



“BEHOLD, I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW”

(Rev 21:5)

*Spiritual Exercises of the University Students
of Communion and Liberation*

RIMINI, DECEMBER 8–10, 2023

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Introduction – Francesco Ferrari
December 8, evening

Please stand. Watching all of you enter, and also earlier, observing the choir rehearsing and the secretariat at work, I felt again the explosion of expectation I have been nurturing during these weeks. Expectation of what? As one of you said in a contribution for this weekend: an “expectancy of discovering everything again, finding everything again”; hope for everything. I am very grateful that we have gathered here again. Singing now, let’s ask for a simple heart, a heart that is not closed or prejudiced. Let’s also ask that all our worries can be reduced to their most essential terms and be calmed, and that the heart can express a simple prayer of entreaty. Lord, in these two or three days, make us like children who are waiting, looking, desirous of drinking at the wellspring they have encountered. Let’s sing, “Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word.”¹

Let’s ask that these days may be an encounter with true wisdom, with the true word. Let’s sing together with all our hearts, here at the beginning, to ask God that in these days we may receive all we need.

*Be Thou my vision
Land Of The Living
La notte che ho visto le stelle [The night I saw the stars]²*

Welcome everyone. It is great to be here together. We are not here only from Italy—we have friends among us from far-off Kazakhstan

¹ “Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word,” *Be Thou My Vision*, Irish hymn, eighth century.

² “Don’t want to be like the dust that settles / This empire of nothing / I find that I’m king of all these empty halls [...] / But you can’t be an old fire if you’re burning with a new flame [...] //, I was born to be free, you were born to free me” (repeated four times), from Roo Panes, “Land of the Living,” in the EP *Land Of The Living*, 2013, © CRC Music Group. Claudio Chieffo, “La notte che ho visto le stelle” [The night I saw the stars], in *Canti* [Songs] (Milan: Società Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, 2014), 236–37.

and others from Poland, Portugal, and Switzerland. In particular, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to some Muslim friends who are here with us, because they are a testimony to the simple and open heart, free of prejudice, that we desire. I am very grateful for their companionship and friendship. The Spiritual Exercises taking place in these days are not intended to be a parenthesis in our lives; we are together because we want to pursue life deep down and not detach ourselves from the most pressing issues, from the questions we have most at heart. As we will say in the coming months of School of Community, we want “to live always the real intensely, without preclusion, without negating or forgetting anything.”³ First of all, we do not want to forget, censure, or take for granted the desire for happiness we have inside. If we are here, even if we have come out of an insistent habit, let’s reawaken the desire for happiness we have inside. Amongst all of our worries and expectations, there is this deep desire for happiness, no matter how confused it may be. “Every life needs a hope of glory,”⁴ as we just sang.

But beyond this desire, I do not want to censure the fact that many things around us seem to threaten this desire and the possibility of happiness. Let’s not be afraid to look them in the face this evening. Your contributions express a great number of questions that I do not want to censure.

The war around us

The times we are living in are marked by great violence. For years, Pope Francis has been speaking about a “third world war fought piecemeal.” For two months, there has been a conflict in the Holy Land and for almost two years another in Ukraine, and then there are those in Nigeria, Syria, and South Sudan, to name only a few.

Then there is the violence around us, violence in our cities, and at times in our own families. There is violence in our universities, in the lives of our classmates. I’m thinking of the universities where we are present, where there were recent occupations accompanied

³ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), 113.

⁴ Panes, “Land of the Living.”

by many insults. But above all, I'm thinking with great pain of the hidden and terrible war many of our classmates and even some of us are experiencing, the war called solitude, suffering, pain, and lack of meaning, which leads people to do things we would never want to hear spoken of. At times there is a little war among us, in our friendships, small resentments and divisions. If we are here today with something of the kind in our hearts, let's ask to be able to cast it out in these days.

So, war and evil are part of our present, and they prompt real, true, and urgent questions in us. I think of all the contributions asking about the story of Giulia, the university student killed by her ex-boyfriend. I'll read a few. "I can't manage to conceive of any meaning in the things that have happened. This could happen at any time in any of our families, even in the family next door, because human beings are hungry for violence. So, what's the sense of planning your life, dreaming and loving, if everything could vanish because of some human instinct?" Another one of you wrote: "In these days I've been thinking about Giulia's ex-boyfriend. Why is such a normal guy seized by such atrocious evil and cruelty?" It would be easy to gloss over these questions in these days, to pretend they have not been asked, which is something that we do too easily and too often, unfortunately. Instead, in these days we want to face them head-on because they concern the fundamental needs of life, the need for truth, the need for love. One of you wrote: "A lot has been going on in these months, with many relationships taking a turn I hadn't expected, many changes, and many wounds. I feel a gigantic need to find meaning [the need for truth], something that can make me say that it's worthwhile." And again, in reference to Giulia: "Where can we find the strength to stay in front of evil?" Another person summarized the situation this way: "I feel a great need for love and truth."

The war within

We want to face these questions, doing so truly, allowing all the drama and true suffering they elicit to emerge. In order to face them, we have to stay in front of them. They cannot be faced with indif-

ference, with the terrible anesthetic of taking refuge in a video or a chat. They cannot be faced with the agitated anxiety that is aimed at finding social, psychological, or historical justifications. These are all important things, but at times they distract us from the deeper level of the drama that these vicissitudes place in front of us. Truly facing them means first of all allowing them to speak to us. One of you wrote: “In front of the death of Giulia I thought of the young man who killed her and I wondered what great wound he must have had to end up doing what he did. A wound that I, too, often find within.” This is the point, folks: we have to acknowledge that the war is not just outside us, but inside us too. That war is the beginning of all evil.

This is the war we would like to face, and face truly. One of Jesus’s teachings that has most challenged me is this: “But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. [...] All these evils come from within and they defile.”⁵ This counters our usual attempt to blame the difficulties and evils of life on external circumstances. Instead, the evil comes from within.

What is the face of this war that is fought within ourselves?

Certainly, it has the face of all the wounds we have suffered, of all the hurt we have received (above all from people we love, who love us or try to love us). But deeper down, this war is the evil that originates with us, from what we do. This is the evil that wounds more than everything else, that hurts us the most. Remember Grossman’s great lesson: “Only one judgement is passed on the executioner—he ceases to be a human being. Through looking on his victim as less than human, he becomes his own executioner, he executes the human being inside himself.”⁶

When we do evil, when we give space to violence, we execute the human being inside ourselves. I want to be clear that this is not a psychological question—it is a matter of a deeper wound, which

⁵ “But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile” (Mk 7:20–23).

⁶ Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*, trans. Robert Chandler (London: Vintage Classic, 2011), 128.

certainly does not exclude the psychological dimension, our history, and our lived experience, but we are not just the consequence of our history, of what we have experienced, of the society in which we live. We are free. We are born to be free, and we can use this freedom for good or for evil. It is important to recognize this because if the evil we can experience or do had only social, historical, or psychological causes, then there would be no guilt or responsibility, and thus everyone would be authorized to do whatever they want. Instead, there is freedom—we are free. Inside us is a wounded freedom that makes us no different from those who wage war or commit terrible acts. If we look inside, we too can wonder: “Why do I hate?” It is said that someone once asked Saint Francis: “Father Francis, how can I know the measure of my charity and goodness?” He answered: “Think of the brother you hate the most. There it is, your charity.” Why do we have inside us this mystery such that we hate, betray, and wound people? Why is it that I sincerely want to be good but at times can be so cruel?

There is this strange contradiction inside us; we want happiness and do everything for it, but many of our choices apparently go against what the heart desires. Saint Paul expressed this contradiction clearly: “For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.”⁷ “Original sin” is the church’s name for this mysterious wound that at times drives us (not forces, but drives us) to not choose the good. Our friend’s question, “Why is such a normal guy seized by such atrocious evil and cruelty?” is urgent because it does not concern others, but me. Only someone truly thoughtless and simple-minded can feel exempt from evil.

The two faces of the contradiction

I would just like you to take note of how this mysterious wound we bear inside emerges normally in our lives. It seems to me that this can be seen in the two needs I described in the contribution I

⁷ Rom 7:18–19.

quoted: the need for love and truth. This mystery of contradiction we have inside emerges as resistance to truth and resistance to love.

The war inside us begins when we resist the truth, when we do not open ourselves to the search for or embrace of what is true, the truth that comes from outside and is greater than us. War always begins when the truth is enclosed inside one's own ideas. That mysterious evil is always first of all a kind of idolatry. Giussani defined original sin as idolatry, as "the claim of being able to identify the total meaning with something comprehensible (with an idol)."⁸ An idol is the negation of a truth greater than me to which I must submit, to which I must bow. An idol expresses the claim that a particular thing I choose is everything. For example, thinking of today, our times, an idol is the particular of land that has been absolutized, which generates violence against a people. An idol is the particular of your body detached from the totality of your person. It is the particular of the pleasure you give me compared to who you are, the heart you have. It is the particular of the error you have committed that forgets the history uniting us. An idol is always a particular absolutized; it is what I have already decided about you, forgetting who you are and what I still need to discover about you. One of you spoke about the idol of your own plan: "I feel suffocated by my egocentric position centered on me and the plans I don't want to abandon." This is the wound of a reason that does not open to a greater truth but instead absolutizes something and makes it an idol. An idol generates violence because we have to defend that particular against everything else, and this is the origin of the fragmentation and division in ourselves, in our lives. Unity springs from truth, while only division and fragmentation can emerge from pursuing an idol.

Fortunately, our heart rebels against this, and even though we live in the so-called post-truth era in which personal convictions, opinions, and emotions weigh more than facts, even though we are in the era of relativism in which everyone fabricates his or her own truth, reason continues to be the need for truth. Experience tells us

⁸ Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 145.

that when we find ourselves in front of truly dramatic situations, it is there that reason is reignited. We want to know *the* truth, not a piece of the truth. In front of a war, we want to know who is right and who is wrong, who is on the side of truth and who is not. The answer may be highly complicated, but we want to know. If your girlfriend leaves you, you want to know why, the truth of what happened. Our reason is the need for truth. When we give up on this search, this journey, violence ensues because if there is no truth, everything becomes banal, flat, all the same. As a singer from my teen years sang, "Shave myself or kill/ What's the difference?"⁹ Only a truth greater than the human person, a truth from outside that cannot be manipulated, can keep peoples, families, lovers, and friends together; only a truth greater than everyone can keep everyone together.

The war inside us also expresses itself as resistance to love. I was struck by how many contributions spoke about the difficulty of allowing oneself to be loved or of running the risk of loving; this difficulty causes self-affirmation vis-à-vis the other and division to take precedence over making a gift of self to the other and love. Resistance to love is homicide in all of its forms; this is true in all ages. But a more everyday resistance to love can be seen in the divisions among us, the resentments and scorn, often over futile things. An almost paradoxical resistance to love is the egotistical claim we often make with respect to the people we love the most or would like to love the most. Then there is a resistance to loving ourselves when we do not accept ourselves just the way we are. I would like us to help each other with this, friends, because I think we find it too difficult to love ourselves. "How can I love myself, if I am made so badly?" one of you wrote. Well, I hope with all my heart that these days will help you see, all of you, that you are not made badly, that you, like me, can do evil, but that you are not made badly. These are two different things.

I think this resistance to love is also the result of a false idea of love. If you reduce love to a sentiment, then you become a slave to your moods, to how you feel. If you separate sex from love, sex can

⁹ Vasco Rossi, *Stupido Hotel*, 2001, © EMI.

be experienced not out of love but out of hatred. If you isolate sexuality, separating it from reason (that is, from the question about the meaning of our gestures), affectivity becomes animal instinct, without reason, and thus satisfaction of our instincts and domination. If we separate ourselves from the body we have, nonacceptance of oneself becomes almost obligatory. We have to help each other to react against this mistaken idea of love, which is a product of today's culture, by (I ask of you) criticizing the things in this culture that do not help us form a correct idea of love. For example, we cannot be indignant at the indescribable violence suffered by Giulia and then listen to the kind of music I heard a few days ago that says, "I'll kill you just because you talk with her."¹⁰

So then, evil comes from inside, and is always the negation of reason and love. When we give space to evil, a fear of losing takes over and we see the things in front of us disintegrate and crumble. One of you wrote: "Usually I experience relationships through the filter of fear of abandonment or substitution [this word really hurt me: the opposite is the case, because none of us can be substituted for]. There is always the doubt that 'you say you love me, but is it only because you still haven't understood that there's much better?'"

This evil that comes from within, this resistance to truth and love, generates fear. Truth and love always go together. They cannot be unbound, because you would never accept a false love; it would be a contradiction. If you discover a truth, you love it. In front of Giulia, all of us can say that there was not true love in her ex-boyfriend. Truth and love, reason and affection, always go together.

Open the cage

Fortunately, no one, none of us, gets used to war. Every person continues to desire truth and love, even within the greatest contradictions. We desire what was described in the prayer for Fr. Giussani's intercession that you found on your seats: "Victory over death and evil." Cardinal Pizzaballa, the patriarch of Jerusalem, one

¹⁰ Takagi & Ketra, featuring Shiva, Anna, and Geolier, *Everyday*, 2023, © Columbia Records, Sony Music.

of the people to whom I look with the most esteem these days, recently said, speaking of the situation in his country and the conflict underway: “The heart is closed in a cage of pain and anger. [...] We need to open this cage so that our heart can breathe again.”¹¹

We need to open the cage. In the beginning we sang, “I was born to be free,” but none of us on our own has the strength to leave this cage, to open it, to free ourselves from evil. So what hope is there in front of war and in front of the Giulias and the Palestines? There are many analyses, many theories, many condemnations, but in the end, What hope is there? Is it possible to live a truly new life?

Heaven begins here

Let’s look. On the screen you see the image we chose for these Spiritual Exercises, *Le Cabanon de Jourdan*, a beautiful painting Cezanne did a few months before his death in 1906. He said that with his art he sought to give things “the breath of duration, the gusto of the eternal.”¹² He sought in nature, in reality, that which is more, that which does not pass, that which is eternal. He sought for the truth of reality. Without absolutizing particulars, he wanted to grasp the truth of all of reality, its unity. For this reason, he played with colors in a strange way: there is blue in the meadow and green in the sky. It is as if through chromatic osmosis he wanted to capture that which holds everything together. For me, the result of this painting is very beautiful. In particular, the very simple and rudimentary house is marked by a door of the same blue as the sky. Something of the heavens is part of the house. That house is no longer just a house; it is something new, a home inhabited by heaven, which allows you to enter into heaven.

It is the Advent season and we are waiting for Christmas. Christmas is the expectant awaiting for an unimaginable newness, for a heaven that has drawn close to us. It is the birth of a man who

¹¹ Cf. “*Saluto del cardinale Pizzaballa a CL Spagna*” [Cardinal Pizzaballa’s greetings to CL Spain], October 27, 2023, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7JCx-Llz18>.

¹² “Nature is always the same, but nothing of it remains, of what appears. Our art must give the thrill of its duration, must make us taste the eternal.” Paul Cézanne, *Lettere* (Milan: SE, 1985), 163. Our translation.

marked the beginning of a new life that is possible for everyone. When Jesus was born, the world was at war, Palestine was at war, and the people of Israel were under the domination of the Romans. There were divisions in families. Jesus was not born into a world without war. But that child who was born, who seemed like nothing, absolutely nothing, was actually everything. That little life was the whole hope of the world. He was the salvation of reason and love. So then, if I think of Christmas, Christ's coming among us, I think of a heaven that decided to dwell in our homes, to walk with us, to become our friend and companion on the road. "Heaven begins here," as Andreï Makine said in a beautiful book.¹³

In a letter to his faithful at the outbreak of the war, Cardinal Pizzaballa said that we have to start again from the gospel, from the announcement of the good news (gospel means "good news"). Within this war that is around and inside us, we can offer good news. "I cannot live this extremely painful time without looking upward, without looking to Christ, without the faith that enlightens my view and yours on what we are experiencing" [...] We need a Word to accompany us, to comfort and encourage us. We need it like the air we breathe." Then he quoted John's gospel, where Jesus said to His disciples: "I have told you this so that you might have peace in Me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world."¹⁴ Then Pizzaballa continued, "Precisely within all this evil, Jesus has already won. Despite the evil ravaging the world, Jesus has achieved a victory, and established a new reality, a new order [...]. God's answer [this is beautiful] to the question of why the righteous suffer, is not an explanation, but a Presence. It is Christ on the cross."¹⁵

So then, we can stay in front of all those questions, all that tragedy, and we can truly face them together with courage because we have received the promise of a "new reality, a new order," a new life

¹³ Andreï Makine, *L'amico armeno [The Armenian friend]* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2022), 12. Our translation.

¹⁴ Jn 16:33.

¹⁵ Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, "Letter to the Entire Diocese," October 24, 2023, available at <https://english.clonline.org/news/church/2023/10/25/pizzaballa-message-diocese?hl=Pizzaballa%20October%202023> and at <https://custodia.org/en/news/letter-entire-diocese>.

brought by Christ. I want to know it more and more and to offer it to you more and more. “Behold, I make all things new,”¹⁶ is the title of these Spiritual Exercises. Christ said these words in the book of Revelation: “I make all things new”; that is, *I make your heart new, I make your mind new*. I want to know this newness, to see these new things, to see in what sense Christ does not respond to the evil in my life and in the world with theories or analyses, but with His presence.

Is it possible today to know Christ and the new life, the new order He brought?

Say the name

For months now I have been mulling over the question a friend asked at a gathering: “I’m happy to be here with you. This is a beautiful companionship and I’m grateful for it, but why do I have to say ‘Christ’? Why is it necessary to arrive at this name?” I was struck that a number of contributions asked the same thing. This is an important question, and in these days we will try to answer it. I’d like to thank this friend. He showed me the road I think we must walk together, because this is the question of faith. Faith is never an obligation. None of you, none of us, will ever be obligated to say “Christ,” but in these days we will try to help each other see how faith is humanly worthwhile, to see the newness of reason and affection that comes from acknowledging Christ, from the new life He has brought. This is why we are interested in Christ—because of the new life He brings forth in us. We will help each other understand what it means to say that Christ is true and that acknowledging Him is the beginning of a new life.

We will be helped by an exceptional figure who lived with Jesus: Simon, son of Jonah, whom Jesus called “Peter.”

The great Peter was a sinner. All four gospels (poor Peter!) list all of his mistakes, all of his wrong words, all of his misunderstandings, all of Jesus’s scoldings. It almost seems like the evangelists enjoyed casting Peter in a bad light.

Peter was impetuous and combative. He could sense the evil out-

¹⁶ Rev 21:5.

side him, which he called “a *roaring lion* looking for someone to devour.”¹⁷ But Peter also knew the sinfulness within himself and surely at a deep level, having discovered it over time. In fact, one of the first things he said to Jesus, as reported in the gospels, was “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”¹⁸ He was a strong and rough man, but also a bit insecure at times, proud and competitive. He lived in Capernaum with his wife and probably (in the sense that we do not know if she was still alive) with his mother-in-law, whom Jesus had healed. His home was one of the places Jesus returned to most gladly. It was a house inhabited by heaven.

Peter was a man of contradictions, like all of us. He was generous and violent, secure and insecure, faithful and traitorous, passionate and distracted. However, this man, like us, made a beautiful journey; he was the disciple who arrived at the point of saying that name in the conversation when Jesus asked His disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”¹⁹ Why did he say this? How did he reach that point? What did he earn for us?

This is the journey we will try to make together tomorrow, following Peter, so that we can discover the new life that Christ brings.

Announcement about silence

Now, before Mass, I would like to make just one announcement, about silence. Everything we will try to say, everything we will do and listen to, has a meaning—to facilitate the journey of each of us. One of the most important aspects of this is silence. I’ll talk a bit about it because it is also one of the most difficult aspects of our time together. We propose observing silence as we leave and enter the hall and during the bus trips back and forth. Obviously, let’s say it, we will also observe silence during the night. What is silence? It is not an empty, neutral, or indifferent time. Silence means leaving space for God in our lives, not speaking in order to hear Another

¹⁷ 1 Pt 5:8.

¹⁸ Lk 5:8.

¹⁹ Mt 16:15–16.

speaking. Normally we flee from silence because in silence you have to face yourself. If you truly try to observe silence, after a while all the memories, questions, and annoyances rise to the surface, and so generally we try to avoid it and fill our lives with noise.

Instead, during these days we want to live moments of true silence in which the presence of God can find space in our hearts. In this sense, silence will not be just the absence of words. For example, silence is reviewing what we have said, meditating on what we have heard, rereading the notes we have taken. We can also venture to have our own personal dialogue with God.

I'll mention two things that can help us. The first is to help each other observe silence. Calling friends to silence is not being a bother; it is a gesture of friendship to help each other. The second thing is help each other to be present here and now, not elsewhere. For this reason, I propose that you block the data traffic on your cell phones during the moments of silence and the lessons, so that there are no disturbances from outside. All the instructions and announcements we will offer have the exclusive goal of helping each of us embrace the new life we will be talking about.

Lesson – Francesco Ferrari
December 9, morning

I wonder as I wander

Fr. Stefano Lavelli. Before beginning Morning Prayer, I would like to say two things. Yesterday Fra' invited us to be like children and not censure anything, to be open and available. Well, little children do not know how to speak, and they learn because they hear their parents, or maybe their older siblings teach them to say some words, to express what they do not know how to express. We say Morning Prayer because the mystery had such pity on us and knows our heart so well that He suggested words to us, just like mothers and fathers teach their children to speak. In addition, our way of addressing God, mystery, and life is not something solitary, like only children closed inside their bedrooms. We have been joined together, which is expressed in our way of saying Morning Prayer. We should not worry if we do not understand all the words we say or if we get distracted. We can start over again. Over time we will gain familiarity with these words, which maybe in the beginning are not our own.

Survival
Canzone dell'ideale [song of the ideal]
Ritualitos²⁰

Francesco Ferrari. Thank you for the songs, which help us to open this day so beautifully. This morning we begin a journey that follows Peter, who is wonderful, and whom I hope we can truly identify with, letting ourselves be guided by his steps.

²⁰ J.J. Niles, "I Wonder as I Wander," in *Canti*, 332; Needtobreathe, "Survival," from the album *Out of Body*, © Elektra; Claudio Chieffo, "Canzone dell'ideale [song of the ideal], in *Canti*, 223–24; Marta Gómez, "Ritualitos," from the album *Musiquita*, 2009, © Aluna.

The event

“Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ [...]. Then he brought him to Jesus.” Peter, a man like us, lived his days normally and had desires, expectations, and difficulties. One day his brother Andrew brought him this unimaginable announcement (think of us: we are walking down the hall at the university on our way to a lesson and at a certain point a friend or maybe a brother stops us and says, “I’ve found happiness, I’ve really found it!”). Imagine Peter: “We have found the Messiah” meant “we have found the one our people has been awaiting for centuries.” Giussani said that Peter must have seen that Andrew was absolutely rapt with this news. Imagine ourselves in that hallway and a friend says, “I’ve found happiness” with conviction, and we understand full well that he is not out of his mind.

“Then he brought him to Jesus.”²¹ And so at the beginning of the history of Christianity there was a simple method inaugurated by Jesus, and then followed by His disciples and by us as well: “Come and see.” The first greatness of Peter was that he went to see with a simplicity born of curiosity and trust in Andrew. That day Peter met a man, a face, two eyes, a certain bearing. He met Him at a certain hour, in a specific place. He heard Him say certain words. A fact, simple and yet astounding, overturned Peter’s life. Giussani called this dynamic “an event.” “Christianity is an ‘event,’ something that was not there before and arose at a given point. [...] There is no other word to indicate its nature, neither the word *law*, nor the words *ideology*, *concept*, or *plan*. Christianity is not a religious doctrine, a series of moral laws or a collection of rites. Christianity is a fact, an event. All the rest is a consequence.”²² Consequence does not mean something indifferent, but that it follows, comes after; it exists, but it comes afterwards.

²¹ Jn 1:40–42.

²² Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 8–9.

God's response to the expectancy of women and men of all times, and to the expectancy of Peter, is an event, a specific fact that became a story for Peter, for the others, and for us. The gospels recount this story. Peter and the others saw Him again a few days later as they were fishing, then they accompanied Him to a wedding in Cana, and then when He went into a synagogue to pray and when He passed through villages. They followed Him. That fact became history. Slowly, Peter and the others, following this story, learned to understand and enjoy what they had encountered.

What were the characteristics of this fact? Friends, this morning let's focus on Peter and try to identify with his experience. We will see then the consequences for ourselves, too, but for now, let's learn about Peter.

An exceptional encounter in normal life

Giussani said that "the Christian event has the form of an encounter, a human encounter in ordinary day-to-day reality."²³ The gospel recounts (this must have happened a few days after the first encounter between Peter and Jesus) that "as He was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen [in fact, this was their livelihood]. He said to them, 'Come after Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed Him. He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed Him."²⁴ The event happened in the context of their usual life of fishing and repairing nets. He entered and overturned everything. It was a human encounter. For Peter it was the encounter with a man who said to him, "Follow Me, do it this way," and then, "Cast your nets on the other side of the boat" and "I will make you fishers of men." Within the repetition of the ordinary, day-to-day things, a newness entered.

²³ Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, 17.

²⁴ Mt 4:18–22.

The same thing happens today, as you are walking down the hall at the university or through the courtyard, as you go into the classroom, as a professor is speaking to you, or as you hear friends singing. Within your normal day-to-day life. Each one of us should return in our memory to the moment when that event made itself present. These moments can also happen after many years in the movement, precisely because it is a history. There is not necessarily just one "first moment," even though there is obviously a "first moment," but you might remember it in a confused way. These are the moments when your usual everyday life is turned upside down by something new. I am reminded of my friend Federico. During high school, my Student Youth friends and I decided to do a "Christmas tent" [*Translator's note: a stand to raise funds for AVSI charitable projects*], so we went to the main square in Reggio Emilia to set it up. At a certain point, a young fellow walked by, a classmate of one of the girls at the stand. They saw each other, and the girl looked at him and said, "Hi. We're going on holiday with our Student Youth friends. Would you like to come with us?" And he said, "OK." That was all. He has been with our friendship ever since! This was not much different from that day when Jesus said, "Leave your nets and come after Me," and Peter responded, "OK." He did not know what it meant to become fishers of men, just as my friend Federico did not know what Student Youth was, and just as many of us did not know what was happening at the beginning. I think of my friend Aly, who wrote a beautiful contribution that at a certain point says: "I discovered this beauty thanks to a friend." He was his classmate at the university. In the beginning, Aly did not know what that beauty was. It is within our usual everyday life (in a university classroom or during a walk in the square) that something happens that marks the beginning of something new. It is the start of heaven that begins to dwell on earth.

Pietro, Federico, and Aly did not follow that fact because they understood everything, but because they sensed something. They were struck by something exceptional. In fact, Giussani described the event as an exceptional fact.

Exceptional, spectacular, electrifying

I would like to dwell for a moment on what Giussani meant by “exceptional.” I’ll read you a passage. “Why do you feel something exceptional as ‘exceptional’? Because it *corresponds* to the expectations of your heart, however confused and nebulous they may be. It suddenly–suddenly!–corresponds to the needs of your soul, your heart, the irresistible, undeniable needs of your heart in a way you never would have imagined or foreseen, because nobody is like that man. Thus, paradoxically, the exceptional is the appearance of what is most natural for us. What is natural for me? That what I desire happens. What could be more natural than this? That what I most desire happens: this is natural. Running up against something absolutely and profoundly natural, because it corresponds to the needs of the heart that nature has given us, is something absolutely exceptional. It is like a strange contradiction: what happens is never exceptional, truly exceptional, because it does not manage to respond adequately to the needs of the heart. Something hints at exceptionality when it makes your heart beat with the perception of a correspondence that you believe has a certain value, and that the next day will be disowned, the next year will be voided.”²⁵

I would just like to make three observations about this extract because it helps us understand what happened then and what happens to us now. First, the exceptional is not necessarily a question of emotions, something that makes your heart beat like crazy. It is not something spectacular, like Elon Musk launching a rocket into space. It is not even something electrifying, like a thrilling night out that makes you feel a surge of electricity. This is not the exceptionality of which Fr. Giussani was speaking. It is, rather, what corresponds to our original, deep, ultimate expectations (these are the words he used to describe it), to our expectancy for truth and love.

A second, very important observation. I hope I can communicate it to you. Something is exceptional and corresponds deeply to our heart because it exceeds our expectations. It responds, corre-

²⁵ Luigi Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio: Dio e l'uomo* [Time and the temple: God and man] (Milan: Bur, 2015), 47. Our translation.

sponds, precisely because it exceeds these expectations "in a way you never could have imagined," Giussani said. It goes beyond all the images we had formed. Think of Peter. He certainly must have been expecting a political liberator, like everyone in Israel (the messiah was to liberate the people), but he never could have imagined meeting God. Peter wanted to understand how to be in front of evil, like us, but he could not have imagined what Christ's forgiveness would be. He desired things not to end, but he could not have imagined the resurrection. The event is exceptional because it exceeds all of our expectations and goes far, far beyond them; it corresponds precisely because it exceeds all of our expectations. Think of a love relationship. Which is more beautiful: to tell your girlfriend, "My darling [I don't know what you call her, maybe my turtledove?], you are exactly what I imagined," or to say to her, "You are more, more, than everything I imagined; you exceed my every expectation"? The thing that is exceptional for our heart, that corresponds, is what surpasses us, what goes beyond.

Third observation. Precisely because the exceptional "goes beyond," it reveals to us all the depth and breadth of our heart. In front of Christ, Peter discovered that he was made to encounter God, that he desired forgiveness, that he desired the resurrection. The more he followed Him, the more he discovered that his heart desired much more. He desired exactly what that exceptional man made him see, which he could not even have imagined before. "Christ [...] fully reveals man to man himself."²⁶

Christ reveals us to ourselves. One of you wrote about the encounter with Christ in these words: "I had a desperate need for that beauty, greatness, and mercy [but] I didn't know how much I needed it before I saw it." This is the experience of all of us, sooner or later (I hope!). It was my experience: before becoming fond of the movement I did not know (and thinking of it moves me) that I was made for such an immensely beautiful life, which I would not exchange for any other. I thought that life consisted of a girlfriend,

²⁶ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 22.

kicking around a soccer ball, and having a souped-up scooter. I did not know that I was made for such a great thing. So then, in this sense, the event is exceptional because it responds to our heart, and this response is always an event that exceeds all of our expectations and imaginings and that confirms that we are made for what we do not yet know. We are made for a greater life than we can even imagine. Excuse me for insisting, but this is really important to me—I think we often desire too little! Our idea of a successful life is small change compared to what God has in mind for us. The life that awaits us is much greater!

The exceptional nature of Christ

Let's take another step in Peter's footsteps. In what sense did Peter see and encounter this exceptional nature? What exceptional things did Peter see?

We could spend days immersing ourselves in the experience of Peter and the other disciples, who for three years admired the unimaginable. Jesus was the undreamt-of made man! He was "the beyond all measure" made man. He was the surpassing of all imaginings and expectations, incarnated in a man. Consider His miracles, especially the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. The comedian Benigni said ironically that the extraordinary nature of Christ lies not in the fact that He performed miracles, but that the first miracle was to heal a mother-in-law! Think of Peter who saw the miracles, think of the human fascination Jesus must have evoked, of the goodness with which He looked at people, of the intelligence and persuasiveness with which He spoke. Listening to Jesus speak in parables must have been entrancing. Why did He gather thousands of people to listen to Him? He must have spoken in an irresistible way. Think of how He understood people: "You are Peter," you are hard, you are rocky.

We can say that Christ's exceptional nature lay first of all in this: Christ was a fulfilled man, a true man, true. He did not have suffer from the contradiction we heard about last night, that wound of reason and affection. He was a man who knew and spoke the truth. Think of when the Pharisees, wanting to trap Him, asked whether

it was licit to pay taxes to Caesar (Israel was under Roman domination). If He said no and supported the Pharisees, He would set Himself against the Romans. If He said yes, the Pharisees would set themselves against Him. He gave an answer typical of a man who does not know idolatry; that is, He was able to grasp the full truth: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”²⁷

Jesus must have had an irresistible way of loving children, the sick, and the poor. But let’s risk talking about women. Think of how Jesus loved women. There are two or three stories in the gospels about His encounters with a sinful woman, maybe a prostitute or maybe an adulteress. In any case, the whole town considered her a sinner. The encounters between Jesus and this woman were incredible. While the whole society condemned her, He said: “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.”²⁸ I hope you will hear this message when you condemn yourselves, that you will hear “neither do I condemn you.” Think of the time that perhaps this same woman entered the hall where he was dining, lay at His feet and bathed them with her tears (maybe because she had already been forgiven), and everyone murmured, “Look at her,” and Jesus gave this response: “Her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love.”²⁹ Jesus did not censure her sinfulness—“I forgive her many sins,” because she had many sins to be forgiven—but the sinfulness lacked the power to stain the beauty of her heart: “She has shown great love.” Jesus was able to see the desire for true love within people.

Let’s think of Peter, who probably had a relationship with women like ours, like all of ours, a tangle of good desire, instinctiveness, and fear: male-female relationships have been a problem since the beginning. Within this tangle, think of Peter seeing Jesus love women in this way, with such a pure and true gaze, that of a true, fulfilled man, a man who did not manipulate people, though He had all the power to do so. Jesus had the power to understand the

²⁷ Mt 22:21.

²⁸ Jn 8:11.

²⁹ Lk 7:47.

human person, but He did not manipulate people. Instead, we often live our relationships with a view toward manipulation. After three years with that man, what exploded more and more in Peter's heart? The desire to understand Him and live like Him. I think the same thing happens in our lives in certain moments of beauty and truth or in front of certain testimonies—the desire to live this way is born in us. “Command me to come to You on the water,”³⁰ Peter asked when he saw Jesus walking on the water. What does this mean? “Help me to do the things You do, to love like You love, to see the way You see.” We, too, have this desire, but like Peter and the other disciples, in looking at this exceptional nature, we, too are invited to take a further step.

An inexplicable presence

That exceptional nature had a secret and precise origin.

In following Jesus, Peter and the others understood that what they saw could not be explained merely by saying that He was a great man. It was not enough. He was more than a great man.

“There is something inexplicable about Him, something we cannot quite grasp.”³¹ They saw many things. Clearly, He was a man who ate, spoke, and lived like a man, but then there was something that eluded them. It is like this in every relationship, even with my dearest friend, my friend Dado, whom I know so well; I ultimately do not know who he is. Every human relationship is this way because the other is a mystery. But with Christ they understood that what mattered was exactly what they did not know about Him, and it was urgent to know Him. So the question arose: “Who is this man?” What is behind this man? With “this question, the problem of Christ began in the history of the world, until the end of the world [...]” “Who is this man?” is another way of asking “What is behind this man?” The way Giussani commented on this question really struck me and I would like to dwell on it more here. This question arose from some-

³⁰ Mt 14:28.

³¹ Luigi Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 65.

thing incomprehensible in the man Jesus. What was behind Him? Giussani said: "There is nothing that the human person desires more than this 'incomprehensible nature.'" There is nothing that we desire more than this incomprehensible something, because we are a need for that which surpasses us. "There is nothing that the human person desires more ardently, albeit fearfully, [...] than this inexplicable presence. Because this is what God is."³²

This is God: God is this mysterious origin of all the beauty I behold. He is the origin of this life that I desire, this power of friendship I want. Giussani said that the event is "a fact that surfaces within experience [that I live] and reveals the Mystery that constitutes it,³³ that points to Another. Who is behind this? Jesus answered this question in a mysterious way, with words like "The Father and I are one."³⁴ "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."³⁵ "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."³⁶ The things He said about Himself day after day to help the disciples enter into that inexplicable presence were always mysterious. Jesus said He was God, the origin of everything. Think of Peter and the others! In the same way—in the same way!—in our friendship we affirm: "Here among us, in the church, in the movement, there is an inexplicable presence. There is a secret origin, a hidden origin, something Other." It is inexplicable, mysterious, ungraspable, and yet it is a presence, Someone present. It is there, otherwise this life would be inexplicable.

Here we truly reach a point where words do not suffice. You try to say it, but in saying it you reduce it. This is the value of the songs that have become part of our experience—the melody and beauty of certain songs help us glimpse and sense of what we cannot explain. So now let's stop and listen to a song that tries to describe that which deep down cannot be described.

³² The quotations in this paragraph are taken from Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio*, 53. Our translation.

³³ Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, 13.

³⁴ Jn 10:30.

³⁵ Jn 14:6.

³⁶ Jn 14:9.

I'll read you the words:

“O sweet Christ, O gracious God,/ O my love, O my life,/ O my salvation, O my glory. You are the Creator, You are the Saviour of the world. / I yearn for You, I seek You, / I adore you, O sweet love, / I adore You, O dear Jesus.”³⁷ These are the words of a person who, in front of Christ, senses all of His goodness and beauty, and the beauty of the music supports and amplifies the words.

[Listening to Dulcis Christe]

A journey of trust

Certain songs are of such beauty that they lift your heart and soul for a moment and open you to this presence that is inexplicable for our natural reason, beyond our reason. This is why the journey Peter had to make in following Jesus was a journey of trust. In chapter 6 of John's gospel, Jesus had just performed a crazy miracle, feeding thousands of people, and they were all wound up and following Him. However, He wanted to lead them all to recognize the inexplicable presence, the mysterious origin behind His person. Jesus did not want an easy acknowledgment; He did not seek acclamation. People arrived in the synagogue of Capernaum and He began saying things to provoke them. They were there because He had fed many people, but in Capernaum, He said, “I am the bread that you seek; I am the living bread. If you eat of this bread, you will live forever. And the bread that I will give you is my flesh. I will give you Myself to eat.” Understandably, the people were aghast. “This guy is crazy,” they began thinking. The gospel records that many of His disciples left (those who were following Him, not the apostles!).

The twelve, the members of His close circle, were also aghast. They had seen Him say and do things that were out of this world, but this was truly a bit too much! So Jesus asked them: “Do you also want to leave?” It was Peter who responded: “Lord, we do not understand

³⁷ “*Dulcis Christe, o bone Deus / o amor meus, o vita mea, / o salus mea, o gloria mea. / Tu es Creator, tu es Salvator mundi. / Te volo, te quaero, / te adoro, o dulcis amor, / te adoro, o care Jesu.*” Michelangelo Grancini, seventeenth century, “*Dulcis Christe,*” in *Canti*, 20.

either, but only You have the words of eternal life!" I was struck that he would say, "You alone have words that explain life," while he did not understand those words! He did not understand them!

I would like to dwell on Jesus's question: "Do you also want to leave?" I was struck that Jesus did not ask His apostles: "Don't even you understand?" He did not say this! Instead, He asked: "Do you want to leave?" Jesus did not focus on their comprehension. He focused on their bond of affection: "Do you also want to leave?"³⁸ Why? Because only within a bond of affection do we open ourselves to that which surpasses our understanding, that which we fail to comprehend. Christ asked Peter to adhere to Him, to stay with Him, to trust Him, because He knew that only within this bond, within this affection would he be able to understand, would he become open to a new understanding. Jesus said this explicitly when Peter did not understand why Jesus wanted to wash his feet: "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later."³⁹ The same is true for when He said: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in My name—He will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you."⁴⁰

Giussani commented on this episode with a beautiful intuition: "What is the difference between the excited crowd a few days before this episode and this small group of faithful followers, who are also enthusiastic but in a different way? The crowd sought Him out for their own reasons and that is why, when He began to explain why He had come—an explanation that went beyond anyone's expectations—they left Him. They were more attached to their own limits than to the truth."⁴¹ Those who left were more attached to their own image and measure of Him than to the reality of Him. Peter was bound to Him, to Christ, and so would never leave Him, and so, over time, Peter (not those who left) began to understand.

This proclamation of affection for Christ, this bond that he affirmed and repeated, was not a renunciation of reason or a desire

³⁸ Jn 6:67.

³⁹ Jn 13:7.

⁴⁰ Jn 14:26.

⁴¹ Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, 65.

to understand, but an entrustment that enabled understanding, an entrustment to Him as the terrain where understanding could flower. Only within this bond of affection do we open ourselves to that which surpasses all our imaginings and understandings, and by doing so gain access to the true correspondence.

Think for a moment of the opposite possibility—that faith is only a question of a theoretical understanding of a discourse. This would mean two things. First, faith would only be for intellectuals, for intelligent people, and so the simple and ignorant would be excluded, and we, at least out of humility, would be among them! Second, and more serious, faith in who that man was would only be a question of what I understand; there would be nothing that surpassed my understanding, it would only be what I understood! But I “understand” that which is inside me, not that which is greater than me, and this would not correspond to us because what truly corresponds is what surpasses, what is beyond me.

Who do you say that I am?

Peter’s faith, as a journey of trust, was made clear one day in Caesarea Philippi. “When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’ [images of the messiah that everyone had, understandable images]. He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter said in reply, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”⁴² You are Christ means You are God; You are the answer to all the heart’s expectations. You are the unimaginable, the unforeseeable, that which is beyond, the creator of everything; You are everything. The name “Christ” indicated God. It was the name Jesus gave Himself: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Those who see Me see the Father.” All of Jesus’s efforts went to help the disciples understand His proclamation that He was God. This was exactly why He was condemned— for saying that He was God.

⁴² Mt 16:13–16.

Peter’s saying “You are the Christ” was an act of faith; he accepted and affirmed as true what that man had said about Himself. Nobody can say of a man: “You are God.”⁴³ That day, Peter did not see anything different—Jesus was the same as the day before. Nobody sees the divinity. As we sang, “No person has ever seen Your face, only You can reveal the Mystery to us.”⁴⁴ Christ was the one who had said that name, “God,” to identify Himself. I have never seen or heard God, I have never spoken with God like I speak with Francesco, here in front of me. There has never been a conversation between me and God in which I heard the words, “Oh, Francesco, do you know that the Trinity is so and so and such and such?” I think we have to resolve a doubt here, some confusion. Folks, we do not see God directly, face to face. We will see God in heaven and it will be wonderful. One day Cardinal Biffi was asked: “Are you afraid of dying?” The elderly cardinal of Bologna answered, “No, look, I’m dominated by curiosity, because I wagered the one life I have on Jesus Christ and I don’t even know what color eyes He has.”⁴⁵ Well, this type of vision will be possible only in heaven. Seeing God face to face—this is heaven. Here on earth, knowledge of God comes through faith. But the wonderful thing, which we will see in the afternoon, is that this faith opens us to a new way of seeing, a new way of knowing.

At times we are scandalized by the fact that what we speak about is beyond the natural ken of reason. But saying that it is “beyond the natural ken of reason” does not mean that it is irrational. If

⁴³ “You cannot say ‘this man is God.’ You will never be able to say it. You cannot see whether a person is God or not. But from the exceptional nature of the experience of relationship with this man, you draw the conclusion that you must trust this man [...]. If I contradict this, I contradict the evidence I have about Him, I go against myself, I would be incoherent with myself. I would go against the evidence: I cannot. Therefore, I don’t know how, but this man is God. I don’t know how it can happen, but this man is God. I don’t know how it came to be, but this man is God. What He says, I repeat.” Luigi Giussani, *Si può (veramente?) vivere così? [Is it (truly?) possible to live this way?]* (Milan: Bur, 2020), 125–27. Our translation.

⁴⁴ Trappistine Sisters of Vitorchiano, “Innalzate nei cieli lo sguardo” [Lift your gaze to the heavens], in *Canti*, 165.

⁴⁵ Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, interview by Giancarlo Perna, “Lezioni sull’al di là” [Lessons on the afterlife], RAIDUE—Passioni, August 5, 1998. Our translation.

I were to talk to you about a pink elephant on a tricycle smoking a pipe, this would be irrational! If I were to talk to you about drinking a gin and tonic with a donkey while flying on a magic carpet, this would be irrational. For Peter and the others, Jesus's words were beyond the reach of their reason, but they were not irrational because they had seen and understood so many things (how He looked at people, how He loved people, how He spoke). Those words that they did not understand were offered to them as the deeper explanation of what they did understand; the words explained what they saw.

For Peter, this journey of following Christ meant a journey of conversion.

A journey of rebirth

How did Peter grow in this trust, this faith? Slowly, he had to travel a journey of conversion and rebirth, of rediscovery of himself and of life. What was the nature of this journey of conversion? To put it succinctly, it was learning to convert your own heart and your own reason. After he had said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," after Peter had made his profession of faith and after Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,"⁴⁶ giving him a very nice compliment (they were rare!), Jesus added, "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." And right away Jesus began speaking about the cross. "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly [...] and be killed and on the third day be raised."⁴⁷ Again, He was saying mysterious words. At this point, the gospel recounts that "then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, 'God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.'⁴⁸ This is understandable because He loved Jesus, and hearing Him talk about His suffering and death, he reacted by saying, "No, it won't happen." We do the same thing. How many times do we

⁴⁶ Mt 16:17.

⁴⁷ Mt 16:21.

⁴⁸ Mt 16:22.

balk at what the church, the movement, or life ask of us, saying "No, no, no; it can't go this way!" Jesus's response to Peter tells us what conversion is. His words are very harsh: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do!"⁴⁹ Conversion means beginning to think the way God does.

Actually, Jesus's reproof contained something fascinating because in fact the meaning of what He said to him was, "Return to a place behind me, Peter; don't put yourself in front of Me." Jesus repeated what He had said to Peter the first time: "Put yourself behind Me, follow Me." This conversion is always for the purpose of regaining the initial event, the initial encounter, because like Peter, we tend to take possession of what we have received. "We want to make ourselves masters / of a gifted love" (as said in a song by Chieffo),⁵⁰ to make it comprehensible, to manage and control it. Conversion always means returning to the initial wonder, the initial surprise at what is greater than me. Following Christ, converting to Christ, following Him, means allowing the event of Christ to overturn my thoughts continually, to set me in front of what surpasses me. Peter had to go through this conversion a whole lot of times. "How many times do I have to forgive? Seven times?" he asked Jesus. The answer: "Seventy-seven times," as if to say, "Without measure! You have no idea!"⁵¹

The journey of following Christ is a journey of the conversion of reason and affection. But what supports us in this journey of conversion? Peter wondered too.

One day, after the episode of the rich young man, they were walking and "Peter began to say to Him, 'We have given up everything and followed You,'" as if to say, "we have risked everything, and now what's in it for us?" Jesus gave him the answer that is the basis of the title of our Spiritual Exercises: "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother

⁴⁹ Mt 16:23.

⁵⁰ Claudio Chieffo, "Liberazione n. 2" [Liberation n. 2], in *Canti*, 243–44. Our translation.

⁵¹ "Then Peter approaching asked him, 'Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times'" (Mt 18:21–22).

or father or children or lands [lifestyle, friends, thoughts, habits] for My sake [...] who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers [friends, ways of looking, ways of loving] [...], with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.”⁵²

What motivates us in this journey of conversion? The hundredfold, the fact that Christ promises a new life, one that is greater and truer, a hundred times greater in reason and affection. It is a mysterious promise (He also speaks of persecutions and eternal life), which, however leads to a hundred times as much, infinitely as much. “I make all things new.”⁵³ What motivates us in this journey of continual conversion of ourselves is the newness, the hundredfold awaiting us. But what does this hundredfold mean?

The abyss of Peter

Paradoxically, Peter discovered what this hundredfold promised by Jesus was by passing through the lowest and most painful point of his experience with Him.

Three years had passed. After the Last Supper, Jesus was arrested after Judas had betrayed Him. Peter and John followed Jesus inside the courtyard where the high priest was conducting Jesus’s trial. The gospels, especially that of John, recount the two vicissitudes in a parallel way; on the one side Christ, who was being questioned by the high priest and responding with strength, courage, and freedom, and on the other side, outside, a short distance away, Peter, who answered the two soldiers and a servant woman who questioned him with, “You are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?”⁵⁴ by saying “I do not know the man!”⁵⁵ Just think: “I do not know the man!” Friendship with Jesus was everything in Peter’s life. It is as if you asked me: “Do you know Dado?” and I said “No, I don’t know who he is.” “And Michele?” “No, I don’t know him.” Why? Why did Peter betray Him? It is a mystery!

⁵² Mk 10:28–30.

⁵³ Rev 21:5.

⁵⁴ Jn 18:17.

⁵⁵ Mt 26:72.

If I look at my life and my betrayals, I have to say that I see many causes and reasons for them, but deep down, if I had to say why I betray, I do not know why, I sincerely do not know. There is a weakness in me, a mysterious wound. I think Peter betrayed Jesus because he did not understand. "I don't know that man" is like saying "I don't recognize Him; He's not the Jesus I understood. He's not the Jesus I have in mind." But he also betrayed Him because he was not able to love. Peter loved Jesus enormously but it was not enough in front of His cross. Maybe he betrayed Him because he was afraid, because he saw that Jesus's life was ending, that He was losing, that everything was going wrong. Maybe he betrayed Him because he had lost his trust in Him. But I am convinced that, were we to ask Peter today, "Why did you betray Him?" he would answer, like us, "I don't know, I don't know!" If you think about it, this is what we always think after we have done wrong: "What have I done? Am I crazy?" Peter had betrayed the man he loved so much, to whom he had promised: "I will lay down my life for You."⁵⁶ Apparently, he did so because of a servant woman's question, but there was something deeper. Why do you lie to a friend? Why do you betray your girlfriend? Why do you hurt the person you love? I do not know. It is a mystery of the evil we have within, which manifests itself as the collapse of what is reasonable (Because it was reasonable to be with Jesus!), as the collapse of what is affectively the truest. (Because it was truer to love Jesus!) But maybe for Peter, as for all of us, his experience of that terrible betrayal caused him to discover what the event of Christ truly was.

The abyss of Jesus

Luke's gospel recounts the episode of the betrayal from a particular perspective. Peter was very close to Jesus, and as Jesus was responding to the high priest, Peter was just outside, and betrayed Him. The evangelist Luke stressed one detail: after Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus turned, and they saw each other. The gospel says: "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter; and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will

⁵⁶ Jn 13:37

deny Me three times.' He went out and began to weep bitterly."⁵⁷ We must immerse ourselves in this scene, and can do so with the help of Mel Gibson's film, which represents this episode in a truly beautiful and painful way. It lasts two minutes: let's watch together.

[Viewing of the clip from The Passion by Mel Gibson]

"I swear I don't know the man. I've never seen Him before." Peter denied Jesus while they were beating Him. I would like to note a few things about this scene from the gospel, this exchange of gazes between Jesus and Peter. Peter wept when he saw that he was looked upon by Jesus. It was under Jesus's gaze that he recognized his sinfulness. Why? Because unexpectedly, Jesus's gaze was not one of reproof, but of love. The gospel, which never uses words by chance, when it says "the Lord turned and looked at Peter,"⁵⁸ uses the same Greek word used in their first encounter: "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)."⁵⁹ That look went deep inside Peter; it was the same gaze, it was the same Christ as ever, the same love of the first time, the same event. In that gaze, Peter saw again and realized whom he was denying, that he was denying everything he had experienced with Christ.

He was fiercely sorry because he realized what he had done and who Jesus was. Maybe only then did he understand Jesus's words: "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. [...] I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."⁶⁰ Reached by that gaze, Peter understood that he was the one who needed to be saved, that Christ was going to the cross for him. For love of him. In the abyss of his sinfulness, at the lowest point, Peter painfully recognized another abyss, the abyss of the love of Christ, who went to the cross precisely to descend into the abyss of Peter, to reach all the way down to his heart, never to abandon him. He who had just been abandoned by Peter was going to the cross in order not to

⁵⁷ Lk 22:56–62.

⁵⁸ Lk 22:61.

⁵⁹ Jn 1:42.

⁶⁰ Mt 9:12–13.

abandon Peter! As we said yesterday, God's answer to the question of suffering is not an explanation but a presence. The cross is Christ who wants to enter us, to make Himself present from within, to cast light all the way down into that betrayal, to bring the event of His presence all the way into the most terrible contradiction.

So now the second note. This is where true repentance is born. Peter's repentance was true, was the painful recognition of his own sinfulness but in the light of Christ's love. Repentance is different from feeling guilty. Often, very often, we live with a sense of guilt, which is like looking in the mirror and saying "you are disgusting. You're worthless. You're not you; you're a mistake." The sense of guilt involves placing a stain between me and myself. It is an experience that closes us, folds us in upon ourselves, makes life bitter and solitary. The sense of guilt only leads to desperation. That day Peter knew all his sinfulness but with the eyes of Jesus, through the loving gaze of Jesus. And if that gaze made Peter's betrayal even uglier, it also enabled Peter not to despair because it was a gaze of love within-within!—his betrayal. As Saint Paul said, "For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly."⁶¹

This gaze alone is what enables us not to despair. The gaze of Christ enables us to look at our own sinfulness without fear; with a boundless sea of pain, but without fear. True repentance is what you experience in confession, where you do not point to your own sinfulness out of disdain for yourself, but so that it may be illuminated from the abyss of the love of Jesus Christ. If you have experienced this, you know that there are moments in which it is an experience of liberation to look together with a person who loves you at certain things that you could not look at alone and try to hide. At times looking with someone who loves you at the evil inside us is an experience of liberation. The thing that saves reason and affection is not our human power to avoid evil (this incomprehensible mystery) but the love of Christ; it is the abyss of the love of Christ that enters within the war and contradiction in order to bring there, into the abyss of evil, another abyss, something new. What saves reason and affection

⁶¹ Cf. Rom 5:6.

is the humility of acknowledging that we are sick people and sinners who need a salvation that only Christ can give.

But Peter had more to learn about that abyss of Christ's love, this love hidden in the event of Christ. This is the crucial point of this morning, and also the last one.

Love that does not die

The day of the betrayal and the cross, when Christ died for him, Peter saw all of Christ's love for him. But after a few hours Christ was dead. In Peter's eyes it seemed to be the tragic victory of evil, the end of that unimaginable love. The letter from a girl, that I began quoting last night continues: "Is there anyone who will never abandon me? Is there anything that doesn't end?" Something that does not end: this is the "measure that is not a measure" of our heart. This is what our heart truly desires. This is what is truly exceptional. The heart is thirst for the eternal, thirst for a heaven that begins here and now. The crucial discovery of Peter's life and also of our own is the discovery of the resurrection. There is no more crucial announcement than this. Since the days of the death of Christ there is an announcement that has never ceased to be repeated, an announcement of hope in the face of all the wars, all the Giulias, all the conflicts. "He is risen," or as Saint Paul said, "We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over Him."⁶²

Think of Peter on that morning when Mary Magdalene went to tell him that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. That specific love, that experience of being understood and forgiven "will never die again, will never end." Friends, we are here for this, not to remember something that is over, but to remember something alive, present, that is not over, to live again that which is not over. "The risen Christ" means that evil did not win. "My arm is stronger than evil / greater than the hour," we sang at the beginning. "I will be with you, I have placed a hand on your heart, / always with you, like a fire / that never dies inside."⁶³

⁶² Rom 6:9.

⁶³ Chieffo, "Canzone dell'ideale," in *Canti*, 223–24.

This is the crucial discovery in Peter's life and our own. My wish is that all of you will discover it, sooner or later. The risen Christ is the love that never dies. No evil, no war, no conflict has the power to tear away from our life this love that never dies.

To close, let's watch and listen to Fr. Giussani commenting on the moment when Peter encountered the risen Christ the third time, when an encounter with the love that never dies overturned Peter's life once more. It is a video from 1989 in which Giussani commented on Peter's yes.

[Viewing of the video: see the transcript below]

"I'm almost ashamed to comment on this page, but I invite you anyway to put the good will of your heart into the ineffable, into that which cannot be said about the mystery of God who touches the human person, and about the human person who is touched by the mystery of God. The first time Jesus asked, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' it is almost understandable that Simon should answer, 'Certainly, Lord, You know that I love You.' But the second and above all the third time, He just asked him, 'Simon, do you love Me?' not 'more' or 'less.' Let's try to enter into the soul of that blunt and rough man. In front of the Lord his whole soul was full of the memory of his betrayal. However, his betrayal was simply the epiphany, the epiphenomenon, the manifestation in a moment, of something he had inside, of the roughness, ungenerousness, stubbornness, fear, timidity, cowardice, narrow-mindedness that he was—he was! His soul was full of this, and in front of that question everything came to the surface. The betrayal was a point that revealed and brought to the surface his wretchedness, all his wretchedness. The church has us say: 'Let us acknowledge our sins and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.' How many of us repeat this when the Church tells us to say it! Simon felt all of his smallness, cowardice, and wretchedness. 'Simon, do

you love Me more than these?’ When he answered, ‘Lord, certainly, I love You,’ when he said ‘Lord, You know everything: notwithstanding all appearances, notwithstanding how I appear to myself, you know that I love You, that I want You’ [*Translator’s note*: ‘ti voglio bene’ literally means I want your good], 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 the moralism and the justice made with our hands. In fact, that man there was a poor sinner like me and you, one who had just betrayed Him so indecently, as perhaps we have never done (at least in our memory so blatantly). He was full of error but he loved Him. He could have committed a hundred thousand more errors but he loved Him, and he could say: ‘Lord, You know everything, you know that I love You.’ So then the Lord said: ‘I entrust you with My testimony in the world.’ He entrusted His testimony, entrusted His kingdom in the world to that miserable sinner.”⁶⁴

The most stunning thing about this conversation between Jesus and Peter, which reveals the deep nature of the Christian event, is the experience of forgiveness, in the sense that forgiveness is not just Christ’s love for Peter, not just His love manifested on the cross, a love greater than evil, but above all in the sense that the apex of this forgiveness lay in Christ continuing to seek Peter’s love. “Do you love Me?” He still asked for his love because Christ wanted to be loved by Peter. We know well that our sinfulness makes us unable to love. What do we have to give, if inside we are so disgusted at ourselves? Sinfulness keeps us from loving. Forgiveness is the rehabilitation that makes love possible. It is Christ who asks you to love when you would not even ask this of yourself.

⁶⁴ Don Luigi Giussani 1922–2005: *Il pensiero, i discorsi, la fede* [Fr. Luigi Giussani 1922–2005: His thought, speeches and faith], DVD, in monthly supplement to *Corriere della Sera*, February 21, 2015; now in Luigi Giussani, *La verità nasce dalla carne* [*The truth is born of the flesh*] (Milan: Bur, 2019), 135–36.

It is Christ who, in forgiveness, restores life to you, because you open again to the possibility of loving. "Do you love Me?" Say it again. Reaffirm that you love Me! Christ knows Peter, knows his betrayals, and even so, as Giussani said, He entrusts the church to him, entrusts everything to that "miserable sinner," asks Peter to love still more. Because Christ will never die again, He will always ask this of him.

I think this is the content of faith. The journey of trust leads to this content of faith: the acknowledgment of the love that does not die, of the mercy that will never again die, of the event of mercy, of the event of the love of Christ, who will never again die. This is the heart of the hundredfold. The heart is this—Christ Himself. It is the encounter with Him as the discovery of a mercy that enables me to live and love always, that gives me life forever.

For this reason, we will conclude with Solov'ev's famous story of the Antichrist, in which the one emperor, who has by now subjugated the whole world, turns to the last Christians remaining. "Now, in a grieved voice, the Emperor addressed them: '[...] You strange people! [...] Tell me yourselves, you Christians, deserted by the majority of your peers and leaders, [...] What is it that you value most in Christianity?' At this, elder John rose up like a white candle and answered quietly: 'Great sovereign! What we value most in Christianity is Christ Himself—in His person. [Peter would have used these words: "What we hold dearest in Christianity is Christ Himself.]" All comes from Him, for we know that in Him dwells all fullness of the Godhead bodily."⁶⁵

The hundredfold, the new life, is first of all the knowledge of Christ, the revelation of the mercy that never dies, of the mercy of the Father. Christ is what we hold dearest.

In the afternoon we will see everything that comes from Him, the new life that flowers from this love of Christ, from the certainty of the love of the Risen One.

⁶⁵ V. Solov'ev, "The Tale of the Antichrist," in *War, Progress and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Tale of the Antichrist*, trans. Alexander Bakshy (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1990), 183–84.

Lesson – Francesco Ferrari
December 9, afternoon

E verrà
Eso que tú me das
What Was I Made For?
*Favola*⁶⁶

A new life

As we saw this morning, Peter's life was overturned and shaken up by the discovery of a love that never dies. The face of God is limitless mercy, love that never dies: this is the hundredfold. We can continue our journey with a passage from Isaiah about God's love for His people. Peter discovered that God's love, spoken of by the prophets, had reached him in the person of Christ. Peter must have felt those words as if they were addressed to him. They describe his experience!

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; [ransomed, released: like the Israeli hostages]

I have called you by name: [You are Peter!] you are mine. [...]

Because you are precious in My eyes

and honored, and I love you, [and Peter discovered the honor later, within his betrayal!]

I give people in return for you

and nations in exchange for your life.”⁶⁷

The overturning of our life, the beginning of that new life we desire, lies in the discovery of God's personal love, in the fact that

⁶⁶ Claudio Chieffo, “E verrà” [It will come] (1997), © 2009 Galletti-Boston. “I will give you everything / whatever it may be, whatever You ask // And what You give me / Is much more / Is much more / than You have ever asked of me / [...] It is much more than what I have ever deserved”; Jarabe de Palo, “Eso que tú me das,” from the album *Tragas o Escupes*, 2020, © Tronco Records (de Palo wrote this song during a long illness that led to his death); Billie Eilish, “What Was I Made For?,” from *Barbie the Album*, 2023, © Atlantic (“Think I forgot how to be happy / Somethin’ I’m not, but somethin’ I can be / Somethin’ I wait for / Somethin’ I’m made for”); Claudio Chieffo, “Favola” [Fairytale], in *Canti*, 226–27.

⁶⁷ Is 43:1–4; 16–19.

God Himself, the creator of everything, loves you and holds you precious in His eyes! God’s love is a personal question!

A personal question, a change of name

If we return to the beginning of Peter’s story, there is a detail that helps us understand what it meant for Peter to discover Christ as a personal question.

Andrew returned from the encounter with Christ, told Peter about it, and “then he brought him to Jesus.” The only thing the gospel reports about that first encounter between Jesus and Peter was Jesus’s attitude and words: “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).’”⁶⁸

In that first encounter, Peter received a new name. Before he was Simon, and after he was Peter. Peter’s identity changed that day. From the very beginning, Christ, fixing His gaze on Peter, entered into his life as the occasion for a revolutionary encounter that initiated a journey of self-discovery. Cephas, Rock, Peter. Certainly, that name indicated his rock-hard, solid character, and so Peter must have felt understood, but that name also indicated something else that Peter could not have understood in the beginning. (“I will make you fishers of men.” He would not have been able to understand this at the time.) It was not just a change in name: Christ was inviting him to a change of his person. In this sense, from the very beginning, that encounter involved a personal question that concerned the very heart of his person, the answer to the questions, “Who am I?” and “What was I made for?”⁶⁹

That encounter was the beginning of a journey in which two identities were slowly revealed. The beautiful thing in Peter’s life was that in front of this change of name, the further Peter traveled in discovering the name of Christ, the more he also discovered his own name. Peter’s journey of faith, which would lead him to recognize the identity of Jesus (“You are the Christ”) was always a journey toward the discovery of his own identity, in the light of Christ.

⁶⁸ Jn 1:42.

⁶⁹ Billie Eilish, “What Was I Made For?”

(“You are Peter.”) The more he followed Christ, the more he discovered himself. “You will be called Peter,” Jesus told him that first day. “You are the Christ,” Peter would say in Caesarea Philippi. “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church” (Mt 16:18), Jesus responded. Peter’s journey toward the name and identity of Jesus went hand in hand with the journey of Jesus toward the name of Peter, toward the revelation of his true identity.

“Behold, I make all things new.” And the first new thing was Peter himself, in his own eyes.

Discovering our name

So it is for each of us. None of us decided to encounter Christ. All of us, in some form, no matter what our awareness may be today, were first of all encountered by Christ. We can journey toward knowledge of the name of Christ only because one day He said our name. This journey toward Him is what will reveal more and more to us of who we are, our vocation. “What are we made for?”

Billie Eilish’s song cries out concerning the search for one’s identity. I watched her sing it in a video of one of her concerts: she was hunched over in intense emotion as she asked herself, “What am I made for?” It was a cry with enormous suffering inside. But this question, which remains open for all of us because we will not know until the last day what we are made for, can be a cry, even a painful one, yet experienced within a great peace. For this reason, Titti sings it better because she sings with the same cry for identity, but does so grounded in peace!

None of us discovers his own identity by himself; none of us creates her own identity. None of us chose to exist. “I do not make myself.”⁷⁰ So the discovery of my identity is necessarily accompanied by the discovery of the One who wanted me, who was the first to call me by my name, giving me existence. He wanted me, Francesco, to exist. God said each of our names, calling us into existence, and then He said our names in baptism (for those who are baptized) because this is what baptism is: Christ who states our

⁷⁰ Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 110.

name, our identity, our vocation. Then He said our name again through an encounter (as happened with Peter) with that friend at the university, with that professor, on that evening or on that vacation. If I think back on my own story, I see many faces who were the “place” in which Christ fixed His gaze upon me, said my name, and so set me off on a wonderful and infinite adventure toward the knowledge of His name. Because of this journey toward Christ, I look with boundless gratitude upon all those faces, all those names, Annalisa, Dado, Tommi, Nicola, Ceci, Marri, Marghe, Fra, Seve, Ste... This weave of names led me toward the great name; they helped me discover my name because they helped me journey toward Christ. What do I discover about myself? What is the newness about myself revealed by an encounter with Christ? Peter discovered it. What can we discover?

One thing alone

My identity is a relationship. In the depths of my being, I am not solitude, but companionship. In February we will read in School of Community that “at this moment, if I am attentive, that is, if I am mature, then I cannot deny that the greatest and most profound evidence is that *I do not make myself*, I am not making myself. I do not give myself being, or the reality which I am. I am ‘given.’ [...] If I descend to my very depths, where do I spring from? Not from myself: from *something else*. [...] I am you-who-make-me.”⁷¹

Over time, as Peter followed that man, he discovered more and more that his own identity was the bond with that man. Christ had involved Himself totally in his life, had entered all the way into the abyss of his sinfulness. By this point Christ inhabited Peter’s life (like heaven dwelling in the country house in Cézanne’s painting). And at a certain point Peter could no longer say “I,” “Peter,” without thinking of Christ (similarly, I cannot say my name, “Francesco,” apart from my history; I would not exist. I would not have a face). For this reason, Peter’s betrayal was not only of Christ, but also of himself. Peter’s identity was his love for Christ and Christ’s

⁷¹ Giussani, 110.

love for him, being one thing with Him. As Saint Paul said, “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.”⁷²

There is a scene in the story of Peter that shows this deep unity between him and Christ. We see it when we enter this hall. It is the image of *The Tribute Money*, painted by Masaccio.

[the image of the painting is projected on the screen]

Let’s read the story in the gospel. “When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, ‘Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?’ ‘Yes,’ he said. When he came into the house, before he had time to speak, Jesus asked him, ‘What is your opinion, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take tolls or census tax? From their subjects or from foreigners?’ When he said, ‘From foreigners,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the subjects are exempt. But that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for Me and for you.’”⁷³

The temple tax was a personal tax that every adult Jew had to pay to support the expenses of the temple, and more deeply as a sign of gratitude for the salvation of one’s life that came from God, in ransom of one’s life.⁷⁴ Jesus paid it so as not to scandalize the people, even though, as the Son of God, He did not feel obliged to pay it (after all, He would give His very life as a ransom for the lives of others). I would like to dwell on the fact that the tax was personal, but Jesus sent Peter to pay it for both of them. This is a small detail that illuminates the communion, the unity, between Christ and Peter. (It is also a detail communicating that Jesus identified Himself with Peter and left to him the task of representing Him. He began to indicate him as the leader of the church, as His presence in the world.)

In Masaccio’s painting we see the entire episode, with the conversation between Jesus and Peter in the center, and Peter paying

⁷² Gal 2:20.

⁷³ Mt 17:24–27.

⁷⁴ Cf. Ex 30:15.

on the right. Masaccio’s main concern was to express the power and beauty of the relationship between Christ and Peter, their unity, which inexorably attracts the other apostles who gather around them. We see it in the gesture of their hands, with Peter imitating Jesus’s, in the gaze between Peter and Christ, which expresses their familiarity but also Peter’s fear: he is almost frowning because he does not entirely understand what Jesus is asking of him. What wins him over and moves him is his esteem for Jesus and also his sense of Christ’s greatness, the “something inexplicable” that eluded all understanding. The tension between these gazes is palpable, an energy of communion that is almost visible.

Jesus viewed Himself as one thing with Peter, and invited Peter to view himself as one thing with Him. To use the expression of Maïti Girtanner, life “is a piece of music to be played by four hands.”⁷⁵ The new life thus born is a life in communion with Christ, with the love that never dies.

“‘What is it that you value most in Christianity?’ [...] ‘What we value most in Christianity is Christ Himself.’”⁷⁶ This communion with Christ as the heart of my identity is the heart of the experience of the hundredfold, the new life born of faith.

Now I would like to indicate some characteristics of the new life. Two points. First, these characteristics are not “little answers” to the dramatic events we were talking about last night. These features of the new life are a promise of life that embraces every drama. Second, I’d like to ask you to do me a favor: don’t sit there listening to me thinking, “Well, no, I’m not that way: I’m still way behind. I don’t experience this,” because this is obvious. We would not be here doing these Spiritual Exercises if we were already everything we wanted to be. Rather, listen to the things I say, remembering what we said yesterday evening and this morning: for Peter, everything happened within a journey, a journey that was given. So, as you listen, don’t worry about what point you have reached, but

⁷⁵ Maïti Girtanner, *Resistenza e perdono [Resistance and forgiveness] (Castel Bolognese: Itaca, 2022)*, 141. Our translation.

⁷⁶ V. Solov’ëv, “The Tale of the Antichrist,” 183–84.

rather, whether you want it or not. And about whether you see this new life in our friends, in us and around us, with gratitude!

The characteristics that we will see are certainty and peace, boldness and freedom, new reason and new affection.

Certainty and peace at the root of the self

The new life is first of all a new experience of oneself: the core of oneself is no longer doubt, but certainty in one's communion with Christ.

Remember what one of you wrote: "The need for truth and love." Or what another friend wrote: "Is there anyone who will never abandon me?" There is only one true and total answer to this question—only a love that never dies. The discovery of Christ, of who He is for us and who we are for Him, is a revolution in our life, of the deepest dynamics of our heart.

The greatness and hope of life are no longer to be won: they are a fact that has already happened. Life is no longer the toilsome conquest of love but a response to the love that conquered me. We normally struggle to conquer the love of our life: in contrast, in the new life we move with gratitude for a love that is there and that nobody will ever be able to take away from us.

In the discovery of Christ's love, we no longer need to escape from evil, to take refuge in the indifference we spoke of last night, or to censure our sinfulness, as we usually do, in order to be at peace with ourselves. Evil no longer frightens us. It causes pain, great pain, but not fear, because our sinfulness, which is capable of destroying everything, cannot take Christ away from us (that is, this story that has seized us!). Evil does not destroy Christ's love. Thus, the new morality born of Christ is not a matter of managing not to fall or commit errors, of being "perfect," but rather of always returning to Him, to the rock that no evil can crumble. Not even death frightens us because "death no longer has power over Him." I would like to read you a passage from a very meaningful letter from a student in medical school.

"Dearest Fra, I'm writing these short lines to tell you how the meaning of the title you chose for the Spiritual Exercises is becoming something I am experiencing in the flesh in my life: 'Behold, I

make all things new.' Through a series of unforeseen circumstances, I found myself assisting my father's sister who had unexpectedly become ill with COVID, and just as unexpectedly, after only a few hours in the hospital, took a turn for the worse and died. Being at her bedside was a very powerful experience, not so much because of the sight of a body slowly ceasing to respond to treatment and abandoning itself, not only because of the great pain at her loss, which continues, but above all because of the unthinkable serenity [it is called peace, my friend, peace!] that settled in my heart in that moment. I myself was amazed, wondering, 'What, doesn't pain win out? Doesn't sadness reign?' In front of my aunt, who was nearly unconscious [this image is amazing!] I found myself making the sign of the cross, praying and singing some songs from the movement, like *La festa sta per cominciare* [The celebration is about to begin] (A. Anastasio) and *La strada* [The road] (C. Chieffo). The nurses outside the room must have thought I was crazy, alone in there, covered head to foot in protective clothing, singing to a dying woman. [Imagine the scene!] I don't want you to think I was in the grip of emotionality! I didn't even grow up in the movement, but at that moment, in front of my aunt, it was profoundly true for me (and it is true now, too!) that "*God is truly great. This life of ours is truly great.*" It wasn't crazy: I was certain, with a rock-like certainty that I still have now, that she was traveling the road that leads home, where Someone was waiting for her, where God had been waiting for her all her life. [...] I am certain that none of this was due to some capacity of my own, because I continue to be very frightened of death, but this underlying serenity [peace!] is a great grace given to me [this is so beautiful: this peace is not there because 'I made it!' but it is given] in the story of belonging to this companionship, where many faces have continually, incessantly testified to me that death exists and is a painful fact, but that there is something that overcomes it—Christ. [This is a judgment of faith. Our friend did not see the resurrection, but out of trust she embraced a judgment that was offered to her.] The unexpected gladness of these days has seemed like God's caress saying, 'It's me, Christ, who makes you new. I make all things new, even something that is the most mysteriously far from your heart, from the human

heart, which marks the insurmountable limit of that which is finite: death.' [This line moved me]. How beautiful, Fra, to be able to look this way at everything in life, with the awareness that everything is made new. [Folks, this is possible!] This is the desire of my heart, expressed in a daily prayer: 'Don't take away the hardship [think of what a prayer!] but make me attentive to the signs of Your presence and make my whole day new.'"

This new life is the experience of a certainty that grows at the core of our being, a peace that flowers at the roots of our selves. Our doubt about love and the positive nature of life is healed. We sang "There is someone with you, who will never leave you"⁷⁷ because the truth of ourselves is our communion with Christ, who will never die again.

Boldness and freedom

Another fruit of the new life promised by Christ is that new women and men see the birth of a boldness and freedom in themselves that they could never have given themselves. If we follow the vicissitudes of Peter in *The Acts of the Apostles*, which describes the life of the early Christian community around him, we see him act with a courage and freedom that he did not have before.

"While they [Peter and John] were still speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them, disturbed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They laid hands on them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening."⁷⁸ The next day all the leaders (the scribes, priests, etc.) questioned them, and Peter and John answered with striking clarity and power, such that their listeners were amazed and frightened by their courage. So they decided to order them not to speak about Jesus. "They called them back and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John, however, said to them in reply, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not

⁷⁷ Chieffo, "Favola," in *Canti*, 226–27.

⁷⁸ Acts 4:1–3.

to speak about what we have seen and heard.”⁷⁹ What an answer! What freedom!

After all of his experiences with Christ, Peter’s heart was more dominated by the desire to follow Him than by the fear of the leaders and their judgment. Think of the Peter of the betrayal, who fled from a servant woman, and think of this Peter in Acts! “It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard”! Very often in speaking about relationships with classmates, there emerges a problematic or artificial way of telling them about ourselves and our experience. At times we prefer not to tell them we are Christians (and in CL!) and sometimes we bolster these strategies of ours with fairly elaborate reasoning. But a heart dominated by the love of Christ cannot fail to talk about what it has seen! It is free from all calculations and any outcome, any persecution.

Listen to how the story continues in Acts. The leaders, unable to do anything to them, sent them back home but threatened them. Peter and John understood that the persecution had begun (and it has never ceased!). They gathered with the Christian community and told them that the persecution had begun, asking them to pray. What did they pray for? We would expect them to ask for the end of the persecution, but instead: “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, as You stretch forth Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”⁸⁰ As if to say: “Give us the frankness and courage to proclaim Your word! Give us the courage to continue speaking! And then perform many miracles, that is, bring about our conversion!”

This boldness (which was not the product of a courageous temperament: remember that Peter had fled from these same men who were threatening him!) is the expression of a heart dominated by love for Christ. This reminds me of the words of Rebora: “When the heart rises /To the loving gift, / Men no longer invent themselves, but exist,” which Fr. Giussani commented upon in this way:

⁷⁹ Acts 4:18–20.

⁸⁰ Acts 4:29.

“When the heart rises to perceive that everything is a gift [when it opens to the love of God], when it makes this discovery, then people no longer invent themselves, no longer invent their own selves, no longer pretend, do not need to imagine themselves, but finally exist”;⁸¹ they no longer need to invent themselves and pretend, but they can finally be who they are, always, in front of everyone.

New reason: victory over idolatry

So then, the new life born of the event of Christ consists of a new reason and affection.

Yesterday we said that the wound that affects reason is idolatry, making one thing absolute, an idol, a God. The discovery of Christ, the encounter with the love of Christ, frees us from idolatry because nothing compares to that man, because there is only one God and everything has its meaning in the light of that man. As Ratzinger said, in the encounter with Christ we do not take possession of the truth, but the truth takes possession of us.⁸² We encounter something that places itself at the center of our life, and we begin to look at everything in the light of that encounter.

Peter, like us, desired the truth. He saw in Christ a hypothesis of meaning for his life. It is not like Christ sat Peter down at the table said: “Now let’s begin. Why does your mother-in-law exist? Well, I’ll explain it to you. Do you know why the fish were in that part of the lake? Do you know that the Romans...”. That man did not explain the details of Peter’s life: He Himself was the meaning of life.

That man was happiness, truth, and beauty! “What was I made for?” It is for You, Christ that I exist, to encounter You. Everything finds its place, is explained, in the light of the encounter with You. Giussani defined culture as the discovery that “the light of the one Reality invests all things as their criterion and measure and ways.”⁸³

⁸¹ Luigi Giussani, *Le mie letture [My readings]* (Milan: Bur, 2008), 57. Our translation.

⁸² Benedict XVI, “Homily at the Mass Concluding the Meeting with the ‘Ratzinger Schulerkreis,’” Castel Gandolfo, September 2, 2012.

⁸³ Luigi Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In search of the human face]* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995), 164. Our translation.

After the encounter, Peter began to evaluate things as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, by comparing everything with that encounter, which had become for him the yardstick for measuring everything. A thing was good or done well because it led to Christ or because it was done for Christ. A thing was beautiful because it spoke of Christ. Imagine how Peter must have returned to fishing after his first encounters with Christ, how he must have looked at the lake, the sunset, his fellow fishermen, money worries and difficulties. This is the verification of the faith that we propose: discovering in what sense Christ makes all things new.

New reason: the idol and the gift

The first evening we saw that the war within ourselves begins as a wound of reason that tends toward idolatry; that is, making one thing absolute as against the rest. My encounter with Christ begins the healing of reason because I accept that there is only one God and thus I will no longer make an idol of anything. This does not distance us from things, but gives us a deeper understanding of reality. It does not separate us from reality but causes us to enter into it truly. Actually, when we make an absolute of things, we do not grasp their truth.

If I make an absolute of my girlfriend, I make her an idol and expect my happiness to come from her. I begin to lose her and not see her for what she is; I do not accept her limits or her freedom or her time. In sum, I no longer see her the way she truly is.

If I make an absolute of the community or my friends and expect them to be God (and thus think that they will never disappoint or betray me, that they will always meet my needs), I am no longer looking at them in truth, and so I lose them.

If I make an absolute of the results of my studies, if I make them my God, my *raison d'être* (often we do not say this expressly but actually we act this way), if I expect my happiness to come from my studies, in a flash I become a slave to my performance and my studies become my enemy, a source of anxiety, and I no longer look at them with truth and gusto.

The new gaze that is born of faith, of embracing an encounter with Christ, does not make any one particular thing absolute; this is not a

separation from things but a truer gaze upon them. What is the truth of my girlfriend or friend, of my studies or reality? The truth of reality is that it is a gift. There is only one creator, and the rest is the created.

Christ looked at all things for what they truly were: creation, and thus a gift of the Father. Just think of how He thought of His friends. “They belonged to You [Father], and You gave them to Me.”⁸⁴ Think about looking at our friends in the same way: “They were Yours, Lord, and You gave them to me.” As we sang at the beginning, it is all an undeserved gift. Christ saw everything as a sign of the Father. He saw things as being in connection with the Father, which is the true gaze on reality. For Christ, reality was not flat or silent; it was not all the same, merely appearances. Do you remember, “Shave myself or kill/ What’s the difference?” Reality was not this way for Him, because He looked at all of reality together with its source, saw the source from which it came. Things and people were connected with the mystery. Reality is more than what appears.

I’ll give you an example that Davide Prospero offered at the Beginning Day:

“Imagine finding yourself at a rock face that is apparently smooth and thus at first glance inaccessible. For occasional rock climbers, the wall would appear impossible to climb and they would return home disappointed. But to the experienced eye, the small and apparently useless fissures are not insignificant imperfections in the rock, but can be handholds and footholds that bear the body’s weight, meaning that in a place that is seemingly impassible, one can climb. Lived faith obtains a similar effect in us: it leads us to see what the ‘natural’ eye cannot perceive but which is essential to come to see, in order to savor what Fr. Giussani taught us to call the hundredfold, the mystery within circumstances, within the flesh of faces and things. As Fr. Giussani said, ‘I see what you see, but you don’t see what I see!’”⁸⁵

True reason grasps the mystery within circumstances, and thus reality is never neutral, mute, or flat. It breaks through appearances.

⁸⁴ Jn 17:6.

⁸⁵ “Faith, the Fulfillment of Reason,” supplement to *Traces*, no. 10 (2023): 12. Available at <https://english.clonline.org/cm-files/2023/10/27/boy2023-english.pdf>

You are not just you! The truth about me is that in my inner depths I am communion with God. In the same way, the truth about you is that in your inner depths, you are communion with God. You are not just you! You are more than you. You are a connection with someone. If the new life conceives of itself as a communion at the origins of itself, it becomes a gaze that sees the other as a gift of God, as a relationship with the mystery of God. Do you understand that this gives the other an immense weight and meaning?

New affection: yearning for revelation

The new reason that grasps things in their truth as connection with God opens up to a new and fuller affection. I would like to read with you a particularly beautiful and powerful page by Fr. Giussani. It speaks of a truer way to love that is born of the gaze of faith:

"In front of a person you love, in your love for that person, the love is much more intense when you stop a yard from that person and everything vibrates and everything seems to want to grasp the person and you hold back from grasping, not just to hold back from grasping but because there is an adoration and a recognition of the meaning of the thing. You are there experiencing this sentiment of meaning and you hold back the impetus that would drive you to a purely mechanical grasping. In that moment you love that person one hundred thousand times more than if you grabbed the person with both hands. In order to love a presence, you have to recognize that it is a sign of the mystery, of Christ: what it is made of is Christ. In front of it, everything in you is stretching forward as a prayer to Christ to reveal Himself, to make Himself seen, because when Christ makes Himself seen in that face, it will be heaven, eternity. [...] If the person is a sign of Christ, you consequently yearn for Christ to be revealed in her; that is, that the definitive nature of the thing appear, that the truth of the thing in its definitive nature appear, because even in heaven the person you love is a sign in which what it signifies flows out, is revealed, explodes. This is how it was when Jesus looked at the Samaritan woman at the well. She was a sign of the Father, and Christ yearned for the Father to manifest Himself in her, that all the world would see the Father in

her; that is, see Him, because the Father had made Himself flesh in the Son. But Jesus did not have the disorder, the instinct, the itching, the impetuous disorder that we suffer after the original sin, and so He was there, a yard away, but contemplating and desiring. Maybe the word I used before is simpler: adoring.”⁸⁶ It is “a yearning for revelation: adoration that acknowledges that which a thing consists of and passion that it be revealed.”⁸⁷

New affection is born of new reason. I recognize in you a connection with the mystery; I can look at you with truth, and so a new love is born in me, one that does not possess, but adores, that searches in you for a revelation of the mystery from which you are born. You are not only you. You are a relationship with the mystery, and this fills me with wonder, respect and adoration. I kneel in front of you, recognizing all of your greatness. I am willing to sacrifice myself for you because I see all that you are. This is a new love. If in rare moments you have experienced it, you know what I am talking about. In that “not grasping” you perceive that you love more. Egide Van Broeckhoven spoke of the relationship with another in these words: “Lord, make me encounter in every person the unexplored world [the mystery] that You are.”⁸⁸ Do you understand that your friend, your girlfriend, becomes an infinite journey and that you can be together for a hundred years without wearying of each other? This is because that something more, that “beyond” which is a characteristic of God, dwells in the other. A boundless sky dwells in the life of the other.

New affection: unity and virginity

Think of what this new affection means in the relationship among us. It is the victory over prejudices, rivalry, misunderstand-

⁸⁶ Luigi Giussani, *Affezione e dimora [Affection and dwelling place]* (Milan: Bur, 2001), 244–45. Our translation. In this text Giussani clarifies the word “adoration”: “Adoration that involved recognizing that Christ is the substance of the presence, and yearning that this substance be revealed.” Giussani, 246.

⁸⁷ Giussani, 249.

⁸⁸ Egide Van Broeckhoven, *L'amicizia: diario di un gesuita in fabbrica (1958–1967) [Friendship: the diary of a Jesuit in the factory]* (Bologna: Marietti 1820, 2018), 49. Our translation.

ings, and boxing the other person into what I have already decided. It is the rebirth of wonder and gratitude.

I am convinced that our communities must become ever more themselves, the place of a new love. I think that wonder at the gift of the other, who is a sign of God, can truly dominate among us. I think that gratitude for the other can dominate because Christ said not only my name, but yours as well. I think that correction full of charity can blossom, because I want you to move toward Christ, toward the truth and become ever more yourself. I think that forgiveness can grow, which is the victory of Christ's love among us and is greater than the harm we do each other.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts the life of the first communities gathered around Peter. "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common."⁸⁹ Unity among us comes from faith, an acknowledgment that Christ has called us together and that the heart that is born of this is our true face. Unity is our face. The unity born among us has a very deep origin because if in my innermost depths I am not just me, and if in your innermost depths you are not just you, but I am communion with Christ and you are communion with Christ, then you and I are one thing alone, held together by the love that never dies! You and I are together forever. Every gesture or word expresses the eternal, expresses the "forever," and so it is full of weight and dignity.

A few days ago I received a letter from a friend who had signed up for these Spiritual Exercises but then could not come because of a needed surgery. His beautiful letter ends with these words: "So I pray that these Spiritual Exercises may be for me and all those who participate an opportunity for the conversion of our heart and gaze. The economic situation is not unrelated to this. I would like my money [the registration fee he had paid] to go to the movement's Common Fund or to be used to help someone for whom paying the fee is difficult. In fact, my desire is that someone may be reached by Christ, as happened to me within the companionship of the church with the movement."

⁸⁹ Acts 4:32.

This is unity: having one heart and one soul. A person who cannot come does not say: “I’d like my money back,” but “give the money to those who need it so they can experience what I did and about which I cannot be silent.” I ask God with all my heart that we can become ever more ourselves, as a gift for everyone, for all our classmates and all those we meet, for all the people who are alone and without hope, so they can find in us a home with a sky-colored door; that is, a companionship where a new life reigns.

Think, too, about what this new affection means in the relationship with our beloved. Listen to what a friend said in his contribution, talking about his relationship with his girlfriend:

“When we see each other, the good desire for that relationship to fill our hearts becomes, in a fairly systematic way, a physical desire, a fruit of the logic of possession that leads us to desire everything immediately [physical desire is not the problem, friends, the logic of possession is the problem!]. For a long time we were scandalized by the fact that we had to admit we were not happy [to the point of questioning the relationship] but it was not clear why we were unhappy, because we loved each other! We spoke about this several times with a priest, and each time he basically told us: ‘Try to keep a couple of feet of distance between you when you see each other, so that the relationship can be more and more of a help for knowing Jesus, who brought you together.’ We didn’t really understand what he meant, but we tried to trust him. It may seem crazy to say it, but the result is that when we see each other we are much happier! It is illogical that ‘a step back’ makes us take such a significant step forward, and it’s crazy that it can be true, but it is.”

This new possession in distance is called virginity, a gaze upon the other full of respect and adoration; that is, with a sense of the source from which the other comes. Fr. Giussani called it “possession with a separation within.”⁹⁰ It is a distance, but not an emptiness. It is not just a matter of holding back, but of letting the relationship be filled with a greater love. A virgin gaze fills gestures

⁹⁰ Luigi Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro (1986-1987)* [The ‘I’ is reborn in an encounter] (Milan: Bur, 2010), 360.

and words with a prayer that Christ will enter into those gestures and words.

Folks, this gaze full of respect keeps relationships alive, true, and beautiful. Otherwise, we fall into demands and violence. I want to learn to love from Christ. I want to love the way He does, because this interests me. I am not closed a priori to what He has said and what reaches me through the church. At times I have spoken with some young people (both inside and outside CLU) about what faith says about human love, about women and men, and related matters. I have often found among them a certain arrogance and a certain ease in ignoring what I say as something “old.” Not only do you have to use your head, but you cannot judge an idea or proposal on the basis of its age! An idea is valid if it is true, not if it is young! Yes, the church would be much more appreciated if she stopped saying certain things, but this should lead you to think that the church does not bend in order to obtain your approval like everyone else does, but instead offers you a good road, even at the cost of not being understood immediately. Look, Christ and the church are a source of immense richness on the subject of love. Think of Chiara Corbella, Maïti Girtanner, Fr. Kolbe, John Paul II, and Mother Teresa. Let’s be careful not to do away with such richness so quickly, basically out of a fear of the sacrifice it entails. Even Peter, as we have seen, heard many things he did not understand, but in trusting and following, he was able to verify and discover that they were true.

Now I’d like to have you listen to a very beautiful Neapolitan song called “I te vurriá vasá.”⁹¹ Why do I like it, and why are we going to listen to it now? Because it is a love song, a serenade sung by a man to a woman who is not his, who is already taken. It says, “I long to kiss you.” You can hear the powerful emotion of this man, who longs to embrace her, but he adds, “but my heart does not rule me”; that is, stop! This is the moment that he holds back. I would

⁹¹ Vincenzo Russo and Eduardo Di Capua, “I te vurriá vasá,” (“I te vurriá vasá... / I te vurriá vasá... / ma ‘o core nun mmo ddice / ‘e te scetá...”) [I long to kiss you, I long to kiss you / but I do not have the heart / to wake you...], in *Spirto Gentil: Un invito all’ascolto della grande musica guidati da Luigi Giussani* [Gentle spirit: an invitation to listen to great music, guided by Luigi Giussani] (Milan: Bur, 2011), 593–94.

like you to note—this is what Neapolitan songs are like!—how he expresses the power that is in part sentimental and affective, of his “I won’t embrace you,” of his remaining there to watch her, expressing all of his love for her.

[Listening to “I’ te vurria vasá”]

Loving like Christ

As we have seen, the new reason and affection journey together. In brief, we can say that this new life is the very life of Christ, who lived His life for the Father and for women and men. Ratzinger said that His was “an existence for,” an existence as gift, entirely given, all the way to the sacrifice of His life, and for this reason His was an existence marked by love.

When people live like this they are fascinating, and by grace we are often placed in front of witnesses like this, true witnesses. I was struck and fascinated by Cardinal Pizzaballa’s words about the Israeli hostages. In front of the many analyses and strategies that the whole world articulated, and rightly so, he offered himself for them. In response to a journalist, he declared himself willing to be exchanged for the hostages. He spoke about it thus: “A journalist at a press conference asked me if I would be willing—if it were a possibility—to offer myself in exchange for the hostages. And I responded, certainly yes, a Christian [...] is always called to offer their life for others. It’s nothing extraordinary; it’s following in the footsteps of Jesus, who did it for all of us.” Nothing extraordinary?! This is an exceptional life, which becomes my life. Pizzaballa continued: “As for myself, I feel a commitment to give my life like never before. After all, if you don’t give your life, there is no life. It’s the law of the Christian.”⁹²

If you do not give your life, there is no life. The new life is a life conceived as a gift for everyone, a life that opens its heart more and more every day, a life of mission.

⁹² Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, “A Need to Rebuild Human Relationships,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, November 17, 2023, available at <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2023-11/ing-046/a-need-to-rebuild-human-relationships.html>.

Allow me to read you a passage from the testament of Fr. Christian de Chergé, a Trappist monk who died with his fellow monks in Algeria in 1996, where they had chosen to stay even knowing of potential persecution by a terrorist group. At the beginning of his testament he stated that he knew there was a chance he might be killed by terrorists, whom he clearly distinguished from the Islam he esteemed and with which he had lived for many years (attracting considerable criticism), and expressed a desire that his death would not arouse contempt for Algeria, nor idolatry surrounding his person. He concluded by saying:

“Obviously, my death will appear to confirm those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic: ‘Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!’ But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free. This is what I shall be able to do, God willing: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences. For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God [I am always struck by gratitude, because this is the sentiment of the Christian, of those who have encountered Christ], who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this ‘thank you,’ which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families. You are the hundredfold granted as was promised! And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: Yes, I want this ‘thank you’ and this ‘goodbye’ to be a ‘God-bless’ for you, too, because in God’s face I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both. Amen! Inchallah! *Algiers, 1st December 1993; Tibhirine, 1st January 1994; Christian.*”⁹³

⁹³ “Testament of Dom Christian de Chergé,” from the website of the Tibhirine monks, available at <https://www.moinen-tibhirine.org/en/documents/le-testament/51-testament-of-dom-christian-de-cherge>

The new life is this expansion of love even for one's murderer, even to include a desire to spend eternity with one's assassin. The new life born of following Christ is a life like His, capable of an unimaginable love like His.

Veni Sancte Spiritus

I'll conclude with two simple observations on the famous prayer that Fr. Giussani taught us: *Veni Sancte Spiritus, Veni per Mariam.*

Veni Sancte Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit.

All of the life we have tried to describe, Peter's new life, which is possible for all of us, is a gift. It is not the result of a conquest. It is the fruit of a journey whose every step is accompanied and supported by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is the operative desire of Christ to reach our life in order to lead us to fullness.

The initial encounter is a gift of the Spirit. The power of freedom that follows is a gift. The understanding of the event (called Pentecost, the moment Peter understood what had happened) is a gift. The encounter with mercy is a gift, faithfulness is a gift, new love is a gift. But if everything is a gift, the life of women and men is prayer, prayer that the gift may happen: "Come Holy Spirit."

For this reason, as we have said many times, in our personal life and in our communities, we want to give space to prayer, to support each other with prayer. Often I join a little group for morning prayer at Catholic University and I always think that it is there, in that moment, that we truly build our communities.

I want to encourage you to participate in one of the simplest gestures of prayer, one that builds the peace that can be born at the root of our being: confession. In confession we seek the gaze shared by Christ and Peter after the betrayal. It is the one salvation after the betrayal. Confession is opening your life to God's mercy. Go, confess what you have done with simplicity, without embroidering or justifying anything, but simply saying "I did this and this," in order to embrace the grace of forgiveness, which is the deep wellspring of the new life. In my own life, confession has slowly, like drips on stone, carved a foundation of gladness and peace, the gladness and peace born of the certainty of being forgiven.

Veni per Mariam

Veni Sancte Spiritus, Veni per Mariam. The Holy Spirit comes through Our Lady. "Through the viscera of a woman: Christ was born from the entrails of a seventeen-year-old girl, in other words, through the entrails of our common experience, of an experience in community. The Spirit communicates light and help to us through the entrails of a concrete experience."⁹⁴

The gift of the Spirit passes through history, through the story of Mary, that girl who more than any other person lived the new life we have been describing. My hope for you is that you will come to know her better and better and become increasingly fond of her. The Spirit passes through the history of the church, this companionship of ours, and through Peter, the first pope, all the way down to our small community.

The meaning of our companionship is the new life that is born of knowing Christ. The meaning of our companionship is the presence of Christ among us. Maybe we can describe the relationships among us with the line that is the icon of the relationship between Andrew and Peter: *and he led him to Jesus*. We are together so we can be a road toward Christ for each other. Christ is the true meaning of our companionship, the meaning of our being together. He is what we hold dearest, He and everything that comes from Him.

Every gesture we make, everything we propose, is to lead us to Jesus, to offer us this new life. So I invite everyone to live in our community with the same simplicity and curiosity that Peter had that day, so that for each of us as well, an encounter in our everyday, normal life can overturn our existence.

⁹⁴ Luigi Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?: An Unusual Approach to Christian Experience*, vol. 1, *Faith* (Montreal McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 79.

Assembly
December 10, morning

Francesco Ferrari. My heartfelt thanks to Bishop Nicolò of Rimini, who accepted our invitation to come greet us, notwithstanding all of his commitments and travels throughout the diocese visiting and supporting his faithful. This is an important gesture for us. I am truly grateful because this journey is not ours alone. We can make this journey because we are part of a greater companionship, the church, so I thank him, because with his presence he testifies to the closeness and paternity of the church that we all need.

Bishop Nicolò Anselmi. I am the one to thank you, because you answered the Lord's call to come here to share this time of spiritual renewal together. It is beautiful to feel that we are on a journey with the whole church, as Francesco said. I imagine that you will shortly celebrate the Eucharist. In today's gospel, the Lord, through the figure of Saint John the Baptist, tells us to put our life in order, to renew our interior life, our interior room, our "interior castle," as Saint Teresa of Avila would say, putting things in their place, reestablishing priorities, cutting back the weeds that every so often hide in our hearts, alas! It is beautiful to feel united in this.

I am a bit in love with the Sunday readings of the Word of God because the liturgical year shows us Jesus, all the mysteries of His life (Christmas; His preaching, death, and resurrection; and the gift of the Spirit), and encourages our encounter with Him. Every year Jesus's whole life is presented to us again throughout the liturgical year and, from Sunday to Sunday, the liturgy leads us docilely to an encounter with Him who changes our existence. Today's readings invite us to put things in order, to renew our interior lives so then we can be new, and to do so for others as well, in our universities, in the places we live daily, in the places in the world where we are engaged (sports, culture, and so on). So let us feel united: we will all celebrate the same Eucharist and the same Word in the great companionship of the Catholic Church.

May you have a good journey, a good Advent, and Merry Christmas to everyone.

Bishop Anselmi's blessing

*Il popolo canta
Nazareth morning
Tutto sarebbe cambiato*⁹⁵

Ferrari. Hello, everyone. I am pleased that today we conclude these Spiritual Exercises, before Mass, with an assembly together with Davide Proserpi, who, for those who do not know him, is the head of the entire movement. I am grateful for his presence for three reasons. The first is that, as we have just sung, in order to know where to go, you need to follow someone. His being here with us is the sign that we walk behind someone. As CLU, we are part of a bigger journey, that of the whole movement, within the journey of the church. The second reason is that I am eager for a comparison of ideas. I think it is beautiful to compare the things we have said, the questions that have emerged, with all of the experience of the movement. In this sense, I ask you to sift and evaluate, to tell us what you think, what you see with respect to the themes that we will propose to you. The last reason is that my relationship with Davide is a personal support for me; I am grateful for the help he offers me. It really gives me peace to have him here with us.

Some beautiful questions have been submitted; it was not easy to choose which ones to present.

Contribution. I'm studying economics and I'm in my second year. How can I find the same certainty as Peter in following Jesus without having had the opportunity to meet Him in flesh and blood?

⁹⁵ Claudio Chieffo, “Il popolo canta” [The people sing], in *Canti*, 231; Rich Veras and Maurizio Maniscalco, “Nazareth Morning,” in *Canti*, 338–39; Antonio Anastasio, “Tutto sarebbe cambiato” [Everything would be changed].”

Ferrari. We'll add a second question because it is similar, but with a somewhat different nuance.

Contribution. I'm studying engineering. Yesterday, Francesco told us that Jesus wagered everything, not on our understanding, but on a bond of affection. How can we be this way among ourselves, given that we are all small-minded traitors? How is it possible to base everything on a bond of affection, since there's this weakness? What guarantee is there?

Davide Proserpi. Before beginning I'd like to respond quickly to what Francesco said at the beginning, because I believe it's important: from a certain point of view, it mirrors what I would say. In fact, I'm the one to feel grateful to you because without your help I don't know how I would manage. The truth is that we all are following something greater than ourselves. We're together for this, and so our gathering together is first of all a way of helping each other to generate a memory of the fact that we have been seized by what the world still does not know, but awaits, a fact that is the secret of life. We are together because we want to discover this secret. We want to know more and more the content of this secret for us and for all those we meet. This immediately makes us friends. I am here with Francesco first of all because we are friends, not because we work together on a task. There would be no sense in what will happen this morning if there weren't this premise.

So then, our first friend asked how it is possible to reach the same certainty as Peter in following Jesus without ever having met Him in flesh and blood. Sooner or later, everyone asks this question because it would be beautiful to meet Jesus face to face and see His physical features, because we need to know Him within an experience in the flesh: imagination is not enough. Therefore, we have to understand whether what we have been experiencing in these days and today has to do with a description of Jesus's real features. I'll tell you something right away: through this friendship, through this guided companionship, through the proposal made to us in this companionship, we can know the fea-

tures of the face of this man, just as Peter was able to know them. Part of the secret that has reached us, which the world does not believe, is in this: Jesus, Jesus Himself, that real man who walked the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago, that man the disciples encountered, that man whom Peter encountered and lived with (as you’ve heard in these days), established a method for remaining within history. As Francesco told you yesterday, after the resurrection, Jesus has remained in time; he has remained forever, not in a generic sense, but for each of us, for each girl, boy, woman, and man, from then until today and until the end of time. The method He chose for remaining (a method that He wanted to use) has a particular form: it is called “church,” the human companionship of people who, taken one by one, we certainly wouldn’t say are Jesus. None of us is Jesus, that’s for sure. Yet He chose this method to make Himself known after ascending into heaven.

He was the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, and thus could have done whatever He wanted. If He had decided that the best thing to do, the most suitable way to remain in history so we could encounter Him today, would be to continue being present in flesh and blood, He could have done that. Do you think He couldn’t have decided to do so? After all, He was God. Instead, He chose a different method. He said: “For where two or three [or 2,700, as we are today] are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”⁹⁶ This is the method He chose, a “sacramental” method that passes through signs, through an “effective sign” (this is what a sacrament is). Why “effective”? Because in it His presence continually returns and can be experienced. Certainly, the sign has a particular characteristic. It’s not like when you say, “this is a pair of glasses,” and you pick them up. No, the sign asks something of you, an acknowledgment that goes beyond what you can immediately see and perceive. As you have been told in these days, there is a gap between what we see and its meaning, and this is the difference of faith.

⁹⁶ Mt 18:20.

Why did Jesus choose this method? One day we will ask Him, because it's a mystery; but it's a mystery that we can begin to understand through our experience of it because we can manage to articulate at least a little something about Jesus's mysterious choice within our present experience. What you are responsible for becomes yours, truly yours (tell me if this isn't true in your life; for example, with respect to your studies), not just because you look at it, not just because you see it (this is the beginning, obviously). When something is entrusted to you and you become responsible for it, then it becomes yours to the point that you understand how everything that is yours not only belongs to you, but also how you depend on everything that is yours. This could be your child, your girlfriend, your boyfriend—maybe this is an experience that is more similar to yours.

In my own case, my son belongs to me but in this belonging, I depend on him. I can't act as if he weren't there. But not only that—he has to do with everything involved in my life. Christ chose this method so that our relationship with Him could be truly and fully human, involving the possibility of a real dependence on Him.

Regarding the second question about how it is possible to base everything on a bond of affection, given that there's this weakness, and about what guarantee there is, I'll say something very short: there is no guarantee a priori. I'm sorry, friend, but there is no guarantee. We are children of our times who think that, in order to get moving, we should have all the guarantees already lined up, and so before beginning any initiative everything has to be insured. Here, no, there is no guarantee. Do you know why? Because it is in using our freedom and taking a risk that we achieve the most important things in life. Don't you think so? When you tell someone you love her, you run a risk because there is no guarantee she will say yes; even if she has given you two million signs, you feel tension. Why? Because the outcome doesn't depend on you. Look, the first person who takes a risk on us is Christ. It is Jesus who takes risks on us, risks on our freedom, who wagers everything on this. And the truest way our companionship reflects this gaze of Christ on our life is exactly the same: wagering ev-

everything on our freedom. Following Christ, Fr. Giussani also began his attempt at presence among young people using the same method: "Wagering only on pure freedom, on pure freedom!"⁹⁷

I'll give you an example from my experience. After I graduated (I was young, the age of the older ones among you, twenty-six), Fr. Giussani asked me to be a visitor to Europe, which meant going to visit CL communities throughout Europe, some of which were very small (and still are, but at least they still exist), obviously helped by many who were following the individual communities in the various countries. Once a month we had a meeting we called "The Europe Commission," with all the leaders who followed these realities and some of the top leaders of the movement. So, I was only your age and I had to meet with all of these leaders, people much older than me, who understood things more than I did, who were able to explain the movement much better than I could. As you can imagine there were some very heated discussions: "No, because it's this way!" "No, it's that way!" I won't name names, but there were some pretty strong personalities! At the end I had to do the summary: I was sweating bullets! After three of these meetings, I went to Fr. Giussani and I said, "Listen, Gius, thank you for your esteem, but maybe...". I didn't dare say "you made a mistake," obviously, so I said, "Maybe we could begin a bit more low key. I could sit in the back and then we'll see." He listened to me and let me talk. I saw that he didn't say anything, so I began to list all of my doubts. After a while he said: "What do you think, in keeping you there, who's risking more, you or me?" In effect, there was the thought that perhaps I wasn't up to what he was asking of me, but the real problem was that he was risking more, since he was the one who put me there. He said to me that "these people are older and more experienced, but they have to understand that you, who are younger than them, bring something useful to their lives. We have to help each other follow what is greater than us." Well, in that moment I realized that he wagered—wagered!—not on my abilities,

⁹⁷ Luigi Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà [Event of freedom]* (Genova: Marietti 1820, 2002), 10. Our translation.

that I was able to do what he asked of me, but on that great thing he saw and that I could follow, that was for me, that I had to recognize and that kept me bound to those leaders who were older and more experienced than me. We have to learn to look at each other in this way, in terms of the greatness for which we are destined and that our friendship makes possible, and before which our limited abilities often become an objection for us.

Contribution. I'm a law student. Is there a difference between faith and trust? I have no problem trusting my friends on ordinary questions, but if this concerns an issue of faith, then I'm unable to trust, because it seems to be too much. As long as it's a matter of ordinary things, okay, but when it reaches a certain level, it becomes too difficult.

Prosperi. Actually, if you think about it, it's not really this way, because even with little things it's often difficult to truly trust. Why? Because in order to truly trust, you have to trust someone else; that is, something you don't control, and this is hard for us because, as in my response to the previous question, we would like to have guarantees first. Trusting is already in and of itself a challenge to our demands. Those of us who have had the opportunity to study this in School of Community should have learned that Fr. Giussani said that faith is first of all a method of indirect knowledge that is mediated, realized through the mediation of a witness. This means that in order to be able to enter into the content of faith, of what is communicated to me, I must have adequate reasons to trust the witness. Pay attention here: trusting is a leap in the dark, right? The action of blind people? I trust blindly, without reasons? No. I trust based on reasons. When I met the movement, something that fascinated me immediately was exactly this: the betting on reason, truly trusting in the potential of reason, in the heart of each of us; thus, my friend, I don't ask you to trust without reasons, but I ask you to recognize the reasons you can trust, to be serious with what you have encountered. In this sense, faith is not something different from the method you called "trust," in the sense that it is totally based on trust.

At the Beginning Day for adults in the movement, at a certain point I spoke about the episode of the man born blind, a gospel passage that many of you will know. Certainly, it is a fascinating and very rich passage and we could spend hours and hours on it and fail to unearth all of its meaning. At a certain point the Pharisees told the man to whom Jesus had given sight: "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" Why? Because in those days it was thought that certain diseases, especially genetic ones (he was blind from birth) were God's punishment for sins, yours or those of your parents. If you were this way, someone must have upset the balance of the world that God intended. Instead, when Jesus's disciples (who were children of their tradition, and so they thought in the same way as everyone else) asked Him: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" He answered: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God [that Jesus performed] might be made visible through him." The works of God: not only the fact that Jesus gave him sight, but that He restored his very life, because that man had spent his whole life bowing and scraping, begging. Since he was used to begging, asking, his was the simplest and most correct position for accepting what was about to happen. Jesus went to him, spit on the ground, smeared the mud on his eyes (which were the sign of his shame), told him to "go wash," and healed him. The man trusted Him, went there, and was healed. And the Pharisees said to him: "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" and threw him out. Questioned, that man had said, in effect: "I'm not teaching anything. I don't know. You should be the ones explaining to me who this man is. I don't know." The gospel story continues: "If He is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know [his experience tells him] is that I was blind and now I see."⁹⁸ Judgment arises from our experience: it is the first element upon which trust is built. You judge what has happened to you. "That man did this in me, a good

⁹⁸ "Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner." He replied, 'If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see'" (Jn 9:24-25). "They answered and said to him, 'You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?' Then they threw him out" (Jn 9:34).

for me.” But other people say, “He’s an imposter!” “I don’t know, maybe so, but my experience tells me this.” But your experience does not arrive at the content of faith because it does not reveal to you the identity of the person who did this in you. It only can reach the point of saying: “He’s an exceptional man, because He did something exceptional, unimaginable. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. He did something that goes beyond my understanding. This man goes beyond my comprehension.”⁹⁹ The fact that something goes beyond our comprehension is not an absurdity because it corresponds to us; it is for us. As Francesco told you, this correspondence is something exceptional that goes beyond you, but it is *for you*. The man born blind did not know who Jesus was; he could not give a name to this exceptional man. “When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’” What did the man do? He asked: “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus answered: “You have seen Him and the one speaking with you is He.” The gospel records that the man said: “I do believe, Lord,” and that “he worshiped Him.”¹⁰⁰ This is faith. He believed because Jesus told him who He was, not because he imagined it. He did not believe through an intellectual effort, a line of reasoning (“So, let’s put together the pieces...”). He believed because of the presence he had in front of him and all that He had done for him.

Trust is the journey by which, day by day, step by step, every step of your life strengthens your certainty, with this question inside: “Who are You, who makes this certainty grow in me through what You give me, through the understanding I gain day by day about my life, about what sustains my life; the security, joy, and gladness; and the fact of being able to bear the pain and difficulties of life? Who are You?” An Other answers you. You place your trust in this Other who answers you and say: “I believe, Lord.”

⁹⁹ “It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind” (Jn 9:32).

¹⁰⁰ “‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘I do believe, Lord,’ and he worshiped him” (Jn 9:35–38).

Ferrari. I think what Davide said answers some of the questions implicit in the original question: "Does saying that Christ asks for trust mean giving up on understanding?" The progression Davide described shows us that it is the opposite of giving up on understanding; instead, it is the road of comprehension, a road that passes through a different life, that passes through Another.

Contribution. I'm in my third year studying humanities. Yesterday Francesco highlighted the aspects of this new light, and how they are the fruit of a journey, but at the same time and first of all a gift. I wonder then, what the relationship between gift and freedom is.

Prosperi. You're asking important questions. You're people who think. It's not just a question of thought, though, because it arises from a reflection on your experience. You see that in front of a strong proposal like the one that has been made to us, we all feel strongly that everything appears fragile to us, given that (as we said before) it is entrusted to us who are fragile, who have yet to know the content of that greatness for which we are destined and that seems so disproportionate to the way we see ourselves, to how we look at ourselves.

"Behold, I make all things new," the title of these Spiritual Exercises, is the beginning of the answer to your question (a beautiful question, because it relates gift to freedom), because the whole emphasis should first of all be put on your freedom, on the gift. What is this gift? In answering this question, freedom is provoked and engaged because of the fact that a gift has been given to us when we begin to understand the nature of this gift that was and is continually given to us. The title of the Spiritual Exercises was taken from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, written by Saint John the Evangelist. John saw, as if in a dream, everything that fulfills the scriptures. Christ Himself announces the voice of God: "Behold, I make all things new"—and fulfills the great prophecy of all of salvation history. You will certainly know that among the great prophets, Isaiah was the one who more than any other prophesied about the coming of the messiah, describing before-

hand what would happen. In chapter 43, Isaiah said: “See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”¹⁰¹ He was speaking of the great gift, of the land promised to the people of Israel, but this is a premonition of the coming of the new thing that is Christ. Why is Christ the fulfillment? Because He Himself is the newness and renews all things, all the aspects of your life. With Him, everything becomes new. The ancient prophecy is fulfilled in the fullness of human experience. Through the gift of His presence you are given everything. You will have noticed the question: “Do you not perceive it?” This is where freedom comes into play, in becoming aware of this gift, first of all.

In this regard, I would like to show you something many of you have probably already seen.

[viewing of a clip from The Passion by Mel Gibson]

Here, this is the gift: Christ makes all things new by taking on our humanity to the fullest extent, taking our evil upon Himself, all our pain, all that for us would be rejected, and transforms it into something new. Francesco spoke to you earlier about confession. This is the value of confession. The material of the sacramental gesture that we perform is your sins, our sins, which, offered to Him in our repentance, are transformed mysteriously in His design of mercy. His mother accomplished what would be impossible for us: “I’m here. I’m here. Lord, I’m here.” Our freedom is at the forefront of this great gift of salvation, which we could never have obtained on our own. In fact, the more we look at ourselves, the more we see how wretched we are, how incapable we are of achieving the good we desire (as Saint Paul said), while we do all of the evil that we do not want to do. Our incapacity demands two things so that evil will not win out.

First, the memory of this gift. If we remember the great gift that has been given to us, our day would already begin to change. We must continually keep in mind the gift that is given (at least as attention), because our immorality is first of all forgetfulness; it’s not

¹⁰¹ Is 43:19.

just fragility. This we know: we are fragile. Our gathering together is a formidable instrument for supporting our memory; we realize that on our own we forget too easily. How much easier it has been in these days to create a memory of this fact!

Second: prayer. In *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così?* [Is it (truly?!) possible to live this way?] there's a passage in which someone who had begun the novitiate in the *Memores Domini* told Fr. Giussani: "One learns to love Christ in a relationship with reality, but I run the risk of pantheism, while I understand that I have to give my life to a person, to Christ." Giussani responded: "This is a purely abstract hypothesis, just words for words' sake. You learn to love Christ because He reveals Himself to you. I'm sorry, you people here today have been the object of the initiative of an Other: you did not choose the occasion that led you here! Thus, not remembering this is a form of deep ingratitude, and rejecting it is even worse [first: memory]. You learn to love Christ by recognizing His presence. It is a grace [a gift], like the presence, and so the recognition of it." Thus we shouldn't be scandalized when we realize that it is difficult for us to recognize Him. This is also a grace. But pay attention: "The development of this grace [the development of this gift] is called entreaty [second: prayer]. When Fr. Kolbe was in the bunker where he died, praying in those terrible hours, how much more deeply was he united with Christ, did he know Christ, than when he was in the seminary studying theology! It is not in knowing reality that we know Christ, because we do not have the connection. It is in knowing Christ that we know reality. And we know Christ more by asking for Him."¹⁰² This means that you ask for Christ in your relationship with reality, and then reality causes you to know the face of Christ better.

Ferrari. I just wanted to add to what you said earlier about looking for a guarantee, an assurance, relating it to a risk we run, because I believe that this can help us. Often, in front of this immense gift, this beautiful and great life, we are tempted to make it ours, to

¹⁰² Giussani, *Si può (veramente?!) vivere così?*, 572. Our translation.

take possession of it, not with a negative goal, but to try not to lose it. As it says in a song by Chieffo, “Why is it that exactly now we want to make ourselves masters / of a gifted love?”¹⁰³ But the moment we take possession of it, we lose it. This life will remain a gift forever, to the last day, and its beauty is that it is given, that it is not mine, that I do not make it. It is given to me. We should be careful that within the question of “What must I do?” we are not seeking to live this life independently of the fact that it is given to us, that it does not depend on me. The beauty of this life is that it is a gift and will remain a gift to the very last day.

Prosperi. This is important because this is the only guarantee we need, and the guarantee is given. God the Father never takes back His gifts. He never takes back His promises. That which is given to you is given forever, even if you leave.

Contribution. I’m studying mechanical engineering. How can the name of Christ not become an idol and thus an alienation?

Prosperi. Do you really think this? Is this a true question or is it just an intellectual exercise? I mean, does it correspond to the experience you are having now?

Contribution. Yes, because the problem of idolatry is something that has always somewhat surrounded me, both with respect to my girlfriend and to my companionships with friends. When I speak about Christ, I speak of the companionship. I always wonder, if the companionship were far away because I went to study abroad, and there were no longer that go-between, How long would my faith endure? Does my faith endure only because of the fact that I have people around me who make me see it? This is what I meant.

Prosperi. There is an aspect of this question, or better, of the way we can try to answer this question, day by day, that concerns the

¹⁰³ Chieffo, “Liberazione n. 2,” in *Canti*, 243–44.

way in which Christ establishes a relationship with our life. Christ does not hypnotize us, but provokes us and subjects Himself to our judgment: "Do I correspond or do I not correspond?" In asking you this question, "Do I correspond or do I not correspond?" He is also asking something of you; that is, He does not leave you at the point you were before. In order to answer this question you must move toward Him. In fact, you gave the example of the companionship, saying that for you the companionship is Christ. But as we said before, the companionship in itself does not exhaust what Christ is. If anything, it is a sign of Christ. So we must understand what it means to say that it is a sign, because if we think about it, also the relationship Peter and the other disciples had with Jesus contained something of this. Once, in speaking about Christ, Giussani said that He is "the sign of signs" because He was an exceptional man who surpassed all imagining. They found themselves in front of a man with human features who walked with them, spoke, did things. Certainly, He did extraordinary things, performed miracles. At times there are also miracles among us. Maybe a paralytic is not looked at in the eyes and set upon his feet, but there are many people whose life has been changed by an encounter with this companionship. What is more miraculous than a change in oneself? It is impossible for our willpower. Just as the disciples could have reduced Jesus to an idol, so we can do the same with the sign of the companionship. They did not do so because they followed Him in what He said of Himself. But at a certain point, Judas began to see Jesus as an idol, and he betrayed Him when He began asking for something that surpassed his comprehension, that did not correspond to what he had imagined had to be the fulfillment of the prophecies. Judas had truly believed that Jesus was the messiah. We mustn't think that he was in bad faith from the very beginning. Like all the disciples, he had seen something exceptional in that man. He thought "He must be the messiah" because he had heard Jesus say, and those around him say that He was "the one you have been awaiting." But why did he turn his back on Him? What was the difference between Judas and Peter? After all, Peter also found himself in front of the same gap. For the people of Israel, the mes-

Isaiah had to be the one everyone awaited, the liberator from Roman oppression and the power of the world, from every power, in order to return the people of Israel to freedom. They all had their own idea about how this freedom should be achieved, exactly like each of us. But that man came to bring a freedom that exceeded their imagination, freedom from true oppression, freedom from what had true power over the heart of each person, freedom from one's own evil, freedom from death, freedom from the end of everything we love. But they could not imagine this. To understand, to begin to understand the nature of the freedom He came to bring, they had to follow Him, to accept following Him, to be led into a knowledge they did not already have, which surpassed anything they could have imagined. They had seen many signs, just as we have seen many, and yet, like them, we struggle to understand. Think of Isaiah: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."¹⁰⁴ What? A pregnant virgin? It contradicts logic. A woman cannot conceive a child and remain a virgin. And yet it happened. The impossible happened. Imagine that fifteen-year-old girl who was told this. Maybe she knew Isaiah's prophecy, maybe not, but even if she had known it, when the angel brought her the announcement that "behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son," she said something that I do not know how many among us would have been able to say: "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man? [...] May it be done to me according to your word."¹⁰⁵ I believe that Christ does not become alienation if the question, "How can this be?" arises in us. He does not become alienation if this presence continually proposed for our life (a human, living proposal that we are called to follow within the journey of this companionship) becomes a journey of knowledge and affection, a fully human journey, charged with the prayer of entreaty. This prayer, this question, is always a comparison with what one is living: "How is this possible?"

¹⁰⁴ Is 7:14.

¹⁰⁵ Lk 1:30–38.

The other thing I want to say is that this freedom, which is impossible for us, must be asked for. We have to ask for it first of all from she who was able to say yes, who was capable of the impossible, whom God thought of from the very beginning for this task.

Therefore, let's help each other read the signs in our life. The uncertainty that continually assails us is caused by an inability to read the signs, which happens because signs by their very nature need to be interpreted. They do not force or oblige you; they do not eliminate what you are. Rather, they ask everything of what you are, ask for our acknowledgment, and ask for our yes, just as it happened to Mary. We have to be educated to this; we are not born already "instructed." We are together for this purpose, in order to learn this journey of certainty in life, to make this journey of certainty in life together. Learning in our companionship does not mean that there is someone who explains things and then you go forward on your own two feet. Rather, it means that you learn by doing together, you learn to walk by walking together. This companionship never abandons us. If we do not leave it, it ensures us that we will have this road our whole life long.

Contribution. I'm in the fifth year of communication design at the Polytechnic. On Saturday afternoon, Francesco described the features of this new life, so I would like to ask, What instruments are useful for remaining attached to this announcement? In particular, I am curious about the proposal of a new affection and the example of the "couple of feet of distance" to keep in love relationships. What does it mean in concrete terms that this distance is filled by Christ? What method can be followed to verify that this is worthwhile?

Prosperi. Why this wise advice to respect "a couple of feet of distance"? It doesn't come from fear of what you are, but to give space so that something else can enter into the relationship. Giussani said that in order for a relationship between two people, between a man and a woman, to be true, there has to be a third in their midst. If you think about it, the vocational fulfillment of this affection in marriage is

also this way. Certainly, the celebrants are the spouses, but there is always a third person, the priest, and the community is present. Why? Because it does not just involve those two. It involves all of us, the whole community. In order for that relationship to be true, true deep down, not only in that moment when you look deeply into the other's eyes and feel that sweetness and ecstasy and heart-melting that then leads to consequences, in order for it to be true forever, even when there are problems, when there is trouble that creates friction (not only between the two, but also with children), even when there are difficulties, in the great trials that sooner or later inevitably arrive in life, and even if the relationship was always happy, in order for it to be true always, it needs to be supported. The relationship does not stand on its own. Getting used to this from the very beginning, letting ourselves be educated to leave space for this You who has the power to support the relationship, enables us to walk more surely and love each other more truthfully, enabling the other to continue being the person who fascinated me; that is, a mystery. Instead, we want to grab everything and carry it away immediately. We want to exercise our power because this is what we learn from everything that surrounds us, without even realizing that it is what slowly but surely carries away what makes the relationship beautiful; that is, the fact that it involves something we cannot possess, something that belongs to an Other and that has a destiny. Giussani called this affirmation of our power over the other "the out-of-place violence to true affections."¹⁰⁶ Without the great presence, there are no longer true, serious presences in life. Everything fogs up, becomes opaque, becomes part of the rabid affirmation of ourselves and nothing else, of our violence, even without our realizing it. Today in the newspapers we continually read about the fruits of this will for possession, which concerns us too, though it does not reach these extremes.

In those two feet of distance, Christ begins to enter. When you look at your boyfriend or girlfriend, you have to ask yourself who you answer to in your relationship. Only to yourself, and yourself

¹⁰⁶ Luigi Giussani, *Realtà e giovinezza: La sfida [Reality and youth: the challenge]* (Milan: Bur, 2019), 149. Our translation.

alone? Only to her? Who do you answer to with respect to your time? Who do you answer with respect to your studies? This applies to everything of value in your life because from here you begin to understand whether the space between you and the other, between you and things, is occupied by a presence or only by your imagination. This question means that you need to judge the relationship with your girlfriend or boyfriend, your studies, and your parents. Our friendship educates us to judge things, to truly judge things. Many times, even people in the movement treat their woman, the relationship with their woman in the dreadful way everyone does; this happens because they do not judge the relationship with their woman in the light of the given; that is, in the light of the movement, of this companionship and the way this companionship treats me, with freedom and passion for my destiny. It does not impose upon me its idea of how I should be. So why do I expect my girlfriend to be the way I want her to be? Because I do not accept that our relationship should be of help to her in recognizing what God wants for her. And maybe over time I understand with pain that I am not this help to her in fulfilling her destiny. Living a relationship with this freedom, with this openness, is possible only when you accept the other presence in your own life. This is called sacrifice. Sacrifice does not mean doing things we dislike—it means recognizing this presence within all things, a presence that makes them holy. Thus, you can begin to experience adoration and veneration for the mystery of the other that would not be possible when you grasp them, as all the world does with the things it wants to possess.

Contribution. I'm in medical school. Is it possible to explain in concrete terms what it means to say that "God's answer to the question of why the righteous suffer is not an explanation, but a presence. It is Christ on the cross"? I want to understand this better for my life but above all for a friend who has experienced much more suffering than I have up to now and has a strong desire to understand this.

Ferrari. I'd like to add a nuance that emerged in other questions: What does this mean in front of the suffering of the innocent, the pain that comes not from the evil you do, but from the illness of a child, which is the pain that upsets us the most?

Prosperi. The suffering of the innocent is the mystery of mysteries. Why does God allow it? It is no coincidence that the first saints that the church venerates after Christmas, right after Saint Stephen, the first martyr, are the Holy Innocents. It is a mystery. It is a mystery because, as Cardinal Pizzaballa wrote in his letter, it finds its only explanation, I'd like to say justification, in participation in the greater mystery of the Just One who suffered this injustice. This is not simply a consolation. In front of the pain we feel in front of our suffering, which at times seems so unjust, we look for explanations, like the man born blind. "What did I do wrong? Why is God punishing me?" or "Surely he must have done something." But when we see the innocent who suffer, we can find no explanation and words of consolation are not enough. "How can a good God, a God who loves me, allow this?"

I don't know how many of you have read *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, an author who, though he came from a Catholic tradition, certainly did not profess himself to be one. And yet this novel portrays extraordinary Christian power, above all in his description of mercy. In an early scene Jean Valjean, a prisoner who had already paid in abundance (he spent nineteen years in prison for having stolen a piece of bread, a disproportionate sentence), was, upon his release, condemned to a miserable life because he constantly had to go sign his parole passport. He escaped and found hospitality in the basilica with Bishop Myriel, a holy and charitable man of God. One night, in an act of profound ingratitude, Valjean stole the bishop's silver and fled. The police captured him and brought him before the bishop, who said, "Ah! I am glad to see you. But how can this be? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are made of silver like the rest, and for which you could certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?" Valjean stared at the bishop, not understanding. "My

friend,” resumed the bishop, “before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them.” Having sent away the police, the bishop drew near and said in a low voice: “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”¹⁰⁷

In the course of Jean Valjean’s many trials and difficulties, we see the whole trajectory of his conversion. He grew to become great in love and charity, the same charity the bishop had bestowed on him. During all the ensuing years, Valjean would never abandon those candlesticks. He lost everything and had to flee, but the candlesticks were always with him because they were the sign of his memory of the man who had saved his life. Why? Because our evil, and not only the bad things we do, but the evil of the world, injustice, comes with a price, and there is One who paid this price, who paid this price for us as well, who took on the burden for us. The gift exceeds the measure of reparation; there is an imbalance. God’s mercy involves an imbalance, making impossible the re-establishment of balance: it is more, and we must continually create a memory of this extra. For this reason, the only explanation for the suffering of the innocent is the cross. Why? Because it is participation. When a person becomes aware of this, when the suffering is offered up, it is a participation in the mysterious miracle of God’s mercy that changes human hearts, that saves the world. How can we be close to Christ on the cross? We saw it before. We need to have the gaze of His mother. “I’m here. I can’t do anything.” When Our Lady was at the foot of the cross, she did not scream at the Romans to take Him down. Every year during the *Via Crucis* we sing and hear it sung. What did the Mother do at the foot of the cross? She stayed. She was there. *Stabat Mater*. The mother stayed there, was there, participating mysteriously in this newness of life. The crucifixion of Christ, a gesture incomprehensible to the human mind that went beyond anyone’s logic, including

¹⁰⁷ Victor Hugo, “The Bishop Works,” book 2, chap. 12, in *Les Misérables*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1887), 125–26. <https://dev.gutenberg.org/files/135/135-h/135-h.htm>.

hers, fulfilled the destiny of everyone. Mary was the only one who understood in some way, through her participation in the life of her Son. We need and must continually ask for Our Lady's gaze so that we are able to stay like her, are able to share that hope that saves the heart of every person.

I'll add a last observation, because yesterday Francesco said something that really struck me when he read the line from Fr. Christian de Chergé, who prayed for his enemies, his murderers. We understand that this was something great and heroic, but it seems very far from us. It is totally beyond our logic, and instinctively we would say that it was an error. "What?!"—irrational. Only in one case does it become rational: only if we have the deep awareness of being children (children, not masters of our life) of the same Father, and thus siblings. Think of your siblings. I have in mind my children. They bicker constantly because one is one way and the other is another way. They tease and offend each other but they are still siblings. They are united by the fact that they are children of the same father, and while they may fight like cats and dogs, woe to anyone who hurts their brother or sister. This is another logic. It is the logic of being a daughter or son, and it makes you look at everything as the possession of an Other, as a gift of the Father. This totally changes the way you enter into relationship with whomever you meet, because that person is given to you, even those you first perceive as hostile.

Ferrari. I would like to thank Davide for having been with us and for the help he's given us in looking more deeply at the things we've said in these days, but also for opening new reflections and ways of looking at things. I think this is beautiful. As I said at the beginning, this possibility of dialogue and of following is a treasure for me.

There's a final question we didn't cover because of time restrictions, so I'll summarize it in my own words. Our communities must become places of new reason and new love. How do we keep alive this awareness of unity and newness that is present in our communities?

A few days ago I received a letter from a friend who has just left the CLU and is doing an internship of several months in the Holy Land, in circumstances that are far from simple. She wrote: "In all the confusion and difficulties of my daily life, I'm grateful for the experience I had in the CLU. The intensity of life I experienced there is a gift for me now because I learned a method, I learned that there is a road, that there are instruments to help us recover and live the judgment given on life, the good judgment given on life." Then she gave an example. "I've been thinking about the Mass and the morning prayers we offered, not because they resolved the problems in my day, but because in all the years with the CLU I experienced that beginning the morning by simply being in front of an Other throws my heart and my desire wide open." I was struck that she said her current situation made her think of her CLU years. The things we propose to each other serve to answer the question of how we can keep alive the awareness of unity and newness. This awareness is kept alive through a journey, and the journey is our companionship, with all the richness of life and friendship it brings. This journey is supported by three simple but powerful gestures that are the pillars of our proposal: School of Community, charitable work, and the common fund. They are concrete instruments that have the same concreteness as when Jesus said, "Let's go here, let's go there, prepare that house, buy the food...".

What is School of Community? Speaking of Mother Teresa last night, Lele said: "With her gentle eyes, wherever Mother Teresa looked, she saw." School of Community is an education in seeing and a deeper gaze on reality, the gaze of Christ, of the church, and of Giussani.

Charitable work is a simple gesture we propose so that we might learn to love. I should think that just this should make us say: "Well then, let's do it!" It's a journey verified through faithfulness.

The common fund: think of the testimony I read you yesterday from the friend who couldn't come to the Spiritual Exercises. It's an even simpler method, and yet the most ignored among us because, like children of the utilitarian mindset, we do things only for an immediate benefit, and here we do not see the outcome. The

common fund exists to educate us to conceive of ourselves as being together, as part of one thing, and at the service of the mission; that is, of the world horizons of the movement and the church, as that friend wrote, who asked that his fee be given to the common fund to help friends to be able to encounter Christ, as he did. My wish for you is that you grow to have such a big heart. Let's help each other to live these gestures and to journey along the road that we undeservedly have been given.

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