



THE CHALLENGE OF THE PRESENT

Spiritual Exercises of the University
Students of Communion and Liberation

RIMINI (ITALY), DECEMBER 2008

TRACES



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INTRODUCTION | JULIÁN CARRÓN

December 5th, evening

The structure of the human being is expectant; awaiting. If we were deeply aware of ourselves in this instant, we would find within, as the thing that best defines us, the expectant awaiting for fulfillment, for fullness in living, for happiness. But how often is this expectation buried under so many distractions, so many useless things that fill our life! For this reason, the first gesture of friendship among us today expresses a way of loving each other, of being true companions: supporting each other, helping each other to acknowledge what's most central to ourselves, this expectant awaiting, because the more we're distracted or the more this awaiting is buried, the more we need to pray, to ask that it be awoken in us. So nothing is more consonant than beginning by asking the Holy Spirit to reawaken in us this expectant awaiting for happiness, for fulfillment, because those who don't desire happiness are in a truly serious condition, are already close to the grave. The less urgent this expectation, the more we need to cry out.

Come Holy Spirit

A warm welcome to all, to each of you, especially those of you who've come from abroad.

No matter where we come from, what's the thing that unites us all? What defines us? What do we feel in our innermost depths as more definitive than all the changes, the passing situations of life, the states of mind? That life is something serious. It's neither a game nor a banality, as many would lead us to believe. We see this, perceive this, on many occasions. We've just sung about this seriousness, which in so many circumstances we perceive with powerful evidence. As our friend Sara said in the contribution she sent, "A few days ago, two long-time good friends of mine graduated, friends

with whom I'd gone all the way through university, until now. We had planned the evening festivities down to the smallest details. We went to dinner in an incredible place, ate wonderful things, drank extraordinary wine, conversed on all sorts of subjects [everything seemed to be going perfectly as planned]. But I felt continually overwhelmed by an infinite sadness, which I tried to hide, but which insistently re-emerged." This is the seriousness of life. We can have a beautiful experience, but find constantly re-emerging in us this infinite sadness, this ultimate dissatisfaction, this lack, this desire for fullness that no wonderful dinner can resolve, and that often we try to hide.

We're friends if we're together to try to look at these things; otherwise, we're together distracting ourselves from the fundamentals; we're together, but the most decisive things about living, we face alone.

Instead, we're not condemned to live them alone! This is why we're together these days, to be able to look at life in its seriousness, because—as we've seen in *School of Community*—normally in life, "...the problem of money is serious for everyone, the problem of children is serious, the problem of man and woman is serious, the problems of health and politics are serious. For the world, everything is serious except life. ...Yet, what is more *life* than health, money, the relationship between a man and a woman, children, work? What more is life than this? What does it involve? Life involves all these things, but with a goal for everything, with a meaning."¹ Thus, the urgent need of life, which we cannot avoid at any time, is the need for this meaning. You can live without many things, but not without meaning.

The first thing we have to look at, this unease and this sadness, is a good, because it tells us that we need meaning, that we're not dogs, that we're not rocks, that we're human beings and we need to discover the meaning of living. The unease, the sadness, and the lack are the sign of the greatness of our life. We want to reduce life to some of the aspects we indicated before (work, money, health), but very often you can find an extraordinary job, exceptionally satisfy-

ing, pertinent, that gains you the recognition of everyone, or you can have a girlfriend, or get excellent grades, and get along well with everyone, but it's not enough for you, as Sara said. This is why we always feel something looming inside us, even when we're trying to distract ourselves.

What is this meaning? We're all here seeking greater clarity about this meaning. Those who've come for the first time are here because in meeting some of you, in seeing you live, they've glimpsed something that sparked their curiosity, and made them think that maybe coming here they might find something decisive for their lives. Others of us have been together for a long time but, we, too, feel this urgent need no less than the others who've come for the first time, because we're all the same. We're all the same; we all have this desire for fullness that we can't shake off.

As we've studied in School of Community, Christianity, obedience to 'Something other' that we follow, is reasonable only in one case: "you must be aware that the success of life lies in this."²² We can't be here very long if we don't perceive that here we find the meaning that holds the true success of life. We've studied that a person can stay here for years without this awareness and, thus, lives badly, because you can't belong to Christ without the awareness that this belonging is the fulfillment of life, and that it fulfills you much more than if you'd just done what you wanted, felt like, or imagined. This is why we're challenged to constantly verify what we've encountered, because staying here isn't enough, if we lack this awareness.

Roberto says in his letter, "I'm writing to you in dramatic times for me and those around me. The more time goes on, the more I realize that the creeping nihilism of the world we live in also penetrates my life and that of my friends. Being in CL doesn't protect us from this danger. The confusion and chaos reigning at the university are one of the many signs of these dark times. It's evident that the way we've looked at and responded to this dramatic situation of recent months and the way we live our life in general marks a diversity, which is the sign of His presence. But, notwithstanding this evidence, there's always the feeling that it's not enough, as if there were

a dualism, a doubt, an ultimate indecision, and so the heart isn't glad, isn't moved by the acknowledgment that He exists. In this dualism, on the one side, there's faith (sincere, too), but, on the other, there's the concern for my own personal advantage and the fear of ending up duped." You can be here and think, deep down, that you can end up duped. So you feel badly. "So," he continues, "you use everything badly, reality, and the companionship of the Movement. Let me explain better. Lately, I've offered Christ the expenditure of a great amount of energy, numerous gestures of obedience and witness to Him (working to improve the university with my friends as student representative), but these gestures were useless because, in doing these things, I wasn't conscious of serving Him, and thus often what dominated was dissatisfaction, self-recrimination, and accusation of the others—the reduction of what we've encountered to ideology, discourse, moralism, or, worse, psychology. Instead, the heart cries out, cries out forcefully and doesn't surrender to this reduction, because it has profound needs that don't stop at your state of mind or the whim of the week, and wants the evidence of Christ to be decisive, constant, and definitive, and reaches the point of true obedience, whatever happens in our lives." That is, we all need the verification that what we've encountered truly serves life, serves to respond to our studies, to sickness, solitude, the difficulty of what we have to do, and the urgent need for unity of our life, to not live it in pieces.

Does this exist? Is there this foothold that can respond to this urgent need we feel? Fr. Giussani says, "Existence first of all represents a decision about what one acknowledges as one's own foundation: this decision is an event that continually re-proposes itself. It's a matter of finding the *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, or, in other words, what we acknowledge as the meaning of ourselves and therefore as the foundation of everything we do."³

We're here seeking that one thing necessary that can respond to this seriousness of life. But there's a condition for recognizing it when it happens in front of us: not censoring the drama, the urgent need we have within. Without this urgent need, even if He appears

before us, we won't recognize Him, we won't be able to recognize Him.

This is why the great grace we must request is not to censure any of that need that constitutes us, of what still isn't all settled in our life, of that need for sense, meaning, fullness, companionship, gusto. It seems like almost nothing, but usually we censure it by ourselves. The fact of being together this evening, all with an awareness, with an urgent need to be serious with life, takes away the shame that I so often feel, seeing many people around me who aren't serious. It's almost embarrassing to be so. Here together we can overcome this embarrassment. We don't have to censure anything—we can look it full in the face.

As Caterina says, “This period has been really wearisome for me because the daily grind of things to do and people has become unbearably monotonous and boring, and though I could recognize the lack of stimulus in doing everything, I was scandalized at how this inactivity also touched the things I care most about, from my relationship with my boyfriend to my studies, and made me question them. Facing this void, my entreaty for happiness and fullness has resurged; the urgent need for an answer has prevailed over all the toil and has allowed me, together with the people alongside me, to desire not to settle for less.”

We're together, as friends, to support each other in this entreaty, which is the prayer the Church offers in Advent season, this time of waiting born from the depths of the urgency of living: come Lord Jesus! Come in such a powerful way that we can acknowledge the meaning of life, that in these days we can know You more fully, in a way that isn't theoretical, banal, or abstract; that we can see Your face, your unmistakable features, so our life can be filled with this meaning! Re-awaken in us, Jesus, this expectant awaiting, so we can recognize You!

Advent season is a beautiful time. Sometimes you may ask yourself why we wait for Him, if He's already come. Precisely because He has come, we await Him, precisely because He accompanies us, we can look at Him together and we can desire Him more and more.

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Only the Church celebrates a feast like this, a time like this, because the others aren't waiting for anything anymore! We await because we've encountered Something, because we've glimpsed Him already, His presence, and so we desire that He make Himself more present in our life and save us, that is, that He reveal more of life's meaning. How many of you have written to me about your desire to know Him more! Why do you desire Him more? Because you've already encountered Him. This is why the Church desires more and more, cries out more and more, "Come Lord Jesus!"—precisely because she has encountered Him, like we have.

December 6th, morning

I. THE EVIDENCE OF THE FOUNDATION

“That I see you, this is morning,”⁴ as we’ve just sung, because without You, Christ, without feeling the warmth of Your presence, the power of Your presence, we’re orphans! Here you understand the urgency of the question we started with yesterday, “Existence first of all represents a decision about what one acknowledges as one’s own foundation.”⁵ It’s a matter of finding the one thing necessary, that is, what we recognize as the meaning of ourselves and everything we do. But the foundation, the meaning, the Mystery: does it exist, or doesn’t it? Let’s get down to business: does it exist, or doesn’t it?

Giacomo writes, “Last week, we posted the CL flyers on the case of Eluana Englaro around the university.” [Eluana Englaro has been in a coma for 17 years since a car accident when she was 19. Her father’s ten-year battle in Italian courts to obtain permission to remove her feeding tube, to cause her death, succeeded in November 2008 when the Court of Cassation in Rome, the highest appeals court of Italy, upheld a lower court ruling in Milan granting her father’s petition. The nuns and staff at the nursing home where Eluana is cared for refused to stop her water and nutrition, and her father’s search for a clinic willing to participate in carrying out the order has met with opposition from the Italian Minister of Health and Welfare, who has recently issued guidance saying that under Italian law, withdrawal of food and hydration from helpless disabled persons in the care of public health facilities is “illegal.” In January 2009, an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was rejected because the pro-life coalition presenting it did not have a legal link with Eluana. Considered the “Terri Schiavo” case of Italy, this event has been the subject of intense political debate.]

“After a few days, we found some written responses alongside our flyers. I began reading these responses and, at a certain point, I stopped at a sentence quoting the line in the flyer that says, ‘So the case of Eluana puts us before the first evidence that emerges in our life: that we don’t make ourselves.’ The writer countered, ‘Evidence? You’ve got to stop this business of calling evident what is instead a creed of yours’ [the writer is challenging us big time!]. This line stopped me in my tracks, and I asked myself, ‘For me, being made by an Other, having all the hairs of my head numbered, is this evidence or a creed?’”

This is the challenge, my friends. It’s already a grace to know that someone faced with a question like this doesn’t flee, but looks it in the face. We’re together so we can look everything in the face, even such a penetrating challenge, so decisive for life. Is it only out of a sensibility that we affirm Him? Do we just talk about Him, or does He really exist?

I was talking recently with one of the first people who formed the *Memores Domini* with Fr. Giussani, and he told me about a dialogue he’d had with Fr. Giussani in which he asked him this very question, “Is all this a sensibility of yours? Because if it’s just a sensibility of yours, count me out!” Fr. Giussani answered, “Don’t be silly! I give you the reasons. It’s not a sensibility. I give you the reasons!” We’re here to give each other the reasons, and each of us has to grapple with those reasons. It’s not a sensibility. It’s not our imagination. There are reasons.

Therefore, the problem is the method by which we answer the question, “Does He exist, or doesn’t He?” And here, the point of departure is crucial. This came out when a student of mine posed almost the same question asked of Fr. Giussani: “Are you really sure of what you say about God with such certainty?” I shot back, “Yes, because I don’t start out from God, but from reality.”

We’ve given this example on many occasions. If one of you were to find in her room a stupendous bouquet of flowers, you’d immediately wonder, “Who sent them to me?” If someone said, “Stop it! What evidence? Stop it! It’s just a creed of yours that makes you

think of a *who*,” what would you say? Is it just a creed, or the impressiveness of something that points you to something beyond? Is it easier to explain the bouquet of flowers or to explain that we are here now? That we’re here, that I’m alive, that you’re alive, that you’re here now... Becoming aware of this is acknowledging with simplicity that saying “I exist” with full awareness, with all my capacity for reason, is acknowledging that “I am made.” If the bouquet of flowers could become self-aware, it wouldn’t fail to say, “I was put here by an other.” We’ve always been educated and challenged to start out from reality, but not reality detached from ourselves, because reality becomes transparent in experience. Therefore, the point of departure is our experience. It’s important that we never detach reason from experience. So let’s try to look together at experience in order to discover the impact that reality provokes in us. It’s clear that the amazement before a bouquet of flowers or the presence of the beloved or the presence of reality constitutes an experience of provocation. Opening my gaze to reality, I have before me something that achieves a provocation of openness. “Reality presents itself to me in a way that invites me to pursue something else. I do not react to reality as a photographic film upon which reality ‘impresses’ its image and that’s that. Not only does reality make an impression upon me, it also moves me and solicits me to engage in a search for some other thing, something beyond immediate appearances. It latches on to my consciousness, enabling it to pre-sense and perceive something else. Faced with the sea, the earth, the sky, and all things moving within them, I am not impassive—I am animated, moved, and touched by what I see. And this motion is toward a search for something else. I can express this reaction with questions: What is this in front of me? Why this? A kind of strange unknown lies within such questions; the world, the real, provokes me toward an Other. Otherwise, one would not ask *why, how*.”⁶ This becomes evident in the decisive moments. But pay attention, because what’s important is how to acknowledge it in experience.

A few weeks ago, a person gave this testimony at School of Community: “Let me start by saying I’m not in the Movement. I’m

a friend of Eluana's, one of the famous four friends who should've testified at the trial, though in the end my testimony wasn't heard. In all these years, I've often spoken with Eluana's father, since she'd told him I was a dear friend, and he has always involved me in this story. Before such a thing as this, the first reaction is the one I had, too: I was 21 (I'm a year younger than Eluana), and my first reaction was to escape. Then reality returned, because Beppino Englaro sought me out more than once with insistence and set me in front of this reality. I saw that the Church and the Movement have always underlined Beppino's good faith... And it's absolutely so. When I compare thoughts with him, there's the juridical problem that—it's clear—provokes a short circuit even for a lawyer like me, because the objection he makes is that “in the famous case of Maria, who had gangrene in her leg, she was able to refuse care, as the Constitution stipulates. Eluana's condition is much worse, because she can't express her thoughts. And yet she's not permitted” to refuse care, or, at least, she wasn't permitted until the Court of Cassation intervened.... But there's something else that troubled me, and continues to do so. I often went to visit Eluana, mostly in the beginning. The sensation is that of speaking with a person who isn't listening to you, who doesn't hear you. Recently, I went to visit her and I spoke to her, but as I was doing so, part of me felt stupid, in the sense that I wasn't convinced I was speaking with someone who could hear me... I don't want to come out with an opinion. I just bring you the testimony of a person who knows her for who she was before, who has experienced her father's battle, who has compared his ideas with those of different positions... and who, before this thing, has always asked: is this life? Because this is the problem that I as a Catholic asked myself, presented with a thing that is part of my life, that has struck me in such an evident way: is this life? Afterwards, though, I found an answer to this question. At the moment the Cassation sentence came out, I set aside my being a lawyer, set aside the role of someone who can be on the right or the left, can be Catholic or not, and within me I said, “Could you really do it [could you remove the feeding tube and let her die]? And my answer was *no*. I could

never do such a thing. So then, maybe, if a person looks into his heart and feels that he could never do this thing, maybe it's because this form of life, at such a minimal level of consciousness ... is nonetheless a mystery, nonetheless a life that exists, nonetheless a mysterious thing. And I, as a man, couldn't bring myself to suppress it."⁷

It's one thing to look in from outside experience, and another when you find yourself in front of experience, in front of something that takes complete hold of you. This is how reality reveals itself, as Fr. Giussani always taught us: reality becomes transparent to us not when we look at it from the outside, because reality isn't like photographic film, but when it grasps me, revealing its meaning. This is the nature of the sign that makes the meaning of things operatively enter into life. The sensibility for perceiving all things as sign is the tranquil truth of the human being.

In this recent period, we've all been provoked, by many things (from the work we've done in School of Community, to the case of Eluana, to questions about the university), to be serious about life, like this friend whose words I've just read, and I'm struck by how the Mystery uses precisely these things to educate us. How does He educate us? Not by giving us a discourse on the Mystery, but by making things happen. He educates us through reality. In this period, we've been moved, challenged in many ways by reality, but, as we've seen, we can live reality with different attitudes because there's always freedom involved, our attitude toward it. Nobody is neutral before reality; we all take a position, are forced to take a position, to discover that we live it in one way or another.

A friend was telling me how she was experiencing the vicissitudes of school this year: "I began this year at school with great expectation and also with great drive, such as I haven't had for years, because of everything I experienced this summer, with the impressive testimonies, and because of a series of favorable circumstances at my school (a colleague friend of mine had arrived, I had formed a friendship with a smart young man, and the classes assigned me suited me very well). But after a month, the political turmoil lead

to my school being occupied, and I was really annoyed. I felt very resentful because things weren't going the way I wanted; they had taken an unexpected turn. It struck me, because I realized that this resentment of what was happening put me in a political position, an ideological position, not an original position: I was—like everyone else. And when we're like everyone else, we're in the minority, and thus shunted off to a corner. The drama for me wasn't so much that I was pushed off to a corner, but that the corner wasn't mine, and for two weeks it was really difficult for me even to enter the school. Then some things happened. I was very struck by the way a friend took initiative at school, very differently than I had. Above all, I was impressed by the correction I received from School of Community, because I realized, in this circumstance, that the form of my disobedience, the normal form of my disobedience before reality, is to fake that I've understood what's happening. Faced with Christ's claim, I don't say, like a lot of people, 'Jesus is nuts!' I say, 'Yes, yes, I understand,' in the sense that there's a discourse that is a fake knowledge, that eliminates the given, and I found myself very, very angry." In our dialogue, I asked her, "Where's your mistake in the method?" She said, "In not accepting that I am You who are making me." I answered, "But even before the 'You who are making me,' even before, the mistake lies in the fact that I don't give a darn about what's happening." "Yes," she responded, "my way of not caring a darn was being angry." And I said, again, "No, before you were angry, you didn't give a darn about what happened in front of you. The anger is a consequence."

Yes, my friends, everything begins with the first impact with reality, but oftentimes for us, reality isn't something that introduces us to the Mystery; it's not something that introduces us to a journey of knowledge through which I can know what I'm seeking, the Mystery, the meaning of reality, the foundation. So often, what remains of our belonging to the Movement is a discourse to paste onto reality ("I understand"). But before certain circumstances, this just doesn't work, as we see in the case of Eluana.

A couple of weeks ago, I was invited to do a meeting on School

of Community as it related to our flyer. I was there with the responsible of the Lecco community, whose father, Gianni, lives in the same conditions as Eluana, practically in the next room. He has the same illness, and his son began our School of Community meeting with this question: “I wanted to ask you for help looking at, entering into, a situation like this.” I answered right away, “Yes, this is the decisive initial point in question: whether you let yourself be provoked by what happens, because it’s a way of looking at reality deep down.” This is what we’re seeing in the case of Eluana, as I’ll say right away, because denying this condition of ‘sign’ means denying the Mystery and therefore denying reality. Because, what is our great temptation? It’s rationalism, the reduction of the sign to appearances, choking off reality inside our own measure. “The great temptation of man is to exhaust the experience of the sign, of a thing that is sign, interpreting it merely as its immediately perceived aspects.... A certain attitude of the spirit does more or less the same with the reality of the world and existence.... [I]t feels the impact, but arrests the human capacity to enter within and search for meaning, to which undeniably the very fact of our relationship with reality solicits human intelligence.”⁸ Human intelligence cannot run up against something without perceiving that it is a sign of another reality.

But we feel this temptation constantly. One of you writes me, “Notwithstanding what I see at work before my eyes, I stop.” He feels the repercussion, but arrests his capacity to enter within reality; he stops. Like many of our contemporaries (because we were born in a precise historic circumstance), we conceive of reason as measure, and when reality challenges us beyond this measure, we give up. In this way, reason, which is this energy for penetrating, entering into the meaning, is reduced, mutilated, separated from its affective motor, which is the desire to discover the truth. If we accepted this and gave up trying to enter into the meaning, we’d suffocate. We see it in so many of our companions, who seem to have chosen the option of a simpler life, not allowing themselves to be struck by the provocation of reality. Look and see whether you or your compan-

ions live better; look! Don't be afraid to look—look to see whether life this way is fuller for them!

How does the Mystery act? How does He battle against this measure that suffocates us, that makes life a tomb? How does the Mystery care for us? The Mystery comes to us through reality. I was thinking this about Eluana: if you just looked at appearances, as our lawyer friend did, you would reduce her. But when you're forced, you can't help but acknowledge the Mystery. This provocation made him acknowledge the Mystery. This is why the Mystery can't be manipulated, can't be reduced to what I can manipulate, what I can touch. You have to stop before Him, in the positive sense, because otherwise it's violence. The more you let yourself be struck by the meaning, by reality just as it is, the more you realize that the "I"—as we've always said to each other—is the relationship with the Mystery, that can't be reduced to antecedent factors (biological, psychological, or sociological).

As always, we try to say, "We already know." Instead, the Mystery constantly blows away our measure and provokes us. He engages us in this battle to make us breathe, to open us, to throw us ever more wide open to Himself. And how does He do this? The Mystery reveals the meaning by making us live reality intensely. The Mystery cares for us, has this tenderness for us, constantly throwing open our closure, our measure. This is the fierce battle that the Mystery has undertaken with each of us. Why? Why did He undertake it? Because He doesn't love us? Or precisely so that we won't ever renounce this desire for fullness, this need for meaning, without which we suffocate? And in this fierce battle, we see that we resist, resist giving precedence to what the Mystery is doing. Thank goodness the Mystery never lets up, never lets me rest in my measure, never leaves me to suffocate within myself, and calls me. But before this call, before the modality with which the Mystery, through reality, provokes me, challenges me, I have to decide, as each of you testifies; I'm forced to decide.

One of you wrote me, "The title of the Exercises is incredible. It describes like nothing else what I've been experiencing dramatically

this first term. After a stupendous summer vacation with the community, I headed out with some university friends, thinking, ‘Finally, this long-awaited, relaxing vacation...’ Not so. That vacation was the start of a cry that was stronger and more difficult to understand than usual, because my father called me from Milan to say my mother’s tumor had progressed, that she’d taken a turn for the worse and been hospitalized. So, I had to return. The month of September was very difficult. Everything seemed against me, against my hopes and desires. My exam scores tanked. My mother’s treatment didn’t work. My father got angrier by the day. My mother couldn’t do anything anymore, because of lack of breath. I couldn’t do well what I had to do. But it was incredible to see first-person that the greatest and most evident mysteriousness in the midst of all this chaos was my mother’s will to live, notwithstanding her condition. She had an uncontrollable vitality, always accompanied by a constant, detailed, and often painful ‘yes’ to everything (the painful operations, the difficult decisions, the bad news—reality, in short), as if it were her response to the call of One who’d promised her everything.”

This is the decision, my friends. Either reality is against me, or reality is the response to the call of One who has promised me everything. This was testified to us by Damiano, the young friend of ours who died in October in Treviso. His girlfriend writes, “The exceptional thing that always struck me about Damiano was his awareness that the illness was *for* him and not *against* him. He lived it as an occasion, an occasion to go deep down to the bottom of everything given to him. His labor was great, and also his suffering. Damiano accepted everything thrown at him; he truly offered everything.”

That is, when you let yourself be provoked by reality and don’t arrest the human capacity for entering fully in the search for meaning, you perceive it as a good, not as something against you, but as something that throws you wide open to an Other. Many of you in these times have experienced how the provocation of reality, which could make you deeply angry, is instead what makes life beautiful.

Lorenzo writes, “Lately, I have been provoked a lot by the things

happening [reality provokes us!], from the school budget cuts to the case of Eluana. I've been following the whole itinerary of her story, and wanted to know more. It interested me, disturbed me, because I've seen that if you let yourself be moved by the situations that happen to you, life is much more lively, more beautiful. I want to stay before things without my measure, because I recognize that in all things I put my measure. I don't know if it's presumptuous, but I want something to happen every instant of my life that makes me see things as they are."

Or, as Carlo writes, "The university protests of these months have provoked everyone, and we, too, as well as many classmates, haven't remained immune to the violence of the protests. This emerged while we distributed our first set of flyers, when a strange inferiority complex brought to light our unconfessed position. 'What are we doing? Do we just post flyers? Posting flyers doesn't change things.' We discovered we were reasoning like everybody else, thinking as the world thinks, breathlessly defending one position among many. But the day that the university is perfect, will we be all set? This question restored my free breathing [just ask the right question, just avoid getting stuck by a measure, and you begin right away to breathe freely] and helped me acknowledge the intelligence with which we moved right away, for example, in the meeting we organized in the Great Hall of the Statale University in Milan with the rector and two senators, two thousand attentive students, in silence from the beginning to the end, with an order that struck even the sound technicians [this is too rich!]. We began with a song of ours, 'L'Opera' ['The Work']. This is what I've moved for in these months. I'm not primarily interested in politics; I'm interested in my humanity, the university, the fullness of life encountered with the Movement, and so I'm also interested in politics. Singing freely in front of the rector and the professors was the sign of the reborn consciousness of what happened to me with Christ [far from an inferiority complex—this is what enables us to enter fully into reality!]. From here, a gratitude has grown that makes me glad and victorious, regardless of the outcome—a sight unknown to the world. The

rector commented, ‘Certain gestures like this, only you CL people can do.’ A Philosophy professor, openly of the extreme left, said at the end, ‘Looking at what happened today, one would be tempted to hand over management of the university to all of you,’ adding, to mitigate, ‘Just joking!’ ... but he’d felt the repercussion.” A second later, the cynicism came and blocked him, but he’d liked it. It’s real; it’s evident. In order to intercept a different humanity, one that corresponds, no explanation is needed. Are these people, atheists or those in totally contrary positions, visionaries, or is there a different humanity? This is what challenges our reason. This diversity is what we have to explain. Is it reality or is it a creed? It’s even seen by those on the other side, and they certainly aren’t going to admit in the least that we’re right... “But it’s so imposing that it’s enough to look. You don’t have to belong to some strange association to realize what’s happening [we can say: you don’t have to belong to a particular creed to realize what’s happening]. These professors, like the many friends we’ve met recently, are the proof that it’s enough to *look*. At times, they see it better than we do. I’ve come to understand better what it means to say we have no homeland. We don’t move for an idea or a value. Even if at times we’re with the rector, we’re not his group, and even though at times we’re with the minister, we’re not part of the minister’s block. Our criterion for moving in reality isn’t a political party; we don’t belong to an idea, but to Christ in the life of the Movement, a correspondence that can be experienced only by those who live it, only by those who engage in reality. Only there does Christ surprise us, only in reality, only in risking the verification in reality.”

And then there’s Alberto, who writes, “Every day’s toil and battle bring me to the depths of myself, to the depths where there’s nothing left to cheat, nothing with which to distract myself, nothing that interests me more than my heart bared of everything, naked in the face of reality. I’ve never been this far before. So I’ve begun the work.” Therefore, it demands this openness of reason, “it demands first of all the cordial renewal of the word ‘reason,’ the most confused word in modern discourse,”⁹ a conception of reason that

isn't blocked, a reason fully invested with affection, because reason can't act without what we call affection. The heart is the condition for the healthy actuation of reason. "The condition required for reason to be reason is that affectivity invests it, and so moves the entire man."¹⁰

2. AN AFFECTIVELY ATTRACTIVE PRESENCE

What could facilitate this healthy actuation of reason, that is, reason invested with this affectivity? It was necessary for the Mystery to become so fleshly, a presence so affectively attractive that it magnetized our entire "I," all our reason and all our affection. God entered the life of man according to a human form, in such a way as to magnetize our thought, all our imagination, affectivity, and creativity. And how were we magnetized? Through the presence of a different humanity, in which we could experience a unique correspondence, an intensity of living never before imagined.

And here we see what Jesus does. Why did He enter history, attracting all our reason, all our affection, magnetizing us entirely, with all our "I"? We've already read it in *School of Community*, but if we take a moment to read it again we can understand even better how He holds us and educates us. Jesus had pity on the people before Him because they were lost, like sheep without a shepherd, and He began speaking out of His compassion for them. But two or three days along, Jesus realized that they hadn't eaten, and He performed the multiplication of loaves. The people were very grateful, to the point that "they wanted to take Him and make Him king,"¹¹ but He eluded them. It's beautiful how Jesus moves. He could've settled for their recognition. Deep down, wasn't this what He wanted? But Jesus doesn't take them lightly; He knows full well that the fact of feeding them is not enough for living. "And Jesus said: 'Your fathers ate manna in the desert, but they died. I will give you manna, I will give you a bread such that whoever eats it will no longer die [if you don't eat this bread, these words of mine, you can't live].'"¹² And once again, Jesus could've stopped, but He knows that this will not be enough either. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man

and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.”¹³ He challenges the full measure of their reason.

Why did He challenge them so forcefully, to the point of saying something that seemed madness to them? Because He didn’t love them? Hardly. When Jesus communicates the thing He came for, which is His passion for the destiny of each person, He doesn’t yield, as we’ve studied in School of Community. He insists, doesn’t yield, and doesn’t dilute the inconceivability of what He says. Since it was beyond the pale of their measure, the others left, saying He was crazy. Instead, the disciples remained, but He didn’t even spare His closest friends (He could’ve settled. They had stayed; what more did He expect?) “Do you want to leave Me too?”¹⁴ This is a friend. Why is someone who asks you a question like this a friend? How did Jesus show that He was a great friend to the disciples? He could have spared them it, but they would’ve remained as we so often remain, without doing the work, without truly realizing deep down why we remain. Instead, by challenging them, He forced them to find the reason why they stayed, forced them to realize the correspondence they’d experienced. Only He had the words that correspond to the heart, that give meaning to life, because reason is discovering the correspondence between what someone says about reality and the heart’s need for life. Christ draws out that evidence of truth that becomes manifest to our experience in the experienced correspondence. Be careful here: we have said “experienced correspondence;” that is, no learned dissertation, no visions... just experienced correspondence. In order to account for that experience, there’s someone who corresponds to me like nobody else there is—of course there is!—and everything in me cries out this correspondence; it exists. Jesus wanted His friends to realize this, and He forces them to draw it forth from their very guts, from every fiber of their being. Leaving Him is losing the best thing that ever happened in life, so real is this experience. This simple loyalty is enough. No philosophy is needed. You just need to be challenged—as Jesus challenges them—to become aware of this. Tell me if this is the stuff of visionaries! Why did the others leave? Because their measure had become their ulti-

mate criterion—not their experience but their measure, their capacity for understanding, their conception of reason as measure. Instead, the disciples were all magnetized by that affection, which kept reason from becoming the measure. As we've said, the heart is the condition for the healthy actuation of reason. The condition necessary for reason to be reason is for affectivity to invest it, not to close it; thus, reason can look at all that's there—not what isn't there—all that's there, but which one fails to see without this openness of affection.

This was the great education of Jesus: Jesus didn't let go, didn't yield, didn't dilute one bit to make them understand what had happened, forcing them to stay before the question and draw forth the evidence of the correspondence. And this immediately had two consequences.

First: an increase of the "I." It made them grow in the awareness of who He was and what had happened to them. He didn't let them go off into distraction, forgetting themselves, but became their friend; that is, He revealed Himself as the One who wanted to defend that correspondence much more than they did, a fierce battler in defending what they'd experienced, because Jesus isn't afraid of challenging us. What He wants to bring is greater than what we have in our little noggins, in our little measure. If Jesus hadn't challenged them, they might've remained, but more fragile, more unconscious, less aware. The person who consoles you isn't a friend; even if we do it among ourselves, we're not friends this way. Christ brings to life something more. Second: the introduction to the meaning of reality. Reality without this would remain ever more lost. Instead, slowly but surely, the disciples can enter into the meaning of everything. Instead, when we find ourselves before something that exceeds our measure, we think it's a contradiction. No, reality doesn't contradict the Mystery, as you see. Jesus' acting this way doesn't contradict the Mystery; it's what introduces us to the Mystery, what enabled the disciples not to remain slaves to their measure.

If for us faith isn't this journey of knowing, when the Mystery challenges us beyond our measure, we get lost like the others, like the crowd: they left, and missed the best. Why, instead, did the disciples

stay? Because they understood more? No. Because they were attached to Him, had journeyed and lived with Him, they couldn't let themselves be defined by their measure of comprehension, and thus they understood more. For them, obedience to this lived experience was reasonable; this is why it was reasonable to remain. The true sacrifice would've been to leave—even though they didn't understand anything—to leave and lose that intensity, the relationship that brought to their lives an intensity and correspondence never before imagined.

This is the great revolution Jesus introduced in becoming man, bringing this newness to history, which makes us have an experience of this caliber. Tell me if this is being a visionary, or if this is precisely in the innermost depths of the life of each of us who is willing to do it, to enter into this experience! Ask yourselves whether you're visionaries when you have this experience, if you can generate yourselves, if it's a production of yours, if it's the creation of your creed! Ask yourselves! It is here that we realize we've run into Someone different from us and can recognize His unmistakable features.

We're not afraid of this, yesterday or today.

Reflecting on a complicated situation in which he felt free, Luca writes, "Who makes me free before these things? Who fills my heart with gratitude? Christ is a Presence that imposes Itself on me." Or Martha, who says, "I've begun to be passionate about reality." Or Angelo, "Don't be afraid: there's an Other at work." We have to look at this; the point of departure is the evidence of what happens: facts, facts that document an overabundance seen in the human difference before our eyes, that has as its most evident point a consistence (as you've experienced in these recent times, in a situation in which everything is crumbling and in which nobody gives a darn). This is why the point of departure is always the given. In order not to start from there, we'd have to deny these facts. Instead, the point of departure isn't our thoughts, images, or sentiments, but these facts: something that comes first, that we don't create, but that is so real, so powerfully real that, if we don't acknowledge it, we're forced to deny a factor of experience. Even "the blind" around us acknowledge

it and this strikes me, because precisely those around us acknowledge the power of something that we, idiots that we are, consider abstract. But if it's so abstract, why do the others, who don't believe, acknowledge it? If it's so invented by us, why do the others acknowledge it; why are the others struck by it? Are they visionaries too? Are we all visionaries? Maybe it's easier to say that it exists, it manifestly exists, as a factor of reality. A different humanity is the demonstration of the presence of Christ in history.

Why do we struggle so? Fr. Giussani says it in *Uomini senza patria* [*Men Without a Homeland*]: “The crowd was struck because the word was true and the truth brings along its own evidence. But the dissipation was immediate; the crowd followed Him also out of passion for hearing Him, but without engaging the depths of their own soul.”¹⁵ This is what Jesus, out of love for our life, doesn't let us do, and if anyone wants to be here this way too, we won't let you, either. What's needed is reason affectively engaged. It's not enough for you to remain here because you've nothing better to do. No, you stay here, challenging reason, giving reasons!

3. A BOND THAT OVERCOMES EVERY OBJECTION

There's a radical objection we raise very often. When we find ourselves before an affectively attractive presence, everything goes fine, right? But when pain touches us... We don't doubt the existence of the Mystery, but when the Mystery challenges us beyond our measure, beyond the capacity of our reason, we begin to get certain thoughts, and I don't want to neglect looking them full in the face. What is the content of the verb “to follow”? To understand the content, we have to look at Simon and the others left with Him. “They were with Him. Watch out: not [only] on His side.”¹⁶ Because when the crisis—the trial—came, it became clear who was truly attached to Him. The crowd didn't have this, and thus couldn't hold up. They abandoned Him.

In order to understand what it means to follow, you have to identify with Jesus: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus.”¹⁷ What do we see in Jesus? To un-

derstand it, let's start out from what the disciples did. When the Passion came, they too abandoned Him. Why? Because the great problem of evil is that it hurts. And what is the evil that hurts? How does evil, pain, suffering, hurt? We see it: if a friend hurts us, we immediately feel a separation from him, don't we? We begin to feel the separation. This is the evil that hurts, understand? How do we see it? The moment evil enters our life and exceeds our measure, a sort of diffidence comes into play, a radical suspicion of the goodness of the Mystery. We have no problem with the existence of the Mystery, but at a certain point, when these circumstances happen... The introduction of this suspicion is the deepest evil that hurts us.

I just happened to read an interview by the husband of Terry Schiavo, the young woman left to die in the United States. The husband said that the sense of emptiness, bit by bit as the days and years ran along equally, was devastating. This is the evil that hurts; the sense of emptiness is devastating. There's no greater pain. We feel this too. One of us says, "Very often, before the difficult things, a suspicion creeps in that the Mystery may not love me anymore." Or another, "I realize I need to look at reality deep down; I need to see that the things that happen are truly placed before me for my happiness, for my fulfillment. I need to see that nothing happens without justice, without a reason, a reason that concerns me."

When painful situations don't change or aren't resolved, isn't everything just a big fraud? What does it mean that pain and trial are the way the Mystery makes Himself present? To answer this, we have to immerse ourselves in the modality with which Jesus experienced it, because Jesus wasn't spared evil; Jesus suffered evil. But what is the difference? That the suspicion never won in Jesus. Why didn't it win? This is the question. We believe it didn't win because Jesus was better. Jesus could do it because He was more courageous than us, because He had more energy—deep down, because He's God (thus, reducing Jesus to a stupendous moralist, a rabid Kantian who has more energy for avoiding defeat). This is the conception that passes in the end: that obedience, deep down, is ultimately about how good we are; if we're really good, we can remain at-

tached. Look, we've already reached this point. In School of Community, we began with faith as a way of knowing, the test of which is freedom as satisfaction. In just three chapters, we've returned to the old framework—Christianity as moralism, understand? It doesn't take much. You see this in the way we conceive of Jesus: Jesus was better and could do this. Since we're not so good, when these things happen, we can yield. It would be a pity for us to leave School of Community without changing our concept of obedience.

Actually, evil was unable to defeat Jesus because it couldn't break Jesus' bond with the Father, could not sever the relationship Jesus had with the Father. In Jesus, the suspicion about the goodness of the Father didn't win. In Jesus, the moralist didn't win, the Son did. His obedience was the victory of this bond, the victory of sonship, of attachment, which is a judgment on the Mystery. Evil didn't introduce suspicion, didn't make it to win. Instead, we want to be strong without bonds; we want to be Christians without Christ, as if Jesus had to do the will of the Father without this bond with the Father. We want to get by on our own energy. As one of you said, "I would change the title from 'Reality is what cries, "He exists!"' to 'Reality is what cries, "Everything is Mystery."' Before the fact of Eluana, I acknowledge that the fact that she exists is a mystery, but I stop there; I don't go further and say that I need Christ in order to look at this situation." He can't go further and say he needs Christ, that he needs a bond stronger than any evil. Instead, obedience is reasonable only if we see that in this bond, in this belonging to the Father lies "the success of life,"¹⁸ because leaving You, Christ, is the true sacrifice. In Jesus, what has won? This relationship with the Father, the bond, a lived belonging. Without this, friends, as soon as something comes along that exceeds our measure, we see that our faith has an expiration date. I'll close by reading this letter; look at the degree of profundity of experience a person can reach:

"Dearest Fr. Carrón: My second child, Giovanni, was born with a very serious congenital heart condition and within a few years he will need his first heart transplant. In July of this past year, I had

an unexpected phone call from Victoria, a young woman in Rome, six months pregnant, who'd just discovered that her child would be born with a heart disease very similar to my son's. She told me that the next day she and her husband were going to Barcelona to abort the child (in Italy, it was too late in the pregnancy). A niece of Vittoria who lives in Como and who, through a bizarre series of circumstances, knew my story, had tracked down my phone number and encouraged her aunt to call me. Initially, Vittoria didn't even want my number; it was too painful to talk anymore about the choice they'd made and, also, she was concerned about her husband's health, because in the past he'd had serious depression. However, an unexplainable something urged her to call me, without her husband's knowledge. We spoke for about half an hour. While she was explaining, I understood that the child's heart condition was much more serious than she herself thought, but I deliberately didn't tell her, so as not to worsen the position of the child. When I told my husband about this detail, he very decisively said, 'Excuse me, did Giussani ever hide from you any of the toil of living? Didn't he instead bet everything on your freedom?' We decided to find an intelligent way to let Vittoria have all the factors in hand she needed to decide. We thought of putting her in touch with our cardiologist, so she could be informed thoroughly about her son's heart disease. I called her back to give her the number and to ask if I could call the next day to know what the doctor had said (and also to have a pretext for speaking with her again). The next day, Vittoria was the one to call me. She informed me that she was about to leave for the airport to go to Barcelona. My blood froze in my veins. Then, she quickly added, 'We bought a ticket for Alice, too, our firstborn, and we're going on holiday. I'm not going to have the abortion.' It's impossible to describe the joy I felt. I told her I was very happy that the cardiologist had eased her fears, but she promptly told me, 'The cardiologist has nothing to do with it. I had already decided after our phone call. You've saved my son's life.' After several phone calls, I felt the need to meet her personally, and in mid-October I went to Rome for the day to do so. Ini-

tially, Sergio, my husband, and I were at a loss about the price of the ticket and the trouble it would take to organize things for the family. But it was enough for us to ask ourselves, ‘What price are we willing to pay to obey the way the Mystery decides to happen in our life?’ It didn’t take much for us to answer together, as School of Community reminds us: ‘He made Himself obedient, even unto death.’ Just as Christ’s attitude toward the Father was obedience, the attitude we need to have toward Christ is the same. Obedience defines Christ’s attitude before the Father. Christ acknowledges, accepts, and adheres to the design of the Father, so that even when the Father’s design means His death, Christ acknowledges it as the road of His life. This is why God glorified Him and gave everything into His hands. This is why we decided I should go. In Rome, I was welcomed like a queen. While we were strolling along the streets of the city, I asked Vittoria what had persuaded her, because things didn’t add up for me. I didn’t think I’d said anything so decisive. [See? The power of a fact, and you don’t even realize the power of what’s there.] She said she’d been struck by the fact that I was a happy woman and that my husband and I had decided to have two more children after our Giovanni, who is now five years old. She couldn’t understand how, with such a gravely compromised son, we could’ve decided not only not to abort, but also to have other children. Simple—I told her—we needed a way to tell Giovanni, without saying it, that life is good. He would only understand it if he saw me and my husband certain of this goodness. What better way than to give him siblings? She added, ‘This is what persuaded me.’ After spending the morning and early afternoon together, they accompanied me to the airport. Piero, her husband, was incredulous that I’d wasted time and money to go to Rome just to meet them. He kept saying, ‘I thought you’d come to Rome for business. Instead, you’re here just for us. Nobody in the world would’ve done this.’ I told him that, actually, there was a long list of friends who’d wanted to be there with me but who hadn’t been able to come. But I want to tell you another fact, the decisive one, the one that has shaken up my life. While I was walking toward the

gate, Vittoria burst into tears, saying, ‘I don’t want to lose you. You’ve given my son his life.’ I smiled at her, but felt like yelling in her face, ‘Not me, not me, but He who is giving life to us, as well, in this instant, and who is giving us to each other!’ I held my tongue. Smiling and looking her in the eyes, I said with an unknown tenderness, ‘Don’t cry!’ During the flight I reflected on this fact, and was sorry I hadn’t told her what I was thinking. The next evening, studying the exhibit on Saint Paul that I presented in Bergamo, I read from one of the Pope’s addresses at a general audience, ‘According to Paul, the life of the Christian implies our identification with Christ, and Christ’s with us. Paul writes: “We have been completely united with Him. Christ is in us, Christ is in me.”’ As I finished reading, I thought back on the scene I described to you, and it almost knocked the breath out of me as Jesus’ encounter with the widow of Nain came to mind. He’d told her, ‘Woman, don’t cry!’ and restored her son to her. From that time, this has been my dominant thought: how can it be that Christ has so bent over my nothingness as to make me one with Him? Who is He, that He has had such compassion for my nothingness? Who is Cristina, that You should care for her? A poor thing. And what does Christ do with me? He has decided to go out of His way for this poor woman, a nothing, an absolute nothing, whom He has decided to make everything with Him, a unity, precisely one thing alone, freely. Who is He? My God, what gratitude! As usual, the Beloved takes my breath away. In the meantime, the little one was born, Filippo, and has been hospitalized for about a month at the Bambin Gesù hospital in Rome. Vittoria has met Paola, a friend of the Movement in Rome, with six children. Seeing the friendship and gladness of Paola is helping and comforting Vittoria and Piero. I don’t know what will become of them, if they’ll ever fall in love with Him whom we’ve fallen in love with, but I know well what I want to become of me: crazy or balanced, sick or well, all His, all Him. Nothing else interests me.”

ASSEMBLY

December 6th, afternoon

Julián Carrón: A great number of questions arrived, and we've chosen some of the most significant ones. So, let's get started.

I'm Maria Laura from Rome. Yesterday, reading a girl's letter, you told us that even if we enjoy a beautiful evening together, there always re-emerges a sadness, which is a good, because it is the entreaty for meaning. I wonder if this sadness will ever end? When do we find the meaning? What meaning have you found? Do you have this sadness? Certainly!

Isn't it a contradiction? I don't see sadness as positive at all, because I want joy in my life, not sadness. I don't want to be sad.

Let's help each other understand this, because it's a question that returns often, Maria Laura. Why does sadness happen? Because we're missing something. Isn't it the sign that we're missing something? An absent good. And why is this? Why can there be this sadness after a lovely evening? Because this sadness is the sign of your greatness, my greatness: we're so great, we're so made for the Infinite, for the totality, so much so that the party isn't enough for us. At times, this amazes us, because we'd almost prefer that the Mystery had made us a bit less great, and that we could content ourselves with a bit less. It's as if a chill ran through us before this greatness, so unbounded, and we wanted to reduce it. Instead, don't you see that this sadness is the sign of our greatness?

Then, if you understand this, you begin to see that recognizing it is a good, because so often, if you don't recognize it, somebody will take you for a ride, because he'll say that what responds to your sadness is a certain thing, and then another person will sell you something else, and another sells you something else again, and so on. How many times have you gone after so many things that promised

you this answer, and duped you? First, we accept this reduction—they convince us that it's better to reduce this sadness—and then they dupe us. Instead, if we begin to perceive it as a good, as the capacity I have of judging everything, then nobody will take me for a ride...

So I should be happy to be sad?

No, you should begin to judge—it's not that you should be happy; happiness arrives when it arrives. You should begin to judge, to acknowledge that when they offer you an answer that is unreasonable because it doesn't respond to all the greatness of your question, you have the clarity needed for not going backwards.

But, you say, if we've encountered Christ, if we've encountered the meaning, what's the sense of this sadness? What's the sense of this sadness for me? This sadness, this dissatisfaction, which is a different dissatisfaction, has the meaning of challenging us to look for this meaning. I always give the example of longing. A person in love feels longing for the beloved, right?

Yes.

Yes. And is this longing positive or negative?

It's positive.

It's positive; she misses something. She's encountered the beloved and feels longing for his presence. It's positive. Would you like to be in love and not feel this longing?

It would mean I wasn't in love.

Good. It's the same thing for me with Christ. This is why I'm not interested in any kind of relationship that doesn't have within it this longing for Christ, this sadness that enkindles the desire to find Him more and more. And so when I feel this sadness it's like this kind of longing. Why do I feel this? Because I miss You, O Christ, and I thank You for this because without this sadness, without feeling Your absence, without feeling this longing for You, I couldn't live. Do I explain myself?

Clearly.

If the point of departure is an abstraction, you don't understand; if it's an experience, you understand. If you start from experience, you understand these things. This shows how our reason often functions outside experience, and for this reason we don't understand many things, and in this way we'd like life to be different, when, in reality, nobody would like to have this longing lifted, because this is the permanent chance for a relationship, the thing that always makes me think of Christ.

And this—I was saying—is different from a person who's alone, who hasn't found an answer, who hasn't encountered a meaning. Because for one who's encountered Christ, this sadness is embraced by His presence, and therefore it isn't a contradiction; I'm already fully embraced and everything that remains is because the Lord wants to bring me beyond, beyond the fullness I've reached, to give me an ever greater intensity, to fill me more and more. If you want to settle for less, that's your problem. It's not my concern; it doesn't interest me.

I'm Gabriele, from Rome, and I study at La Sapienza University. Today, talking about the high school teacher, you said that disobedience was not giving a darn about what was happening. Regarding the occupation of my department [by left-wing students], I've been very involved in the relationship with my classmates, and I've also participated in the assemblies held by the students' collective. With friends in the Movement, we've also written a flyer with a judgment against the obstruction of lectures. In short, it's not that I don't give a darn. However, notwithstanding all this, I was very angry. So I ask myself, what does it mean to be committed, to be involved?

A lot of times, as I was saying this morning, it happens that we feel acknowledged, and then, instead of letting ourselves be struck by reality, which challenges us to look for meaning, we say, "I understand, and I'm not interested anymore," because we already have the answer. So often we already have the prefabricated answer. And what happens? That when it's this way, people have no interest in our ideologically constructed answers? As the teacher said, the consequence

is a lot of anger. And I say: thanks be to God, my friends, because we don't need prefabricated answers either, as if Christianity, what remains of Christianity, were a discourse that we know well, and we get there, say our discourse, and yet fail to come to grips with reality. It's not useful for us, because it's more and more common that people are far from this. So we remain with our correct discourse, the others ignore us, and we're increasingly angry, because we're always excluded. It's fundamental to understand this, because otherwise we'll just increase membership in the party of angry people. A lot of Christians are angry at a world that is falling apart before their eyes. "We're right, and nobody's listening to us!" It was for good reason that Jesus became flesh (He didn't send a speech by mail; He could've sent us instructions by mail). He became man to be our companion in the way He lived reality.

Remember the last letter this morning, the beautiful one by Cristina? What convinced her friend not to abort? The doctor's speech or Cristina's witness? Cristina thought that she'd be convinced by the reasons offered by the doctor. Instead, no. "What convinced me was seeing how you lived your relationship with your son who has this disease." It's not enough for us just to have the right doctrine! What's needed is for me to have an experience before the sick child, the sick child I have, such that, in the way I have to live it, I perceive it as a good for me. If I don't experience this, you can imagine just how useful having the right doctrine about life will be for the mother. How useful is it to spouses trying to hold their family together to have the right doctrine on matrimony? We, too, are called to do the journey of knowledge; that is, we are challenged by the Mystery to enter into reality in such a way that this increasingly becomes a chance for living. So, if I perceive it this way, if I begin to live it within any experience, I verify my faith and am less and less angry, because, regardless of the fact that I'm in the minority and that the others ignore what I say, I begin to have a positive experience of living for me. This is the modality of communicating it to others, because the content and the method coincide.

There's no other way to communicate what we say than by living

it. There's no other modality for communicating the correct and clean discourse than testimony. Because, otherwise, what do we make of Christianity? Once again, a stupendous theory. But, if the Word became flesh, now we can't go back and remove Him from the flesh to reduce it to a discourse. Christianity is communicated through the flesh of the witness. To be witnesses, it's not enough to watch the bulls from the stands; we have to get down into the ring. We have to see whether this journey of knowledge is a good for us, a thing that builds life for us, something that makes us increasingly ourselves, of greater solidity, more grateful. If we don't do this, we'll go on more and more being the angry ones with the correct discourse.

This is the opportunity for us, because we see more and more that a world is collapsing before our eyes and the people are ever more distant. How can we start fresh? We start fresh the way Christianity began, the way Saint Paul started fresh. Can you imagine Saint Paul, when the whole world thought differently from him, angrily traveling the roads of the Roman Empire to bring Christ? Or was he entirely enthusiastic about what he'd encountered, because it enabled him to enter into reality, to face everything with the presence of Christ, in such a way as to verify what happened in his own life? Or Saint Benedict? They were people living in a situation that is slowly but surely becoming ours as well. We can get angry at the world because it doesn't think according to our thoughts, and simply say it's wrong. Or we can listen to Péguy: Jesus didn't waste time reproving the world for being bad. He cut straight through, and created Christianity; that is, He began living, in His relationship with reality, what we said this morning.

I'm Lorenzo from the Polytechnic in Milan. Lately, I've realized that I haven't been living this period fully, and I'm dissatisfied. My response to this is to wait—I'm certain that an answer exists, but at the moment it's not evident in the least. I don't experience it. I had my doubts about coming to the Spiritual Exercises, for example, and I've questioned the experience we live. However, reading a note my

mother had written in The Religious Sense, in which she said that doubt is the fruit of disengagement from reality, I wonder if my attitude is the problem. The question that derives from all this is: how can I break this disengagement? How can I recognize the answer, and when will the waiting end?

Let's start from what your mother said. Doubt is the fruit of disengagement from reality. How do you answer if I ask whether this piece of paper is white?

Yes, it is.

Yes. You see that there's no problem recognizing it? Do you have any doubts?

No.

No. When we're not disengaged from reality, doubt is overcome. But for this—as you see—you don't need who knows what kind of particular energy. You simply need loyalty. But even if you have a tiny bit of loyalty, it's not automatic. It's not a huge effort, but the "I" must be engaged. Acknowledgment of reality isn't automatic; it's a gesture of the "I," involves the "I." You can be a fraction of an inch away from reality without engaging yourself, without making a gesture of acknowledgment, or you can simply acknowledge it, be loyal to yourself and acknowledge it, and the doubt is overcome. It's very easy, very easy, but it's dramatic because it's not automatic. Understand? We want to spare ourselves this, but imagine your relationship with all the rest, with your friends, with yourself, without this involvement. If you don't engage with loyalty (because it's simply a loyalty to what happens), you remain ever more distant, ever more in doubt, because it just takes a fraction of an inch to remain in doubt. Instead, if, every time, before any thing, the "I" is engaged, it's the victory over this doubt, over this separation, over this disengagement, and therefore you're increasingly attached, more certain, in one sense or the other, and then you grow. If, instead, we remain detached, we're increasingly prey to states of mind, continually changing sentiments, and increasingly lost.

I'd like to eliminate this drama for you, but it's impossible. I'd like to alleviate the toil, but it's not possible, friends, because this is our greatness, our dignity. You can accept it, and then life will become ever clearer, ever more certain. Or you can detach and remain increasingly in doubt, on quicksand. This is a choice you have to make. It doesn't make life any easier. If this disengagement made life any easier, I'd say, who the heck expects us to do otherwise? Instead, it's exactly the opposite: you remain ever more lost, and therefore life is more complicated, and you don't know how to move. I say, isn't it more consonant with our need and our desire for meaning, to engage ourselves, to answer the challenge of reality, the provocation reality flings at us? Each one of us has to consider the response, because nobody can answer for you.

My name is Agnese and I'm studying Education at Catholic University in Milan. In the silence on the bus ride here I was thinking about what I want from life, in terms of my relationship with my boyfriend, my studies, and my friendships. I don't have a clear idea about what I want, or, rather, a lot of things come to mind, but I'd never think of saying just one thing, so decisively and certain as Cristina wrote in her letter: "Being entirely His. Nothing else interests me." How do you arrive at this certainty? How can I keep these days from becoming just a parenthesis? How can I keep from stopping at the repercussion, and instead make it a method in everything, every day?

So, you're not the way you say you are! If you desire to affirm, "Being entirely His. Nothing else interests me," I wouldn't say that everything's up in the air. Something is already clear!

Yes.

To reach that point, you need to travel a road; you have to journey. This is what we're constantly trying to accompany each other in doing, through our gestures, our staying together, our responding to the challenges of life. Like the disciples did, and unlike the crowd. What enabled the Apostles to reach this certainty? They were in-

volved in a relationship with Jesus, and at a certain moment (as you would like for yourself), for them, the sacrifice would be to leave Him. They didn't remain because they wanted to please Jesus—they remained because, without Him, where could they go?

The disciples, who were poor fellows like us, who messed up royally, who wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans when they got angry, who bickered among themselves, didn't understand—like us, exactly like us. It's not that the Gospel paints them unrealistically; all their faults and limitations are explicit, because the Gospel didn't need to take away any of their faults. But in the midst of these faults, they journeyed a road that enabled them, slowly but surely, to become increasingly fond of Jesus. The question is whether every circumstance we live, every moment of life, is like a fresh coat of glue for us, because this is how you truly begin to understand what you want, the difference between persisting without a meaning, without fulfillment in life, or having this experience of fullness that glues you ever more tightly to Jesus.

This is a journey. Often we're worried about being good, or coherent, but we're like the disciples, full of limitations. This shouldn't confound us; it doesn't interest us. What interests us? That, slowly but surely, every experience we have enables us to understand ever more clearly what we want. And this is what will bring you to an affection for Christ, to the point that you can say: "Your grace is worth more than life. I want to remain with You. Being entirely Yours is what interests me." This was the outcome of a journey, a shared life together, a verification of a proposal made, an obedience to the correspondence with Christ. If you've found this correspondence, like the disciples, what's there to stop you from involving yourself in such a way as to verify more and more whether this correspondence is what truly makes life more beautiful, clearer, more satisfying in everything, in your studies, in the relationships with your friends, in the relationship with your boyfriend? In everything, in everything you experience...

Without this, it wouldn't be reasonable, because nobody asks you to adhere to something that you haven't verified. What did Jesus do?

“Look, friends, I become man to accompany you. More than that, I can’t do. I can say: look, if you come with Me, life is more beautiful, the hundredfold here and eternal life.”

This is the challenge. For someone who wants to reach fullness and happiness in living, this is the greatest challenge. And it isn’t seen just in a theory of the past; it’s seen in people who witness that, living this way, life is more interesting. It’s not that we’re idiots and we’re here because we don’t have anything better to do on the weekend; it’s because we’ve experienced this. So then, if we accompany each other in this, slowly, slowly, we’ll have this experience and we’ll understand increasingly more why it’s reasonable to adhere, to be Christians. Without this, you don’t have adequate reasons.

I’m Vera from Munich, Germany, and I study Psychology. In these months, I’ve been coming to see how all the theories I have to study don’t suffice to explain man. There’s a mysterious factor that goes beyond any measure of mine. Here, even more, here with you, I recognize an exceptionality that I find nowhere else. How can I look at reality in such a way that it’s evident that the Mystery has the face of Christ? Reality: precisely everything, even the things that don’t correspond to me... How can I say His name without it being abstract or a label?

I want to thank you, because the way you link experience and your studies is decisive. So often, on one side, we have our studies and, on the other, our experience. Instead, that she is beginning to realize that all those theories aren’t enough to explain man—this mysterious factor that exceeds every measure—is a decisive question for her studies. Otherwise, what psychology is she studying? An already reduced psychology. It can happen in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, in everything. I think this is fundamental for overcoming the dualism we have at times: on the one hand, our experiences, our studies, that use reason as measure, and on the other, our experience of this fierce battle that the Mystery undertakes with us to break this measure, as I said this morning. Exhilarated by the experience you’ve had, if you want to understand the psychology of a person, you have

to start from this experience, otherwise you won't understand anything, and I'll never send anyone to your clinic, not because I don't want to, but because you'd cause more harm than good. Understand? So this tells you that if you start out from this hypothesis, you have to try to study more, that is, you have a true motive for studying, for verifying how all the things you study relate to your experience. It gives you more curiosity to stimulate your study. Then, studying is different, if it relates to the experience you have. Our experience isn't for those who want to become devout and pious on the one side, and let their studies run along a different track. No, we want to become men and women and overcome this dualism that causes the division of the "I," separating the way I use reason according to a measure from the experience I have. This is why your question struck me, because it already contains the beginning of an answer; realizing this in the way you study is fundamental.

I'm Cecilia from Turin. Today, you completely overturned the situation, when you said you're sure about what you say, not because you start out from God, but because you start out from reality.

I totally overturned it for you?

Yes, you overturned everything for me, because this means saying, then, that the point in facing things isn't that we have to make an effort to demonstrate that...

Good! Finally! Do you all see? It's not that we have to make an effort to support the existence of God. You understand? Very good! But...?

...But stay before an evidence.

But stay before what is there. Then you rest. It's not that we support Him with our attempt (as if the Mystery needed us to support His existence!). He exists. Relax... We have to relax a minute—He exists, and none of our problems can cast doubt on this fact. I always say this with a joke: look how the mountains are trembling at our doubts of their existence! They're not trembling in the least! We're

so modern that we're convinced that we're the ones who create reality, and if we support it, it exists, and if we don't support it, we let it collapse into the void. Finally, we're beginning to understand that maybe it's the opposite, and so we can relax a little.

*Yes. That is, above all, on the one hand, it's very freeing.
Good; very freeing.*

And, on the other, before the world's relativism, it's the only position, because you're not defending your own particular point of view.

Perfect, perfect!

So then, my question is about the next step. Today, you said there's the temptation to "do" Christianity without Christ. I realized that, I don't know why in the world, but as long as it's a matter of saying, "Mystery," "Presence," "companionship," its okay; but when it means saying "Jesus Christ," I feel a veil of embarrassment fall over me, a fear of slipping into visionary spiritualism. It shook me up today when you spoke of Him as someone alive. So my desire is that I, too, can speak of Him like you.

Look at the passage you've made between reality and Mystery: you had the same trouble with the Mystery before that you have with Christ now. You've taken a giant step. Now you have to take another, right? That someone can tranquilly say, as you've done, that He exists, without having to make an effort to sustain that He exists, simply acknowledging Him, is important.

The point of departure is always reality. What is the reality that enables us to tranquilly acknowledge Christ? An exceptionality. Once you've understood what you've said, the step of Christ is the easiest. Do you know why? Because He's more exceptional; because the more beautiful a thing is, the more exceptionally beautiful, the easier it is to acknowledge it. And Jesus is so exceptional, so unique that He's easily recognizable, with absolutely unmistakable features—it's precisely Him, with a capacity for tenderness, with a capacity for

correspondence, with a love for freedom, with a passion for destiny. Where do you find Someone like this? Along the road every day? To be a Christian, you have to be a genius—not that you need any particular quality, but in the sense that among many faces, you can discover the face of one person, first name and last name, nothing abstract; first name and last name. The more exceptional it is, the easier it is to acknowledge it. Do you understand why the disciples had no problem recognizing Jesus? It was easy to recognize Him. Do you think there were many others like Jesus in His time? Why was it easy for us to recognize Giussani? Were there a lot of Giussanis? Why was it easy to recognize the exceptionality that brought you here? Do you have a lot of companions like this? It's easy, absolutely easy.

So then, the more exceptional it is, the more you are struck, the more you are taken, the more—as we said this morning—you are magnetized. Then you have to ask yourself: now that I find myself magnetized by this, in history, when did it begin? And if you don't give up on this question, on this simplicity—I assure you, I challenge you—you will end up being able to say His name to explain that exceptionality. It's very easy. Don't complicate things for yourselves. It's very easy. The more exceptional it is, the easier it is.

This evening, we'll see it, listening to our friend Vicky. When everyone else rejected her, among her relatives, in her village, were there many who would get close to her? Who, when Vicky moved away on the bed, would also move, to be closer to her? And when, as Vicky said, she stank, was there someone who instead of moving off, came closer to her? Were there many people like that? Did Vicky have a hard time recognizing in Rose's face the unmistakable features of Christ, now? She'll tell us this evening. We have trouble for just one reason: the way we detach from experience. We think this happens outside history. The others who enter into a relationship with us recognize it better than we do, so much so that the greatest grace for us are the people who arrive last, those who are more open to wonder than us, because, at a certain point, we've come to take for granted these unmistakable features, and thus we think that they've descended from the heavens, that it's through magic. No, no, no, no, no—

no magic, no falling from the heavens. It's simply a chain of witnesses with a precise origin: Jesus of Nazareth.

I'm Guadalupe from the Complutense University in Madrid. Why is it that we have such trouble using affectively engaged reason? I don't want to end up like the crowd that abandoned Jesus. In you, I see a reason affectively supported, which goes to the heart of reality; that is, you say the name of Christ. Why is it that Jesus asked, "Do you want to go?" instead of, "Do you believe in Me?"?

Precisely for this, to challenge us to use reason in a way that is affectively engaged, because without this challenge of Jesus, we'd have acted like the crowd. Instead, the more we are struck by this, by His presence, the more He magnetizes us. It's a fresh coat of glue, and you desire all the more to commit yourself.

Look friends, if you fall in love, it's not toilsome—it's just because of reason affectively engaged. Is it complicated? And afterwards, if you don't commit with your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your friends, you can't understand the good they are for your life. The same happens with Jesus, but on a much greater scale, because of what we were saying before, because He's so exceptional that it's easier. We have to get out of our heads the idea that Christianity is difficult; it's only difficult in your head. The more exceptional it is, the easier it is to recognize Him, and therefore to commit yourself, let yourself be taken. It's an abstraction that we see Christianity outside experience—because, what is the normal experience we have? That reason is affectively engaged. And I want to engage myself in this. Our freedom is in play, not because it's complicated; I engage because I don't want to lose Him. You do what you want, but I engage because I don't want to lose Him. The disciples engaged with Jesus not to do Him a favor, but because they didn't want to lose Him. This is obedience to this experienced correspondence that we've studied in School of Community, because you don't want to lose that relationship that fills your life, your eyes, your heart with joy. I engage myself for this. Why? Because I can't stand living without Him any more. It's not that I don't feel sadness, like everyone else, or solitude, but all this for me is a re-

source, not a difficulty. I thank Him that all these things happen to me as they do to everyone, that I'm not different from everyone. I don't want to be different from everyone! Because if I were different from everyone, I wouldn't need Him; I wouldn't need to engage myself. I wouldn't need to feel affection for Him. I don't want to be different. I want to be like everyone, because the Mystery made us this way and we're such idiots that we think He made us badly. No, He made us very well, made us in such a way that we let ourselves become glued to Him. But we let ourselves become glued to Him if we allow ourselves to be struck, if we let ourselves be attracted, fascinated by His presence.

This is why I am and always will be grateful to Fr. Giussani for this modality of speaking to us of Christ, of introducing us to Christianity in this way, because now I can't judge or experience sadness without remembrance of Him. So when someone asks me, "How do you manage?" I say, "How can you manage to live without Him? Explain it to me! I'll explain it to you very well, because I do it." That is, what amazes me is how you can live without engaging yourselves. How can you? How can you live without observing silence? How can you live without reading School of Community? How can you live without hearing His voice? I couldn't keep living if I didn't hear His voice anymore. How can you do it? Tell me! So often we live badly; you can't be here without thinking, without experiencing that here, here, in this relationship, is the success of life. Afterwards, I make mistakes like everybody else, but this doesn't distract or confound me; it doesn't leave me bewildered. I always know what I long for, and that I long for Him. I can seek Him or not, but I know what I long for. Sometimes I'll say "yes" and sometimes I'll say "no," but I know what I long for, and when I'm sad because I say "no," I know full well why I'm sad; it's not that it confuses me. I want to use my energy for this.

I'm Sara from Milan, and I wanted to ask why, in the face of difficulties, I let other criteria take precedence. Everything exceptional I've experienced in this beginning of the academic year doesn't break through my struggle in certain situations, in which I feel...

Because the Lord didn't promise to spare you toil, do you understand, Sara? If He took away the struggle, how would you feel your need for Him? Christ didn't promise to spare us toil (let's call a spade a spade), as Cristina's letter this morning said.

I don't doubt the presence of Christ, but why isn't the bond with Him pertinent to everything? Why doesn't it overcome every circumstance? Sometimes I'm afraid I'm missing something. Before, you said that a person is an idiot if he thinks something is missing, but in certain situations that happen over and over, I always feel I have no energy.

Look, let's take the example of a mother and child. Often, the child sees his mother and clings to her, and other times he goes off and does his own thing. Does this mean that he's missing something that his mother fails to give him, or that he just needs time to truly understand? It's not that he's lacking anything in particular; he lacks the awareness that the most precious good for him is the relationship with his mother. How do you learn the difference between Jesus and any other thing? At times, you learn this by choosing another thing, because you see that it's not the same. This is why Jesus has no problem, and tells you, "Compare Me with everything, Sara, compare Me with everything, because in this way you'll understand who I am."

We need time, and shouldn't be amazed that weakness is weak, that fragility is fragile. The central thing is that you always start fresh from what has happened to you, because the encounter for us isn't the end; it's the beginning for entering, then, into every circumstance. You might've blown it the evening before, but the next morning when you're feeling sad, who can stop you—as we've been educated—from letting in fresh air, the tender gaze of the Annunciation, by praying the *Angelus*? What's there to stop you?

Nothing.

In fact, maybe after blowing it the evening before, you realize more fully what a grace it is to pray the *Angelus*, and so you begin to understand what a difference it is. Because without traveling this very

human road, where you make mistakes, where you fall, where you let Christ's gaze, so full of tenderness, enter, you don't understand who Christ is. The Lord gives us the time and space needed to reach this certainty full of humanity (which isn't magic at all; no lightning bolts), made up of real things, just as the child grows in his bond of affection with his mother. Do you think that the child, making mistakes over and over, ends up concluding that anything is better than his mother? Does he come to this conclusion? No. Doing everything, he bonds more and more with his mother.

The Mystery isn't afraid of our freedom, our mistakes. We are. We're easily shocked. He gives us all the time in the world to acknowledge Him. We're the ones interested in learning as quickly as possible; He waits for you until the relationship becomes a bond that involves everything. But it's a human journey, very human, full of the normal things of life, the same way you came to certainty about your mother, with all sorts of things happening on the way. Why should it be different with Jesus? We see that it's the same for the Apostles.

I'm Ahmad and I study in Pavia. I was struck by what you said, even though I'd already heard some of these things from my friends, because it's true that everything you've said corresponds to me. They're true; they're part of the experience I'm having. But even with this consciousness of the correspondence you described, I still find it hard to apply this to my life. Why? Why do I and others struggle to accept these facts and this reality, even though we know that they correspond to us a hundred percent? Does the fact that I struggle mean that I hate myself? Does it also mean that my reason still isn't affectively engaged?

Do you all see? I chose this question so that many of us could recognize this problem. These facts, this reality correspond to us one hundred percent. It's not that it's unclear or we're a bit confused. No, we know that it corresponds to us one hundred percent. It's a judgment: nobody is like Him. We, too, today, can acknowledge that we've never seen anything like it. A hundred percent; it corresponds to us

a hundred percent! But then we struggle. Why? Because even if it corresponds to us a hundred percent, a gesture of the “I” isn’t spared. Even if it corresponds to everything you desire—I can give you a gift, which is He whom you most desire—but you at least have to accept it, right? Does it seem human to you?

Yes.

Jesus doesn’t want to spare us this. But it’s not toilsome. Often Fr. Giussani would get angry, precisely when someone would say, “But it takes so much courage!” What courage? You don’t need any courage. You need this “yes,” and that’s all! You see the correspondence; what courage do you need? Just one thing is needed: simplicity, or, if you like, loyalty. There’s no struggle; no particular energy is required. I just have to yield to this attractiveness of Christ that corresponds to me, because I acknowledge it as corresponding one hundred percent. Yield and acknowledge Him.

I’m Federica from Milan. I wanted to ask you a question on the last point you touched upon today, when you spoke about suspicion. In the face of the objection of pain and evil, it’s really true that we can have the same experience of sonship as Christ, and enter into reality with this positive hypothesis. Why, instead, do moralism and diffidence intrude?

Do you love your mother?

Yes.

A lot?

Yes.

Are you sure?

Yes.

And you think you can come in with a negative hypothesis about anything your mother does with you?

No.

It's the same thing that happens with Christ. Do you have any particular struggle?

No.

That is, when you've reached this certainty about your mother's love, you wouldn't introduce another hypothesis into the relationship with her, and even if you don't understand, you'd ask, "Why, Mom, why are you doing this?"—but you can't ask if you don't start out from a positive experience.

The same thing happened to Jesus. If Jesus was the Son and had this relationship with the Father (He could be defined by this relationship of sonship with the Father), as you have this relationship with your mother, do you think there was another possibility than approaching the relationship with Him with this positive hypothesis? It's not so complicated or so far from our experience that we don't have the resources for understanding. Okay, at times we may do it or not do it, but you have to admit that it's comprehensible. The question is whether we've reached that degree of intensity, certainty, such a powerful bond with our mother (like Jesus' with His Father) that we can always to enter with this positive hypothesis. Therefore, the question of life is the deepening of this bond, that no pain, no toil can shake, introducing suspicion. After all, the world would have to collapse for you to introduce suspicion about your mother, don't you think? Actually, if the world fell apart, you'd still continue to say, "My mother, no. She must've gone crazy. To act like this, my mother would have to lose her mind; she'd have to stop being my mother, not the one I know," right? You'd have to throw your experience out the window, all the experience of every fiber of your being. Do you agree?

Yes.

Jesus would have to do the same, to enter with a different hypothesis. We're interested in this because we want to be absolutely reasonable. Is it reasonable for you to approach the relationship with your mother this way? Absolutely. With no other person are you so full of reasons for a positive approach to the relationship as with your

mother; nobody else. No other relationship of Jesus' enabled Him to enter reality so tranquilly as did His relationship with the Father.

I'm Cristina from Bologna. In his letter, Damiano said: "The illness is for me." I can't conceive of this because I'm going through a very difficult family situation. This morning, you said Christ's bond with the Father was what enabled Him to face death. However, before the big questions of my life, I just feel like everything is against me. Concretely, for you, what is this bond?

What I was trying to explain just now. I can't conceive of it either, outside a bond, but when this bond exists... if this bond is lacking, then, no.

Yes, but when I'm there I can only say, "Everything's against me." Okay. Why? Why is this bond lacking?

It's what I do in my life...

Perfect, perfect. This is the road we're saying has to be journeyed, right? It's not that you have to go to the gym tomorrow to train to be a better person, to have more energy. No! The child doesn't need to go to the gym; he needs to live a relationship that brings him the certainty we spoke of earlier. The question is whether, with all that happens, this bond grows in us; whether, every time—like the disciples—that we live in the relationship with Him, it's a fresh coat of glue.

If you think you can comprehend it outside this relationship, I understand it's impossible; it's impossible to understand that things like those we've heard about can happen. But this is Christianity, my friends. Cristina never would've dreamed of writing such a letter, just as Vicky never would've dreamed of saying what she's going to tell you this evening, if it weren't for a lived experience. Christianity can't be conceived of before it happens. This is why I understand that someone may not be able to conceive of it, and this means that, often, we only *think* of Christianity. We think we can live it without Christ, but without Christ we can't even conceive of it.

But, excuse me, in Bologna, I have a lot of people close to me, and

then I return where I have these problems and I can't manage there, because I don't have these people close to me.

It means that when you're with your friends, you need to travel your own personal road, so that what you experience with your friends becomes yours.

Yes.

So that when you're alone in a situation, you're more defined by this that has taken root in you—even if your friends aren't there with you—than by the circumstance you're going through.

We want what we learn from others to become totally ours. This is why I so often say: we can't dream that it'll become ours without us. You won't learn math just by warming a chair in the classroom. Just warming a chair here doesn't work as a criterion. Do you understand why we can't spare ourselves this work?

And is this always possible?

Absolutely. Who's to stop you? Tomorrow, when you return, you can continue to have this relationship with your friends in Bologna, and you can try to live it ever more deeply and have your own personal experience. And one day, my dear, you'll have a big surprise. What surprise? That you'll go face the circumstance, and you'll feel free, not determined by the circumstance, but determined by what has happened to you. I expect you to write me when it happens. This is Christianity: not the outcome of your own effort, but the surprise that what's begun to make its way in you becomes so yours, that at a certain point you discover you've begun living it in that circumstance, which earlier was impossible to live, with this newness you have inside, because this newness has become yours. This is what we'll talk about tomorrow.

It's a friendship in which at a certain point what another tells you becomes so yours that you can't live without it; you're defined by this, and it doesn't depend on who tells you, because it's yours and you can enter into any circumstance—as Fr. Giussani said—with a deep tranquility and a capacity for gladness.

I'm Matteo, and I study Political Science at Catholic University in

Milan. Yesterday afternoon, you said we're friends because we're together to be able to look at these things; otherwise, we're together, but the more decisive things we live alone. And then this morning, speaking of friendship, speaking of Jesus asking His disciples, "Do you want to go as well?," you said He was truly their friend because He challenged them; that is, He wanted them to do the work, starting out from this experienced correspondence.

These two things struck me very much, because for some time now this question of friendship, the relationship with my friends, has begun to be urgent, to be a real need, and so, since I see that there's some difficulty, I wanted to ask you how in daily life, concretely, we can help each other deepen this bond with Christ. Because it's clear to me that we're friends for this; that is, we're friends because an Other puts us together.

Matteo, have you begun to glimpse a change in your concept of friendship?

Yes.

This is already the first step: what we said this morning has to be a judgment on how we live, on our conception of friendship (because often our concept of friendship, more than friendship, is collusion). According to our parameters, what Jesus did with His disciples in the passage I talked about this morning isn't a friendship. Instead, no. Jesus is a friend because He has their destiny at heart, their good, and since He doesn't take us for a ride (as instead we often do with each other), then He doesn't yield, attenuate, or reduce the need.

If you identify yourself, immerse yourself in Jesus' relationship with His disciples, in the friendship Jesus experienced with His friends, you begin to understand the meaning of the friendship among us, our being friends, that is, not accomplices. How can you be a friend and not an accomplice? By living with all your human need. What does Jesus do? He doesn't yield to the reduction of friendship. Jesus says, "Look, if you want to live, you have to eat this. Don't you understand? Do you want to go as well?" Or when He says, "Look, we have to go to Jerusalem, where I have to die." "No!" says

Peter. “Get out of my sight, Peter!” He doesn’t yield. This is a friend, someone who wants to live loyally with all the need for human fullness that He has within. And this is service; it is friendship with the friend, because if you look at him for his destiny, you can’t fail to desire to act like Jesus, and this is friendship. The rest is baloney, covered with the sacrosanct name of friendship.

We’ve always said to each other that friendship is a companionship to destiny. We’re friends if we journey to destiny. Otherwise—pay attention—our friendships won’t last, because in the name of a sentimental type of friendship, basically a collusion (as often happens, for example, in couples, in engagements), what happens? It doesn’t last. Over time, it loses our interest, because it’s made up of connivance between us, not true friendship.

This is why we can’t end this School of Community without asking what has changed in our concept of friendship, in our way of being together. As Fr. Giussani said, what we often call friendship doesn’t interest me at all. You can just imagine what Jesus would’ve said—I don’t think it would be very far from what Fr. Giussani said. Beginning to understand this means beginning to understand what loving each other truly means, being friends, having at heart not our collusion, but the good of the other, the destiny, the fullness of the other, the fullness that coincides with reaching the heart’s satisfaction (and we don’t decide what fulfils it). We’ve found it; we can live it or not live it, and friendship is this: if I love myself this way, I’ll be a friend to my friends, because I won’t want anything else for my friends than this. If, instead, I settle, I’ll look for friends who’ll settle. God makes them and then He pairs them.

December 7th, morning

Christianity is an event and persists as the spread of this event throughout history; it was made present to men and women through the humanity of a man, Jesus, and remains present in history through a humanity changed by the encounter with Jesus.

What makes us know that He is present before us? The different humanity He brings. This is why Fr. Giussani said, years ago, “The event of Christ becomes present ‘now’ in a phenomenon of different humanity.”¹⁹ Christianity is the impact with this different humanity, in which one discovers a new presentiment of life, something that increases the chance for certainty, for hope, for usefulness in living. All of us here can document this; Christ interests us because we’ve found here, in the present, a different way of living, such that we couldn’t help but feel curiosity, because we perceived it as advantageous for our life.

“I was deeply struck, when I got to the university,” one of you writes, “by the people I encountered. What was the difference? The way they took seriously every aspect of life, the way they were happy about every moment, the way I felt treated, even though they hardly knew me [everything begins this way]. I thought that I wanted to be like them, too, and I began to pursue their company, to try to understand how they live, to learn to live this way.” This is the beginning, something I have before me, that makes me want to grab on—“I began to pursue their company.” Why? “To understand how they live, to learn to live this way. I’m sure that this friendship is a good for me. Why? Because of the fact that it doesn’t distract me from my studies and from the things I’m called to do. On the contrary, it pushes me to do my duty.” The sign is that what we’ve encountered serves us, is useful for living, for living reality, for living what we have to face every day, the circumstances, the difficulties, the pain that we have to look in the face every moment. “The more I do my duty with

seriousness [we're not here for sparing each other this; otherwise, we wouldn't be friends], going to the heart of my studies and the circumstances of my life, the more staying with my friends is beautiful and true. This friendship never leaves me complacent, but always provokes me, when I least expect it; it's a continual call to my destiny, to the meaning of all things, and I realize more and more that everything happens for a reason and that the only way to understand what the Lord wants of me is to live reality."

It's really this way, as we've studied in School of Community. You find something that corresponds to you, and the obedience is in order not to lose what has happened. I encounter someone in front of me and I pursue friendship with that person to learn to live that way. This is why true obedience is a friendship, and for this you need someone who stays in front of you, because this way you can understand the steps this person takes and you can imitate her or him, so that they become yours; otherwise, we begin losing our way.

Another person writes me, "Since the Easter Spiritual Exercises, a new urgent need has worked its way into my life, "and this is the symptom of the truth and authenticity, or lack thereof, of our faith: if we expect everything from the fact of Christ, or if we expect from the fact of Christ what we decide to expect, ultimately making it a starting point and support for our projects, our plans." Faced with this provocation, I had to acknowledge which option I'd chosen as the substance of my life. I had decided upon it. I'm very involved in the Movement. Hearing this call to a radical position in terms of the experience I was living brought out the fact that I'd never considered expecting everything from the fact of Christ. All of a sudden, I saw that this challenge, which I had to rediscover in experience, corresponded much more than any position or discourse I'd sustained up to then, because it started out from my total desire. To be frank, it wasn't enough anymore to pull Christ out of my pocket, to use Him like a crutch to support what, at the moment, seemed the most important thing, and, above all, it wasn't enough anymore to doubt every time my life threatened to take an unexpected direction. The fact was that I didn't know Him. It's easy for me to speak about Him,

fill my mouth with His name. It's as easy as it's painful, and the pain is the realization that nothing underlies it and, no matter how coherent my discourse, it never gives me back a living experience. A need, I'd say a physiological need, has been born in me to truly know for the first time the face of this Jesus to whom I wanted to give my life. The risk I run, then, is to defend a part and say, 'Christ exists because I understand,' and this defense generates weariness."

As you see, if we're not careful, what began as an experience in the encounter with a different humanity, with a human difference that seized us, gets reduced to a discourse that never gives us back a living experience. As a friend said to me, so often it gets reduced to a discourse that you then try to apply, and, after a while, everything collapses.

As you see, this is a fundamental problem for continuing our road, because we find ourselves before a decisive question that, thanks be to God, Fr. Giussani had already looked in the face years ago. This is why I had *Traces* publish "Something that Comes First," because there Fr. Giussani corrected the Movement in terms of the risk that we now see among us. What is it? That we think there's a method for the beginning (when we have before us a human difference) and then another method for continuing. We think the encounter with this human difference is needed for starting, and then we try to possess a discourse; in doing so, as we've seen, we end up with our hands full of nothing.

Therefore, my concern is that we understand Christianity well, because this is the crucial question, the risk that can happen in general in the Church: you can acknowledge that Christianity was an event in history, but live as if this event remained in the past. What's the only thing left of this event? The attestation to this event, which is called the Bible. For us, the Movement can have been like this, an event, the only thing left of which is the discourse I learn and apply. Along the road, we've lost the flesh, the Mystery that became flesh to magnetize us (as we said yesterday). All our reason and our affection becomes,, once again, something abstract, incapable of grasping us. Instead, Christianity, if it wants to remain Christianity, if it wants to

be coherent with the modality with which it was born, must remain fleshly.

This is why, in that text, Fr. Giussani says something definitive for us, that we have to truly understand. The person's running into a human difference is something very simple (as we sought to testify yesterday), absolutely elementary, that comes before any other thing, "... that has no need of explanation, but *just needs to be seen*, intercepted. It is something that evokes wonder, awakens an emotion, constitutes a call [what a beautiful description, full of the flesh of life!], moves a person to follow because it corresponds to the structurally expectant awaiting of the heart."²⁰ "The event of Christ becomes present 'now' in a phenomenon of a different humanity: a man runs up against you and discovers in you a new presentiment of life, something that increases his chance of certainty, of positivity, of hope, and of usefulness in living, and moves him to follow. Jesus Christ [look at the continuity!], that man of two thousand years ago, is imminent, becomes present, under the veil, under the aspect of a different humanity. The encounter, the impact, is with a different humanity that strikes us because it corresponds to the structural needs of the heart more than any other modality of our thought or imagination—we never expected it, we never would've dreamed of it, it was impossible, it cannot be found elsewhere."²¹ This is a challenge for each of us. Look, a modality strikes, corresponds to the needs of the heart more than any other modality of our thought or imagination. Each one of us has to verify this; is it true or isn't it? Because otherwise, you don't have the reason for remaining attached to this difference.

He continues (pay attention, because here's the decisive issue): "Running up against the presence of a different humanity *comes before*, not only at the beginning, but in every moment that follows the beginning [in every moment that follows the beginning!]*—*a year or twenty years later. The initial phenomenon—the impact with a different humanity, the wonder born of it—is destined to be the *initial and original phenomenon of every moment of development*; there is no development if that initial impact is not repeated,"²² because if this initial impact isn't repeated, we don't go ahead; we simply repeat

what we've heard, simply try to interpret it, but there's no development. We have a continual example in the vicissitudes of the Jewish people; since its [Hebrew] content has become merely a canon fixed in the past, there remains the interpretation. There's no more development, just the effort to better interpret the discourse of the past. We can do the same, and then over time the Movement will no longer interest us, because nihilism wins; there aren't facts, just interpretations.

This is how Fr. Giussani continues to be our companion, because none of us could speak so pertinently about the need we have now. The originating factor is permanently the impact with a different humanity. It's not that, at a certain point, I say, "Okay, I understand. Now I'll take over," as if I had no need for the impact with a different humanity. [In the impact with a different humanity], you say, what liberation! What liberation enters my life! I can breathe freely and deeply now! So, therefore, if it doesn't happen again, if it isn't renewed, true continuity doesn't happen. It follows that the important thing isn't that I be better; the child doesn't have to be better, no. He has to acknowledge that he always needs his mother, that he always needs the impact with something that constantly awakens his heart, his curiosity, his affection. If you don't live the impact with a new human reality now, you don't understand what's happened to you in the past. Only if the event happens again does the initial event deepen; only in this way are continuity and development established.

This is why in School of Community, after faith, after the encounter and the experience of the satisfaction of freedom, we studied obedience, which is attaching yourself to, following this present humanity, this different humanity that is present.

One of you said, "Before the witnesses in whom we see a reawakened heart, the deepest questions renewed and living, and an exceptional gusto for life, I can't really say I'm all squared away. I wouldn't be loyal to myself if I said their experience isn't desirable for me, too." It's not that we're doing Jesus a favor. It's that you find before yourself something that's desirable for you, too. "Thus, many times, having people like this before me has helped me acknowledge

that that exceptional fact is for me, too, even though I've betrayed it a thousand times, and without it I'd conceive of myself much more narrow-mindedly, reduced to reaction and interpretation. My weakness lies in the distance between these witnesses or, better, what they carry, and me. It's like I'm always chasing after something that's never truly mine, and I'm sick of being good and recognizing my errors and the reduction of my heart. So what, then, is asked of me?" My dearest friend Pietro, only one thing is asked of you: the simplicity of following. Don't worry. Don't let the mistakes stop you. Just be like the child who doesn't stop because of his mistakes, or his falls, and is again drawn, attracted by the presence of his mother.

Do as Matilde, who even learns from her little brother. She says, "I want to tell you about the fact with which once again the presence of Christ has been made contemporary for me. I'll begin with a situation from the Page One section in November [Vol. 10, No. 10, 2008] *Traces*, because what is described there has happened to me. This running into a human difference is something very simple, absolutely elementary, that comes before everything, any catechesis, reflection, or development. It's something that doesn't need to be explained, just seen, intercepted, and constitutes a call, moves us to follow because of the correspondence to the structural expectations of the heart. It's strange, but this is exactly what's happened in the simplest and most unexpected way, because it's so truly close to me. This year, my brother Giuseppe began university and, surprisingly, something has changed. I've always had a good relationship with him, but never have I felt so strongly as now that I'm a companion in his life. In fact, sometimes in the evening at home, when it's close to time to prepare supper, he sits down and, without my asking, starts telling me about his day at the university and says things that, by the way he tells them, seem surprising, but above all seem to bring him an enviable fullness. I've known him all my life, and yet I seem to be meeting him for the first time, because he's renewed day by day by an experience that makes him alive and new. Often I stop in front of this amazement and desire it for myself, too, but then, returning to the routine of the day, everything goes back to normal and flat." Do

you see? It's not that the Lord abandons us on the road, but if we remain distant, if we don't have the simplicity to follow the modality with which He remains contemporary, which could be the last way I'd have imagined, everything goes flat again. "But every evening I'm with him, the suspicion returns insistently that he lives his days better than I do. With time, this suspicion becomes detestable: how can my brother, silly fellow that he is, be happier than me?" This is a drama. The Lord can even use a silly fellow, as He always uses the silly. So there's no more time; you have to decide. "I can't keep on watching; I want his experience for myself." This is the urgent need that is awakened—I want it for myself! She can stay there watching, forming all sorts of interpretations, saying he's silly, or this ultimate affection for herself can win—"I want it to become mine." "And what do I do? I follow him, and whatever he does, I do at my university too." It's simple. "I read *Traces*, do School of Community, get information on Eluana, read the newspapers, speak about it with my friends and classmates, and then we go post flyers." There's someone in front of me who acts, and I learn from him to act. "I'm doing so many things, maybe too many, but not out of activism, but because slowly but surely, in doing them, I discover that it's for me. The only way for the initial and original phenomenon (that happened back then) to happen again for me is for it to take me today, making me new." Look, it's the last thing she would've expected, that He would make Himself contemporary through this modality.

As she says, that beginning has to happen again. But Fr. Giussani clarifies that it's not necessarily "how" it happened in the beginning, not necessarily the same modality I may be fixated on (expecting it to happen again with that face, with those precise people, with that modality), not "how" it happened in the beginning, but "what" happened in the beginning, the same identical experience through a different face, fleshly as before, maybe with the person I'd least expected. If it didn't happen this way, Christianity wouldn't be possible. Christ would be a myth, not an historical reality. "What" happened to them, happens to me now with a different modality; what happened in the beginning, can now happen to me with a different modality.

The impact with a human difference, in the same event that moved them in the beginning, is renewed. This is why, for our friend, the continuity with that initial moment of encounter with the Movement, with Christ, the continuity with them is re-established only through the re-happening of the same event now. Therefore, there isn't one method for the beginning and another for the continuation; it isn't that now we've understood and then we explain it to the others or we apply it, because this shows how presumptuous we are, that we don't realize that in order to be seized, we always need "what" seized us to happen again. This is why everything is grace. The initial event goes on only if we continually start from the impact with a new human reality.

Christianity is the obedience to this new human reality, following a presence in front of me, and we can continue what we've begun and have continued these days only if we remain in this friendship, because obedience is this friendship.

Matteo writes, "This has been the most intense period of my life, because of all the trouble at the university and the university elections held this week. In October and November, I studied very little and dedicated myself to the elections. The eve of election day, I was worn out thinking of all the things I still had to do. What Rose said is really true: doing things wears you out. I was living this circumstance of the elections like a weight to bear, the sooner over the better, but I thought that this position was inhuman, because it's inhuman to go through a situation by just wanting it to end as quickly as possible. Then a friend told me, 'Your position isn't inhuman. Actually, it's the greatest thing about you. It's like Jesus is telling you, look, Matteo, if I'm not present, you suffocate.' I was very struck, first of all because it's really true that without acknowledging Him present, I ultimately suffocate; maybe I do all the things, but ultimately I'm dissatisfied. And I was also struck by the way my friend valued my heart, my desire, the fact that I'm needy [this is how we are; it's not that after the encounter we're no longer needy, as we often dream]; for me, it was an inhuman position, but he was enthusiastic. And then there were other episodes, some very gentle and dis-

creet, like a friend who wrote in a note, ‘What use is it to a man to gain the world and then lose himself?’ Another friend, the morning of the first election day, wrote me a text message: ‘I ask for myself and for you that our hearts remain open to the encounter with Him in these hot days of the elections,’ and during the day he sent me this text message three times: ‘Remember, Matteo, *quaerere Deum*. The rest is all garbage.’ I’m telling you about these episodes because I was very moved by a line from School of Community that says, ‘The dynamism of freedom for adhering to faith doesn’t know the road. It understands where it has to go, but it doesn’t know how to get there. Therefore, the Mystery tells you what you have to do, tells you through the companionship He puts you in,’ and I thought, ‘Well, I have a heart. Reality exists. So, what do I need?’ I realized through everything I’ve told you that I need a friendship, that is, those faces that remind me and always insist on what I’m made for. This insistence can be very discreet, a note or a text message, but continual, untiring. The friend is the person who calls me to ‘What’ my heart is made for. This friendship impressed me because it’s not sentimental: it’s a judgment... a judgment. Saying, ‘He’s my friend,’ is beginning to be a judgment for me, even though it may be devoid of an emotional or sentimental rush. If a friend is the person who calls me to the truth of myself, then it follows that the more I follow these friends, the more I follow myself. I’m beginning to understand Giusani, when he says that friendship isn’t an option, because it’s absolutely decisive for me. I can’t do without someone who tells me who I am, what I’m made of.” And if you have friends like this, everything they tell you begins to become yours, as we said before.

This is why the chapter on obedience concludes with speaking about this friendship, because, when it becomes so familiar, “the extreme form of obedience is following the discovery of yourself operating in the light of the words and example of another, without which you fumbled in the dark....”²³ That gaze, that way of moving, that way of perceiving yourself, of looking at reality, of staying before reality, becomes mine. In order for this to become mine, I need a friendship, someone who I can ask, “How do you manage to live

it?” And when this friend tells me how he or she manages to live it, I say, “I’m grateful that you told me. Thank you for telling me,” and this becomes yours, and you have to follow yourself, struck by this other.

Life is simple. This is why we’ve often repeated the line, “Why torment ourselves when it’s so simple to obey?”²⁴ Life is simple because the Mystery, precisely because of this tenderness with us, became flesh, continues to take on our flesh to make Himself contemporary with us, to continue placing us before a human difference to follow. This is the hope.

Last night, chatting with some friends at dinner, one of them said, “I’ve been wanting to go home to tell my parents what I’ve seen, so it can become hope for my mother, too.” It struck me, because when we live according to what Fr. Giussani communicated to us, this faith seen by the satisfaction that then becomes obedience, friendship, without reducing it to moralism, makes us say, “This is our hope.” It’s as if he were already announcing the next chapter of School of Community on hope. See how Fr. Giussani didn’t just stick words one after the other; it’s precisely the description that he sees coming out of the heart of this experience, and when you have this before you, you can face life—you can face the future with hope.

This is exactly what we celebrate at Christmas, this event that reawakens hope in us. We’re friends; the Lord has made us meet, has magnetized all of us here precisely for this relationship He wants with us, to bring us to a fullness of living, to an intensity found nowhere else.

NOTES

¹ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible To Live This Way?*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2008, p. 132.

² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³ L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1995, p. 95.

⁴ A. Mascagni, "Al mattino" ["In the Morning"], in *Canti*, Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, Milan, 2002, p. 176.

⁵ L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano*, op. cit., p. 95.

⁶ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 110.

⁷ N. Brenna, "È una vita che c'è" ["It's a Life that Exists"], in *Tracce-Litterae Communionis*, no. XXXV/11, dicembre 2008, p. 38.

⁸ L. Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino [Man and His Destiny]* Marietti, Genoa, 1999, pp. 112-113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹¹ *Jn* 6:15.

¹² L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* op. cit., p. 120.

¹³ *Jn* 6:53.

¹⁴ *Jn* 6:66.

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *Uomini senza patria (1982-1983) [Men Without a Homeland]*, Bur, Milan, 2008, p. 11.

¹⁶ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁷ *Phil* 2:5.

¹⁸ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?*, op. cit., p. 130.

¹⁹ L. Giussani, "Something That Comes First," in *Traces*, Vol. 10, No. 10, November, 2008.

²⁰ *Ivi.*

²¹ *Ivi.*

²² *Ivi.*

²³ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* op. cit., p. 135.

²⁴ P. Claudel, *L'Annuncio a Maria [The Announcement Made to Mary]*, Bur, Milan, 2001, p. 179.

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What makes us know that He is present before us? The different humanity He brings. This is why Fr. Giussani said, years ago, “The event of Christ becomes present ‘now’ in a phenomenon of different humanity.” Christianity is the impact with this different humanity, in which one discovers a new presentiment of life, something that increases the chance for certainty, for hope, for usefulness in living.

