment; he said yes right away. That evening I sent the text of the song to a friend who speaks German as his first language; the next morning I woke up and there was the text translated. I prepared the sheets to hand out in church to all those present. The next day was the funeral. I called the relatives, proposed the song to them, and they said yes. So I sang at the funeral and it was an amazing thing: so many of my patients were there, and I recognized how I left that funeral seeing them as brothers and sisters; it also seemed that the way they looked at me had changed. A few days later, the same nurse who helped me with the catheter came into the office and said, “I went back to that house. They told me about what happened, and I broke down crying.” And right there we had a beautiful conversation about the heart: “What was it that moved you so much that you started crying?” This happens when we are in front of the truth.

Fr. Paolo Prospero. Thank you.

Francesco Cassese. This lineup of friends who say yes, the guitarist, the translator, and you who go to the funeral and sing, and then again the nurse who breaks down crying... When we hear the story of these things it is important to understand that we are not dealing with normal stories. We are so immersed in this companionship that we risk considering as normal certain episodes that are nothing of the sort. This initiative and then the chain of people, of availability, of affirmation of the other: Why are they important? Because the worst thing would be to become the means through which the mystery reaches this nurse—who recognizes this

“strangeness” and in fact starts to cry, is moved in front of this exceptionality—and to lose the taste and the wonder that are born when we see Him at work. You haven’t done anything, except saying this yes, making yourself available. And yet the story that you told is extraordinary—it speaks to us about a presence that is much greater than we are. This is called *faith*. At a certain point we ask, “But who are You that generate an experience like this?”

Paola. All that we have been saying to each other makes me feel a sense of responsibility that, on the one hand, creates in me an anxiety of performance.... For example, now, hearing what Michele said, there are so many yeses, which is not normal, because so many times we say no. And it melts me in a particular way, because I think about so many people in this history that at a certain point left us and about so many, instead, who are within this story because of that wonder, that different humanity, that thing that is “not normal.” This is really causing me to question. I feel this responsibility, and yet even though I am often in front of my husband, my colleagues, my children with a transfigured face, sometimes I am not. I understand that to be immersed in this companionship helps me to have that transfigured face, but it is also true that there are moments when it is not like this and I get annoyed. I want to understand better this responsibility. You said a little about it when you spoke about passivity and activity; I do not want to be the typical moralist who “has to,” but I feel this ache.

Fr. Paolo Proserpi. Certainly.

Marco. Yesterday, in the passage about creativity, you said that “it is the spontaneous fruit and unforeseeable outcome of your opening yourself.” And this is very clear. The example you gave about remote preparation is very clear as well—you read the readings not just to be able to preach but because they are helpful to you. But then you said: “When we have responsibilities, the preoccupation with wanting to communicate eats away at everything.” But there are moments when we do have responsibilities: I think about children, work... How do these two things stand together?

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. He says: it is good not to be worried about the immediate outcome of our actions, but if we are given a certain responsibility, if I have to take charge of a certain question, of a certain person, then it is inevitable that I feel all of the weight implied in that responsibility. Moreover, if I don't feel it, if I don't feel some fear and trembling in front of that responsibility, if I do not feel a just urge to carry it out well, that means that the good of the thing (or the person) does not interest me and that I am not moved by the One who has entrusted that responsibility to me. Therefore, this story about wonder and remote preparation is all well and good, but then one is in front of a task—for example, a child who does not want to study—and one can't just not feel that urge. And so how do you get out of this conflict? Was this the point?

Marco. This is the question.

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Very good.

Francesco Cassese. I will try (badly—I am warning you) to synthesize the point that is emerging. It has to do with a question that is born not only from the spontaneity of the assembly today. It seems to me rather a question that has been emerging on the path of these months as an unexpected fruit—at least in my case—of the experience that we are living. We have felt ourselves the object of a preference, and for this reason we have been introduced into the experience of the memory of the Lord. This preference and this memory are in some way helping highlight the word *responsibility*. We feel that the experience we are living brings with it a promise: the promise of the fulfillment of our lives, but also a promise for the whole world. This is the first element that I underline because I find it beautiful: this urge that the presence we have encountered be known by everyone. And yet this *responsibility* is found together with the fact that rarely does our presence “disturb” the work environment; our presence does not always generate a communion around it. And so, apparently, it seems that we reach the end of the road with a miserable failure. Despite this *responsibility*—born from

the encounter we have had—we find that our communications have been inefficacious and empty. Therefore, Father Paolo, I have these questions for you: What is responsibility? And, what does this responsibility have to do with vocation? What does it mean that this responsibility is a part of this path, a part of this call?

Fr. Paolo Prosperi. Okay, given the hour and the fact that we are all tired, I will limit myself to offering some initial comments on the topic, and then tomorrow maybe return to the question you pose after thinking it over a little.

I would like to start from the provocation of Marco. His question really struck me because it describes the experience of a “stuckness” in which I often find myself to be caught as well, *mutatis mutandis*. I will reformulate the question in my own words: How do we put together the *pondus*, the weight of responsibility in its concreteness (you gave examples and I think that we all have a hundred thousand examples; our lives are made up of these responsibilities that weigh on us, that cling to us on all sides), with the primacy of wonder about which we spoke, with the “cultivation of wonder” about which we spoke?

It seems to me a good point from which to start. It is clear that, in saying what I said about this topic in the first assembly, I wanted to push things toward the extreme (and therefore to simplify things), to try to bring out the essential point, the essential logic. In concrete life, things are more complex and intricate, if you will. It was important to me, in the polemic against the narcissistic activism of the self-made man, to insist on the idea that our fruitfulness, our generativity is truly such if it is born from a receiving, from the primacy we give to the grace of Another, to the action of Another that by inhabiting me makes me generative. Not by accident did I insist on the image of maternity—in the maternity of the woman, this dynamic happens in a clear, paradigmatic way.

Let us start again from this image, and see if it can help us to throw some light on Marco’s question. In effect, it seems to me that at least three or four of our contributions—I think about Belen, about Paola, and others—implied a kind of equation that

risks insinuating itself into us. We can say it this way: “If I do not generate, if I am sterile (in the sense of a visible productivity, of bringing forth something visible) then it means that I do not live wonder, that I don’t love Jesus, that I don’t live memory. If I do not generate, it means that I do not live the experience of the charism. While the one who bears fruit—in the visible, sensible, measurable sense of the word—he or she does live the faith, does have an experience of Christ.” It is a bit like the sterile women of the Old Testament, who thought they had sinned because of the fact that they were sterile, in the physical sense of the term. What a pity, though, because they were wrong. Pay attention! *Fruitfulness* is not to be confused with the visible, immediate outcome of one’s dedication. As we know, one can be the holiest person here and spend her whole life in bed, offering what she lives for the salvation of humanity. In life, she will maybe never see how much good she has done for others. Patience—she will see it in paradise! Will she not see any fruit here? Here she will see fruit, I would say, and above all this one: her own humanity that changes (and in this way inevitably becomes luminous).

There is, though, another side to the coin—and it is in reality on this other side of the coin, if I am understanding, that Marco said he was stuck. I would reformulate the question like this: Does the fact that love for Christ frees me from the outcome mean that I don’t have to worry, for example, about whether my son grows up well or badly? Does it mean, in other words, that a relationship with Christ makes me *indifferent* to the outcome of my efforts?

The true question is here, I think: What does it mean exactly that we are free from the outcome? Is it wrong that I worry about my son, who maybe is beginning to hang out in a bad crowd—is it wrong that I feel *all the weight* of my being father, of my being mother? No, it cannot be wrong. I wouldn’t love my son if I did not feel the “weight” that one of my words or decisions might have on him. “Given that I should not measure myself, given that a relationship with Christ frees me from being held hostage to the outcome, then I don’t have to worry anymore.” Not at all! There is something that is clearly not right in this position.

What is not right? Even if it is obvious, I will say it all the same: what is not right is the fact that, in reality, between the love of Christ and the love of my son's destiny there cannot be any distance, because taking care of my son is the *mission* that Christ has given me to do. So we return to Simon Peter: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." It is in the word *mission* that we find the point of unity between the love of Christ and the desire that my efforts turn out well. Why? Simply because educating my son coincides with the mission Christ has given me. Better still: it coincides with the way Christ calls me to participate in *His mission*, which is that of bringing the world to its destiny. To know this, to remember this, does not reduce, it is true, the weight of responsibility; but it certainly allows me to see that weight from another, decisively more "epic" perspective.

In short, the point is not "weight or no weight." The point is how you see this weight—what you see in this weight.

Those who know me know that I am a huge fan of *The Lord of the Rings*. Well, being Frodo means carrying the great "Burden" (this is what Tolkien often calls the ring), even though he would prefer to be just another hobbit, one of those who remains in the shire.

The point then is not the weight of the responsibility, but the way you look at it. Without memory, you see it as a weight and that's it. To live memory, instead, leads you to see the weight as part of the "Burden" with a capital B; that is, as the way that is *all your own* (this mission is entrusted to you and to no other, says Elrond to Frodo) to serve the All, your personal way of giving your life for the salvation of the world. This is a perspective that is totally different (and that corresponds more to us). Or am I wrong?

It is right, then, to feel the *pondus*. It is the sign that we recognize the connection between the fulfillment of our existence and the outcome or "success," I will allow myself to use this term, of the mission that has been given us. The problem is that we are not the ones who set the terms in which this success consists (even if it is inevitable that we will make images of it). Is it right that a married woman who is not able to have children suffers? Certainly, because it is in the nature of her vocation to have children and

raise them. But this does not mean that she is destined to failure. It means rather that her vocation will be fulfilled in another way that she must discover. This involves the whole travail of suffering, the weight of suffering a path that is not what one expected.

Which brings us to a second point that I would like to touch on having to do with the *historical* reason why responsibility is always *also* a weight. A weight not only in the sense of “kabod,” that is, “glory,” but also in the sense of burden, struggle. In fact, it is not only the woman without children who suffers. The woman who gives birth also suffers! Both of them suffer, even if for different reasons. There is nothing we can do; whichever way we go, we suffer. Why? We said it this morning: because of *original sin*.

In fact, giving birth; that is, bearing fruit, requires sweat and labor because all of reality, starting from the reality of our heart, carries within it the root of “resistance” to the good, to order, to the destiny for which it is made. The Bible says this right after the story of the Fall, and so, helping us to complete the conversation on work we started in March, when we quoted from Psalm 8, we quote from Genesis:

“Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you.... By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat” (Genesis 3:18–19).

There was the Fall. And since then we cannot be “subcreators” any longer, we cannot generate without sweating through our shirt. Pay attention—it is not that God made things like this from the beginning. As we said in March, quoting the story of Genesis chapter 2, in the beginning work should have been a pure joy, a pure gift.⁶² Obviously, we would then have to ask (and we will do so shortly) whether it is only “bad luck” that things are like this, or if, instead, God allowed this because He had His plans. But first of all, we have to account for the *given*; if we don’t, we cannot understand anything. In fact, whether we want this or not, our life is full of sacrifices. If you read

⁶² Cf. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 18–19.

the chapter on sacrifice in *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*, you recognize that Father Giussani, formidable realist that he was, starts right here: everything is full of sacrifice. Whether we like it or not, that is how it is.⁶³ You are there, you do everything right, you never make a mistake... and your son rebels. He leaves you empty-handed—just like that, without a reason. How? Why? You didn't do anything wrong, you love him, you bent over backwards... and he turns out wrong. How can we explain this? We explain it by the fact of original sin. Because of which, if you want your son to go straight, you have to sweat three times as much, you have to labor, you have to spend so many nights without sleep, all because you don't know how to help him... and because you know that even if you do everything right, in the end you can't take for granted that everything will work out. You don't know. This is the human condition, the heartbreaking human condition. Everything is full of imperfection, everything. Even the face of your wife, which for twenty years seemed so beautiful, is now full of wrinkles and you don't like those wrinkles. You have to overlook them, you have to cross “the desert” of those wrinkles if you want to find again the wonder about which we spoke in the lesson. And this crossing is sacrifice, just like it is sacrifice to spend yourself raising children, starting a business, managing an office....

Certainly, as we said before, there is also an attraction in this labor, there is also “glory” in taking on the weight of others. And yet: if one has a minimum of awareness; in fact, the more awareness one has, the more, in looking at one's own fragility, one can only tremble at the thought that the good of others depends on him. If he does not tremble, he no longer feels any “weight” and he even enjoys thinking about the weight; this doesn't mean that he is free—it means he is a sociopath (like so many around us). One who no longer feels any weight in carrying the weight of other people is not free. He is an irresponsible person, a pathological narcissist. The more you love, instead—as Péguy said so beautifully in his *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, the more you tremble.

⁶³ Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*, vol. 3, *Charity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 65–102.

Now, at the core of all this, which helps us maybe get out of a too-romantic interpretation of the icon of Peter's dive, the issue becomes that the work is there, it is a fact. But is this *fact* a pure misfortune? This seems to me the true question: Is the effort only something that hinders, that blocks, my desire for happiness, for fulfillment, for a full life? Or not?

In light of this fascinating question, I would like to say so many things. But dinnertime is approaching and we are all tired; so, I limit myself to two simple notes.

The first is nothing but a deepening of what we already said in the lesson, speaking about Peter who first dives in, leaving behind the fish, and then hauls to earth 153 large fish. Ultimately, for me, the key to the question of the relationship between "love for Christ" and "carrying of responsibility" is all here: in what way does the work of memory; that is, this diving in toward Christ, reshape my way of carrying the weights that are given to me? Which means, explicitly, how do I manage to carry 153 large fish as if there were not 153 of them? What is this *new lightness*?

What we have said up to this point, even with the help of Marco's and others' contributions, has helped us clarify what this does not mean: it does not mean that the weight; for example, the fear of saying the wrong thing to my son, magically disappears. This fear remains, and it is right that it remains!

Then what is this freedom? This freedom consists in the fact that at the root of your actions, there is no longer, in the first place, your will to do good, but instead there is *charity*; that is, your desire to *express the good that you want* to Christ and to your son. This is much more than taking away the apprehension and the struggle: it transforms these things into the *concrete sign* of the "up to what point" that your love for Christ and your son will reach. We can say it in other words like this: How does memory, the living of responsibility as a response to Christ, transform my relationship with the responsibilities that I have? It transforms it in the sense that it gives a new scope to my action: the primary scope of my action is my yes to Christ, which does not exclude, as we said, the fact that I want to do good. But this desire to do good is, as it were, part of a larger

horizon, at the center of which there is this great motive: everything that I do, I do for You, O Christ. Now, what repercussions does this new scope, or this new root, have on the aspect of risk and struggle that every “mission” contains?

It has very important repercussions. Why? Because if what *primarily* moves me in acting is *to speak love*, then the primary end of my action is no longer *at the end, after the action*, in the material result of the action (which I care about, of course!), but is rather *within* the action, in *giving myself, donating myself*. Certainly I want to succeed, and certainly it pains me if I things turn out poorly. But that is not *everything!* Not *everything* is there! There is a value and therefore an enthusiasm within my giving myself that does not depend on the visible outcome of my giving myself. What value? What enthusiasm? I have said it: the enthusiasm of “speaking” my love. This is what lightens the weight, and even transforms it into a value, into something interesting.

I will explain myself with an example: let us imagine that one of our friends who is helping us with the songs this evening had to sing a song by herself, in front of all of us. And let us also imagine that she did not feel so good, because she has a sore throat that keeps her from singing like she knows she can. So, how do you think our friend would feel, while she is there waiting her turn, if the *only* thing that counted for her was doing well and being appreciated by everyone present?

Clearly it is right to desire to sing well and to help the community experience something beautiful. If she was chosen to sing, it is because she is a good singer, obviously. And yet, if achieving this goal is her *only* interest (and I underline *only*), then it is clear that our friend will not be able to get up on stage without being totally dominated by the terror that her voice will break. And so—here is the irony—she will end up simultaneously not enjoying one second of her performance and not moving anyone (even if her voice only broke once).

Now, let us imagine another scenario. Let us imagine that our same friend, before getting up on stage, collects herself a moment in silence, in the wings. She does not feel well, she knows that the

state of her voice is not what it usually is. It hits her that in a little bit she is going to make a mess. She gets red with shame at the idea of the mess she is about to make. Surely someone will laugh and say, “Oh my God...” But look: in a moment another thought invades her: “And so? Ultimately, what does it matter? Lord, it is for You that I am doing this. Unfortunately there is no one else tonight who can sing in my place. And so, yes, Lord, I will do it. I will do it for You. For You. I will do it because You ask me to. And even if my voice is not in shape, I will be patient. You know what? If someone laughs, all the better: I will be able, *even more*, to show You who You are for me.”

To tell the truth, I have to confess that this example is a bit autobiographical. Camu certainly remembers it. We were in CLU, many years ago now, at the PIME missionary center in Milan. There was an assembly (overflowing) of the Catholic University students and Father Giussani was there (it was one of the last times, if not the last time, he came). Alas, I was assigned the task of singing a Russian song—*Vecernyi svon*—in front of Father Giussani and the whole assembly. The choir started and I, who was the soloist, would have to come in soon after. Only I was so worked up that my voice would not come out, would not come out, and when it did come out, it was a disaster! There was laughter... in short, it was a big flop. And yet, despite my self-love, I did not experience any shame while my clumsy performance unfolded. Why? It is difficult to explain, but I would say it like this: while I sang, I was not thinking about myself. I was not concentrating on myself (let’s just say that I was too little focused on what I was doing!). I did not experience shame because I felt that in the end what counted more in my eyes, in my awkward attempt, was to express to that man who was there in front of me my affection and gratitude. It is even more paradoxical than this: it is that the wave of emotion made, to my ears (to mine alone!), my clumsy singing even more beautiful than if I had sung to perfection.

It is late and Camu still has to talk. I will therefore cut the second note, which is just a brief comment on Federica’s contribution, down to the bone.

If you noticed, Federica told us, with an example that was as simple as it was beautiful, about how that process happens by which a “yoke” that first was felt as a weight becomes at a certain point “sweet.” Now, what struck me most about her contribution is the fact that Federica came to that experience through a very human path—a path on which she did not at all renounce her reason; that is, her human desire for fulfillment. Rather, she chose to broaden her reason, making space in within herself for an act of faith, for a hypothesis of fulfillment that was beyond her measure, in order to encounter the truth in her experience. And so she was able to “taste” the hundredfold, to experience a real satisfaction. Certainly, not a satisfaction as the world would understand it. What “modern” woman outside of this room (and maybe even in this room) would say that Federica chose well? Probably no one. And yet, one hears her and feels, intuitively, that what she describes is desirable, correspondent. Here is the paradox of Christian experience. Faith fulfills our humanity—but it does so only if one is open to getting carried beyond the simply human, beyond what her reason by itself would affirm and live. Faith is this, brings this out in us. And in fact Federica was able to enter into this experience because she trusted, because, that is, she took seriously the words that had been spoken to her. And so those words became a path to a new experience that she had never had before.

I will close by underlining something that touches on one of the characteristic accents of our charism: “He is if he changes,” Father Giussani said. Christian faith shows itself to be “advantageous” and therefore persuasive only if and in the measure that it is present to the one who lives it, who tastes a hundred times more his relationship with the reality of this world; that is, with what interests everyone. With a *nota bene*, though: the hundredfold—it is this that we struggle the most to understand, said Giussani—is not the quantitative multiplication of the taste that everyone has. It is not to have “a hundred times more” what everyone already has. It is instead, to possess, to “taste and see” the same thing in another way, in a new way—and Federica’s story, in its simplicity, has offered us a beautiful example of this.

Francesco Cassese. I too will share my own experience. Today, after many years, there broke out in my heart, and reached my lips, this expression: “How great Bach is!” This morning, the Franciscan brothers asked us to celebrate the Holy Mass together and they took care of the singing. During Communion, a brother played on the organ the second movement of Bach’s *Suite No. 3*. The organist was good, but not that good, and while he played, every once in a while, I said to myself: “Let’s hope he hits the chord with his left hand,” because the passage would end up faltering. When he had gotten through the passage with the left hand, my worries moved on to the right hand, where there are two melodies on top of each other. I am used to hearing that section executed perfectly. And yet, listening to other performances, there has never come into my mind the expression, “How great Bach is!” The brother on the organ, with all his inadequacy, in his imperfection and insecurity, made me hold my breath: “Come on, I am with you.” For the first time I realized how much I wanted that chord to arrive, how much I desired to hear it. None of us today would be able to write the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and those who play his music communicate something great, something beyond themselves. And all of a sudden, this new thought came to me: we are all like this organist; none of us is capable of living, of transmitting and communicating perfectly, what we have received. Bach’s greatness is disproportionate to any interpreter in the same way that our relationship with the Lord is disproportionate. But the fact that this imperfection, this incapacity, can coincide exactly with the glory of Christ, this fact, today moved me to tears. I think this helps us to understand that, ultimately, mission is not about performance. The trajectory that we have followed, starting from the slavery of the “burnout society,” could lead us, tragically, to measure ourselves according to how we are more or less capable. Mission is the dive of Peter that desires to reach the Lord and forgets about itself in a childlike way. It is only this love that makes us move, usually struggling, stammering His name. We are at the same time willing to risk an error in the chord (a naïve rashness) as well as affirming that presence. What has taken hold of us is the story of a God who wanted to communicate Himself through our human smallness.

Sunday 26 November

SYNTHESIS

Fr. Paolo Prospero

Here we are at the last act. I will preview what I will say by stating that I do not wish to pretend that I am synthesizing the richness of what has emerged in these days—I am thinking above all of the richness of the assemblies. Rather this synthesis will be a kind of reaction in the moment to what has emerged in these days, aimed at “moving the ball forward.”

In order to introduce what I want to say, I would like to start from the song that I requested our friends play for us—I don’t know how many of you know it: it is “All That I Want” by Rival Sons. This song is dear to me for two reasons. The first is that I was introduced to it by my dear friend Giuditta Zola. For those who don’t know her, she is the daughter of Adriana Mascagni (and therefore she understands something of music). The second reason is that when I heard it the first time I was rapt, not so much by the music, but by the fact that I thought about the words of the song as speaking not from the point of view of someone in love with some beautiful person, but as a message from Christ to me, to every human being (by the way: when I suggested this to Giuditta, she responded right away: “This is why I had you listen to it: I hear it in the same way!”):

*If I could help you see me / The way that I see you / Hope
you like what you see / ... If you could feel my heartache /
Each time you walk away / You would never leave.⁶⁴*

In these days we have spoken a lot about the new eyes that faith gives us, in both the lesson and the assembly. We have heard so many

⁶⁴Rival Sons, “All That I Want,” *Hollow Bones*, 2016 © Earache Records.

testimonies that have documented for us the change in the way we look at reality that is born from a lived faith. And yet, yesterday evening, above all thinking about the second assembly, at a certain point I said to myself: in all that we have said to each other, even in the things that I said before, something essential was missing. It seems as if that perhaps we risked taking for granted a foundational point that is the key to putting everything in the right place. What point? I feel like explaining it by first asking this question: What is the *first object* that the faith allows me to focus on? The first object, the first reality that we begin to see “in its true splendor,” thanks to the event of faith, is Jesus Himself, *the person of Christ*. We have spoken about this so much! And yet, for how many people is Jesus just an uninteresting name? How many people look at the crucifix without that figure hung on the cross causing any “disturbance,” to quote an expression used by one of you yesterday in the assembly.

We can understand in this way the first and greatest function of the charism in our life. What is an ecclesial charism? A charism is that gift of grace that allows the one who receives it to perceive the splendor of the man Jesus Christ with a particular force and accent—a force and an accent that end up illuminating others as well. Father Giussani said that the charism is “*a window through which you see space in its entirety*,”⁶⁵ that is, a window on the mystery of Christ. How beautiful! The charism is a window on Christ, which means that it is the gift of a gaze that penetrates the mystery of Christ, so that this gaze becomes like a “window” through which others can also participate in the same wonder.

1. “We would like to see Jesus”

I have thus already introduced the first point of this morning, which I will entitle: “We would like to see Jesus.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Cf. Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, trans. Patrick Stevenson (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 80.

⁶⁶ “Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we would like to see Jesus’” (John 12:20–21).

As some of you may remember, John puts these words in the mouth of a group of Greeks who, having come up to Jerusalem for the Passover (they were probably God-fearing believers, sympathizers with the Jewish religion), heard people speak about Jesus. After He raised Lazarus, in fact, Jesus was the only thing people talked about in Jerusalem, either with enthusiasm or hostility.⁶⁷ From that came even the curiosity of the Greeks and the request to Philip and Andrew, “We would like to see Jesus.”

We desire to see so many things. But ultimately, can there be any curiosity stronger than this? “We would like to see Jesus.”

“We would like to see Jesus.” How important it is to keep this desire alive in us! Why? Why is it important?

I thought about this right at the end of the assembly yesterday, when we were focused more and more on the theme of responsibility and weight, on the struggle that this inevitably introduces into our adult lives (we are talking about the responsibility linked to our personal vocation—family, work—and to the commitment to build the movement: these are ultimately the same thing). As we said yesterday, it is an aspect of realism to recognize that effort and sacrifice are ineliminable dimensions of our vocation (at least on this planet). On the other hand, it seems that there is in us a risk when we talk about this topic (and yesterday I had confirmation of this) of tending, without even recognizing it, to disconnect the discourse on responsibility from the discourse of faith, as we have been speaking about it. As if to say, on the one side there is faith, my personal relationship with Christ; on the other, *afterward*, there are my responsibilities, my mission, understood as an added juxtaposition, a “duty” to get through by flexing our muscles. Instead, this is not how things are. If we see them like this still, it means that maybe we have to focus a bit better on the relationship that links these two things—the mechanism, so to say, that makes one the motor of the other. What mechanism? We have already said it really: what gives wings to our freedom, what

⁶⁷ “So the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from death continued to testify. This was also why the crowd went to meet him, because they heard that he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him’” (John 12:17–19).

frees our freedom from every calculation, from fear, from continual self-measurement that makes everything heavy, is the discovery that we are loved. Better—to have an ever clearer awareness of *how much* and *how* we are loved: “If you could feel my heartache each time you walk away, you would never leave.” It is this kind of “feeling” that, arising in us, makes us “response-able”; that is, etymologically, *able to respond*, as Dante said it better than anyone (even if there he said it in the negative): “Love, which absolve no one beloved from loving” (*Inferno*, V:103, translated by Robert Hollander). This is love that prevents the loved one (who discovers himself loved) from not loving in return.

It is in seeing ourselves loved that the power of dedication rises again in us. Which brings us back to the primacy of “the desire to see Jesus.” If what we have said is true, then the first responsibility—the responsibility that underpins every other responsibility and is therefore the first responsibility—is to take care not to extinguish the desire to see this love better and better, or—to return to a beautiful expression of Father Giussani that we have already quoted—to “deepen wonder”:

One should not worry about how to express himself, he should worry about how to deepen wonder, because to deepen wonder leads to the adequate expression of self; while, if one spends himself looking for an expression of the self, he will find more and more dispersion of the self.... We are not asked to seek out our expressivity, we are asked to deepen the wonder from which expressivity is born. Expressivity, that is, fruitfulness, is born from a love, and love is the wonder at a present that is welcomed and embraced, is recognized and accepted.⁶⁸

Why does Peter change? If you remember, we insisted in the lesson on the fact that the Peter of John 21 is not like the Peter of Luke 5. What was changed in him?

⁶⁸ Giussani, *L'autocoscienza del cosmo*, 204–5 (translation ours).

What changed is *having seen*, having experienced the “to what point” of the love of Christ for him. What changed in Simon after Easter is that Simon is now “drunk” on wonder-wonder for this love without limits, that in the still-open wounds of the Risen One he has now seen and touched. In the same way, we can burn with a love for Christ similar to that of Peter in John 21—a love that prevails over the sense of inadequacy, over fear, over self-measurement—only in the measure that we begin truly to see and taste, or at least to smell the hint of the *reality*, of the “*res*” of the love of Christ for us.

This is a law that we know well. *Nihil desitum quin precognitum*: we only desire what we know. We do not fall in love unless we see beauty. It is the vision of the beautiful that makes us fall in love, that moves us, that calls us, as the great Dionysus the Areopagite said with a delicious play on words: “*Tò kalòn kalei*,” which in Greek means: the beautiful calls, attracts to itself. It is this seeing the *beauty* of Christ, that which tears us from ourselves and pushes us to give ourselves to Him and for Him. From here comes my insistence on what I call a “desire to see” better and better, or a desire to deepen wonder (it is the same thing). This is the first work: to desire Christ.⁶⁹ Or better—to see Christ (memory), begging that our wonder at what He is, our admiration for what He is, would deepen in us, because it is from this wonder that, ultimately, the explosion in us of the impulse to respond depends, for us as for Peter; this is the wonder that makes sweet all our other work.

There is another passage in John’s Gospel that says all this in an even more powerful way than John 21. We do not find it at the end, but rather in the middle of the Gospel (in the right place, I think!). In the middle of the Gospel of John, at the turning point

⁶⁹ At the first Exercises of the Fraternity, in 1982, Father Giussani said: “The reason you get together is because you want to help each other desire Christ and believe in Christ, and that’s it. The strength of our movement in the first years was this. We faced cultural and social problems as intense as the ones we face now, but we methodologically we were clearer, sharper (my friends from the first years can tell you): the point of departure was Christ, was wonder, was the simplicity of the recognition of that Event, of what happened, what has happened, and what was happening in the world: Christ.” Luigi Giussani, *Una strana compagnia* [A strange companionship] (Milan: BUR, 2017), 65–66 (translation ours).

of the story from the public ministry of Jesus to the great drama of the passion, there is no gesture of Jesus, as we might expect. There is instead the gesture of a woman: Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who pours a pound of nard on the feet of Jesus and then dries his feet with her hair (John 12:1–3):

Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.

A couple words on the context: we are most likely in the house of Lazarus, in Bethany, where Jesus is in hiding because he is a wanted man, the leaders of the people having decided to arrest him just after he raised his friend (John 11:1–54). At the dinner, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary are present, which invites us to suppose that the dinner is really a thanksgiving banquet for Lazarus's return to life. At a certain point, Mary, as if seized by an uncontrollable impulse, takes this pound of very precious nard (a Roman pound was around 327 grams!) and “squanders” it, pouring it out on the feet of Jesus. The ointment, so precious in fact that Judas thinks it could be sold for 300 denarii (the annual salary of a worker!), evidently begins to trickle onto the floor and so Mary bends down and begins to dry the feet of Jesus with her hair, partly to express even more her devotion to the Master and partly to drench herself in the precious perfume, which she certainly held in great respect. Who knows how much she had worked to buy that nard for herself!⁷⁰ And yet in this moment it doesn't matter to her; she doesn't think

⁷⁰ According to scholars, “genuine” (*pistikòs*) nard was a rare spice in Palestine. It is mentioned only two other times in the Bible, both, significantly, in the Song of Songs, 1:12; 4:13–14. Scholars believe that the spice must have come from the valleys of the Himalayas in India.

about it. Or maybe she does think about it, and precisely for this reason she pours all of it out on the feet of Jesus.

So, at the center of the fourth Gospel there is this gesture of total dedication, of the almost foolish impulse of this woman, who pours on Jesus's feet the best that she has. It is "costly and genuine nard,"⁷¹ says John. Which means, it was not only an exorbitant quantity but also of first-rate quality: the best she has. Where does this kind of gesture come from?

The answer is simple—this gesture is simply the return of the wave of Mary's wonder, a return for the love with which she has been loved. It is crucial to notice this connection, something that we usually do not pay enough attention to. And so, to give it our attention, it is apparent that in His first coming to Bethany, Jesus did not limit Himself to raising Mary's brother (which in itself is not a little thing). No, John tells us something else. He tells us that Mary, prompted by Martha, reaches Jesus when he is still at the entrance to the town, and throwing herself *at His feet* (*even here*, the feet, as in John 12:3), breaks out crying in front of Him. So what does Jesus do? How does he react, how does he respond to the pain of Mary? "When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled,"⁷² and in the end, "Jesus wept."⁷³ "*Edàkrusen o Iesus*": Jesus wept. It is the shortest verse in the whole New Testament, and yet it has everything in it.

Seeing Mary cry, Jesus broke down and cried. And Mary had not forgotten this. This movement of the emotion of the Lord in front of her, for her—she could not remove it from the eyes of her heart. And this is why she did what she did at the dinner. Her gesture was like a return of the wave of memory, brimming with wonder, that filled her.

Allow me now a last zoom-in that "squares the circle," so to say, of everything. If we pay attention, there is a gesture (only one!) in the fourth Gospel that is similar to Mary's. It is the sign accom-

⁷¹ Cf. John 12:3.

⁷² John 11:33.

⁷³ John 11:35.

plished at the wedding of Cana, the transformation of water into wine (John 2:1–11). Here as well, in fact, we have the same double “excessiveness” of Mary’s gesture: *an exorbitant quantity* (more than 600 liters of wine; cf. John 2:6!) and of *a very high quality*. (cf. John 2:10; Why did he have to provide a high-quality wine given that the invited guests were already a little tipsy? As the headwaiter notes, they couldn’t even appreciate it.) “Why this waste?” Judas asks, scandalized by Mary’s gesture. Well, this is only the reflection, the mirror image, of another waste. This devotion is nothing but the effect produced in Mary by her wonder at “the breadth and length and height and depth”⁷⁴ of the love of Christ—that love that led Him to “bleed Himself dry” for us.⁷⁵

“We are not asked to seek out our expressivity, we are asked to deepen the wonder from which expressivity is born.” If we do not love, if we get stranded, as is normal, it is simply because we are still on the way—it is because this wonder is still not ripe in us. So, what helps us on this path of deepening wonder?

2. So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter: “It is the Lord!”

Allow me to return for a moment to Peter’s dive. If you remember, we underlined in the last point of the lesson that Peter dives into the water thanks to a prompt from John. It is the beloved disciple who recognizes the man standing on the shore and then opens Peter’s eyes as well.

To what we already said, I would like now to add a detail that seems interesting in our context; it relates to the identity of the beloved disciple in the fourth Gospel. He is the eyewitness of the Lord’s love “to the end”⁷⁶—the only one who had felt the beating of His heart in the hour when He embraced His destiny in the upper room; the only one who stood before Him, when the glory of His

⁷⁴ Ephesians 3:18.

⁷⁵ It goes without saying that, in the eyes of John, the “wasted” wine at Cana is really just a symbol of a much more shocking waste: that of the blood freely poured out by Jesus on the cross for love of every woman and man.

⁷⁶ John 13:1.

love broke forth from his torn-open chest on the cross. It is therefore right that he is the disciple who opens Peter's eyes—the one who “restores” Peter in the presence of the Risen One. It is right because this is what Peter continues to need, to be regenerated and restarted in his task as fisherman, in his task as shepherd: to be placed again in front of the splendor of the love of Christ, of which John is the witness par excellence. And so it is for us. We do not know Christ by ourselves, through a purely individual experience. We deepen our awareness of Christ through the mediation of those who have seen and heard Him before us and more than us, of those who have had before us an experience of Him that is deeper and fuller than ours.

We come thus to the second point on which I want to pause—a point that previously emerged in the first assembly and that, from what I was able to understand, has led to some discussion. It is worth the effort, then, to return to it.

If you remember the other morning, at a certain point I said, reacting to one of the last contributions, that we are often tempted to interpret reductively the second point of the prologue of the Statute of the Fraternity, where Giussani says that the lived experience of communion (or *communionalità*) is necessary to generate memory in us. What did he mean? I spoke about this yesterday with one of you: it seems to me that we are often tempted to think that the educative function of the companionship is simply that of reawakening my awareness to something that is already totally part of my I, that ultimately “I already know,” a little like Plato's Socrates does with his disciples. That is to say, on the one hand there is my I, which has this capacity of direct, immediate relationship with the mystery; and on the other hand, there is the ecclesial companionship, which is a help, sure, but only in the sense that it reawakens me to the awareness of something that is already inside me. Instead, the mediation of the ecclesial companionship, understood in the Catholic sense of the term, is much more than this: it is a *real means* of communicating something new to me; that is, the awareness of Christ. In fact, whether I like it or not, I cannot know Christ, I cannot come to “taste and see” Christ *as He truly is* (and not as I imagine Him to be), except

through the mediation of someone who already knows Him, who is already immersed in Him.

In the strictest and most objective sense, this means two things: first, that none of us can reach Christ except through the testimony of the apostles, which reaches us through the authoritative mediation of the church; second, that none of us can experience Christ without the mediation of the sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, etc.). Now, the particular accent of Giussani is in underlining—in perfect consonance, however, with the Second Vatican Council (I will return there shortly)—that what is true about the church in the institutional sense of the term, is true in an *analogical sense* (but existentially no less essential) of the vocational companionship, understood as a “companionship guided toward destiny.” In other words, it is right to say that lived communion, in the type of Christian experience to which Father Giussani gave life, has a character that we can call “quasi-sacramental.”⁷⁷

What does sacramental mean? It means that something is a vehicle of the knowledge and experience of Christ. We do not come to “see Jesus” *without mediation*. We come to see Him by entering into the eyes of others who have already seen Him and see Him—which means, as we said in the lesson,⁷⁸ through the method of faith.

But think how dizzying this all is: What is Jesus trying to say, when, referring to John at the end of John 21, he says to Peter: “What if I want him *to remain until I come*? What concern is it

⁷⁷ The expression is from Giussani, but it conforms significantly to the letter of what that famous paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* says about the Church (the expression *uti sacramentum* is in fact translated by some as “like a sacrament,” and by others as “quasi-sacramental”): “What established my face and my personality is what creates me, what loves me to the point of creating me. Therefore, it is Christ! And He has even placed Himself in our companionship: ‘A new guest appears in our midst.’ Then, what gives concrete shape to life is the belonging to something that already exists, to Christ, and I belong to Christ within the historical, concrete modality with which He has made Himself known to me, in a mature, and therefore persuasive and operative, way. What gives shape to life is the belonging to that companionship that is the efficacious, quasi-sacramental, sign of Him.” Giussani, *Certi di alcune grandi cose*, 464 (translation ours). In his last letter to John Paul II in 2004, Father Giussani says about our friendship: “Our company—acknowledged as a precious and particular gift of the Spirit—becomes a sacramental part in its belonging to the Church.” Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, 1119.

⁷⁸ Cf. Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 18. See here, page. 44.

of yours?” (John 21:22). Clearly, this is an enigmatic phrase. The greater part of scholars today agree that the most probable meaning is the following: until the end of time, until the return of Jesus, John is destined to *remain* through the testimony of his Gospel. This is his gift, his charism. Which means that until the end of time, whoever wants to see Jesus will do it by entering into the eyes of this disciple. Wow! Jesus is therefore saying: “Dear Peter, well yes: all Christians of all times, millions and millions, in order to see Me will have to pass through the eyes of that young man there who is following us. This is the gift I wanted to give him, so calm down and follow me.”

Catholicism is this: the mystery of this God who is so in love with man that he wants to entrust the revelation of His face to the mediation of men of flesh and bone, sinners like me and you.

And where does this “personal” experience end up? And where does the richness of charism, which the Spirit distributes freely to whom He will, end up? Isn’t the Risen One sovereignly free to manifest Himself to whomever He will? Is it perhaps true that a Saint Francis, given that we are in Assisi, has had an authentic experience and yet in some way a “new” and totally “personal” experience of Jesus?

Without a doubt: but that does not mean an experience that led him *beyond* the Jesus of John or Peter. Certainly, as Jesus Himself says, the Spirit introduces the Church slowly “to all truth,”⁷⁹ and in this sense there can be “particular traits” of the unique Jesus that Saint Francis or Father Giussani came to see better even than the apostles (!). But that does not mean that the Spirit leads beyond *that Jesus* who said of Himself: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”⁸⁰ The action of the Spirit does not add a comma to the Jesus of John and Peter. Rather he has us taste and see ever better “the breadth and length and height and depth” of the Jesus of John and Peter. From here comes the paradox by which a charismatic like Saint Francis, who, while he had a personal experience of Christ

⁷⁹ John 16:13.

⁸⁰ John 14:6.

that was more exceptional than any other, in order to *deepen his knowledge* of that Jesus to whom he had spoken at San Damiano, also needed to pass through the words and the eyes of John, of Peter, and of Paul; he also had to drink from the sacraments and the wisdom of the church.

And so, something analogous is also true for us in relation not only to Holy Mother Church, but also to our companionship. When Giussani speaks about a necessary “immanence to a lived communionality,” he is not talking about a crutch on which we support ourselves when we are not able to manage by ourselves. The vocational companionship is much more than this: it is the place through which—*by osmosis*, Father Giussani said—the new mentality and the new life of Christ are communicated to us. One of the most important dogmatic constitutions of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, which is dedicated precisely to the mystery of the church, in its first paragraph says this exactly, to the letter: that the church is “in Christ like a sacrament [*veluti sacramentum*] or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit *union* with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”⁸¹

⁸¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 1 (italics mine). Even if this is not the place to do so, it would be interesting in this vein to deepen in the future the connection between the first and the second part of the explanation that *Lumen Gentium* offers of the meaning in which the church is a sacrament. What relationship is there between the *union with God* and the *union of the whole human race*, of which the church is in equal measure a sign and instrument? I limit myself to a couple of observations: first, as we already said at the first meeting in Assisi and as Father Lepori more deeply illustrated in the second meditation of the 2023 Spiritual Exercises, cf. M.-G. Lepori, *Our Eyes Are Fixed on Jesus, Who Is the Origin and Fulfillment of Faith*, 63–65, we are not dealing with two juxtaposed ends, or one that is only vaguely connected with the other, as if we could have a union with God that is not at the same time union with our brothers and sisters. The fact is that the God who unites Himself to me in a personal relationship with Christ is not a generic “mystery,” an unknown God without a face. He is instead a God whose blessed life is communion, reciprocal love. From here (the second observation) comes the fact that a decisive terrain for verifying the authenticity of the experience of Christ of a baptized person is and cannot be other than, as Saint John teaches, charity toward her brothers and sisters. If the life of God is charity (1 John 4:8, 16)—even more: *reciprocal charity*—then it goes without saying that whoever knows the God of Jesus *truly*, cannot but love his brother and desire communion with him (even when, for a thousand reasons, it is difficult to keep alive this desire). “Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.... No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection

An important clarification: in saying this I am not denying that the Lord is free to “*happen*,” that is, to manifest Himself how and where He wills. That the Lord is risen means precisely this: that for Him time and space are no longer limits, as Father Giussani loved to say, and therefore He is sovereignly free to manifest Himself to whom He wills using the circumstances He wills, even the most improbable ones, even a great suffering (as some of our friends in these days have witnessed to us in a heartbreaking way).

An example: as Camu well knows, I have a particular passion for animals. For this reason, when I was in Washington D.C., I often went to pray in a little forest close to my house that teemed with animals (in the States, even close to the cities, nature is much more virgin than it is for us): deer, raccoons, hawks, woodpeckers, owls, mallards, etc., etc. Well, one of the men in my house was instead very passionate about Eucharistic adoration. Even I did Eucharistic adoration, let’s be clear, together with my brothers (once a week: this was the rule). If, though, I had to identify the place that most helped me to live the memory of Christ, Eucharistic adoration does not come to mind, but rather the forest of Cabin Jones: the cry of the falcon, the leap of the deer, the majestic flight of the owl. Attention: I am not saying that for *everyone* it has to be this way. I’m even a bit ashamed to say it. But for me this is how it was. What could I do! In fact (not because I had decided it), nothing helped me remember Christ, nothing evoked in me His “unmistakable traits,” as much as praying while looking at the leaping deer, hearing the cries of the falcons. This is a mystery of God’s freedom!

in us.... We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.... If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (John 4:8, 12, 16, 20–21). Up to what point it is true that fraternal communion is not in the life of faith just a means, but rather the end (cf. *You Have Given Him Rule*, 55–58), we can understand most powerfully from the words with which the end of Jesus’s great high priestly prayer opens: “And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:22–23).

With a crucial *nota bene*: in order to see *in the leaping deer* the unmistakable traits of Jesus, I have to know the unmistakable traits of Jesus. How do I do that except by seeing them in the deer, in the falcon, in the face of my wife? If the face of Jesus is for me this great unknown, how can I *recognize Him present* here or there? In order to recognize the presence of your daughter in the midst of a crowd, you have to have etched in your mind her physiological traits. If not, how will you find her? You lack the criterion of comparison. But—someone will object—the criterion of comparison is the *heart*. “The heart,” as Father Giussani himself says, “is the criterion of comparison for *recognizing Christ*.”

I respond: without doubt a comparison with the heart is the criterion for understanding that Christ is the One my heart awaits, when and if I encounter Him (as it was for John and Andrew), through the correspondence that I experience between Him and my person. But the criterion for recognizing Christ present in reality, whether it is a deer or a poor man on the side of the road, is not, nor can it be, only the heart. More precisely: the criterion is the heart, but only in the measure that Christ Himself has already “shone” in our heart the unmistakable traits of His face⁸² through the mediation of the Christian community, as Father Giussani makes clear in his first point about the structure of Christian experience, which was proposed again to us at the Beginning Day.⁸³

⁸² “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ *has shone in our hearts* to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6, italics mine).

⁸³ In the first point, Giussani describes “an *encounter* with an objective fact originally independent from the person having the experience. The existential reality of this fact is a tangible community, as with every wholly human reality.” Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, trans. Mariangela Sullivan (Montreal McGill-Queens University Press, 2019), 87. In the second point, Giussani underlines that “we cannot sufficiently understand the value of the fact we come across in an encounter,” with Christ, His face, “without a gesture of God. Indeed, the same gesture with which God makes himself present to humanity in the Christian event also enhances the mind’s cognitive capacities, tuning the penetration of the human gaze upon the exceptional reality that has provoked it. We call this *the grace of faith*.” Giussani, 87. In *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, he reiterates: “Just as Christ gives Himself to me in a present event, he brings to life within me the capacity for grasping it and recognizing it in its exceptionality.” Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, 22–23.

In short, the criterion to say whether a certain face reminds me of Mister X or not is the memory of *the face of Mister X* that I carry *within me*, it seems. Which presupposes, though, that someone has introduced me to Mister X.

From here comes an important conclusion: it does not make sense to oppose the unpredictability of Christ's happening, the freedom of Christ to come meet me under surprising and new "robes," to the fact that we know Christ through the immanence of the ecclesial companionship. If I think about my experience, the contrary was and is true: it is true that precisely *the familiarity with Christ* that I have slowly acquired by remaining "immersed," so to say, in the vocational companionship, has made me in time capable of grasping the presence of Christ also in places, in regions of my experience where I would have *never* imagined being able to find Him.

Before moving on to the third and final point, a last clarification, without which our discussion risks remaining incomplete—I think it is evident to everyone that when Giussani speaks about *immanence*, he does not mean being *passively* immersed in the companionship, as if this being immersed brought about *mechanically* the deepening of wonder. As we know well, one can be immersed in the companionship and not deepen any wonder. What is it that makes the difference, then? One of you hinted at it yesterday: it is the fact that my being immersed is full of a cry, of all of the thirst and the hunger of my heart. It lies in the fact that *I am here*—but here with an awakened heart, a heart that asks, a heart that begs, a heart that cries out. So all the richness of what there is inside the companionship begins to shine: "Let me see You! Let me see that I may know You more within this place!"

It seems right to say, in this sense, that the second condition for deepening wonder is humility—but humility understood in the sense in which Pope Francis used this word in his speech of 15 October of last year. Humility thus means not presuming that one has already understood either Christ or the companionship that has fascinated us. Right at the end of the Gospel passage about the man born blind, at a certain point Jesus turns to the Pharisees and says these words, which are both bitter and ironic: "I came into

this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see [he is obviously talking about the man born blind, who not only recovered his sight; he also believed in Him *at first sight*], and those who do see [or think that they see, that is, already know what there is to know about God: the Pharisees] might become blind.”⁸⁴ How terrible! What is the moral condition needed to arrive at “seeing Jesus” more and more? Only one thing: that you recognize that you do *not yet* see, that you recognize at least in part that you are still blind, that you recognize that you still have an infinity to discover, that you recognize that there is an ocean of beauty and truth that is ahead of you that you still have not explored. While if you think that you already know everything about Christ and about the charism, then you are already lined up with the Pharisees.⁸⁵

3. “The house was filled with the fragrance”: to give one’s life for the work of Another

In the light of all we have just said, I think we can understand better the third and last point of this synthesis, which I would like to dedicate to a reflection on the third “pillar,” if we can call it that, of the description of CL’s charism that we find in the prologue of the Statute of the Fraternity, which I will read:

The memory of Christ inevitably tends to generate a communionality that is visible in and offers proposals to society.

Here, the whole accent on the primacy of wonder that we have proposed up to now, I think, helps to make these words less ambiguous but also to demonstrate their importance. It is from memory,

⁸⁴ John 9:39.

⁸⁵ I’ll have us note: in the fourth Gospel, the only man in Jerusalem who confesses his faith in Jesus publicly is the man born blind, while the Pharisees, those who should be able to see better than everyone the fact of the Messiah, do not recognize Him! This coincidence contains a message for us. The man born blind finds himself paradoxically in a better condition to welcome the new revelation that Jesus brings precisely because no one is as aware as he is of needing to see better than he is able to see.

we have said, that is, from the renewal and continual deepening of wonder that “generativity” is born. Your generating communion and my generating communion, whether it is within or outside the circle of our friends, is nothing but the overflow of a love that we are continually receiving. Do you remember the image of giving birth? A woman generates if first of all she opens herself to receive, if she makes space in herself for, another.

Let’s return to Mary at Bethany. What happens after Mary pours the nard on the feet of Jesus? Do you remember?

The house was filled with the fragrance.

The great Origen comments that this is the image of the expansion of the fragrance of the gospel through the missionary work of the church in the person of Mary.⁸⁶ How beautiful! What are the works that are born in and from our history? They are nothing but the fragrance of the nard that fills the whole house. They are nothing but the sensible, perceptible effect in the world of the generous dedication with which so many of our friends have responded to the love that, through the encounter they have had, has filled them; they are nothing but the fragrance of a passion for Christ that, through an encounter with Father Giussani, has set them on fire. Certainly, we are all sinners. And it is easy to lose our bearings when we put our hands into the dough of life. Still, if we could embrace in one single gaze all the many works that are born from our people, it is impossible not to ask ourselves: What has generated all this? The answer that comes to my mind is: a love, or more precisely, that same impetus of love that two thousand years ago led Mary, without even thinking about it, to “waste” all the nard

⁸⁶ “Mary, the Scripture says, brought a pound of ointment of spikenard of great price, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped them with the hair of her head. And the whole house, it says, was filled with the odour of the ointment. This surely shows that the odour of the teaching that proceeds from Christ, and the fragrance of the Holy Spirit have filled the whole house of the world, or else the whole house of the Church... And, because that ointment was full of faith and of precious, loving intention, Jesus Himself bore witness to her saying: *She hath wrought a good work upon me.*” Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 160–61.

she had on the feet of Jesus. What was Mary thinking about while she was pouring out her oil on the feet of Christ? Was she thinking about how many rooms of the house the fragrance of this nard could reach? No. Mary thought only about expressing her love for Jesus, to say *better than she was able* who that man was for her. But in doing this, here is the irony—“the house was filled with the fragrance.” What is a *work*, in the Christian sense of the word? It is the same thing: it is the spontaneous effect—“*inevitable*,” Father Giussani says—of that dedication without calculation that is affirmed in the heart of the person who lives the memory of Christ.

There is no opposition, therefore, between the primacy of a personal relationship with Christ and social engagement, cultural engagement, public testimony; rather, one generates the other.⁸⁷

It is therefore right to say here that there is something that comes before our initiatives, because if these initiatives are not moved by the love for Christ, and thus by charity toward men and women, they will be “a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal,” as Saint Paul says.⁸⁸

On the other hand, we should also say—without beating ourselves up, though—that if the “fragrance does not fill” the “house,” if, that is, our works and our public presence languish, then maybe our love is also beginning to languish. In order to avoid every error: I am not *at all* talking about *the efficacy* of our initiatives (falling again into the logic of performance, from which we wanted to free ourselves). The initiative can be clumsy, imprecise, imperfect—it doesn’t matter! What matters, when we love, is giving ourselves. As one can, as one is able—it doesn’t matter. But the point is to give ourselves, knowing that *sooner or later* this giving will bear fruit. Why? Because the fruit, the “fragrance,” is nothing but the inevitable (*inevitable!*) effect of that total gift of self of which the act of love consists. What counts in Christianity is the free gift of self. The

⁸⁷ Father Giussani said in 1969: “The beginning of the presence within the environment is not the environment itself, but something that comes before. [...] The announcement does not come from how smart we are at resolving the issues, but comes before, it is something that is given to us and in which we find ourselves, from which we are constantly beginning.” Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*, 423.

⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:1.

rest is left to God. One gives himself or herself generously, like our Spanish friend, and nothing happens, it seems like the fragrance doesn't spread. It doesn't matter. Keep going, dear Belen, keep going! And if nothing happens for ten years, keep going all the same! Because we are not held hostage to the outcome of our commitment. What moves us is love for Christ. This makes us tireless, free and tireless, even when the fruits do not come. It is a path, a path on which we constantly fall into another logic, the old logic, and then everything becomes a burden. But the problem is not in the weight of things. The problem is the absence of an adequate "fire." We should, then, help each other to keep the "fire" lit. And in this we are helped by the witness of those who are given to us as companions on the journey.

At this point, I cannot refrain from saying something a bit personal that happened to me the other night, while I was listening to the witnesses from the Holy Land. All of them struck me, but there was one that really moved me. It was the last, the one from Jack. Not because it was more touching than the others but because I have known Jack since he was little—I carried him in my arms when he was a little baby (his dad was my teacher in elementary school and we have been friends our whole lives). And then the other evening, seeing what became of that baby that I carried in my arms: seeing his fearless dedication (because that crazy guy stayed); seeing his black eyes shining there in the middle of the disaster—shining with passion for the good of that poor people, I was moved. Who among us did not experience at least a little bit of holy envy when we were listening to him? And it is right to feel that. It is right because Jack is a "great one." It is right because each of us could perceive in his eyes and in his words a passion for the people and for what he is doing that each of us would like to have. And again: it is right because Jack finds himself now living what he is living because of the simple fact that he said a series of yeses, and all of us can say, and often do say, our own yes. He let himself be fascinated, he did not oppose the great story within which he "was taken up." And so now he finds himself doing great things, things that as a baby he could never have dreamed of doing.

But I want to finish with the other side of the coin.

This love leads us to do great things, we said. Well, not only this. This love brings about a miracle that in some ways is even greater: it makes great what seems to everyone else to be small. How beautiful it was, in this sense, to listen yesterday to the witness of Federica. It was beautiful because it was instructive, corrective. She did not say it in front of everyone, but the work that Federica left (I hope only temporarily) to be with her husband is not just any work. It is a work that Federica loves with a passion. And yet, in trusting the perspective that our companionship suggested to her, in trusting the new logic that is born of faith, she discovered something that is a hundred times more. And she witnessed it to us. She witnessed to us that in living everything with this urge to offer herself—whether it has to do with how Federica washes the dishes or how someone, like Jack, goes to Syria—we begin to taste an experience that is the exact opposite of what the performative ego lives, the point from which we started. For the performative ego everything is always small and “the grass is always greener on the other side.” The one who lives in the presence of Another, instead, sees even the smallest gesture, and even washing the dishes, become greater in her hands.⁸⁹ Even more: precisely because more is sacrificed, that gesture becomes greater, more expressive of where our true greatness lies. Where does true greatness lie? As a wise man said, in Christianity, the one who loves more “conquers.”

Francesco Cassese. Let’s think about the gospel and the Bible, this “strange” book we spoke about at the beginning. We will not be able to understand anything of the gospel, except by virtue of a present event unless we have encountered something in the present, unless the event is happening today. In the same way, we will not be able to understand anything of what is happening to us today without returning to look at the gospel. So, there is a virtuous circle between the past and the present, a past-present dialogue,

⁸⁹ Cf. Giussani, *L’avvenimento cristiano*, 31–33 (translation ours); cf. Luigi Giussani, “Religious Awareness in Modern Man,” *Communio*: ICR 25, no. 1 (1998), 138–40.

that makes it more and more interesting to read and understand the gospel. Through a reading of the gospel, Father Paolo is helping us understand what is happening to us today. In this sense, I would like to look again at what he told us in the light of what has happened in these days. I will make three observations:

1) Before coming in I was seated next to a friend who told me: “In these years I had distanced myself a bit from the movement but I have come close again in these days.” And he added: “I had been passing through the desert. But in these days, it was for me like returning to my father and my mother.” When Father Paolo says that in order to recognize we need to know, it means that you can recognize your father and mother only because you had previously known them. This is faith: to recognize a presence. Faith is to recognize those unmistakable traits that cause us to say, “We are home; You are here.”

2) Father Paolo, in the last point, told us that this faith, this memory, the awareness of a presence, generates community. But isn't this what has happened in these days? Without any of us looking for it or seeking it out, communion was immediately born among us. This is the sign of the Lord's presence. The Lord is present among us and we have to have the audacity to call Him by His name. The Lord is here.

3) The last point I wanted to touch on has to do with responsibility, because responsibility, as Father Paolo has described it—as task, mission, work—is an attempt to reciprocate this love. I am surprised because these have been extraordinary days, and I think that all of our legs are trembling a bit: we realize that something great is happening, not only for us, but for everyone, even for our friends to whom we will return. It is a tremor in front of the initiative of the Lord and, as we said at the beginning of this gathering, we still do not know where it will lead us. Our responsibility is to say yes to this initiative. To say yes to this initiative means that, in some way, we will help each other more and more to understand how this story can go forward, what forms can serve what is happening among us, even as we are ready to correct ourselves if we realize that a particular form is not adequate.

We saw each other in March and also now, eight months later. I don't think we should try to see each other again before the summer, in part because we will have the Exercises of the Fraternity and the Exercises of the Young Workers. I do not know, then, what it means for us to say yes to what has begun and which form, maybe even something new, might be born to accompany this story. I have to say that at lunch and dinner a few ideas and suggestions have emerged; we can verify their feasibility in the upcoming weeks. I will offer an example that, in fact, still has to be verified. Yesterday I was at lunch with some of you and at a certain point a need came out that was expressed like this: "We cannot wait to return home to tell our friends in the Fraternity what has happened in these days." I do not know how what is happening among us can reach other friends who are not here. There was a suggestion that those who were here could organize a local weekend gathering, giving ourselves a little time to verify the content that has emerged in these days, and then have a moment of dialogue inviting some of you. In short, there will be space for creativity and inventiveness. We will see how this story goes forward. Certainly, what has begun is a story that we cannot allow ourselves to abandon.

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Translated by Matthew Henry

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