



**“CAN A CULTURED MAN,
A EUROPEAN
OF OUR DAYS, BELIEVE,
REALLY BELIEVE IN THE
DIVINITY OF THE SON OF
GOD, JESUS CHRIST?”**

Spiritual Exercises of the University Students
of Communion and Liberation

RIMINI, DECEMBER 2009

TRACES



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R I M I N I (I T A L Y) , D E C E M B E R 2 0 0 9

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Friday, December 4

No matter how limited the awareness each of us has now, it is unlikely that we do not feel truly needy, lacking, and desirous; we have not made this effort to come here from far away for nothing. This desire that has moved us, that has brought us here, now becomes a cry. Why? Because all the attempts we have made to respond to this need are insufficient. We need Someone greater who gives us the fullness that all our attempts fail to give us. This is the greatest intelligence of man. You have to be stupidly presumptuous not to recognize this most elementary evidence. For this reason, we, as women and men aware of what we are, of the need we find within, with all our intelligence, and with all our consciousness, can only cry, cry to the Holy Spirit, to the energy of the Mystery, to give us what we are unable to give ourselves.

Come Holy Spirit

I greet each of you, who have come from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Holland, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Hungary, and Italy.

All the contributions that you sent for this moment of work of the Spiritual Exercises show clearly the situation in which we are called to live. It is particularly beautiful, as we will see now, that the questions that arise in your lives come from the fact that you are in reality, in the circumstances, in the environment. It is life that makes the questions arise, that presses within the circumstances; for this reason, precisely because you are not outside the sphere of reality, you realize more fully the drama of the historical moment we are living, the confusion reigning (as we said this summer), the difficulty of clarifying the road for ourselves. Many of you feel an urgent need for certainty in living, clarity for the road. I am always reminded of that passage we have read on many occasions from Plato's *Phaedrus*, which describes our drama: before the difficulty of living, we, like everyone, desire to cross life (the open sea, Plato's imagery for life) in a sure form of transport, so as not to lose life.

We are immersed in epochal changes. We were not born in historical circumstances in which a tradition is handed on almost mechanically. We find ourselves before a diversity that forces us to choose, to give reasons for our choices. It is no longer possible to get on the moving sidewalk and be transported mechanically. There is no longer a moving sidewalk, as there might have been in the past, when the mere fact of being born in a certain environment, a certain country, facilitated things. To live today without being overwhelmed by the torrent of confusion, more than ever before the “I” is needed, and this is seen in each of us.

Sharon writes, “I have just arrived at San Raffaele University after finishing my three-year undergraduate degree at Bicocca. Everything that seemed solid and taken for granted before I now feel the forceful need to justify—my relationships with classmates, my work in student government, the Food Bank, or our distribution of various flyers. In living this reality I am unexpectedly finding within myself the method we have been educated in this period to use: judgment. Every moment is a pressing occasion to ask myself why and to discover what lies at the end of the long procedure, that is, what moves me. It is not enough for me to be there in line, and I begin to ask all sorts of questions, from why I want to arrive early at the university when I am waiting for the bus in the morning, to asking myself what I am. I ask myself about what is necessary—we see it from within our experience—the work we are insisting on in this period, since last summer.”

Michele says, “My first reaction after the *équipe* was difficulty accepting that the missing ingredient was experience. I was struck by the decision to face the roots of the confusion and boredom of the present, but the medicine, that is, experience, seemed too bitter, almost exaggerated. The start of the academic year, our work welcoming the freshmen, exams, changing my apartment, the European Court decision against crucifixes in Italian schools, and the attacks against the CUSL helped me understand that the work Carrón makes us do is not a new discourse to learn, but the real opportunity for a turning point. I am not practiced at delving below the surface; I am not used to giving voice to the persistent questions that are harbored in my heart and that agitate it in every impact with reality. Why? Is it enough? Who makes this reality? The perception of the Mystery has thus become more frequent in my days, and has introduced new

breathing room.” “Because without judgment, our life seemed guided by chance,” as Andrea says with his friends of Perugia.

For this reason, reality itself is what forces us. Carlo describes this scenario, “During September and October, the booths in front of the Registrar’s Office for freshmen multiplied; in addition to our stand, there are now those of the young Leninists, some young ex-drug addicts asking for money for a Milan dog shelter, a little group of experts proposing courses for fast memorization, and a stand of homosexuals. What a zoo. It is impossible to live at the university, man the booth, study, meet people, and attend lessons, without having a firm point, without judging what happens. Before all this, as never before, I have become aware of the need for truth and meaning that everyone at the university expresses. I often ask myself how I respond. What is truly needed?”

It is not that one plays the intellectual; it is life, life that presses urgently, and in response to life’s urgent demand it is not enough for us to parrot things. As Maria Piera from L’Aquila says, “When the earthquake happened, for me everything collapsed and I realized that the things I thought I had understood were not at all mine, that I was repeating things like a parrot. The theory was mine, but I did not even know how to give an example starting from experience, and it seemed I had thrown away years of the Movement.” It is not useful for us to be like this.

The European Court decision against the crucifix in Italian schools made this emerge with more clarity in many people, as Luca from Rome recounts: “The day of the European Court decision, I was at home with the flu, so I had a lot of time to watch the news on TV and hear the comments of politicians and even the talk show debates, a lot of time to read the news on all the online newspapers, a lot of time to read the articles of the major journalists. I wanted to take advantage of the big dose of time I had available to understand this issue inside and out and to formulate a true judgment. The first thing I realized is that this judgment did not develop in clarity and profundity in proportion to the number of articles I read or the hours of television news I watched. That evening, when my brother returned home and asked me, “Luca, what do you think about the business of the crucifix? What idea have you formed?” I did not know what to say. I had swallowed everything but without making a move. I could only mechanically repeat the comments of others, and

this left me with a profound insufficiency. It seemed to me I would never reach the answer to the question pressing within, when commentators merely reduced the crucifix to a sign of our tradition and identity, a sign that offends no one. It seemed I could not get to the heart of the question, to the decisive question: why is it worth keeping the crucifix? And thus, what does that Man nailed to the cross mean for me? I can carry this question within every day, without even feeling the need to hurry to pull the right answer out of my pocket. And then my surprise when I read the CL flyer.” Or, as Michele says, “The challenge issued by the flyer and the closing question [that we chose for the title of these Spiritual Exercises] was like a strong slap in the face of my way of living every day, in a period in which my life at the university and with my family, in everyday things, seems to be farther and more detached from the claim of Christ on this very life. That a piece of paper should explicitly ask me, ‘Michele, can you believe, truly believe in the divinity of the Son of God?’ was not something to take for granted; I could have remained detached like always and continued my days as if Christ had no part in them. Instead, the question arrived; it wounded my detached attitude, took space in my heart and my reason, and made me realize that you can distract the heart, but you cannot trick it. You cannot uproot those elementary needs upon which I have begun to work so much this year, in the school of community for freshmen, even though I am a second year student. And this piece of paper—the flyer, that is—effectively dismantled my presumption. Why should I ask myself about the problem of the fact of Christ? After all, I am in CL, so I know He exists and that is enough for me. Instead, no. Precisely this discounted ‘let it suffice for me’ revealed all the smallness of my attachment to Christ, because, as time passed, Christ remained, but whether He was there or not changed nothing in my life.” Or as those of Bovisa write, “After distributing the flyer on the European Court decision, some friends got together to talk about our impressions of this work. While the first lines examine the problem from the social point of view, with the percentage of Italians scandalized by the decision, in the second paragraph the challenge goes to the personal level. ‘And you, who do you say that I am?’ This question destroyed any possibility of facing the problem by withdrawing ourselves to an external vantage point, like moderate or dispassionate spectators. Many of us would have preferred

to defend the crucifix without implicating ourselves with Christ, that is, defending our interests as Christians without bringing the decisive issue for us: Christ is a living Man. We could have comfortably sided with the more numerous faction, for the defense of Western culture, and instead we were asked to involve ourselves to the point of saying who we are, that is, to the point of expressing what we hold dearest in life, to the point of saying who Christ is for us.”

If we do not take all these questions seriously, even a little boy can embarrass us, as Matilde describes: “The last time I went to do charitable work, a few weeks ago, I helped a little Arab boy study the French Revolution in relation to Italy. At a certain point, this boy asked me if the Pope were our God. I found myself in the strange position of having to explain my religion from the beginning. I tried to begin with the life of Jesus and lead to an explanation of the Eucharist. It has never been so difficult for me to explain something, and while I was talking I felt like stopping because I began to doubt the truth of it all, wondering if I was saying absurd things, and this doubt was intensified by the boy’s insistent questions: ‘How can you say He descended into Hell? How can you say that the Apostles did not make up everything? Why did they follow Him? How can a piece of bread become flesh?’”

Friends, this introduces what Guido and his friends at Bicocca University write: “In this period, the question dictated by the title of the Spiritual Exercises is becoming much less rhetorical, increasingly less rhetorical. The work of School of Community that we did this summer and our return to university are helping us to understand that faith, and what follows from it, is not at all guaranteed or to be taken for granted because of our membership in CL. We realize this looking at ourselves in action in everyday circumstances, and often we find ourselves acting like everyone when faced with personal provocations like our studies, relationships, the presence in university, or those that concern our whole people, like the decision on crucifixes. It seems to us that the root of this lack of originality lies in our estrangement from judgment, in our failure to habitually examine what happens before our eyes in the light of the needs that constitute us. At times, our belonging seems to have no impact on the way we live reality. The inconvenient truth the flyer talks about is not so distant; at times, hidden behind a formal appearance [here we

have it, getting on the moving sidewalk] is a total self-determination about what criteria we use to judge life, that is, an adoption of the criteria suggested by the powers that be. However, this way of doing things shows its insufficiency in the unease we feel, and this unease many times offers us the possibility of starting afresh.”

Then Giacomo says, “I could not avoid a sense of resistance to the title. Come on, we have been working for about a year on what faith is, how it is born. How can you ask me if a European of our days (that is, I) can believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ? Isn’t it enough to have answered once and for all ‘yes’? What else do you want of me? However, I am conscious of the fact that hidden behind this resistance is a repulsion for questioning myself personally again, me, now. It is like shifting your gaze away from one who asks you what you believe in. Resorting to an answer already given, already consolidated, means not responding.”

Each of us can recognize ourselves in one or more of these testimonies of our friends. They show with brilliant clarity the need we all feel, the desire, the heart-thawing yearning we experience in the face of living; this tells us to what point the theme of our Exercises presses urgently within us. As Francesco says, “We are together as women and men who take our lives seriously, also our difficulties.” We need not hide them, need not fear; we can look them full in the face because we are not alone and for this reason we can make this desire, this urgency become a cry: Come, Lord Jesus! Come to give us that fullness, that capacity to stay in reality, without being overwhelmed by all we see before our eyes. We are together, friends, to look this full in the face.

Let’s ask Christ to make Himself so present to each of us in these days that we can recognize Him and leave with greater awareness, a more acute consciousness of His presence, and therefore of His victory. May He find in each of us that willingness, that openness of heart, that simplicity He needs to enter into our life and save it. Because, as Fr. Giussani always reminded us, the protagonist of history is the beggar: “Christ beggar of the heart of man, and the heart of man beggar of Christ.”¹ To this Christ, who will make Himself present among us begging our heart, only one who begs for the heart of Christ can respond.

¹ L. Giussani, “Nella semplicità del mio cuore lietamente Ti ho dato tutto,” [“In the simplicity of my heart, I have gladly given you everything”] in L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generare tracce nella storia del mondo* [*Generating Traces in the History of the World*], Rizzoli, Milan, 1998, p.VII.

Saturday morning, December 5

1. THE NATURE OF OUR HUMANITY

“Can a cultured man, a European of our days, believe, really believe in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ?”² The challenge of Dostoyevsky’s question is addressed to people who possess all the capacity of their reason, all their desire for freedom, all their capacity for affection—people who do not reject anything of their humanity. In the Christmas poster we used again this passage from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: “Why does faith still have any chance at all? ... Because it corresponds to the nature of man. ... Man possesses an inextinguishable aspiration, full of nostalgia, for an infinite. None of the attempted answers will do; only the God who Himself became finite in order to tear open our finitude and lead us into the wide spaces of His infinity, only He corresponds to the question of our being. That is why, even today, Christian faith will come to seek out man again.”³

This summer I went to São Paulo for the meeting with the priests of Latin America. A new priest, who, with the others, had read the Fraternity Exercises the day before, told me at dinner one evening: “In the seminary I always heard that I had to forget myself, to leave out my “I.” I was very struck that what Fr. Giussani says is exactly the opposite: that for our faith to be truly faith, the human is necessary.” It was like a lightning bolt that made me understand the difference of attitude with which one can face the problem of Christ, the problem of faith today, with which one can face this question of Dostoyevsky: eliminating the human (which will make it difficult—as Cardinal Ratzinger said—for Christian faith to find man). To mitigate the question, one might think that this priest was not familiar with the modality by which the encounter with Fr. Giussani introduced us to the faith. But I am increasingly convinced that this position is much more widespread, even among us, than we think.

For us, the human is almost an obstacle, a complication, a hindrance;

² Cf. F. M. Dostoyevsky, *I demoni; Taccuini per “I demoni”* [*The Demons, Notebooks for “the Demons”*], edited by E. Lo Gatto, Sansoni, Firenze, 1958, p. 1011.

³ J. Ratzinger, *Fede, Verità, Tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo* [*Faith, Truth, Tolerance. Christianity and the Religions of the World*], Cantagalli, Siena, 2003, pp. 142-143.

it would be better if it did not exist, so much so that our unease, our dissatisfaction, our sadness, or our boredom are things to eliminate or to neglect. Or, worse still, they scandalize us: “Why am I still this way? Why is there still this dissatisfaction in me, this sadness?” It seems to us that this humanity is an obstacle to surmount, and we think that first we have to resolve this humanity of ours and then, maybe, begin the relationship with Christ. It is as if our humanity were truly an obstacle to this relationship. And thus we show that we are victims of the dominant mentality and succumb to the illusion that we can settle the human by ourselves. This is the extent to which the common mentality, the mentality of everyone, affects us! Already in the way of looking at our humanity, we understand all the signs (the unease, the dissatisfaction, the sadness, the boredom) as limits to settle or to avoid.

Instead, those signs tell us about the nature of our “I,” who we are: a relationship with the Infinite. These are signs that make us aware that our destiny is greater than the entire universe, that the perception of emptiness (“*mancamento e voto*,” “loss and emptiness”⁴) of which Giacomo Leopardi speaks, and the profound boredom of which Martin Heidegger⁵ speaks, are the proof of our human structure, of the inexorability of our heart, of the boundless nature of our desire. And for this reason, nothing is capable of satisfying us.

This is why the first step, the origin of our attempt to resolve our humanity, is a mistaken judgment: we consider all this a curse, and think all these are signs of something that is not right, when actually they are the sign of our greatness. The dissatisfaction, the sadness, and the boredom measure the scope of our humanity, the breadth and profundity of our desire. Precisely because this desire is so boundless, I find myself accusing things of insufficiency and worthlessness. Thanks be to God that we cannot settle it. “How solitary/ has my intellect become/since you began to take it for your home!/Swift as a lightning flash from all around/All other thoughts of mine/Have vanished clean away. And like a tower/On a bare field, you stand/Within my mind, gigantic and alone”⁶: this need for fulfillment reappears anew. That we are relationship with

⁴ G. Leopardi, *Pensieri* [*Thoughts*], LXVIII.

⁵ “Noia che non viene dall’esterno, sorge dall’esser-ci stesso” (M. Heidegger, *Concetti fondamentali della metafisica* [*Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*], Il Nuovo Melangolo, Genoa, 1999, p. 169).

⁶ G. Leopardi, “*The Dominant Thought*” in Giacomo Leopardi, *The Canti*, translated by J.G. Nichols, Fyfield Books, Routledge, March 2003 [13-20].

the Infinite is documented by these facts: the unease, the sadness, the insufficiency are signs of this relationship, not anomalies, as we so often think; they are not diseases to cure with drugs (as happens increasingly often, confusing inquietude of the heart with anxiety or panic). All these signs are the documentation of that irreducibility of the “I” that we are.

Therefore, friends, it is useless to want to settle the desire for the Infinite. We cannot succeed, even if we make distraction a system of life.

The true obstacle is not our humanity: “The supreme obstacle to our human journey is the ‘neglect’ of the ‘I.’ Interest for our own ‘I,’ the opposite of this ‘neglect,’ is the first step of a truly human journey. It would seem obvious that one has this interest, but this is not at all the case.”⁷

Why has this neglect not won in us? Why, notwithstanding everything, are we here with this question, with the awareness of this need? Is it because we have encountered someone with whom we have been able to experience the fact that neglect is not the only road to travel, that there is another, truer way, because it does not censure the human. This censure happens many times in our society and it is precisely where society demonstrates its error, because a solution that eliminates a factor of reality self-demonstrates its falsity. Instead, we have the fortune of finding someone who says, “The most important thing is to feel the humanity of that which makes us suffer, the humanity of the sadness of the limitation. From a positive [see what a change of judgment: for us it is a difficulty, but for him it is a positive!], everything can begin. Only from a positive. [...] What you start from is a good. You can feel a grave temptation; a grave temptation is not a demonic thing. It is a power of the body and of the soul, a humanity. Why is this humanity given to me? This is the question that infiltrates if you understand (if you become aware of your starting point of humanity) that the temptation as instinct, as sadness, is a human positivity, a human capacity, a humanity. What is this humanity given to me for? This is the point; here man begins: why is this humanity of mine given to me?”⁸.

So then, those who ask themselves such a question begin to look at their own humanity not as an obstacle but as a good, as a resource, not as an enemy, but as an ally.

⁷ L. Giussani, *Alla ricerca del volto umano [In Search of the Human Face]*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1995, p. 9.

⁸ L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora [Affection and Dwelling Place]*, Bur, Milan, 2001, pp. 44-45.

As our friend writes me, “For about a year now, many things have changed and I have grown a lot in this journey. I want to tell you about myself and my sadness. This year I began to look more and more at my humanity, all my errors, my problems that often seem to take away my happiness, and since I began looking at them I have begun to realize that this sadness was not contrary to my happiness, did not counter it, but instead was the means through which I become aware of Him. With this sadness you are alive; you are in search of something that will give meaning to this sadness. When I feel this sadness, which by now is almost daily, I never hide it because this sadness is the instrument through which He makes Himself present.”

This is the gaze that we have encountered, such that we can look at humanity without needing to censure it. In the Gospel we see that there was no need of this censure, of this forgetfulness of the human: “Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, ‘Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.’ He said in reply, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But the woman came [she does not let up] and did him homage, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He said in reply, ‘It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.’ Then Jesus said to her in reply, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed from that hour. Moving on from there Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, went up on the mountain, and sat down there. Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and he cured them [there was no need to hide anything, to neglect anything: the fact of being lame, deformed or blind was not a difficulty; it was the resource that pushed them to seek Him]. The crowds were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the deformed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind able to see, and they glorified the God of Israel. Jesus summoned his disciples and said, ‘My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and

have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way” and then He did the multiplication of the loaves and fishes⁹.

It is not that those people first had to settle all their needs and then go to Jesus. It was the sickness, the needs: what we consider an obstacle is precisely what pushed them to go seek Him.

For this reason we cannot help but have this gaze of fondness for the human: “Christ is right here, in my attitude and disposition as a human being, in my way, that is, as one who expects, awaits something, because I sense that I am entirely wanting. [...] First, we must open ourselves to ourselves. In other words, we must be acutely aware of our experiences and look on the humanity within us with sympathy; we must take into consideration who we really are. To take into consideration means to take seriously what we experience, *everything* we experience, to discover every aspect, to seek the complete meaning¹⁰.

But how is it that after having encountered someone who has this gaze full of fondness for the human, after having read and heard so many times these Gospel texts, how then is it that we still feel the human as an obstacle, an objection, as something that has to be settled beforehand? Where did this sympathy for the human end up? So then the question arises more powerfully than before: why is this humanity of mine given to me? What does this humanity of mine have to do with faith, with Dostoyevsky’s question? If I do not take it into consideration, if I do not take it seriously, I cannot respond to the question in a true, human, and reasonable way.

2. ACKNOWLEDGING CHRIST

My humanity was given to me to acknowledge Christ, and for this reason, if I censure it, I cannot acknowledge Him. “We do not directly realize a person’s true worth, unless we see it with our eyes. What is within a person can be understood to the degree in which it reveals itself—and it reveals itself through ‘gestures,’ as if by signs. They could be compared with symptoms, which, for a doctor, are manifestations of a reality not directly perceptible to his observation. The more ingenious the doctor, the more capable he is of assessing the symptoms. So, to

⁹ Mt. 15:21-32.

¹⁰ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, McGill-Queens University Press, 2006, p. 54.

understand and judge the value of a person by his gestures, it is necessary to have ‘genius,’ ‘human genius.’ We are dealing with a psychological capacity which is developed or fostered to a greater or lesser degree. It is composed of three factors: natural sensibility, educational completeness, and attentiveness. [...] The capacity we are discussing here, then, is not necessarily measured by the degree of holiness, ethical faultlessness [being all in order, having everything settled]. Rather, since the elementary relationship of the particular with the whole is at stake, this capacity is better described as the original openness of the soul [...]. In the Gospel, Jesus continuously stresses that, in order to understand him, we need what we have called ‘moral genius.’¹¹ Unless we fully develop this humanity of ours, we cannot with certainty reach the point of answering Dostoyevsky’s question on the total identity of Jesus Christ: “Thus, in order to face Jesus’ conception of morality and to evaluate the personality appearing through it, humanity is required, a possibility of human correspondence with him. [...] What we have called religious genius, that ultimate openness of the spirit, is something demanding a continual commitment from us, even if it takes its cue from each person’s natural gifts. What a great responsibility education has: that capacity to understand, even if it does respond to our nature, is not spontaneous.”¹²

And how are we educated to this? We are educated if we are constantly loyal with all that happens to us, that reopens the wound, that throws us wide open, that makes us understand what our need is. For this reason, if we censure our humanity, if we are not loyal with what happens, we cannot be totally wide open to acknowledge Christ.

But we often see this humanity as a stage in the journey to get past, an obstacle. But reducing the religious sense, this original opening, to a mere premise—saying that it is okay before encountering Christianity, before encountering Christ, before encountering the Movement, but that after, it needs to be eliminated—is the sign that we understand neither the religious sense, nor Christianity, nor the charism. To bring us to the knowledge of Christ, to introduce us to Him, Fr. Giussani told us: “In approaching the hypothesis of a revelation and of the Christian

¹¹ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998, pp. 80-81.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

revelation, nothing is more important than the question about the real situation of man. It would not be possible to fully realize what it means to say Jesus Christ without first understanding the nature of the dynamism that makes us human. In fact, Christ says He is the answer to what ‘I’ am: only an attentive, tender, even passionate awareness of myself can throw me wide open and dispose me to recognize, admire, thank, and live Christ. Without this consciousness, even that of Jesus Christ becomes a mere name.”¹³ This is a passage that all of you—all of you!—should learn by heart, and I am not saying this just to say it.

A mere name does not help us respond to the urgent needs of living. For me to acknowledge, admire and live Christ, I need this attentive, tender and passionate awareness of myself. For this reason, Christianity presents a very inconvenient truth: it requires [aware] men and women to be understood and lived: women and men, that is, the level of nature that acquires consciousness of itself. If humanity does not vibrate—as we have seen in the Gospel, in reaction to the healings—no religious discourse can hold, no matter how persuasive, because to be Christians today we cannot survive by just repeating a discourse. Christianity has no other “weapon”: human beings who live as such, and who renew themselves and make their renewed humanity blossom. Therefore, Christianity has this very inconvenient truth: it demands women and men. If there are not women and men, there is not Christianity. Women and men, that is, people who live the immensity of the question, because without this, Christianity cannot be understood and lived. In order to understand what Christianity is, women and men are needed; otherwise, we speak of Christ without understanding anything. And then we find ourselves disarmed before the challenges of living.

So then, we find ourselves before this question: on the one hand, the human is often an obstacle we have to settle, forget or neglect, but on the other hand, without the human I cannot understand who Christ is. We have seen that on our own, we neglect Him or we are frightened or scandalized, so much so that finding someone who has this fondness for the human is almost a miracle. Just think about when you talk among yourselves: most of the time you do so to complain. How many times I find myself saying to someone who comes to complain, “But you should

¹³ *Ibid.*, but this section was not translated in the English edition. It is only found in the Italian text, *All'origine della pretesa cristiana*, Rizzoli, Milan, 2001, p. 3.

give thanks before you go to bed this evening that you still have the wound in your humanity!”

3. AFFECTION FOR YOURSELF

What is needed so I do not fear my humanity? What can give me this fondness for the human? What can make this fondness remain alive? How is affection for myself, for this humanity of mine, possible?

Fr. Giussani told us, “Man is not capable of being himself, of remaining man, without the help of Christ. Without the help of Christ man cannot understand that he is a question, does not understand that his nature is to be desire, and therefore he is scandalized that his desire is not satisfied. [...] But man alone is so poorly capable of being himself that without Christ he would no longer even be man. And, in fact, he would forget to be desire of happiness and, blaspheming, would say: ‘I am made for happiness and I cannot reach it.’”¹⁴

This is the situation we cannot cancel; this is the wound we cannot heal; this is the insufficiency we constantly find within the answers we try to give ourselves. And Jesus enters precisely at this level to reveal Himself: “Who is Jesus? The question was asked. And he answered it. He answered it by revealing himself through all of the gestures of his personality [...]. But the most enlightening ‘gesture,’ and so the most significant ‘sign,’ [more than the healings, more than the miracles], is [...] his overall, definitive sentiment towards man.¹⁵ Only the divine [pay attention to this decisive passage] can ‘save’ man. The true and essential dimension of humanity and its destiny can only be preserved by he who is their ultimate meaning—which is to say, recognized, acclaimed, defended.” That is, only God is able to embrace my humanity in all its irreducibility and therefore only He can reveal to me what I am, why I am made this way, why my dissatisfaction and sadness, why this humanity is given to me.

Therefore, when someone met Him and felt looked at in the way... Imagine Zacchaeus: what powerful compassion, what heart-thawing yearning in that gaze. This was enough for Zacchaeus to recognize that that man was God: “It is in the conception of life which Christ proclaims, the image he gives of the human being’s true stature, the realistic way

¹⁴ L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* [Affection and Dwelling Place], op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, op. cit. p. 83.

he looks at human existence, it is here where the heart, in search of its destiny, perceives the truth in the voice of Christ as he speaks. It is here where the ‘moral’ heart discerns the sign of the Presence of his Lord.”¹⁶ We have been given this humanity that we may recognize Him; if instead we censure it, how can we recognize Him?

We can do this because Jesus looks at us in a way that does not frighten us, because it is as if all our inability to respond were already embraced: with Him I can truly look at myself without fear. And who can truly look at a man without fear, without reducing him, if not God? Jesus demonstrates who He is in the way He looks at this irreducible humanity of ours. Nobody can bring you love of self, except your mother, for a short time, and then God. And this, the preaching of love for ourselves, of love for our person, precisely this is the sign that Christ is God, is divine, because nobody tells us to love ourselves; none of us are able to love ourselves this way. And thus, when we find someone like this, we are pacified, made capable of gladness, with this discovered love for ourselves.

So then the sign that Christ is God is not a theory, nor is it a philosophy: it is a gaze, a way of treating the human, the way He related with those He encountered, just as they were, before changing anything, with their humanity so needy, so bleeding, so full of need.

But there can be a big objection. In fact, when the flyer on the crucifix issue was posted at the university, someone scratched out the “is” of “Christ is a living man” and wrote “was.” We have to actively engage this challenge. “Is” Christ a living man, or “was” Christ a living man? Can we today, cultured Europeans of our days, respond to this question?

How can we know that Christ is alive today, and makes faith reasonable now? Only if we find in the present a gaze like this, a human gaze like this. Here, you cannot cheat. I can acknowledge that Christ is alive, now, if I can embrace myself, now, if I can have this affection for myself, now, because the first outcome of the relationship with Christ is affection for yourself, love of yourself. But what can make the love of yourself permanent? Fr. Giussani said that “Christ as a distant historical fact [“was”] can be read as a page of beautiful literature, can even give a momentary input, generate emotion, evoke longing, but now, with

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

our failing muscles, with this exhaustion, with our propensity for melancholy, with this strange masochism that life today tends to favor, or with this indifference and cynicism that life produces nowadays as a way of avoiding the suffering of an excessive and unwanted fatigue, how could we ever accept ourselves and others in the name of a discourse?"¹⁷ If Christianity is only a historical fact of the past or a discourse, then I cannot embrace now my humanity or my limitation. If He is not a Presence, if He has not conquered death, if He is not risen, and therefore if He is not the Lord of history, if He is not the Lord of space and time, if He is not mine now, as He was Andrea's and Giovanni's two thousand years ago, I return to being nothing. Therefore, as we have seen, "We cannot sustain love for ourselves unless Christ is a presence, as a mother is a presence for her child."¹⁸

4. CHARISM AND THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF CHRIST

So then, the challenge: Is this gaze here, now, or not? Here the truth of Christianity is sustained or falls: whether Christ is contemporaneous now. This is what attests to the truth of the charism we have encountered; this is already the first answer to the question of whether He is present now. Yes. Why? Because a gaze on humanity like the one Fr. Giussani testified to is something we cannot even dream of. It is not because Fr. Giussani had a particular temperament: that gaze to which Fr. Giussani testified—you would have to eliminate more than half of what he said to eliminate that gaze—is the most powerful sign of the contemporaneity of Christ for us, now; it is the sign that the charism is a gift of the Spirit, that we have seen the Spirit vibrate in that gaze.

The charism is the most powerful sign of the contemporaneity of Christ now, so much so that it has made possible what to us was impossible: this affection for oneself. Being able to look at the human in this way, being able to have this fondness for the human, not just reading about it in a text from the past, but finding it in a humanity now, is the sign of the contemporaneity of Christ. This is what made me understand why I went looking for this sign. At times I could not stand my humanity, and found it difficult to embrace, but in response, as if by intuition, I kept going back to Giussani, because there—not meeting him at lunch, because I

¹⁷ L. Giussani, *Qui e ora* (1984-1985) [*Here and Now*], Bur, Milan, 2009, p. 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

saw him at most once a year—I found a gaze that did not exist elsewhere. This made me more passionate about Christ and ever more grateful to Giussani, ever more attached to him because he showed me more and more this gaze of Christ on me.

And this is what continues to happen now; you have experienced it yourselves. It is not just theory.

One of you writes, “This year my life has changed completely in an extraordinarily gratuitous way not sought by me; it is a grace. The summer of 2008 was fundamental in making me realize that there is a more beautiful way of living everything. I went to work in a hotel in Mazzin di Fassa for a few weeks. I knew nothing about the Movement of Communion and Liberation, but I had before me people whose gaze, even just their way of relating among themselves, won me over totally [because a gaze like this is impossible for women and men, and when you see it, you cannot help but recognize it]. It was evident that their life was happier than mine: you could see it in their eyes, in their attitudes, in their words. At the end of the summer I was convinced of only one thing: I wanted to live exactly like them. And so, not losing contact with the people I had met in the mountains, I came to know the Movement. To tell you the truth, in the beginning I was very distrustful, a bit out of pride, and a bit because I came from a very different reality than that of Communion and Liberation; in my family you did not even dare to mention certain topics [but what is this, that not even family tradition can block?]. So then, I returned home from those heavenly weeks in the mountains, but nothing, absolutely nothing in my life was the same as before [because the heart is the true interlocutor of Christ, and all is burned in a moment].”

Another new friend writes me, “I met the Movement in April, because some of your members asked me to run for university elections, and I said *yes*, because I was amazed by the seriousness of the proposal and because I had been struck by the fact that they took an active part at the university every day [unlike many who only come for exams]. So, bit by bit, I began going to School of Community and spending time with them in the faculty, struck by how I felt taken seriously. And I know this happens because Christ exists.”

And listen to what this girl says: “I will never forget my first day at the university. As I was going up the steps of the Polytechnic, a bit disoriented

because I was in a new city to begin university and hardly knew anyone, many young people were handing out flyers. Without knowing them, I already recognized those of the Movement by the way they moved, the way they put a piece of paper in your hands, apparently like all the others. Before this day, some dear friends of mine had died, and in that period the question of why life is worth living, and what endures, what remains, what is not continually fleeting, became increasingly powerful. Entering the university that day and seeing those of CL, I drew a breath of relief and said: there they are. So maybe I experienced what I had often heard said about the method of faith. I had often heard the example that when you return home and smell the aroma of tagliatelle, you think: Mom has made me tagliatelle [it is so simple, like recognizing the tagliatelle]. In recognizing the Mystery, the same process applies. For me, it was exactly this way. I asked myself what had changed. How was it that before, that example seemed so far away, but going up those stairs, it almost unconsciously became so true? What changed was only me. There I was, on those steps, a bit scared, but wanting to see that place, to find out where my classroom was. I was there, with my humanity, with my fear, with my solitude, but more desirous to see. I began to look at what was there, and what a marvel! To discover that it is not necessary to force yourself, if not in remaining simple, to become aware of what you have in front of your eyes, and I discovered a new gratitude.”

And yet again: “In May, there were the university elections and we met a student from Nazareth in a bar. From then on he began to spend increasingly more time in university with us, starting to come to School of Community, which he found a bit strange, but very beautiful. During the summer he went home, but the very day he returned to Italy he called me to get in touch and see each other. In these months I have really seen how if someone lets himself be struck by the fact of Christ, as he did, life changes radically. Now School of Community is not only beautiful, it is ‘what I have always felt in my heart, but nobody told me before.’” Here and now, not just two thousand years ago: here and now. Because a gaze like this is the most impossible thing for human beings. It is the sign of the divine, the sign of the presence of Christ, of the contemporaneity of Christ. And not just in Fr. Giussani, whom many of us never even met personally: now! Christ’s presence remains now.

It is with this in our eyes that we can truly face the question of whether a cultured man of our times, a European of our days, can truly believe in Jesus Christ. Is faith possible? Does it make sense for a cultured man? As we see, the experience of faith begins with this impact with a phenomenon of new humanity, different, that is, corresponding to the original needs of the “I.” For this reason, the beginning of belief is this fact (a certain encounter, a dinner, a way of staying together at the university, the way we relate together) that challenges my reason because of its diversity, its exceptionality, its accent of truth. Not merely reading a piece of the Gospel or a book, but a human fact, a human encounter. And my reason finds itself having to deal with that experience.

Look at what we have read in School of Community: What is faith? “In our experience, there is something that comes from beyond it: unforeseeable, mysterious, but within our experience. If it is unforeseeable, not immediately visible, mysterious, with what instrument of our personality do we grasp this Presence? With that instrument called faith. Let’s call this instrument ‘faith,’ to use a term that does not lead back to and is not exhausted by the concept of reason, because the comprehension of experience in its immediately experiential factors belongs to reason [...] but in experience we feel the breath or the tremor or the consequences of a Presence that cannot be explained, that is surprising: a surprising encounter; therefore it is something beyond reason that can intuit and understand, and we call this faith, which is an intelligence of reality, an intelligence of experience. [...] I said that faith is a form of knowledge that is beyond the limit of reason. Why is it beyond the limit of reason? Because it grasps something that reason cannot grasp: reason cannot perceive ‘the presence of Jesus among us,’ ‘Christ is here now,’ the way it perceives that you are here. Do you understand? Yet, it cannot *not* admit that He is here. Why? Because there is a factor within, a factor that decides about this companionship, certain outcomes of this companionship [of these gazes, of this newness of relationships], certain resonances of this companionship, a factor so surprising that if I don’t affirm something else I don’t give reason to the experience, because reason is to affirm experiential reality according to all the factors that make it up, all of the factors. There can be a constitutive factor, of which we only feel a reverberation [or the aroma, as in the tagliatelle], of which we feel the

fruit, of which we even see the consequences, but we aren't able to see this factor directly. If I say, 'So, it doesn't exist,' I am mistaken, because I eliminate something of the experience—this is no longer reasonable.”¹⁹

This is what you recognize. Listen to this friend who returned to Romania to do her thesis: “In that period, I lived in an unexpected way. Looking at myself so happy, free, and fearless, I caught sight of the consciousness of being loved, of being loved there in that place. I asked myself where this consciousness came from. I remembered an episode this summer, when I went for a day to see some friends who had gone away to study together. There, I was impressed by the way those people, who were so different from each other, stayed together. A desirable way. In seeing that beauty, I wondered how it was possible. You have to deal with something that is there, within, in that experience I have. And the answer came: such a desirable companionship is only possible because of the presence of Christ.”

Listen to this other testimony: “I could not pretend not to have seen that it was possible to live in a way that measured up to the desire that was lacerating me. I could not pretend not to have seen it. Reason has to deal with something it touches, with something in experience, and I yielded to the evidence and left space for what was happening. Four years have passed and that experience has become flesh every day: Christ present. Reality has exploded before my eyes; it has become everything for me, and I have discovered who I am and Who fulfills me. No aspect of my existence is the same: relationships, studies, and work are charged with a freedom and a fullness never before experienced. My life has changed irreversibly. This is an irreducible fact.”

Another writer says the same thing: “Something that went beyond human measure was visible in the way my friends stayed together. This forced me to go to the origin, and those same living people told me the origin: Christ. This expanded in every critical juncture of life my awareness of belonging to something solid, more powerful than the vicissitudes of the world, that comes from some people who live in a desirable way, the only one that corresponds.”

All the drama of Dostoyevsky's question lies here: whether this factor exists, whether it is real now. This is why Fr. Giussani continues this

¹⁹ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* Volume 2: Hope, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008, pp.103-104

way, “Faith is an act of the intellect, the catechism says. It’s an act of knowledge that grasps the Presence of something that reason would not know how to grasp, but yet that reason has to affirm, otherwise something within experience would be lost, eliminated, something that experience *indicates*; therefore in some undeniable way it is within it. It is unexplainable, but it is within it. Now, of course, there is a capacity to understand within me, to know a level of reality that is greater than the usual; and I am obliged by reason to admit it. [...] The entire nucleus of Christian intelligence is here. It is necessary to understand this. It isn’t necessary to understand *how* Christ is here; it is necessary to understand that one is *obliged to affirm* that there is something else here...”²⁰

It is a grace that happens: “The value of the fact which we encounter transcends our power to understand [it goes beyond our reason] so much so that an act of God is required for an adequate understanding. The same gesture by which God makes his presence known to humanity in the Christian event also enhances a person’s potential for knowledge, raising him up to the exceptional reality to which God attracts him. We call this the *grace of faith*.”²¹

This power with which He appears before our eyes, in this exceptionality that we touch with our hands, exalts the cognitive capacity, broadens reason to be able to grasp what otherwise we could not be able to grasp: the Mystery present.

Not only does faith not fear a cultured man, but it demands one who uses reason this way, deep down, that is, who submits reason to experience, who is truly critical, therefore who uses the heart, who weighs everything in the light of his aspirations, his ultimate, original evidences and needs. Without this humanity of ours there would not be faith, because everything appears against it, and we cannot settle for being carried on the moving sidewalk.

That a fully human faith is possible is seen by how Jesus challenges His own. “He also said to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain - and so it does; and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot—and so it is.’”²² The people in Jesus’ time understood

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²¹ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1995, pp. 101-102.

²² *Lk* 12:54-55.

well that the signs of clouds and south wind indicated something else, pointed to something else. And without adding any other comment, Jesus continued directly, “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?”²³

We are like those people: it is not that we do not see. We are in front of an avalanche of facts, of signs. It is not that the signs are lacking or that we are simpletons; it is that we are hypocrites and we do not want to understand. Jesus’ accusation of hypocrisy is appropriate, because it indicates the contradiction between the capacity to discern meteorological signs and the lack of capacity to discern the signs of the action of God. If we do not do it, it is because we say *no*.

In order to adhere, it is enough to be sincere, loyal with what happens, with what we experience. Exactly in this way, we can respond, as women and men of our times, reasonably, “Yes” to the question of Dostoyevsky.

²³ *Lk* 12:56-57.

ASSEMBLY

Saturday afternoon, December 5

Julián Carrón: We have hit the mark, because your input has brought out precisely the difficulty we have in recognizing our humanity as the greatest resource we have. On many occasions our most common reaction to it is to be scandalized. It is good that it should emerge, that we face it together, that we not fear it, because in this way we can help each other to respond to the questions and problems that emerge.

We have chosen a few questions that express the difficulties that have emerged in the work you have done.

Student: *Premise—I am one of those on the moving sidewalk, absolutely.*

Carrón: Welcome to the club!

Student: *You spoke of sadness not as a limit but as the opportunity to become aware of the nature of my desire. Well, this is what happens with me. I see my girlfriend, then I go home and I feel this great sadness, this great melancholy. But, just as you said, I have understood that this is not an obstacle or something to remove, but a sign that makes me understand how great my desire is.*

Carrón: Why does it make you understand this?

Student: *Because that person should be the most beautiful thing for me, right?*

Carrón: That is, it does not happen when things are going badly, but when I have before my eyes that girl who I am crazy about, and not even that moment is enough for me.

Student: *Exactly.*

Carrón: It is not when life treats us badly; the problem of life arises and begins to be perceived in the most beautiful moment, not in the ugliest one. Why is not even this beautiful thing enough? What is enough?

Student: *In fact, the question that arises is this: what is enough? The problem that I see is this: since my girlfriend feels this melancholy too, since any person feels it, there is no need to be in this companionship to feel it.*

Carrón: Perfect.

Student: The encounter I have had—how does it transform, how does it transfigure this melancholy of mine?

Carrón: What do you say? Have you had the encounter?

Student: Yes.

Carrón: And how does it transform it?

Student: According to my way of thinking, it should almost remove it; and instead no, it is not this way. This is the problem. I feel this thing burning me.

Carrón: Exactly, this is why I called you up, because this is crucial, so we can face this together with all our friends. Would you like Christ to take this away? You have to look this full in the face: would you like it if you did not miss your girlfriend?

Student: No, probably I would get tired, it is true, but...

Carrón: Would you like it if your girlfriend no longer missed you? I'll turn around the perspective, to make you understand.

Student: No.

Carrón: Do you understand? What would it mean if she did not miss you? That she did not care a fig for you. Would you like that? Is this what you desire?

Student: No.

Carrón: We have to have the courage sometimes to look this in the face. Because by looking it in the face, without fear, without being frightened, you realize that maybe it is not a disaster. The day you no longer miss her, what would you say of your love for her? Well then, if it is this way, is the melancholy a good or a disaster?

Student: It is a good.

Carrón: It is a good. But then why in your imagination is it better to remove it? If you no longer felt this melancholy about your girlfriend, what would interest you about her? It is precisely because she is such a precious good that you miss her. The day you do not have it, everything will be over. And this way, do you have a reason to go look for her?

Student: So, practically, the difference is the way I look at this melancholy? The difference from a person who has not encountered the Movement, is this?

Carrón: No, it is another difference. Without having encountered Christ, what happens to all the others? What happens to all the others when this

melancholy ends? Everything ends. Instead, what does Christ introduce into this human experience? That He gives her to you forever and He makes you love her more and more. For those for whom this does not happen, what follows? Everything disappears, so much so that laws are tailor-made for this. Since it will end, you have to prepare the exit called divorce. Everyone expects that love will end this way. So what does Christ introduce? Christ tells you, “Friend, if you do not let My life enter into you, you will not even be able to keep alive this longing, that is, your girlfriend as such cannot awaken this longing in you; you need Me, because without Me, everything declines. Only if I am at the root of your love will it endure; if I do not nourish your love, you will have neither the strength nor the ability to keep it awake, to keep it alive, to keep it fresh, to keep it like the beginning.” Because we are miserable wretches, without this, everything falls away. What does Christ introduce? He introduces that this beautiful thing that has happened to you remains. But not because He removes the longing, not because He removes the melancholy, but rather because He reawakens it in you continually! Or would you like it that one day your girlfriend stops meaning anything to you, as happens so often? Most of the time, those people who most struck me, who moved me to the core of my being, after I felt this melancholy, at a certain point, they do not mean anything to me! How is this possible? It is possible because we are incapable of keeping this alive, and your girlfriend certainly does not have the power to reawaken this longing continually. Only He—who is so powerful—can give you this experience forever. How you would like this always to be so! Not as so often we imagine or see in the experience of many people, where in the end the other is viewed with indifference, if not worse, considered a burden, rejected, unbearable. Jesus did not come to nose around in our personal questions, in our most intimate things. He came to save them. If we let Him enter, if we leave open the possibility for Him to reawaken this, then a thing of the kind can happen. Otherwise our initial input has an expiration date, because your girlfriend (and vice versa) cannot reawaken the interest of the beginning. Why not? Because we are made for the Infinite, and if you do not see this love as a relationship with Him to whom this love points—thinking that everything is there—the most beautiful things, the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to you in life, decays! What if you tried to keep

this relationship from perishing: could you do anything? No. People do all sorts of things, make all kinds of efforts: travel, surprises, and gifts.... Look at the endless number of attempts that fail to keep alive an instant of that longing that we want to see vanish, almost. This is what Christ introduces. Are you interested?

Student: Thank you.

Student: This morning you said that to grasp the value of a fact, of a person, a human genius is needed and that this is not a level of holiness or ethical blamelessness, but an original openness of the soul. I do not understand very well how you can say that it is not an ethical question, because often it seems to me that precisely my incoherence, my distraction, and my superficiality are what block me from having this openness.

Carrón: Why is it the way I said and not the way you say? Let's look together. Let's look together, because one of the most beautiful things of the Gospel is to look at this. Were the publicans coherent? No, they were sinners. Publicans and sinners were synonymous, the example of absolute incoherence. The fact is that the trade coincided with the sin, just think! You cannot get any more incoherent than this! Instead, let's take the example of Zacchaeus, a publican, a head of the publicans, let's say: the maximum of incoherence! Did this incoherence of his stop him from recognizing Jesus? This is the trouble with your question. The incoherence he experienced to the core of his being did not stop him from recognizing this. The Samaritan woman had had five husbands and the man she was with was not hers. Did this remove the thirst she felt, this openness she had? Did this stop her from recognizing Jesus? No. Again, the prodigal son had blown it big time. He had left home and squandered his part of the family inheritance. The Gospel does not spare the details in saying just how incoherent he was; he ended up taking care of pigs, which Jews regarded as the most impure creatures possible, the ugliest thing, the greatest humiliation. But this did not stop him, when he was there in the most absolute incoherence, from saying, "In my father's house everyone lived really well!" Do you understand? What does this mean? The most beautiful thing of the Gospel is that, as you see, the same things happen to these people as happen to us; they experience the same difficulties as ours, and therefore if we look at the Gospel, we find an answer to our questions,

because there Jesus answered these questions. Their incoherence did not stop Jesus from looking at the Samaritan woman and Zacchaeus. And this drew forth their humanity, even under all their incoherence, under the blanket of their sins. This is the greatness: that not even all our evil can erase this openness of the soul we spoke of earlier. Why? Because this openness of the soul is original; it belongs to your human nature, because we are made open to the Infinite; we are made open to reality. Therefore nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop this: only a move of our freedom can block us, not because we have this incoherence inside us, but because we say *no*.

Student: And this is an incoherence...

Carrón: This is a decision of freedom. With incoherence you can say *yes*, and with coherence you can say *no*. The Pharisees were apparently more coherent, but they said *no*; the publicans were incoherent and they said *yes*. If you want Christ to take away your freedom, this is not possible; this is another question. For us, the objection is the incoherence. Incoherence is not an objection, because behind all your incoherence, your freedom remains. Jesus' gesture of tenderness for Zacchaeus cut through the mantle of sin and brought out his whole original structure. Think of the good thief: all his life full of so many incoherences! But up to the last instant a gaze like this can happen that throws everything wide open for him. This can happen in any moment of our life, all your incoherence cannot stop someone from looking at you this way, reopening the game. You can say *yes* or you can say *no*, but this does not stop the game, because a gaze like this, like in the case of Zacchaeus, reopens it; like in the case of the good thief, it reopens; like in the case of the Samaritan woman, it reopens it. Incoherence is not an objection. If you want to look for another justification, look for it, but incoherence is not a justification. Thank you.

Student: How is it possible for sadness to pass from mortification to sign? From my experience, affection for yourself emerges as the decisive point. And then, why, even though I have encountered Christ, and experienced His embrace and His gaze, do I still get scandalized by the sign?

Carrón: Because the gaze of Christ still has not penetrated in you, and it

is not the gaze with which you look at yourself. Because, as you have seen from what we said before, we are scandalized by our humanity, and if we are alone we are scandalized by sadness, and it does not become sign. But when someone has encountered Christ, what happens? I begin to glimpse that this humanity of mine can find a response. When you encountered Christ, did you begin to glimpse this, or not?

Student: Yes.

Carrón: Right. Then you have the whole road, you live like the disciples. John and Andrew, from the first day, began to glimpse this, but then, how many times did they fall? The Gospel spares no details: it does not spare us Peter's denial, or their quarrel about who was the greatest among them, or their reciprocal envy... The whole road, up to the end: "Peter, do you love Me?" The Church acts the same way with us today; she is never scandalized by our humanity and she always embraces us. Do you know the most beautiful thing? That, as the Gospel testifies, even though they fell over and over again, and were scandalized over and over again, they could not alienate Jesus, who constantly embraced them, took them back, and accompanied them. We, too, who fall over and over, cannot avoid someone continuing to look at us this way. And slowly, slowly, you begin to be happier that this Presence exists, rather than worried about your own scandal. And your relief gains the upper hand: thank goodness You are here, Christ! Thank goodness that this Presence exists, that even if I err continually, You always take me back. You are happy because He is there, because that Presence is there. Like a child who can fall repeatedly, but his mother is there. He can make mistakes, and can get into big trouble, and cry and feel all the scandal, all the bewilderment, but what defines him? The joy that his mother is there. At times the Lord lets us go according to a design that seems mysterious to us, to make us understand, "Look, I am here." And at a certain point, you begin to look at yourself with this gaze, with the Presence, with the companionship of this Presence. And you do not feel scandalized any more.

Student: In the beginning of the year, I was diagnosed with a malignant tumor and since then I have experienced what true corruption is, not just moral corruption, like sadness, pain and melancholy, but also physical, visible. But this did not scandalize me. Like the blind, the lame, and the

dumb, I cried for mercy to Christ. That is, I called my friends right away to help me in this trial. The divine has truly saved me through the gaze of some of my friends as they accompanied me during the treatments, and through the gratuitousness of their support and help even after long days of work, like that of a nurse friend who always came, every day, to help me with the injections. And even if my reasoning cannot reach an explanation for all this, my experience cries out His presence.

Carrón: Thank you very much, because yours is the most beautiful contribution that has arrived. Do you know why she was very struck by what we said this morning? Because she was the neediest of all. Not just in a manner of speaking, but physically! True?

Student: Yes.

Carrón: So then, this is the testimony that what we said this morning is true, that when someone has this need, a real need, then not only does scandal not prevail, but she is happy because Christ is there. So then she can understand, and tells us how many times we, who say we start out from experience, actually start out from an experience reduced to our thoughts, to our image, to our idiocies. But a person who has a true, real need, like she does, says this. Rather than closing her, it opens her to recognition of the divine, because the more a person has this wound, the more she can grasp the correspondence in the response. What an impression, and what a testimony for all of us that the Lord gives us to see, before our own eyes, how when there is a needy humanity, not just in a way of speaking, everything is easy. Thank you, my friend.

Student: Thank you.

Student: This morning you told us that only the divine can save the human, only He can save, can embrace my humanity, can reveal who I am to me. He is God; He can do it. How can we common mortals do it for others?

Carrón: The disciples, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, the good thief, whom did they encounter? Did they see the Trinity? Did they see God? What did they see? What did they encounter?

Student: A man.

Carrón: A man, a man! Do not forget this. They did not see God. They saw a man and understood that in that man there was God. But what they saw was a man. That the divine can save, can embrace, can reveal to

me who I am, is normal, but this is not Christianity. Christianity is that God became man, and the one who looked at those people and made them recognize their own humanity was that man there. This is the great difference, because if what you said were just this, where is the mystery? This is not Christianity. Christianity is that God became man and that the divine communicates itself through the gaze of that man. What reached Zacchaeus was a human gaze. What reached John and Andrew, and the Samaritan woman, was a human gaze. Through it they understood that in Him, there was a thing of the other world in this world. But He was a man, and it was only this that helped all humankind understand who God was, in a way that all the other religions that spoke of God never grasped, not even in their wildest imaginations. So much so that I challenge you to find a gaze like the one you find in the Gospel in any other religion, speaking of the divine. You will not find it. God made Himself known through that man. This is why He was the great newness of history, and those who felt themselves looked at this way, were bowled over by this gaze. But those who looked at the others as they themselves were looked at were women and men, so much so that this gaze has reached us, and strikes us as it did on the first day: but who is this who looks at us this way? It is not that they saw the Trinity. They saw people in whom something happened, something they could touch; they were not visionaries. They were women and men. So then, it is not that we are God; we carry what we have received, that gaze that bowled us over, and we cannot fail to look at others with the same tenderness with which we have been looked at, acknowledging all the breadth of the desire that constitutes them, without reducing them to a mere instrument of pleasure or power. Because the Mystery wanted to share this with us (who are miserable wretches) and He shaped us and made us a new creature, so that, with all our limitations, we cannot avoid looking this way, with some crumbs of what we have received. Understand? This is why this gaze has reached you, me and us; otherwise, we would never have even dreamed of seeing a thing like this. But it is the divine that reaches us through the human. Is it clear?

Student: Yes.

Student: This morning you read the Gospel story of Jesus with the sick. You

said they did not need to censure anything, that in fact their sickness was what pushed them to go to Him, and Jesus healed them. I had learned to live with my sadness, initially. I accepted it as a somewhat dark aspect of my character, of my personality. Lately, though, in these years of work on the School of Community I have begun to take myself more seriously, and what you say is true, my sense of solitude has become a special instrument for begging for His presence and for acknowledging Him present. However, there remains an open question, because Jesus healed those people. I, instead... I still feel the pain in sadness. So there are two possible explanations. Either the example is not fitting, because, after all, Jesus healed them and took away their illness, or there is something that I do not understand. Is it in the relationship with Christ that the need, the illness is completed, without needing to eliminate it? And I wanted to understand what experience you have of this pacification in sadness.

Carrón: We think that healing is the elimination of need. Do you imagine that since Jesus healed the sick, your sadness will be healed if He takes it away?

Student: If He takes away the pain. Not the need for Him, which does not bother me at all.

Carrón: But what is pain? It is the need of Him. I always think of the example of the ten lepers. Jesus healed all of them, and it seemed like the story ended there. But for one of them this healing was not enough, because the healing had a goal, to tell him, “Look, you are not alone. I am here, and I care for you.” Because Jesus knew that healing the disease was not enough, that this does not resolve the drama of living. As you say, it is an open question. But through the healing, in taking care of the sickness of the people, Jesus wanted to help us understand that we were not alone, that there is something more decisive than the disease—our desire for happiness—and that He was there. This is what the one leper witnessed to forever: he returned because the healing was not enough, and it was not over. He returned because he felt all the longing for Jesus. For the others the question was closed. And so what happened? They lost the best, because the best was not the healing; the best was Jesus. Because when they got up the next morning and met each other again, disease-free, they still had all their human need; the question was still open. Jesus came not to close [the question] but to be there, with us, to become our

companion, to tell us that we are not alone with our open wounds. And everything becomes beautiful; everything becomes different if you engage this sadness and this melancholy in the relationship with Him. If this need were healed in the leper who returned, he would not have returned; but this way he would have missed the best, because the best was Him. Is that understandable?

Student: Yes, thank you.

Carrón: Thank goodness, as I always say, that Christ does not always respond to our image, to how we conceive of the solution. In fact, He responded to some this way. To the other nine He responded big time, removing their disease. Only one realized that this was not enough to respond to all his desire for fullness. Because this desire is not resolved like a disease; it is resolved in a relationship, in a relationship with Christ! And for this reason, if it is a relationship it will always be open (as I hope it will be if you fall in love, because the day you are “healed” of this, it means that your girlfriend is no longer important to you, that you do not desire to go see her, that you are not amazed looking at her, that you are not moved by her love). Without a relationship you can be disease-free, but you are a stone, and you do not even feel moved. Jesus did not come to make us become stones, but in order for us to live this human adventure: the more you encounter Him, the more the pain lessens, because the pain is that He is not there. But if He is there and I can acknowledge Him, I can be moved every time, whatever the situation.

Student: This morning, you were talking about the gaze and you also spoke about the gaze of Giussani and his charism and you said that it is the sign of the contemporaneity of Christ. Giussani introduced you ever more deeply into the gaze that Jesus had for you. If I am sincere, I realize that I have recognized this inexplicable gaze in my life many, many times. But at a certain point it is as if there were a gap, that is, an ultimate resistance. I do not know if it is due to the fact that doubt worms its way in at a certain point, so that gaze becomes less exceptional, a bit less unique, and gets pigeon-holed together with those thousand facts, those thousand unique gazes I have had in my life. They became almost anecdotes, nostalgic anecdotes, and as a mechanical consequence of all this, all of a sudden my humanity returned to being a source of scandal and annoyance for me, so

that I became afraid again to look upon my limitation. So I wanted to ask you what more is needed so that this gaze and this charism that I have encountered can introduce me ever more deeply into His gaze, so that it can be always present, indelible, here and now?

Carrón: That you are there, because, as you said, you have encountered this gaze many times.

Student: Yes.

Carrón: So then, after the fog comes and the confusion begins, you can use a weapon, which is called reason. Understand? Before these things, you have to stay there and judge whether it is true or not; you have to decide. If you say everything becomes dark, you have to erase these gazes you have experienced. But what more could Jesus have done for you than to have given them to you continually, to the point that now, even in the midst of the doubt you speak of, you cannot avoid acknowledging that they happened?

Student: Yes, but I do not know why I cannot manage to say yes.

Carrón: Exactly, because it is not mechanical, because you people want it to be something that happens without you! I assure you, it cannot be this way! Because as I always tell you, I can give you a gift, but I cannot also accept it in your name! At least this you have to do yourself. Jesus can give you this avalanche of signs that you recognize but He does not take away your freedom; we belong to a Movement in which we have heard that Jesus loves our freedom more than our salvation. That is, not that He leaves us alone, but that He does not impose a mechanical salvation that does not pass through your freedom; He will wait your whole life until you decide, but He will never spare you the possibility of saying *yes* or saying *no*, because that would not be worthy, respectful of your humanity, of your human greatness; and He is so attentive to respecting all of our freedom, all of our greatness, that He does not impose Himself mechanically, but asks for us. He begs for our heart. He will give us all the signs we need; He will return to smile, but He will never remove our freedom. This is what Fr. Giussani says: Christianity has an inconvenient truth because it demands true women and men, not robots, not mechanisms. An “I” is required (even when we want such perfect systems that we are spared being good, as Eliot says, that we are spared freedom). If you want the other thing, you have to look in another place, another religion, because

here God became man to exalt man, as we have seen today; He holds the greatness of humanity in such high regard that He does not force us. He calls us, invites us, attracts us, gives us all the signs, but He does not spare us from saying "I". This is why the question is open.

Student: This morning you spoke of the gaze of love that is continually proposed to us. I can say I have experienced it through my life, in facts and in people. The problem is that this consciousness of His power upon me exists only in a few moments. I want to ask you how it is possible for this consciousness in my days, in my daily life, to become something that takes me up totally, that is always clear and in which I can ground every instant of my life. Because with this awareness I could face everything!

Carrón: The first thing is for you to realize, even if it only happens in a few moments, that you have seen something that is so unique, so exceptional, that it is the sign of the contemporaneity of Christ. And this remains. Then, I can forget about my fragility, but what I have seen in that moment, if I have understood what I have seen, remains. Do I explain myself? I want you people to understand, because much of your uncertainty derives exactly from this: it is as if you reduce what entered into a moment of time, but that is so unique, so exceptional, that it is another world in this world, the divine in history, the contemporaneity of Christ. And this is the first thing to realize, that this is a judgment and for this reason remains, even if what does not remain is me. Understand? I am happy that He remains, even if I then fall away, but it is different that I have this certainty of judgment that He remains. And then, He did not simply enter into those moments, but He remains, remains as a fact in history, for you, so that He can become ever more familiar and prevail over your life, and this is a journey. He becomes part of daily life so that every time He makes himself present you acknowledge Him more, and He awakens in you an increasing desire to know Him more. And when you miss Him, because you feel longing or feel that there is something that is not like what you have experienced, you are driven by the memory of Him, like of the beloved. And thus, slowly, Christ becomes a daily companionship for your life, not just in some moments, but always more and more. But this happens according to a human journey, according to the whole dynamic of the construction of a human relationship,

understand?

Student: Thus, the problem is a memory in day-to-day life.

Carrón: It is a memory. The problem is a memory. And for this reason I say that if you use all your need, this is the resource. Once you have encountered Christ, the longing and solitude, which are like the symptoms that you are missing something, become the resource that you can use to make memory of Christ who presses you to seek Him. And so, without being scandalized that you have forgotten, but using all this as a resource, this sadness of yours becomes the instrument for remembering Him. So then, instead of being a curse, all this humanity of yours becomes a blessing. Why? Because everything speaks to you of Him, because everything is an occasion for longing for Him.

Student: This morning, you asked us if Christ was a man present for us today, that is, now, in this moment, or a man who was present two thousand years ago. I recognize that Christ is present in our midst every day, and thus expect a sentiment of gladness about Christ's presence to dominate in me. Instead, there is sadness and dissatisfaction, which are symptoms of the humanity we spoke of this morning, that manage to prevail even in terms of His presence. Why does this happen?

Carrón: So then, what prevails?

Student: Sadness?

Carrón: The fact that this sadness exists does not mean that it overcomes and can erase the Presence that has filled you with gladness. The Presence is there. Imagine Peter and John, when they felt sad. Was Christ not there? Had they not encountered Him? Who overcame? The passing sentiment of sadness or that Presence that imposed itself before their eyes? This is the question. We often think that since all these things happen, they win; but the question is whether this Presence is a fact that is so real that life is filled with gladness. Because without this I could not have recognized Him. And you tell me that you recognize Him. So He has won! Even in the moments of sadness. The problem is that for you people these things seem incompatible....

Student: Yes, in fact.

Carrón: Eh, yes. The fact that you are sad in that moment does not mean that He is not there, understand? You are happy that He is there, but you

think, “If this Presence is there, it means that It has to erase all the rest.” Instead, no. Sadness happens so that I can realize more deeply what a grace His presence is.

Student: Thank you.

Student: I have always tried to be loyal with my sadness. The problem that I encounter is that I do not see a change, in the sense that I was struck by what you said today on the fact that we do not grasp the signs of His presence, and we do not grasp them not because we cannot, but because we do not want to. I cannot understand what you mean by this, because I try really hard to grasp these signs and I would like to understand what you mean by hypocrisy.

Carrón: What I said, you all have to understand in your own lives. If you do not see the signs because they are not there, then that is one thing, so then there is no hypocrisy. The problem is that Jesus spoke before people who had an avalanche of signs before them (you personally know whether you are before this avalanche of signs or not). It is not that we are idiots; we know perfectly well how to interpret the signs, and the signs point beyond. When we see a cloud we know for sure that rain is coming. And Jesus said, “You have more signs than a cloud. So then you are hypocrites, because you resist acknowledging these signs and therefore drawing all the conclusions of these signs, because these signs are the sign of who I am, because all these signs are the expression of my ‘I,’ the expression of what I am.” You will have to see. I am not judging you; each of you will have to judge honestly whether you have seen no signs (then you are not a hypocrite) or whether you are before these signs and yet you resist (then you are a hypocrite).

Student: I understand. Thank you.

Student: This morning you told us that faith is a new intelligence of reality, an intelligence of experience. I wanted to know how this intelligence happens, that is, happens as a natural consequence of the acknowledgment of this alterity, of this Mystery and of this inexplicability that is reality.

Carrón: What Fr. Giussani says is very simple. As we have seen in the testimonies we read this morning, many of you are here because you have seen within reality something that your intelligence has had to

acknowledge, a difference. And this has sparked your curiosity to explain the nature of this difference. And we have said that if we erase that ultimate origin, we have to erase something of our experience. How do we grasp this ultimate origin that is within experience? We grasp it with what we call faith, because faith is the new intelligence of reality. This Presence has the capacity to broaden our reason so powerfully, to throw it wide open so powerfully, that It enables us to grasp what is inside. Seeing how much a person loves you and how he or she moves you, you see that there is something there that throws you wide open to try to understand something you do not see, but cannot erase from experience. It is not that you touch It with your hand; you touch the signs. If you deny that this exists, if you deny that your mother loves you, you have to erase something in your experience. Believing that your mother loves you is a new intelligence of reality. It is an example to help us to understand that when we do this, we are acknowledging something within our experience: in fact, if we do not believe that our mother loves us, we have to erase something. It is an analogy to help us understand that faith has this dynamic, that we find something within our experience that, in order not to deny it, we are forced to acknowledge. We call this “the grace of faith,” because you could not acknowledge this without the presence of Christ, without the presence of something in your experience that throws you wide open. You could not adhere to the true meaning of reality unless He were so present as to throw wide open your capacity of intelligence. So then you make the most reasonable gesture there is: you acknowledge Him. No vision is required; what is needed is to be honest deep down with that experience. For this reason, everything is played out in this honesty with the experience we have, in this yielding to the throwing wide open of my reason, of my intelligence, of my capacity to grasp what is within and that I could never grasp without such a fascinating, powerful Presence. This is faith. Nobody says that believing that your mother loves you is unreasonable: it is an intelligence full of your experience.

Faith is an intelligence full of the experience of the encounter with a different humanity, with an exceptionality that facilitates your acknowledgment. As you see, we have a long road to travel, but in doing so we accompany each other.

Sunday morning, December 6

The gaze we spoke about yesterday is the one with which the Church in this time of Advent looks at each of her children, with an unbounded tenderness, an endless embrace, so that each of us can feel upon ourselves all the deeply moved emotion with which the Mystery looks at our life, where nothing is excluded from that gaze, even those things we can hardly bear to look at. This is what the Church does with the song *Rorate*, invoking the Lord.

Ne irascaris Domine, ne ultra memineris iniquitatis: do not become angry, do not be enraged at us, do not dwell on our iniquity; *ecce, civitas sancti facta est deserta, Sion deserta facta est, Jerusalem desolata est*. There is no fear in using the words that describe the situation: a deserted city, desolate, a city that was made to sanctify His glory, to praise God, as the fathers had done. But this city is deserted. Why? *Peccavimus*, nothing is excluded from this gaze; *facti sumus tamquam immundus nos*, we have become filthy. Why? Because we have yielded, *cecidimus quasi folium universi*, we have let ourselves be dragged along like leaves in autumn, *et iniquitates nostrae, quasi ventus, abstulerunt nos*, our sins have brought us here and there like the wind; You have hidden your face and have abandoned us to our iniquity. What can we have done that does not enter into this description? What can we oppose to this embrace, to this realism on the life of each of us? What must we keep locked in the closet, where a gaze like this cannot enter? What do we have to defend ourselves from? The Church fears nothing, not the desert, not evil, not our yielding, not our being dragged about like the wind, and She sets all before us. *Vide, Domine, afflictionem populi tui*, look upon our affliction, the weight we bear with all this, *et mitte quem missurus est: emitte Agnum dominatorem terrae*, send Him whom you are about to send, the Lamb, who is the Lord; send Him to console me! *Consolamini, consolamini popule meus: cito veniet salus tua*, it will arrive, this salvation is about to arrive soon; *quare moerore consumeris*, why do you consume yourself in the bitterness of your evil, of all that is out of order? Consume yourself. What do you fear? *Salvabo te*, I will save you, *noli timere*, do not fear.

Because *ego, enim, sum Dominus Deus tuus*, I am the Lord your God, *Sanctus Israel, Redemptor tuus*, your Redeemer.

Friends, this is the gaze with which God through His body that is the Church, through a human gaze today, looks at each of us. Therefore nothing, absolutely nothing, is excluded from this embrace; nothing is left outside. There is no weight that burdens us, no situation that burns us that is not embraced, no evil, no difficulty, no circumstance, no sin; if this is so, who can feel excluded from this embrace full of tenderness, from this gaze full of affection? How I would like to embrace all of you one by one to communicate to you this deeply moved emotion with which the Mystery looks at us and embraces us, to bring us this emotion, because this is the Mystery we have met, and it is so different, my friends, so different that it is only the divine, because nobody would think up a thing like this; it is impossible for it to be generated by man!

You understand why at a certain point Jesus affirms, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”²⁴ This joy pervades the whole Gospel, because many in the world yearn to hear such a thing.

This contemporaneity of Christ is what we need, and for this reason the Christmas poster is the gaze with which to look at ourselves, with the unease we all bear on our shoulders: “Now, with our failing muscles, with our exhaustion, with our propensity for melancholy, with this strange masochism that life tends to favor nowadays, or with this indifference and cynicism that life produces nowadays as a way of avoiding the suffering of an excessive and unwanted fatigue, how could we ever accept ourselves and others in the name of a discourse? We cannot sustain love for ourselves unless Christ is a presence, as a mother is a presence for her child. Unless Christ is a presence now—now!—I cannot love myself now and I cannot love you now.”²⁵

This is the only possibility for us to love ourselves now, to embrace ourselves now: acknowledging His presence now. No particular capacity is needed, no particular coherence, no special energy: let yourself be embraced now, just acknowledge Him present now. That He is present now, as I said before, is so obvious because of the difference of this gaze,

²⁴ *Lk* 10:23-24.

²⁵ L. Giussani, *Qui e ora* (1984-1985), op. cit. pp. 76-77.

which, on the one hand, makes us experience an infinite relief, a unique experience of breathing room, and on the other, almost a resistance, so different is it, so not generated by us, so other is it, so divine. We have always had this burdensome doubt: does He exist or do we invent Him? Is faith our creation or is it an acknowledgment? Figure it out for yourselves, try to imagine if such a thing, which is the sign of God present who still has mercy on us, would even cross your mind. The Movement offers us this instrument of the Christmas poster, so we will not forget that, just as there is no world map without America, so there is no reality, no matter what I am going through, no matter what aridity I feel, no matter how distant I feel, no matter what anguish is tearing at my heart, no matter what pain I bear—there is no reality where this Presence does not exist. This is not something we decide: we can refuse to acknowledge it, but it is not in our capacity to eliminate Him.

In a dialogue with university students Fr. Giussani said, “The trace that the poster left in us is a question, a prayer, a position of personal entreaty: not smugness for having done a work and understood, incorporating it into our own experience and leaving at our backs this proposal as well. Instead, we find the poster before us, not behind us, as the content of an entreaty, a prayer. *Giussani*: Excuse me if I permit myself to interrupt. This image is just too beautiful a point of departure: “The poster before us, not behind us.” It came before us! Normally things come before us, and we study them, some more, some less, and then, later, they go behind our backs, as if they were already acquired [in just this way, we grind up a text and have to wait for the next one, a new key word, a new thought, a new flash of genius, because we are sick of the old one and have to change]. This means that they are never a truth, because truth always stays before us, always. Like the poster, that is always before us. A thing is truth when it is always before us. The tragedy of the Movement is that there are people (please pay attention, because you are the most prone to this error) who already know what the Movement says. For those who are this way, the Movement has never been a truth, understand? Even if it were the most honorable President of the University of Tolentino! This image is just too beautiful. “The poster is before you.” I interrupted, I permitted myself to interrupt, to underline that [...] truth is always before us. This observation is the

confirmation of the famous sentence I am repeating for the hundred and second time in a year: “Rarely do people understand what they believe they already know.” What they believe they already know, they do not even understand! Yesterday, while I was speaking at the Close of the Year Day of the adults of Milan, I was struck when this thought came to mind: the truth, a true thing, the more you listen to it and look at it, the more it is new. This is the characteristic of the truth. When one says, “I have already heard this stuff before,” it is because the person has never understood it, or the thing is not true.”²⁶

For this reason, my friends, nothing is an obstacle. It is for this reason, because He is before us, that the Church awaits in this time of Advent. Because Advent season, as the Pope said, is the time of expectant awaiting. Why do we await? Because He exists. So often, we take for granted the awaiting, but there are many people who do not expect anything, and the more the years go by, the more difficult it is to find someone who expectantly awaits something. Look around and see how many forty-somethings you know who are not skeptical, and maybe you will begin to understand that expectant awaiting is not something to take for granted. So why does the Church—which is much more than forty years old—She’s over two thousand!—continue to await? Why does She continue to celebrate this time? Why has She not stopped hoping? Let’s not take it for granted, friends. It is not a foregone conclusion: two thousand, this is a fact! Figure it out. Because the fact that someone awaits is the sign that there is someone who always elicits in us the expectation.

The Pope said, “Hope marks humanity’s journey, but for Christians it is enlivened by a certainty: the Lord is present in the passage of our lives, he accompanies us...”²⁷ We can hope because of the certainty of a present—beautiful! As we studied in School of Community about hope, time becomes another thing. He continues, “If time is not filled by a present endowed with meaning, expectation risks becoming unbearable; if one expects something but at a given moment there is nothing, in other words if the present remains empty, every instant that passes appears extremely long and waiting becomes too heavy a burden because the future remains completely uncertain. On the other hand, when time is endowed with meaning and at every instant we perceive

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Vespers for the Beginning of Advent Season*, November 28, 2009.

something specific and worthwhile, it is then that the joy of expectation makes the present more precious. [...] And if Jesus is present, there is no longer any time that lacks meaning or is empty. If He is present, we may continue to hope, even when others can no longer assure us of any support, even when the present becomes trying. Dear friends, Advent is the season of the presence and expectation of the eternal. For this very reason, it is in a particular way a period of joy [...] that no suffering can diminish. It is joy in the fact that God made Himself a Child. This joy, invisibly present within us, encourages us to journey on with confidence”²⁸—because what dominates life is that Presence, that You who makes life different.

Fr. Giussani wrote in this spectacular text, “We must never let go of the fact that there is a man who was born of a woman two thousand years ago and who is present in our life and who loves us. And this man is God. [...] Since I acknowledge Him, I desire nothing else. This is everything. The *You* is worthwhile, and, since I acknowledge Him, nothing else is involved. I am a poor slob, a wretch, lousy, ignorant, faithless, traitorous. Since I acknowledge You, since I say ‘You,’ nothing else matters, all the rest disappears. [...] ‘None of this ever existed; He alone exists.’ It is not a lie. It is this, understand? But accepting to say this sentence means changing your skin, changing your mentality, or better, changing your conception of life. In order to conceive, [...] two partners are always needed (one alone cannot conceive, except in the lower strata of life). Therefore it is with a Presence that you can conceive: acknowledging that Presence, you conceive things in a different way and, if you say ‘You,’ the rest no longer has anything to do with it. [...] *You*. *You* is a speaking with the index finger directed, the eye directed and the heart directed, the mind directed toward a Presence, a reality present; to a reality present, turning to which—since you are not a piece of wood, not a piece of rock, not even a star, but a person—the only word that you can use is *You*. The problem is that with all our discourses we try as much as possible to hide the totalizing power, the totalizing value that this *You* has. We say ‘You’ like saying, I don’t know, ‘prosciutto!’ ‘You, prosciutto.’ And, while you say it this way, it is sliced away, sliced away, to make it as thin as possible, to set apart as much as possible, to steal. We say ‘You’ trying to

²⁸ *Ibid.*

steal, while *You* is everything. In fact, the alternative to this *You* is not other things: it is nothingness. The alternative to this *You* is nothingness, the void. The more in saying ‘You’ we try to safeguard some capacity of ours, some value of ours, to excuse our defects—it is like saying ‘You, but...’ ‘You, but...’—the more we do this, the more we blaspheme, the more we speak badly of God. [...] He can leave us weak as much as He wants. He can leave us what we are, as much as He wants, but outside of Him, there is nothingness, nothingness suspended by optical illusion in dust particles. What is it called? Appearance [...], which from sunrise to sunset declines and disappears like dew, like the morning dew. [...] In order to say with modesty and truth the word love, perhaps it is just to substitute it with the expression expectant awaiting. Expectant awaiting holds within love because it is ‘striving for,’ but it is a striving that awaits without fixing the times or the ways.”²⁹

Do you want to tell your beloved that you love her, or do you want a little machine to do so for you? No, thank you. I do not want you to spare me this. I want to say *You* to Christ, every day. The instant holds within it this density. Being able to say *You* to Christ, ever anew, like something that happens now, that grace by which He takes me, draws me away from distraction, makes Himself present, and I, so touched by this move of the Mystery with me, can say, “You, Christ. You, Christ.”

This is possible because of the affection that Christmas introduced into history. “Christmas is the celebration of affection, of God’s affection for man,”³⁰ precisely in order to awaken this affection in man, because without awakening this affection in us, we are like a drifting mine, like leaves blown about by the wind, blown about by our idiocies. What tenderness!

Therefore my prayer for you for this time is that you may “make your human preference the presence of Christ.”³¹ May His presence be a human preference that takes all of you, more and more, that takes you in the depths of your being, to the point that you will say to Him, moved and grateful, “You.”

²⁹ L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù*, [*The Attraction of Jesus*], Bur, Milan, 1999, pp. 23-225.

³⁰ L. Giussani, “Natale la tenerezza di Dio” [*Christmas, the Tenderness of God*], in *Tracce-Litterae Communionis*, No. 12, December 1991, pp. 31-34.

³¹ L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora*, op. cit., p. 96.

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