

WHAT GOOD
DOES IT DO A MAN
TO GAIN
THE WHOLE WORLD,
IF HE THEN
LOSES HIMSELF?

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

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December 8, 2006
Evening

INTRODUCTION

Julián Carrón

All of us who are here feel a great and pressing need within us. Even though we come from many different places, this is what we share in common: we all came here with the same need. If I had to choose a word to describe the situation we are all in, whatever country we come from (but now we are all in some way in the same country), I would use the word “confusion.”

To indicate the situation of someone living in a country like ours, who finds himself before this society, this people into which he was born, and in the midst of which he is trying to gain clarity for himself, trying to begin to understand how he should live, I can’t use any other word than “confusion.” In our newsstands, just as on television, what do we run up against? An enormous jumble of messages. One can see that this is our situation from the pressing need for certainty you express in your contributions. This desire is so powerful that it demonstrates just how great the confusion is. Therefore, we need—as much as we need food—to clarify the road, to be certain we’ve found the right road.

Let’s begin this road together, looking all this confusion straight in the face, without being scared. Let’s ask ourselves: is there something that resists all this confusion? Is there something that resists in such an evident way that not even all this confusion can defeat it? All this confusion cannot evade—and actually, it makes it emerge more clearly—the need we always feel within: the need for happiness, the need to find the right road, the need for truth, to understand the meaning of time, of suffering, of living. All the confu-

sion cannot avert the emergence of the heart. “The heart,” said Fr. Giussani in Padua (and we’ve read in *Traces*), “is the place of the great needs: the need for truth, the need for justice, the need for love, the need—and this summarizes everything—for happiness. The heart, for the Bible, is this place of the great needs, which distills in the end into that shorter, more important word of all those we can say, which is the word ‘I.’”¹

“What good does it do a man to gain the whole world, if he then loses himself?”²—if he loses his own “I,” his own heart?

We may all think differently, each in his own way. Our heads may be filled with whatever we want, but if there’s something nobody wants to lose, it’s himself. Not even all the confusion can eliminate this. Rather, the more everything gets confused and we become aware of this confusion, the more this need comes to the forefront: through sadness, dissatisfaction, bewilderment, restlessness, or the fullness we sometimes experience.

In the talk I mentioned before, Fr. Giussani spoke of a chapter in Fr. Gemelli’s book, *Franciscanism*, that began with an illuminated letter “Q,” and inside the oval of the “Q” was “the silhouette of St. Francis of Assisi, with his arms open wide and his head back, and, before him, the faraway outline of a mountain, behind which the sun was rising, and the tail of the Q was a little bird. The first ‘Q’ of the chapter... began another phrase...: *Quid animo satis?* What can satisfy man’s heart? The symbol was clear; [St. Francis of Assisi] the most distinguished man, the man who best exemplifies the sensitivity of our race, before the finest panorama of nature and the rising sun, felt his heart opened wide, and his arms were spread wide to imitate the feeling of his heart. In that moment, nothing seemed to be lacking [in that moment in which everything was so beautiful, so broadened, thrown wide open], but actually everything was still lacking. ‘What can satisfy man’s heart?’—for man’s heart is that place in our personal existence in which we grasp that we are that level of nature in which nature becomes need for relationship with the Infinite.... Before this, everything collapses; before this eternal and infinite shore, everything collapses, even the face of the person you love most is ruined, even the things you possess most escape from your hands and ‘more what I liked most,’ said a poet friend of Giosuè Carducci, ‘And more what I liked most.’”³

This nature that becomes need for the infinite, this exigency we call “heart,” is so deeply rooted in our humanity that we cannot

destroy it (it's just as well that it's rooted in our innards, or we, too, would try to do away with it!). All the confusion crashes into this fact over and over again, which is rooted in our humanity, in the marrow of our bones, in our innards, and is thus ineradicable: it is a given. Nature—flesh, bones, innards, and cells—becomes in man the need for the infinite. Unlike other animals, our physiology is entirely designed with this openness to the infinite: it is rooted in our humanity, and for this reason is ineradicable. Everyone acknowledges it. “I am filled by a question,” said Pasolini, “which no one can answer.”⁴ No nihilism can vanquish this. We can try to trample it down, we can try to forget it, we can leave home, like the prodigal son, do everything we want, but even there, once we've ended up there, eating with the pigs, we feel it within us again, as always. The prodigal son is not the only one: “All of philosophy is nostalgia, the desire to feel like we're at home, wherever we are,”⁵ as Novalis said.

Since this is something that nobody can defeat, we find ourselves before an alternative: either we give credence to this “heart,” this exigency we always feel within us, that persists in us against all confusion, or we try to eliminate it. Either credence wins, or deceit. Since we can't eradicate it, the only thing we can really do to oppose it is to lie continually, because we have to deny it constantly. The culmination of this deceit becomes self-hatred, hatred of that given, objective desire, so rooted in my humanity that I can't eradicate it. But I can hate it. “One day,” Nietzsche wrote, “the wanderer slammed a door shut behind him, came to a halt, and wept. Then he said: ‘This penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent, certain—how it exasperates me!’”⁶ The heart can become the enemy to be defeated, “How I hate it!” But this isn't the only alternative. We can give credence to this heart, start afresh from it, no matter what our situation, whatever our state of soul when we arrived here: nobody, no power of this world can stop us from doing so. We can start anew, begin our being together here with a gesture of loyalty to ourselves. Even if all day long or all month long we were uninterested in ourselves, nobody can stop us now from performing this act of loyalty, so we begin to “look on the humanity within us with sympathy; ... 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 meaning.”⁷

In order to start anew, we just need this gaze of sympathy, of

fondness for our humanity: just an instant of fondness to start afresh. This is what has brought us here, what puts us in an attitude of waiting—not letting us be carried away by more or less partial impressions. Why have we all come here? Because of this expectation we always have within us. “The more we discover our needs, the more we become aware that we cannot resolve them on our own... A sense of *powerlessness* accompanies every serious experience in our lives. [And as soon as we look at experience, we begin to emerge from the confusion]. This sense of powerlessness generates *solitude*. [Solitude, loneliness, isn’t what we usually think it is, reducing it to pure sentimentalism]. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution within us or in others. We can well say that the sense of solitude is born in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity... like one alone in the desert, all he or she can do is wait until someone appears.”⁸

Therefore, this gesture, our staying together, arises from a judgment—however timid, even though still confused—about our life as need, as exigency. This gesture is an opening of our heart to that which makes life worth living. Let’s begin, then, asking to be here, just as we are. We don’t have to change anything: let’s be here just as we are, with our humanity, without eliminating anything, looking with fondness at everything boiling inside us, sweeping away all shadows of formality, like children who call a spade a spade.

But in order to look at this humanity of ours without being scared or shocked, we need a Presence. “Without a presence, the child is a desperate nothing. His only distinction from nothingness is that he is desperate. Without Presence, man differs from nothingness only in that he is desperate,” Fr. Giussani said years ago. This is why we often fear looking at our humanity, and the only way out is distraction, normal dissipation, leaving our mind and heart at home. But in order to recognize this Presence, we need an energy, a moral strength: in fact, many times we resist this Presence.

To help us, we need Something other; we need a Presence that is a friend. Here one sees even more clearly what we truly need. In fact, without this Presence, deprived of a good Presence, our desire “goes crazy;” it is a desire that doesn’t know where to go, that disorients us even more, leading us here and there, so we’re like a balloon adrift. As Gide said, “Desire, I’ve dragged you

through the streets, I've laid waste to you in the fields, I've gotten you drunk in the city, I've gotten you drunk without quenching your thirst, I've bathed you on moon-filled nights, I've brought you around everywhere, I've rocked you on the waves, I've tried to lull you to sleep on the billows. Desire, desire, what to do with you? What do you want, then? Will you never tire?" So many times, we don't know what to do with this desire of ours. It carries us everywhere, it drags us all around, it's as if it's crazed. We experience a growing sense of powerlessness and there's nothing we can do about it but wait.

But Someone has come more than halfway to help us in our powerlessness. All of us here have experienced this: someone has come to help us. Yet how many times do we think that He, too, has failed, that not even He can quench our desire, attract us, vanquish the confusion! No, the Pope told us, "God never fails. Or more precisely: initially God always fails, He lets human freedom exist and this freedom constantly says 'no,' but God's imagination, the creative power of His love, is greater than the human 'no.' With every human 'no,' a new dimension of His love is bestowed and He finds a new and greater way to bring about His 'yes' to man, history, and creation... [From the beginning, with Adam, this story began.] Adam... was not satisfied with God's friendship; it was not enough for him because he himself wanted to be a god. He considered friendship as a dependence and considered himself a god, as though he could exist solely by himself. He therefore said 'no' in order to become a god himself and in this very way, he threw himself down from his exalted position. God 'failed' in Adam—and likewise, to all appearances, throughout history. But God did not fail, for now He becomes a man Himself and so begins a new humanity; He roots God's being in a human being in an irrevocable way and descended to the deepest abysses of man's being: He humbled Himself even unto the Cross.... What does all this mean for us? First of all, it means one certainty: God does not fail. He 'fails' continuously, but for this very reason He does not fail, because through this He finds new opportunities for far greater mercy and His imagination is inexhaustible. He does not fail because He finds ever-new ways to reach people and to open wider His great house so that it is completely filled. He does not fail because He does not shrink from the prospect of asking people to come and sit at His table... God does not fail, not even today. Even if we come up against many *nos*, we can be sure of it. From the whole of this history of God, starting

with Adam, we can conclude: God never fails.”⁹

We see it. All of us are witnesses to how He has not failed: all of us, in fact, are full of *nos*, of all the times in our life we've said “no” to Him; but all of us are witnesses to how He has opened another way to reach us. Again today, He has found the way to reach us, according to His imaginativeness. During this weekend, He, with His unique imaginativeness, will seek a path for reaching our heart: let's pray that we not withdraw from this initiative of the Mystery who begs for our heart.

December 9, 2006
Morning

LESSON

Julián Carrón

1. The problem of certainty

What is the question that emerges most forcefully, that drives and presses the most within us, in the midst of this situation of confusion in which we live? The question of certainty, the certainty of the road and, for those of us here, the certainty of this road, that is, the certainty of Christ, about Christ!

What does it mean to be certain about Christ? How can we gain this certainty? What's it made of? One of you said, "What truly interests me is that you give me a hand so that my experience in the community may truly deepen my certainty." Hers is one of many such contributions focusing on this theme.

"How can I," we studied in the School of Community, "who arrived the day after Christ left, know that this really is Something of supreme interest to me, and how can I know this with any reasonable degree of certainty?" We have already noted that, whatever the answer may be, it is impossible to imagine a problem graver than this for a human being. For any person who comes into contact with the Christian message, it is imperative that he or she attempt to obtain a certainty about it, since this is such a decisive issue for his or her life and for the life of the world."¹⁰

Now, the question of certainty becomes urgent, dramatic, especially because of the characteristics produced by our times, the nihilism we breathe, the inability to accept the most elementary evidence of our experience, and thus to attain certainty in any field of human existence. We bear the burden of our onerous inheri-

tance and of this void, which are compounded by a profound affective weakness and a strange laziness in our reasoning. Where judgment weakens, so falters the capacity to reach certainty in life.

Fr. Giussani always had the pressing need that faith be reasonable: he was convinced that without this, in the world in which we find ourselves living, faith could not survive. Therefore, there's nothing more important in life than gaining this certainty.

But we have to take into consideration a difficulty we always harbor within ourselves that complicates our chances of gaining this certainty. In fact, in school, at the university, in the context in which we live, we've been accustomed to thinking that one can attain certainty only by using reason in a particular way. That is, our difficulty has to do with the relationship between knowledge and certainty—in other words, with a way of conceiving of reason and its use, with a conception of knowledge that conditions us, even if don't realize it. We are children of that “modern self-limitation of reason” that Benedict XVI spoke of in Regensburg, that has reduced the field and the task of reason to what can be examined scientifically. The only reason accepted is scientific reason, and its sphere of activity is identified exclusively with the reality that can be transcribed, translated into mathematical terms and subjected to demonstration through experiments; everything that can't be transcribed, translated into mathematical language, and can't be subjected to experimental demonstration, is not knowable; it is the field of the merely subjective.

This dogma of scientific rationalism is the air we breathe. This is why we are loathe to say that there are other types of knowledge with which we can attain certainty. The Pope says: “Only the kind of certainty resulting from the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements can be considered scientific. Anything that would claim to be science must be measured against this criterion.” Earlier, Fr. Giussani had written in *The Religious Sense*, “Only in the field of science and mathematics can the truth about an object be perceived and affirmed. With any other type of knowledge—concerning destiny, the affective and political problems—one can never reach objective certainty, a true knowledge of the object.”¹¹

For us, only what is demonstrated through calculation and confirmed by experiment is “certain.” Thus, the sphere of authentic knowledge is reduced to a small field of abstract and formal truths with the consequent scientific-technical applications. What is the result of such a restriction, of this domination by scientific ration-

alism? That reason and knowledge no longer have a relationship with life, with the questions of life. As such, reason is separated from existence. How can we, then, with this use of reason to which we are accustomed, attain certainty in a problem like the one we are facing, the problem of Christ? With this use of reason, it's impossible. In fact, this was the Pope's challenge at Regensburg. If we, who live in this cultural situation, want to attain true knowledge, we must broaden reason, because reality is greater than the measure of our reason and reason isn't a mechanism; "it is life," as Fr. Giussani says in *The Religious Sense*, and entails different methods according to the type of object: it would be irrational "before the richness of the real"¹² to claim to use the same method for realities that present themselves as irreducibly different. There is a more primary and fundamental method that precedes and even makes possible the scientific one: it consists of the intelligence of the sign, that is, the capacity to grasp the connections between things, to go beyond appearances, to follow the continual journey of the sign to its origin, its meaning. Only in this way can we truly know. Only if we truly let ourselves be struck by reality and follow, willing to follow its provocation, can we truly know reality in its totality.

2. Faith, a method of knowledge

The first question we have to address, then, is whether faith is a method of knowledge.

In the situations in which we find ourselves, there are facts that challenge us. Italo Calvino wrote years ago, "The hell of the living isn't something that will be; if there is one, it's what is already here, the hell we inhabit every day, that we form being together. There are two ways not to suffer from this hell. The first is easy for many: accept hell and become part of it, to the point that you see it no longer. The second is risky and demands attention and continual learning, seeking and being able to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, isn't hell, and make it last, and give it room."¹³ "Being able to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, isn't hell, and make it last, and give it room." We, too, in the midst of this confusion, can be attentive to seeking and recognizing something that differentiates itself from this confusion. Faith begins this way: I find myself in the midst of darkness, in the midst of hell, in the midst of confusion, before a fact that is not hell, that is not darkness, that is not confusion. "The first characteristic of Christian faith is that

it comes from a fact,"¹⁴ a fact that sets reason and freedom into motion. Let's help ourselves understand this with one of the most beautiful stories of the Gospel—which I have mentioned a few times, but that we can look at in more depth now—that of the man born blind.

In John's Gospel, Chapter 9, he writes, "As he walked along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?' 'Neither,' answered Jesus. 'It was no sin, either of this man or of his parents. Rather, it was to let God's works show forth in him....' [We always start with a prejudice: "Who sinned?" Nobody: it's like this so that the works of God may be manifested, the glory of God, that is, so that the truth may shine forth, His truth, His glory may shine forth.] With that, Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with His saliva, and smeared the man's eyes with the mud. Then He told him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam....' So the man went off and washed, and came back able to see [here is the simple fact, a fact that immediately provokes wonder, a question]. His neighbors and the people who had been accustomed to see him begging began to ask, 'Isn't this the fellow who used to sit and beg?' [A fact is what sets into motion the reason of those who let themselves be struck; here faith begins as a journey of knowledge; thus the various interpretations begin to come out.] Some were claiming it was He; others maintained it was not but someone who looked like Him. The man himself said, 'I am the one.' They said to him then, 'How were your eyes opened?' [This fact demands an explanation; there has to be a reason.] He answered: 'That man they call Jesus made mud and smeared it on my eyes, telling me to go to Siloam and wash. When I did go and wash, I was able to see.' 'Where is He?' they asked. He replied, 'I have no idea.' Next, they took the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. (Note that it was on a Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud paste and opened his eyes.) The Pharisees, in turn, began to inquire how he had recovered his sight [the fact evokes a question in the Pharisees as well; all of them are struck by the fact, no matter what position they may take later]. He told them, 'He put mud on my eyes. I washed it off, and now I can see.' This prompted some of the Pharisees to assert [now we see how reason, this urgent life within, begins to move in the face of the fact itself]: 'This man cannot be from God because He does not keep the Sabbath.' Others objected, 'If a man is a sinner, how can he per-

form signs like these?' [The reality was too evident.] They were sharply divided over him. Then they addressed the blind man again: 'Since it was your eyes He opened, what do you have to say about Him?' 'He is a prophet,' he replied [the blind man begins to travel the same journey of knowledge]. "He is a prophet!" [someone beyond those we usually know]. The Jews refused to believe that he had really been born blind and had begun to see [since they weren't willing to acknowledge it, they began to deny the fact], until they summoned the parents of this man who now could see. 'Is this your son?' they asked, 'and if so, do you attest that he was blind at birth? How do you account for the fact that now he can see?' The parents answered: 'We know this is our son, and we know he was blind at birth. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we have no idea. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.' [Freedom is a very rare good, as you can see.] (His parents answered in this fashion because they were afraid of the Jews, who had already agreed among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue [because of this fear, the parents almost feigned not knowing who their son was and what had happened to him]. That was why his parents said, 'He is of age—ask him.'). A second time they summoned the man who had been born blind and said to him [we see now how prejudice, our measure, our pre-established stance, obstructs knowledge], 'Give glory to God! First of all we know this man is a sinner' [they aren't talking about the blind man anymore, but pass directly to accusing Jesus: "He's a sinner!"] But where is all the power of the blind man in the face of these experts of dialectic? It is in his simple attachment to reality, to the fact, in that moral energy we spoke of yesterday, which is a simplicity. What simplicity we need in order to know! So let's see how the blind man responds.] 'I do not know whether He is a sinner or not,' he answered [I won't get into your interpretations]. 'I know this much: I was blind before; now I can see.' [But once again they try to trip him up.] They persisted: 'Just what did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?' 'I have told you once, but you would not listen to me,' he answered them. 'Why do you want to hear it all over again? Do not tell me you want to become His disciples too?' They retorted scornfully: 'You are the one who is that man's disciple. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke through Moses, but we have no idea where this man comes from.' He came back at them [intelligence is exalted in the simplicity of

the attachment to the fact]: ‘Well, this is news! You do not know where He comes from, yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners, but that if someone is devout and obeys His will, He listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this man were not from God, He could never have done such a thing.’ [Here is knowledge: it sets out from a fact and, if you’re loyal and let yourself be drawn by it to the origin, then you become aware of its factors: “It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this man were not from God, He could never have done such a thing.”] ‘What!’ they exclaimed, “You are steeped in sin from your birth, and you are giving us lectures?” With that they threw him out bodily [which means: we don’t want to believe our eyes, there’s always someone else—like the Pharisees—who has to tell us what reality is, as if we didn’t know how to say it ourselves! Instead, what’s decisive is the simplicity in the adherence to the fact. Faith is this journey of knowledge, which, starting out from a unique, exceptional fact, ends in the recognition of the origin, in the acknowledgment of an exceptional Presence]. When Jesus heard of his expulsion, he sought him out and asked him, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘Who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?’ ‘You have seen Him,’ Jesus replied. ‘He is speaking to you now.’ ‘I do believe, Lord,’ he said, and bowed down to worship Him [Jesus, this fact, His presence, His work, His gestures bring a newness that brings out our attitude toward reality]. Then Jesus said: ‘I came into this world to divide it, to make the sightless see, and the seeing [those who think they see] blind.’ Some of the Pharisees around Him picked this up, saying, ‘You are not calling us blind, are You?’ To which Jesus replied: ‘If you were blind there would be no sin in that. “But we see,” you say [and we can add: “And you won’t acknowledge what you say you see”], and your sin remains.’”¹⁵

It’s breathtaking to see the journey that such an awesome fact unleashes in reason. Our point of departure isn’t any “vision.” The point of departure for faith is a fact. Precisely because it is a real fact that happens, it unleashes a journey of knowledge. “Faith is a human gesture, therefore it must come about in a human way. It wouldn’t be human if it came about without reason: it would be unreasonable, that is, inhuman.”¹⁶ This isn’t just a fact in the past; the same thing happens today, with the same method: in the midst of darkness, in the midst of hell, a fact that isn’t hell.

One of you said, “If God inclines those He loves to believe in the

Christian religion, why hasn't the same thing happened for me? I spent part of my life looking for God, and I did it with all my strength, but I don't understand why He didn't show Himself to me. After innumerable attempts, I had concluded that God didn't exist, that He was just an invention of ours, that religion itself has been concocted by an ingenious ruler who utilized the figure of God to terrorize his subjects and thus keep them from violating the law. I always considered believers to be silly, but at the same time I envied them because they succeeded in finding answers, while I hadn't managed to do so. My battle against the Church began with this, and then, with time, turned into true hatred. I began to challenge every proposal coming from the Church, and the more time passed, the more I convinced myself that my views were right. I even came to the point of liking myself, because finally I had found a meaning in my life. [But the unexpected happens: God never fails.] Encountering you Communion and Liberation people at the university brought to light the dissatisfactions I thought I'd hidden behind my aggressive attitude. Seeing how you live Christianity made me start to suspect that everything I'd fought for might be wrong. Returning from my university, I was almost afraid to tell my friends, my 'comrades' about the experience I was having; I was scared they wouldn't understand, or worse, would ridicule me. I don't know why, but I was scared to admit that after the encounter with you something was changed, and the hope I'd feared lost was flowering again. You can't imagine how much I envy you, how much I envy the serene way you relate to reality, but, above all, I envy you because through your faith, you're strong, while I feel weak. I tried to escape what was happening to me, but I couldn't. It was a real flight from all of you. I needed to return to my old friends, the ones I'd shared everything with; I was looking for an answer from them; I hoped that seeing them again would help me return to my old self. Instead, the unthinkable happened: that journey made me understand that I was fleeing pointlessly, because sooner or later I would have to face up to what was happening to me. I found the answers. Accepting this, I realized that the old ways I'd liked so much were now confining. So, now I'm really convinced about coming to the Retreat with you." Her friend from the university community, having seen all this, wrote: "Witnessing her amazement, I've realized how blind I am, because I live that reality every day, and take it for granted; I don't even notice it. First of all, I need to acknowledge constantly

the greatness that makes itself something I can experience daily.”

The encounter, in the midst of darkness, with an exceptional Presence... “The second characteristic [Fr. Giussani tells us] is that it is a fact [we find ourselves before] which is not normal, an encounter that is not normal; it’s an encounter-encounter, which means it has a characteristic of exceptionality, which is why it’s taken into consideration.”¹⁷ “When can you say something is exceptional? ...When it corresponds to the deepest needs for which we live and move.”¹⁸

This is what one of you said: “Last May, I participated with some of you in a trip to Greece organized by the university. In the beginning, I kept my distance from you. Then, I realized that things were different than I had expected: I saw greater freedom in you. I saw you living every moment more intensely and joyfully than I. It was so important for me not to reveal my ideas that I spent my time with people whose thought I didn’t share at all. After we returned, one of you insisted that I come study with her at the university. I was a bit uncertain, but in the end I accepted and I enjoyed being with her. Slowly but surely, she began proposing Mass, dinner, and, not long ago, School of Community. In the beginning, I didn’t want to accept because I didn’t want to get involved. Actually, I was scared of being judged by the others [fear always shows up again], but then I realized that these proposals were really the response to a question of mine, a need I’d been feeling for a long time, an unexpected but splendid answer, corresponding to what my heart desired [this is why the encounter is an exceptional fact, because it corresponds: “What characterizes the phenomenon of the encounter is a qualitative difference, a diversity that corresponds.”¹⁹] So here was my alternative: should I accept the invitation or should I withdraw from something that filled me with joy just because I wasn’t willing to change anything in my life? I accepted this friend’s invitation to participate in these Exercises, because I believe I can see in the events of these months something more than simple, chance coincidences, and I couldn’t ignore what has been presented to me as evident.” Is she a visionary, or has a journey of knowledge brought her to the point of saying such a thing?

So, then, what is our problem? First of all, it is a problem of the use of reason and the heart before what we see, that irreducible diversity we come across. That’s the place where a partiality is established, the partiality that we can call “irrationality” or “rationalism”—they’re the same thing. We reduce what we have before our

eyes and that even strikes us, we block the provocation to our intelligence and heart prompted by what we see. The problem of faith concerns not what we see, but our relationship with what we see, what challenges us, what throws us wide open, what forces us to broaden reason, because otherwise we would have to censure the diversity we find before our eyes. Like the Pharisees: in order to keep their position, they have to deny the facts, deny that that man was blind; this was the only way they could remain in the position they had. It isn't a problem of faith in the sense we usually speak of; since we aren't willing to follow the provocation of reality, we deny reality. But if we don't accept the provocation of reality—that sets our reason into motion—to the point of acknowledging its origin, when we speak of faith, we affirm it unreasonably—it is no longer faith that is generated by the fact, to grow and flower starting out from a fact, but it is faith that generates the fact. The very opposite of what it is. So often, since we won't accept taking this reasonable journey, in the end we suspect that we're visionaries. It seems like we're the ones who generate what we say. Instead, it's exactly the opposite: since a fact struck us, setting all of our reason into motion, we are prompted to acknowledge its origin.

Tresmontant said, "*Jesus constantly appealed to men's understanding*. He pleaded for it, and His frequent reproach was the question, 'Do you not understand?' or, 'Have you no understanding?' 'Do you not yet believe?' was also His question to men. This faith for which He was pleading had nothing in common with credulity. It was quite specifically the mind's approach to truth, the recognition of that truth, the assent of the convinced mind, and not in any sense a surrender of intelligence, or *sacrificium intellectus*."²⁰ Faith isn't the absence of reason; it's the fullness of reason. It flowers at the extreme limit of reason. For us, faith is this knowledge we reach starting with facts, which otherwise would remain unexplained. Like the man born blind: the fact of seeing would have remained unexplained if he hadn't acknowledged the origin of that fact.

What is the test that what happened to us in the encounter is true knowledge? How do we know whether we hold that something that has happened is a true knowledge? We can tell by the way we relate to reality. If it happens that someone falls in love, it's the next day, in the repercussion that things provoke in him when he opens his eyes, that what has happened to him inevitably comes out. If an event truly happened, and I acknowledge it, I realize it through the way I face everything, by how I experience the

repercussion of everything. Therefore, if faith is generated by a fact, an event, that I can know, I realize it through the relationship with everything. Thus, every gesture reveals what faith is for me, if it's true knowledge or if it's equal to nothing, if it's mere sentiment. Faith is a true knowledge, if in everything we face we are impacted by a real Presence, so powerfully real that every repercussion makes us more aware of the Presence that has collided with us.

"This year," one of us said, "the university journey began again with the exceptional experience of the Equipe [CL university student responsables' meeting] in September, to which I was invited for the first time. This fact reassured me immensely, because it testified to me in every moment how it is possible—for the people I saw there—to be certain and glad in life's drama, to the point of desiring it in order to be able to live fully, a hundred percent. It was the point from which I could start anew in order to look at everything and everyone from a much more interesting perspective, and this is bearing fruit. In facing the pain over the smallness of my heart, I can't help but make memory of what I've seen, and thus start afresh with those at my side: I've seen the hundredfold in flesh and blood [it is a knowledge] and I, too, have touched it. In this period everything is dramatic for me (from the road I've chosen in the university, to a love relationship, to the question about vocation), and yet I am certain that all this is a toilsome grace that has been given me to understand my destiny and truly enjoy the gusto of life."

If a presence crashes into my life, you see it in the way I face everything. If one of you said, "I've fallen in love," and then this fact didn't determine everything that happens to you in life, I'd say, "You're kidding me!" In fact, it wouldn't be true knowledge; nothing would've happened to you! If faith isn't recognizing a Presence that collides with us and that becomes a new start in the way I face everything, what are we talking about? We are rationalists to the core because, as we've studied this year in School of Community, instead of starting from a presence, we start from an absence. "The rationalistic stance works from the hypothesis of absence." Sometimes we reduce this to a problem concerning those dedicated to historical research, but such a stance is ours as well, and influences everything we experience. "The rationalistic attitude... may be the attitude of each one of us. It tends to lead the mind back to a concept that in any case is more familiar. It is a mystery to us that God made Himself a human presence, and faced with the Christian message, we are always tempted to reduce God, ever present, to

the level of the images we have of presence and absence.... What is new in the hypothesis of Christian revelation is that God is not a distant fact towards which man strives with great effort. Rather He is Someone who has joined man on his path, who has become his companion.”²¹ Therefore, I can recognize that faith is a true knowledge for me if, in everything I experience, in my relationship with money, free time, affection, work, etc., I discover that my point of departure is this Presence. This is where I see whether the journey of faith has introduced me to true knowledge.

What we often realize—when faith isn’t this knowledge—is that we are living with an anachronistic vision of reality. If each of us looked at a map without America, we’d realize right away that something was missing. So often, we speak of reality as if Christ hadn’t come, as if the Resurrection hadn’t happened, as if faith didn’t introduce us to a true knowledge of reality. You see it in the fact that we see reality like everyone else, ugly, as everyone else sees it, and then, since we’re Christians, we try to live in a more “moral” way: Christianity is reduced to a system of ethics, an attempt to live reality trying to be up to snuff, in a situation, however, that isn’t looked at differently. Today, what usually passes for Christianity is only this ethical attempt. We are children of Kant: since we can’t know reality, the only thing left is ethics. So, when I speak of the “work” to which we’re called, it’s immediately reduced to what we have to “do,” to an attempt to live reality trying to get by. Instead, your work, your first work, as Italo Calvino said, is to make room for the fact, make room for the point in the midst of hell that isn’t hell, embrace what has happened. What did the blind man do? He embraced what happened to him. Von Balthasar said, “The first thing we need in order to see objectively is to let be what demonstrates itself, what happens. The first thing is not to seize possession of what happens,” but to recognize it, adore it, because the newness lies in letting this event enter, this event that has happened in our life; the newness is looking at what happens before our eyes and that so often we don’t see.

A friend of ours from Trent wrote, “In the last few days, more than looking at how I can lose myself in the attempt to gain the world, I’ve been able to watch how it is possible to regain yourself and all the rest, keeping your gaze fixed on Christ. I saw it during the last months with Nicola, our friend who died of cancer Friday morning. I had the fortune of being in the hospital with his parents and siblings right after his death. Only Christ’s Resurrection

can exhaustively explain for me what happened that morning: the gladness on the faces of his family, even in the midst of infinite pain. It was enough for me to watch, without saying anything—this is the only thing that enabled me to be sure. In the following days, I was continually tempted to fix my attention on the thoughts flitting through my mind, but I realized that it was infinitely more interesting and worthwhile for me to watch what was happening there: the gladness, the certainty of his family. This fact was what totally opened my reason. I want to have the gaze that Nicola had.”

It’s a matter of letting yourself be struck, leaving room for what happens—instead of mastering a discourse or slipping into an ethical attempt—because only this opens out our horizon. All our attempts are not enough; they fail to provide even an instant of the newness that enters our life through a fact.

3. Christ, God’s companionship to man

How can we avoid reducing Christianity to a system of ethics or simply a sentiment? How can we let this event enter? Part of this is our need for companionship, a company. If we have this need, it’s not because there’s something wrong with us; it’s part of the journey toward certainty, as we said this summer. I always think of that page in *School of Community* in which Fr. Giussani describes the journey of certainty: what has entered into our life, that Presence, must become ever more familiar.

After the wedding at Cana, “the evangelist then concludes recounting this episode: ‘And His disciples believed in Him.’ This sentence is amazing. Haven’t we just seen... that the disciples had already ‘believed in Him’? Instead, this is the psychologically perfect and precise description of a phenomenon that’s normal for all of us. When you meet someone important for your life, there is always an initial moment in which this phenomenon is present; something within us is cornered by the evidence of an unavoidable recognition: ‘There he is; it’s him;’ ‘Here she is; it’s her.’ But only the room given [‘make room’, said Calvino] to the repetition of this documentation charges the impression with existential importance. Only shared living makes it enter ever more radically and deeply in us.... This road of ‘knowledge’ will receive many more confirmations in the Gospel, that is, it will receive much more support, so much so that the formula, ‘and His disciples believed in Him,’ is repeated often, up to the end. That knowledge will be a persuasion that will slowly come to pass, and none of the

following steps will contradict the previous ones.” It’s not that we’re doing something wrong; we need Christ truly to become our companion; we need His Presence to be truly known, so we can no longer look at reality without having His presence constantly in our eyes. Therefore, “From sharing His life would emerge a confirmation of the exceptionality... [believing] embraces the itinerary of conviction through a series of repeated recognitions.”²²

Certainty is a journey. When I was in Brazil, a university student said to me, “I want to have this certainty, but don’t talk to me about a journey.” She was defending herself even before beginning. I replied, “Look, this journey is a decisive part of certainty. When you meet somebody you like, at that moment you have the evidence you need for the next step—you’d like to see him again, have a coffee with him the next day. But if he said he wanted to marry you, you’d run away. When you accept the invitation to have a coffee, if the initial impression is confirmed, you have the evidence for the next step. And so on. Step after step, you become increasingly more certain, so much so that it’d take a cataclysm to cast doubt on your relationship. Instead, if it were a matter of just one meeting, it’d be easier to think, ‘Was I just imagining things?’ So, when do you become more certain? When you’ve had a lot of confirmations, or when you’ve seen him just for a moment?”

The journey Fr. Giussani describes here is an integral part of certainty; it makes the encountered event become ever more deeply ours. But, for this to happen, it’s essential that Jesus truly become a regular companion, that what we’ve encountered become, without reductions, companionship in our life, that His Presence become an everyday constant, become the presence of one who looks upon your life in such a way that the question we’ve used for our Exercises becomes continual: “What good does it do a man to gain the whole world, if he then loses himself?”²³ Before someone who loves you so much that your life feels embraced, enveloped in a wave of tenderness from the other world, you can’t help but ask, “Who else is so interested in my life?” It’s He; it’s this Presence that exists in history and that nobody can remove from history, nobody can reduce. It’s a Presence without which I can’t be myself; I can’t emerge with all my capacity to love, to live, to build, to rejoice. It’s a Presence that makes us become ourselves.

Where does this Presence live? In order for it to be everyday, it must live today. This Presence lives in our companionship, in our friendship. The Presence of Christ must be physical in order to

become companionship. Where do we continually find this Presence that loves our life so powerfully? “In a place where true friendship lives,” as Fr. Giussani said. “The presence of Christ is within a sign; it’s hidden within a sign. You can’t surrender yourself to Jesus if you don’t surrender yourself to this sign. All of us are one thing: the truth is the presence of Christ that is encountered in a place where true friendship lives.” Our chance to know Christ truly lies in our decision to participate in the place where He touches us constantly, where He collides with us, where He refuses to be reduced to a system of ethics, to moralism. “Morality,” said Fr. Giussani, “is something living in which you participate. For the first Christians, the moral life was to follow after Him.” Follow, follow what in the midst of hell isn’t hell—this is morality. This is love for ourselves. “Following isn’t understanding a discourse; it’s existentially learning the attitude to have toward oneself, toward those you encounter.” Therefore, the great rule within our friendship is to seek out the people who introduce us to this, who make us perceive this more. Saint Augustine wrote, “Even granted the ordinary miseries and mistakes, of which all human relationship is full, there is no greater consolation than the unfeigned loyalty and mutual love of good men who are true friends.”²⁴

4. The verification of the faith

A certain faith, alive in a place of friendship. In everything that we encounter, in everything that happens to us in life, we verify faith.

One of you said, “Often, we’re afraid to put truth to the test. We’re fearful because, deep down, we believe that we ourselves define the truth. We speak of a reality that we ourselves create. Instead, I’ve seen truly free men who live their lives before a fact that crashes into them and who also look at me without any preconceived mindset.” We mustn’t fear the risk of betting on what we’ve encountered in our relationship with reality, because this is what enables us to see deep down what has happened to us, to really attain certainty. The journey to the truth is an experience that we have in the relationship with everything.

Listen to what a friend on mission to a truly terrible city wrote: “Passing in the midst of the desolation, violence and ugliness that now are my daily companions, for a moment I thought, ‘Isn’t it naive to say that true reality isn’t this overwhelming appearance?’” Herein lies the challenge: are we visionaries, or is it rather that reality won’t be reduced to just this ugliness? Constantly, what we

experience makes us examine whether what we have attained is truly a knowledge. The letter continues, “To this question, a forceful ‘no’ resounded within me, because I could count all the times that, going deep down into what I have before me, I’ve realized with amazement that my heart lacks nothing in order to live, and that Jesus can truly manifest Himself as the Lord of all in every moment. So I realized again, facing the provocation of the facts, that my only work is to participate with my ‘yes’ in God’s great ‘yes’ to my humanity, and to what I encounter every day, just as it is. Here, He needs a nobody like me who acknowledges Him, prefers Him, and loves Him. My responsibility is to throw my freedom wide open in every moment to His already being here, mysteriously, but truly victorious, being open to His work that is already changing me and reality. And everything flowers. Certainly, it’s a sacrifice, but this isn’t the dominant aspect because, in the midst of this ugliness, there prevails the fullness [this is the point: no ugliness; attaining something true, a true knowledge, can defeat it], the certainty of a love that is my companion in every moment, and for this reason can ask everything. So I too can say once, and with more truth, that loving reality in virginity is precisely a beginning of paradise here on earth.”

Another friend of ours says the same thing, having realized that, living reality, it becomes evident who Jesus is: “Very often, these days, things don’t make sense to me, but I’m asked to just fix my gaze on what happened to me, on that rock that exists. I say these things and I see Christ’s preference for my life, not because of an indoctrination or a mystical illumination, but because I have seen with my own eyes, concretely and in the flesh, albeit mysteriously, the flowering of a good [this is why we’re not visionaries: Christ is such a real presence that He makes the good flower] and a positivity in the most toilsome circumstances, so that it’s been possible for me to exclaim: here it is, the glory of Christ, the truth of Christ, the power of Christ! I’ve seen the glory of Christ flower in the discomfort and absurdity of reality. The glory of Christ isn’t that things turn out neatly; it isn’t that your family is perfect or well-off; it isn’t that your boyfriend is always close by; it isn’t that your friends are always coherent and in line with your project for them, but that, even within our limitations, in the toil and in the non-correspondence of reality, there is a flowering, a triumph of a good, a rebirth, so that in the final analysis you can’t help but admit a positivity in life. It’s the Resurrection that wins over every-

thing, even over death, which seems to eat up everything. The glory of Christ is seeing the mysterious gaze of my mother toward my father, who, after twenty-seven years of marriage, departed; it's the embrace of my boyfriend within my limitations; it's the availability and humanity of a professor of mine who begins an interesting work with me. I can no longer allow myself to think that my circumstances are unfavorable because it is precisely through their apparent contradictoriness that Christ seeks me out every day."

What a difference between this and the image of correspondence we have in our heads that says things correspond only when they turn out neatly and make sense. It is His correspondence that has impacted our hearts, and therefore you can find this correspondence in any situation, as is the case for a Catholic University student who is in Uganda: "I'm writing from a little Ugandan town where I'm doing an internship with AVSI. Here I can confirm that the problem isn't what I do or what I have, but Who makes my life full, Who makes me more a woman; and this is the truth throughout the world, which I am discovering is so great and so much in need of Him. An example of this is my trip twice a week to see terminal AIDS patients in their poor huts to give them their medicine (because they can no longer get to the hospital), to share a bit of their time and their suffering. If I thought that a little medicine and a greeting would be enough to make them happy, I would be absolutely arrogant and wrong; for me, then, their gladness would be enough, shining through when I'm there, their continual thanks, their desire to give me something at all costs before I leave. Where does this gladness come from? Every day, I discover ever more deeply that it comes from the encounter with the Lord, who has used a nothing like me to go visit them and let them feel the warmth of His embrace. These sick people have absolutely nothing; they have no money, no health, no food, no decent housing, and yet, as soon as you walk in, their faces change. Their faces change because of a love they feel surrounding them. This is why they load me with gifts, depriving themselves of the few supplies they have. It's something that always leaves me dumbstruck. I sense that, truly, you can have everything, but if you don't have Christ, if you don't feel His embrace, nothing will be enough; instead, if you have little, but you encounter Him, your life becomes more beautiful, more human, broadened." And she says these words in this situation.

"Who are you, O Christ, that if you are missing, nothing has fla-

vor?" The more life is enlivened, the more this is the question that grows in my heart every evening and that I never want to cease exploring. This is what constantly challenges the journey of knowledge, that makes us never stop walking, because we are still at the beginning of the true knowledge of Christ. How could this young woman imagine, before going to Uganda, that Christ could even make that a different place?

These are the facts that make faith reasonable. "Memory," said Fr. Giussani, "is composed of facts. Unlike dreams, memory is composed of facts, of bricks, facts that one gathers in the instant. The present is the outcome of many facts that have happened," that we always find within, that we have now in our eyes. How do we explain them? These facts are the true challenge to our reason. They are facts "to be read with the heart, that is, with reason engaged affectively," facts that challenge us, like a man born blind.

Why is it so hard for us to recognize Him? Why does His presence elude us so often? Why don't we become certain? To close, I'll read you Fr. Giussani's response to a young man who told him that he'd been participating actively in the life of the Movement for two years without, however, having discovered "what lay below," because, deep down, as you understand from his words, it didn't matter at all to him. Giussani replied, "Perfect! This is the abolition of the hypothesis. You pretend to take the hypothesis into consideration, but you don't take it into consideration at all. Taking the hypothesis into consideration means going to buy the necessary instruments, changing the job you're doing, changing your major, changing something. But what do you change, what have you changed in order to verify it? If you don't change, it's because you never wanted to verify! You came to check things out, like someone goes to a karaoke bar once to see what it's like. But this 'what it's like' was already decided and defined by your not giving a damn. Therefore, probably, what separates us [pay attention to what Fr. Giussani says: faith isn't what separates us] is a passion for what exists and for life, for things and people, and for what exists, now [This is why] I challenge you to tell me whether, at this age, you can't understand that at this moment, you don't make yourself [you don't give yourself life], everything you are, you haven't brought into existence! Not even a crumb of what you are has been created by you! The greatest evidence you and I have at this moment, with our already mature age, already consciously aware... is that we do not make ourselves alone. We are born of

something that isn't us. So what should I say to this something from which I am born in this instant? If I get to the point of saying 'You,' then I truly take Him seriously."²⁵

We can live all the facts we have before our eyes with this "not giving a damn;" we can live them, as one of you said, "without truly engaging ourselves," and so we don't see what happens and thus we aren't certain. Or, we can let ourselves be struck by them. This is what Pasolini said: "The eye watches. This is why it is fundamental. It is the only thing that can become aware of beauty. Beauty can pass along the strangest streets, even those not codified by common consensus, and thus beauty is seen because it is life, and thus real. Let's say, better, that you can happen to see it—it depends where it reveals itself. The problem is to have the eyes. The problem is not knowing how to see, not looking at things that happen, eyes closed, eyes that see no longer, that are no longer curious, that don't expect anything to happen anymore, perhaps because they don't believe that beauty exists. But in the desert of our streets, she passes, breaking the finite limit and filling our eyes with infinite desire."

He passes along our streets, filling our eyes with infinite desire. It is because we have encountered along our streets Someone who fills our eyes with infinite desire that we today—with the whole Church—await, desiring His coming. This infinite desire is the time of Advent, which makes us cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

December 9, 2006
Afternoon

ASSEMBLY

I'm Matilde from Milan, and I study Architecture. Yesterday, you said we can give credence to our heart and start anew from this staying together of ours this weekend. Simply, with a gesture of loyalty, we can begin to look at the human within us with fondness. Just an instant of fondness is enough to start anew. This is my question: What does this act of fondness for myself generate? What I wonder is if this act of fondness is the result of a personal effort of mine, tied to what you called "moral strength," or if I learn this act of fondness for myself starting from the loving gaze of an Other for myself?

Julián Carrón: Looking at ourselves with fondness should be the most normal, most consonant thing. Instead, how strange and infrequent it is to hear someone speaking of his own humanity with fondness! Usually, what prevails is complaining: "I'm this way instead of that way." So much so that when it happens, when you hear someone speaking with fondness of the human—it's something exceptional.

I'll always remember Fr. Giussani's expression, "How human is my humanity!" What human fondness he had for himself, for what vibrated within him! And what's striking is that this vibration, this heart that he felt vibrating within him, was so intense even at the age of fourteen that he felt like a fellow traveler with the likes of Leopardi. What human intensity had a man like Fr. Giussani, to feel that nobody was a companion to him like Leopardi! This should be the most natural way of looking at ourselves,

but when it happens, it's exceptional. It's as if in order to look upon ourselves in this way, to embrace ourselves in this way, to have this instant of tenderness for ourselves, we truly feel the need for Someone who looks at us with real fondness and who helps us. This always makes me think of the sentence of the Prophet Jeremiah, "With age-old love I have loved you; so I have kept my mercy toward you."²⁶

In order for us to begin to give credence to our humanity, we need Someone to look upon our "I" with this intensity, with this tenderness, with this profundity. We all feel the need to be loved, to be looked upon with this total fondness. It's when someone is looked upon in this way, like Zacchaeus, that everything starts again. Many were those who reproved him for his erring ways. Only One looked upon him in such a different way, so uniquely, so powerfully that He changed him.²⁷ Then he was no longer afraid to look at himself, to embrace himself. We're fortunate, because we're in a place where our humanity, where our nothing is looked upon in this way, and this is what makes us constantly start anew, what loosens and melts us, frees us, and makes us ourselves.

I'm Valentina, and I study Medicine in Milan. I wanted to ask if you could explain better what it means to say that certainty is a journey, because I want to be certain now, and I'm definitely not at the end of the journey. What does this journey add to my certainty?

Carrón: Certainty is a judgment, and a judgment isn't something intellectual; it's feeling the repercussion of being. Looking at the beauty of the mountains, we say, "How beautiful!" and we're certain of what we say. It's a judgment. When we come upon a beautiful person, we exclaim, "What a beautiful girl!" It's a judgment, we're certain. When we feel we're looked upon and loved like Zacchaeus, we perceive the repercussion right away, so that a certainty happens. The more beautiful the mountains, the easier the certainty. The more exceptional what we encounter, the easier the recognition. As soon as they met Him, they said, right away, "We've never seen anything of the kind." Certainty, like judgment, happens at the initial moment, it happens now. If you don't like a young man, you don't undertake a journey with him. If, instead, you like him, you begin a journey. Let's say you like a young man. You like spending time with him.

You like his company. You like his gaze. This is a judgment—you're certain about this. But at the same time, there's still everything to be developed. So much so that if he said to you, "Valentina, will you marry me?" you'd flee. Would this mean that you don't like him? No! This is what's hard for you all to understand: if you like him, it's a judgment. You're certain you like him, but this certainty still has to evolve, and evolve through a journey. This is how the certainty you have in the beginning is confirmed and grows, as it did for the Apostles. This is why the Gospel repeats many times (it seems like a contradiction to us), "And they believed in Him." Didn't they already believe? Yes, but the certainty, the initial judgment, is confirmed time after time. Certainty embraces this beginning and this trajectory. The two things aren't in opposition, so much so that if that beginning doesn't happen, if you don't like that young man, you have no desire to make the journey. But without the journey, the certainty doesn't grow, doesn't develop, doesn't mature to the point of making you take a chance on this relationship. Many times we recognize that we've had an encounter and that this encounter is true and beautiful, that it brings something to our lives, but we don't continue on the journey of certainty. So when things don't work we introduce the doubt, "Well, was it true?" This is why we need a journey that constantly confirms the initial impression, that charges it—as Fr. Giussani said—with existential importance. We don't have to polarize the two things. Right now, you have the certainty required to be here and, in fact, you've come. Therefore, you're certain; you have all the certainty needed. But at the same time, you desire that this certainty become ever deeper. And this is happening in you now.

My name's Marisa and I'm majoring in Italian Studies at the University of Florence. I'd like to make this observation. This morning, I heard you speak of the reasonableness of faith, but for me, faith and reason are two completely different things; they belong to two opposite spheres. Another thing that made me think is the fact that in any case, not only is faith something totally different from reason, but it's also something purely subjective, the way I see it, not something that can be standardized.

Carrón: Wait a minute. Let's start all over again. The problem stems from the difficulty you all have in fixing the point

of departure, which is your own experience. Instead of starting from experience, where all the factors are united, you detach them and then try to put them back together, but you don't know how.

We start from experience. Once, when I was a teacher, I brought my kids to the Madrid Planetarium to see the starry sky. When we returned to school, it happened that I had religion with them next, and to start the lesson, I began asking them, "What struck you in what we saw?" Right off they filled the blackboard with questions: "Who made all this?" "What's the meaning of all this?" "Who's the owner?" The reality they'd seen challenged their reason much more than what they would have thought. None of them asked questions like, "How many stars are there?" or such. Reality brought them further. Reason manifested itself in them as a need that had to do with seeing the totality, "Who made all this?" You, before all these questions, how would you have responded?

According to me, faith and reason are two distinct things because in front of the questions, for example, "Why does the world exist?" and "How did we come here, to this world?" reason gives the scientific explanation, and so says, "Everything began with the Big Bang," while faith makes you think, and say, "No, it's impossible that everything began with that. There must be something greater." For me, they're two separate things.

Carrón: This is really the question. We have a concept of reason such that, with the use of "this" reason, we get to a certain point, and from there on, we "stick on" faith. I'll give you another example. Your mother's actions toward you, that you see, does it have a meaning? What meaning do her gestures have?

A meaning in any case.

Carrón: Does your mother love you?

Yes.

Carrón: Now, is saying that your mother loves you an act of reason?

No; in effect, no.

Carrón: You see, this is the difficulty! Instead, precisely in using your reason—a reason not reduced to the scientific

method—you are forced to say, unless you deny the evidence, that your mother loves you. Your reason is what forces you to acknowledge that your mother loves you. Is it reasonable for you to say this, or is it unreasonable?

Yes, it's reasonable.

Carrón: So we're not dealing with two separate things. But you have to be loyal; you have to open yourself to this evidence—without affirming the love of your mother, her gestures toward you would have no explanation. This is an example of how, through what happens, our reason is challenged to affirm something greater. Otherwise, you would be forced to say that, on the one hand, there are your mother's actions that you can analyze with scientific reason, and on the other hand, you become a visionary when you say that your mother loves you. Does this seem consonant with your experience?

No, but it's a thought I've always had...

Carrón: Okay, because you don't start out from experience. Now, when you affirm that your mother loves you, are you saying something only subjective, or are you certain?

I'm certain.

Carrón: That is, it's personal. It's an affirmation that you make, but it's objective. True?

True.

Carrón: Thank you. In reality, in experience, everything appears united. Therefore, our point of departure can be nothing other than looking at experience. What reality is, what reason is, is made transparent in experience. It's there, in experience, that we truly learn that reality is much greater, much more mysterious than what we think, and that reason, precisely because it is the need for totality, to understand reality in the totality of its factors, is forced—if it's truly loyal with this yearning—to open itself to the Mystery. Otherwise, we're loyal neither to reality nor to reason. It's what I was saying this morning, precisely because we are used to reasoning as we've heard. What's needed is a loyalty to the modality by which reality strikes us, opens us, and then, submitting what we think of reason or of reality to the experience we've had.

My name's Marta, and I study at the Polytechnic University in Milan. When you speak of exceptionality, I understand it. But how is it that from this exceptionality one comes to say, "This is Jesus"? Why Him, exactly? It almost seems like you're saying, "Yes, this is Jesus," but only because it is an exceptionality and we don't know what it is. Instead, you say with certainty that it's Him, and you recognize that it's Him at work in that particular reality. How can you say that it's Him?

Carrón: Starting out from the exceptionality. It is again the same thing. We watch an experience in action. Our university friend, whose letter we read this morning, found herself before an exceptionality that began to shake up everything inside her, and therefore she began a journey. In the beginning, that exceptionality amazed her, but she didn't know why, and she didn't say, "It's Christ." She began a journey. When someone truly undertakes the journey of reason, he tries to explain everything that happens, tries to explain in any way possible the exceptionality he sees, he feels. This journey of reason is necessary. The same is true for you. Don't say "Christ" right away; try to explain for yourself what you see. Like with your mother: why does she treat you in a certain way? So you'll take care of her when she's old? Is this sufficient reason to explain all the things your mother does for you? Try to explain what you see, give yourselves an explanation, at least try, and don't say immediately, "Christ," sticking Him on like a label, without having a reason. Try to find explanations for what happens to you.

The first thing that came to the disciples' mind before the exceptionality they saw and that made them ask, "Who is this man?" and "What is this exceptionality?" was, "He's a prophet!" The closest thing that explained what they had before their eyes was what they'd heard spoken of, the prophets. But right away they realized, "This man is more than a prophet, much more than what we've heard told of the prophets, what they've recounted about them." That exceptionality wasn't explained by what they said; that response wasn't enough; it didn't satisfy their question and forced them to go further.

If someone doesn't participate in this adventure, if he skips the steps and says, "Christ," right off, he can say it in the same way another can say, "Nothing." Instead, if someone agrees to participate in this adventure truly, with all his reason, like the disciples, in the end he'll find, like them, that he can say, "Master,

to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that You are the Holy One of God.”²⁸ They were before something absolutely exceptional, that asserted itself before their eyes and, at the same time, they didn’t know how to give an adequate response to the question that welled up in them: “Who is this man?!” They tried to respond. Jesus challenged them, and He didn’t say right away, “And you, who do you say that I am?” They continued trying to find an answer and Jesus didn’t spare them the journey. So much so that when Jesus began giving them the answer—as Fr. Giussani said—it was because within them it had already become clear that “if we don’t believe in this man, we can’t even believe our own eyes.” It’s as if you were to say, “After so many signs, if I can’t believe in the love of my mother, I can’t even believe my own eyes.” And when Jesus said to them, “I am the way, the truth, the life,” they were so filled with that exceptionality that they couldn’t—it wasn’t reasonable to—doubt what He said about Himself. It’s like when a fellow, before an avalanche of signs from the woman he loves, that have accumulated day after day, at a certain point says, “Will you marry me?” Now, why does he say she loves him? Is he certain, is he certain that she loves him? Is it reasonable? It’s reasonable because of the avalanche of facts he has seen. He doesn’t have the least doubt about that affirmation; he doesn’t need anything else. He’s certain she loves him.

But you don’t come to this point in a day. A journey is required. That’s why, when Jesus’ explicit declaration comes, I am so filled with reasons that it’d be the most unreasonable thing to doubt what that man says about Himself. This is why Fr. Giussani said that faith is born, flowers, on the furthest limit, at the height of reason, it flowers like the flower of this avalanche of signs that reason acknowledges.²⁹ No other answer than the one that man had given was adequate to the whole avalanche of signs seen by those who shared their lives with Him; no other position was reasonable, except acknowledgment of what He said about Himself.

Outside an experience, it’s difficult to understand these things, just as outside the experience of a relationship it wouldn’t be likely that you’d say at a certain point, “Love is the only explanation for all these signs.” You have to experience it. I understand that someone who doesn’t experience Him can say, “Christ” like sticking on a label, like putting a hat on reality. We

do this many times, but we know perfectly well that it's an entirely different thing when we get involved, when we engage in a true journey. For this reason, engaging in a shared life in the community is entirely different from warming a chair at meetings. They're not the same thing at all. Therefore, when the former comes to the point, he's full of reasons, full of facts, and the latter isn't. When we're not engaged in an itinerary, everything seems like a label stuck on. When we experience it, though, right from within it comes the evidence that permits, that facilitates, the recognition.

I'm Linda and I study at the Polytechnic Institute of Milan. This morning you spoke of the verification of faith, and at a certain point you said that correspondence doesn't concern just what you like. I wanted to understand: how can something you don't like correspond to you?

Carrón: Often the word correspondence is like an empty box where each of us puts his own image. Then the contradictions show up. Correspondence, friends, doesn't coincide with what we like: correspondence is the need for totality, truth, happiness, which is the need for the infinite. When we say correspondence, what does it mean? What correspondence did Jesus' disciples experience, so that not even the ugliest things cast doubt on it? You don't understand these things as the outcome of the logic of a line of thought. You only learn them by living them. I began to understand them during a bad time of my life when I had every reason to be sad, according to a certain way of seeing things. Instead, to my great amazement, I found that I was happy. I wasn't happy because of the ugliness of what was happening, but because I had encountered and was living something great. My relationship with Christ made me happy. I discovered that not even the ugliest thing could corrode or strike that experience of fullness that I had within me.

This is the Christian experience. This summer, one of our Dutch friends, who was giving me an apocalyptic description of Holland, asked me, "How is it possible to be happy there? How can someone live Christianity there?" I just had to ask him in turn, "There, in that ugly situation, could you fall in love? Could all the ugliness around you stop you from falling in love, stop it from filling you with a joy that nothing can shake? Can this happen or not?" Is it possible that the day the disciples met Jesus

they returned home happy, no matter what their situation had been before? Zacchaeus was scorned by everyone, but is it possible that the day he felt himself looked upon in that way by Jesus, he ran home full of joy to receive Him? (“Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.”³⁰)? Is it possible that Saint Paul could have said to the community of Corinth, a city with all the problems we know and can imagine, “The testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ”³¹? Was Saint Paul a visionary? Did he need to tidy everything up in the Roman Empire to feel happy? Christianity is precisely this newness that Jesus introduces into the world, like the sowing of a seed in which we participate. We, almost incredulous at what our eyes have seen, have to recognize that it is so: we are flooded by this Presence that fills our heart.

Christianity is this fact that can't be blocked by anything (just as all the darkness, all the power, all the wickedness, all the sin cannot block the beauty of the mountains, or the admiration of someone looking at them). Christianity is One who, in the midst of all the weight of the world's problems, has introduced a positivity without equal. This positivity corresponded so much to the expectation of their hearts that they went looking for Him the next day, and then the day after that, because they didn't want to lose it. They weren't visionaries. If it weren't truly so, they wouldn't have moved. Instead, that correspondence was so obvious that they got moving. And you all, why are you here? Each one of you, even if he had different views on faith, reason, positivity, etc., is here because he had a presentiment of the truth that he can't shake off. A fact—Christianity is this. It's not a reasoning; it's a fact that takes possession of us and determines our life much more than all the rest, that corresponds to us in the midst of all the problems; this is what corresponds to us, not all the rest. What corresponds to us is this positivity that Christ has introduced. And why do we say that it's Christ? Zacchaeus had never been looked upon in that way by the Pharisees or by the others. The one who looked upon him in that way had a very precise name: Jesus of Nazareth! It's the same for us, too. We've experienced this gaze, this positivity in certain relationships, in a place, not everywhere, with all the people of our cities. If it weren't so, none of us would be here now. So then, let's submit our reason

to experience: we find ourselves before a positivity that has taken possession of us, that has taken its place in us, and that is linked to the Christian community. This positivity is stronger, corresponds to us more, determines us more than any ugliness.

My name's Chiara, and I study Educational Sciences in Milan. I see that in my life, what you spoke about in the lesson happens to me—I start out from an absence. I wanted to ask: what does it mean to move for a fact that is present now? In what sense is this certainty not a consolation by which reality is “disgusting” but at least Christ wins?

Carrón: Why do you move if, as you say, reality is “disgusting”? If you move, it's for something that has attracted you! When I say that faith is a knowledge, I'm saying this. Instead, we reduce Christianity to a system of ethics, because we look at reality like everyone else—we say, “reality is disgusting”—and then we add Christ like a hat. In doing so, we're at the same time rationalists (precisely because we see reality like everyone else) and pious: this demonstrates that faith isn't a knowledge for us. If I am impacted by the positivity of His presence, when I look at reality I can't say, “It's disgusting.” If, in fact, I look at reality according to all its factors, I can't eliminate the fact that in this reality there is Christ; in this reality the Resurrection of Christ has happened. We—you see—we understand right away that a map without America is wrong, that there isn't a geographical reality without America. But we go on blithely saying in the most varied ways possible, “Reality is disgusting,” even though certain things have happened that demonstrate that it isn't. The positivity that has entered into our life has revealed itself to us in a certain moment of history; we met it at a particular moment—just as Christopher Columbus discovered America at a certain moment in history. But for us, is this real knowledge, true knowledge? When we look at reality, if we don't look at it in its totality, if we don't take into consideration what's happened, and therefore we judge like everyone else, then in the end, when we say “faith,” when we use the word “faith,” it's only “ethics,” an ethical attempt we make to live in a “disgusting” reality. This occurs because we haven't let in what happened to us. You're there in the midst of all that ugliness. “Is this all there is?” I ask. If you say, “Reality is darkness,” I challenge you and I say, “Look!”—as I said yesterday, talking about

confusion: “Look deep down; you have to recognize that, even in this confusion, the need of our heart comes out!” So I say to you now, “Look at all the darkness, look at all the ugliness, and tell me: ‘Is it only darkness that you see? Is it only this?’” I’ve never found anyone who had the courage to tell me, “Everything is darkness.” So why do we continue saying it? Because we don’t use reason; we don’t do this work. So we’re afraid to look reality in the face. Instead, I want “to know”—this is why faith is a knowledge for me—whether reality is only darkness or not! I don’t want a consolation; I’m not interested in it. I want to know whether reality is all darkness or if there’s something other, something that has happened and that has imposed itself before my eyes, my reason, so that I can’t continue saying like before: “Reality is darkness.” This is what I want to know. Therefore, faith and reason go together: if something real hadn’t happened, something that imposed itself before our reason, it wouldn’t be reasonable to affirm this positivity. But if we don’t do this work, if we lack the experience of the reasonableness of faith, as soon as something happens, everything falls apart.

I’m Baptiste, a French student at the Bocconi University in Milan. I was very struck by the relationship between “gaze,” “truth,” and “teaching to look at truth.” I’m French, and I’ve always been taught that God doesn’t exist, but here I’ve seen people who live their life for Christ; I feel the conflict between what I see and the education I’ve received. I’ve been living for myself, and now I see people who live for an other. Who can teach me to see the truth and how can I recognize it? To open my eyes, do I need someone to teach me?

Carrón: What we’re talking about is what no education can impede. In this regard, I always tell the story of something that struck me. There’s a writer, French like you, called Olivier Clément, and he, too, was educated by atheist parents. The first teaching he received from his family was “God doesn’t exist.” But this didn’t stop reality from continuing to strike that boy. When he was ten, Olivier was there with his father in front of the corpse of his friend Antoine. “Papa, where’s Antoine?” His father, an atheist, said, “Antoine isn’t anywhere; he’s dead.” On another occasion, strolling one evening, once again with his father, under a starry sky, he asked, “Papa, what’s beyond the stars?” “There’s nothing beyond the stars.” No power of this

world, not even all the education we can receive, can block the encounter with something that wakens the question. No power can stop the mountains from being beautiful and no power can stop that everything starts again. Before the starry sky, or the beauty of the mountains, or, again, before the human testimony of some to the beauty of a life—as happened for you, Baptiste—the question is born again: “Where does this life I see come from?” So then, let’s go! It’s the beginning of a new road for you, too, and you can’t go back to the way you were before. You’ve seen what you’ve seen. You can decide whether you want to deal with what you’ve seen or not, with the beauty of what you’ve seen, with a certain way of living reality that you’ve seen, and verify whether what you’ve seen corresponds to you more than what they’ve told you. This is the point of no return: you’ve seen! Life is dramatic now, because all your reason and all your freedom are challenged by what you’ve seen. This is the beginning. What you needed, like all of us, was the witness of a life that you didn’t know. Now you’ve seen it. We’ll be waiting with curiosity to see the itinerary you’ll take; it’s the challenge in front of all of us. Many here had decided that Christianity didn’t interest them, even though they’d heard it spoken about, and then everything began again with what they encountered.

I’m Agnese from the State University in Milan. My question, which you’ve partly answered, is about this positivity that one can see even in negative conditions. It seems to me, in my situation, that this positivity is something added on, as you said, that comes a posteriori, as if it were a consolation or a concession to say that in any case, everything is beautiful, that the circumstances are only apparently contradictory and negative, while there’s a good in everything.

Carrón: Can you avoid seeing people who experience that positivity in their lives as something that’s not added on? Don’t you feel really jealous of their intensity, and don’t you want to live your life like them? So then, work it out! Get going! Your freedom is at stake. I’m not saying this because I don’t care about you. I want to tell you that now you have all the factors of the drama. Inside all the ugliness and toil that you feel, if someone breaks in who loves you and you are surprised to find yourself loved and wanted, all your ideas will be beautiful, but you have to deal with that person who loves you tenderly, and all your rea-

son, your freedom, your affection are challenged as never before: no ugliness in this world can block this. You don't want anyone else to resolve this drama for you. You want to know yourself; you want to participate in the adventure with this person who loves you. You want to participate in the first person. This sentiment of beauty, this being loved corresponds to you so much, it's so consonant to what you desire, that you want it forever and you don't want to lose it.

I'm Marianna, from Naples. We've talked about reason as openness to everything, but when reality holds us tight, how can we keep alive this openness of reason without letting "reason as measure" dominate?

Carrón: This is truly a work, because we can all end up closed in on our worries—exams, studies, what we have to do... If in all this we don't open the window, sooner or later life becomes our tomb. How can you look at yourselves, how can you stand yourselves, if you don't feel upon you that gaze we spoke of earlier? Tell me! I can't. The problem isn't that life holds you tight, that you have things to do, that you're preoccupied, that you make mistakes, that you're sad. A person can be closed in there, in what happens to him, or something else can have happened to him, an encounter, that embeds itself, that seeps into everything that happens to him and begins to open wide, to break the measure. We need to make room for this something other. No circumstance can block something happening that broadens the scope of my life, that lets me breathe deeply. So often, while we're stuck in the things of our life, something happens that makes us return home different, because we've given room to that something that has entered into our life. I'll tell you, if I didn't let in the gaze of His presence every time, I couldn't make it. Therefore, I've constantly sought that gaze. When I was in Madrid, I said so often, "How can you live without reading Fr. Giussani?" In fact, I didn't have the chance to have lunch with him every day; for many years, I only saw him once a year, as I always say, but this gaze, that burst into my life through the encounter with him, I could always let enter, right where I was.

The disciples, the day after meeting Him, couldn't avoid waking to find His presence in their eyes; this determined their day more than all the things they had to do. If we let this gaze in,

day after day, being together, reading something, reminding ourselves, acknowledging His presence now—because He is here—if we leave room for this gaze, we won't be defined by our measure. Anyone can see it. How did you come here yesterday evening? Has something happened, being together? Who can stop you, when you return home, from making room for what has happened to you? Your entire burden of confusion didn't stop something new from entering last night—fresh air, a broadened scope in your life.

Making room for the gaze of His presence means breaking our measure; there's someone, there's an event that constantly breaks this measure. Staying in this place, in this friendship of ours, life's horizons begin to broaden, life begins to breathe more deeply, no matter what the circumstances. The more this Presence becomes familiar to us, as when a beloved one becomes more familiar, the more any circumstance becomes a place for deeper breath, broadened horizons. Then the measure doesn't dominate. But, my dearest, this is a work. You can do it or not do it. You can let this gaze in or you can close yourself and let yourself be determined by what you do. We have time for everything, but we never have time for this, and in the end we live our daily life without space to breathe. But we're not condemned to this. We can begin to learn a way of staying in reality with this openness.

My name's Davide, and I study Medicine in Bologna. I realize that in the impact with reality, what immediately prevails is my idea about things. I have the impression that I already know what I have before me; I go to lessons and I already know who my classmates are. I return to the apartment and I already know what I'll find. Even Jesus—I already know who Jesus is and I can give fine discourses about Him. But the outcome of all this is boredom, because when you already know everything, nothing can happen. I realize that the attitude of someone in love is quite different. Someone in love sees all the usual things in an absolutely new way. He returns home to the same house, sees the same things, but everything speaks to him of her, and so it's completely different. On the other hand, I realize that, as a man, I can only fall in love with something that is physically present; I can't fall in love with something abstract. This morning you said that Jesus Christ makes Himself physically present within our companion-

ship. So I wanted to ask you: how can I fall in love with Jesus Christ in our companionship?

Carrón: The first thing that we have to get out of our heads is that we know, because we don't know. The day before yesterday, someone told me about a girl who, at a certain point, understood that the fact of knowing in a limited way, till then perceived as a problem, actually is what enables her to always keep learning. So she was seized by a great joy at the thought that when she married, she would be able to keep learning more about her husband, and she'd never be able to say, "I know him," after which there remains only boredom, but "I'll know him ever more deeply." If it weren't so, just imagine how boring eternal life would be.

We have to surrender to the fact that many things we thought we knew, we really don't know at all. This is how it was for me. What saved my life was that at a certain point I began learning what I thought I knew. I'd studied certain things, but I began understanding them when I experienced them. I was greatly consoled when I discovered, presenting *The Risk of Education*, that Fr. Giussani said the same thing. "I had learned these things in the seminary," he said, to quote roughly, "and then I also taught them as a professor there, but I truly learned them when I was forced to justify them in the 'battle' with my students at the Berchet High School. I learned them when they came out in flesh and blood." We truly learn things in experience. There, we begin to understand that we hadn't understood. Our friend who went to Uganda and saw that she can be happy, even in the midst of that situation, thought she knew who Jesus was. But she understood that she hadn't understood, because there, Jesus showed Himself to her much more powerfully than she could have imagined.

Life is beautiful; it's a fascinating adventure—so I always say, "The best is yet to come"—because what remains to be discovered is infinite, and the more we discover it, the more we become attached to Christ. Nothing is more contrary to the experience we are having than to say we already know. Life is given to us so that it may reveal to us who Christ is. This happens through everything: in this place, where we are accompanied, in the place that is this companionship, where He makes Himself present, but then in the encounter with everything. Here, in this companionship, He shows Himself in such a powerful way that He helps us enter into all of reality, to live everything the way this girl lives it, so that she is ever more attached

to His presence; His presence becomes ever more familiar to her. We can't do this alone (how many times have we seen friends who've left, thinking they'd manage on their own, and then, meeting them years later, observed that it hadn't worked out that way). A place is where He entrusted His presence. It's not something automatic that requires no participation on our part, no freedom, no work; it's something that challenges us constantly, through the testimony others give us: "Look how this person lives, look at what an experience of fullness, what freedom!" His presence strikes us, pushes us, gives us an ever greater desire to know Him in a place like this, in which He shows His truth, and which opens us to the totality of reality.

I'm Magdalena from Vienna, and I'm a medical student. There are about twenty of us students, most of whom have known the Movement for just a short time—max one year, but for most of us one or two months. We're still at the beginning. There's a lot of enthusiasm, but we don't know anything; we haven't the least idea about things and we're still very immature. We often don't even understand School of Community. There's the beauty of the beginning, but at the same time there's the difficulty and the immaturity. We have this question: what's the most important thing to consider in our situation?

Carrón: "Being there." Last week, a friend of ours in Shanghai told me that they had invited an American from work to School of Community for the first time. At a certain point, our friend saw a Chinese friend there speaking with the American and saying, "Look, don't worry, don't be dismayed if you don't understand anything at the start. Just stay with them, because with time, you'll understand. Be here, remain here, because being with them, you'll understand everything." Jesus didn't found a university; He founded the Church, a companionship. What is the most important thing He invited people to do? Follow. "Come with Me." It's with Him that you learn everything; it's with Him, in shared life with Him, that we are introduced to reality. Therefore, the first thing is "being there" with our whole selves, with eyes open, with reason, with freedom, engaging and risking, trying to understand, that is, not brain dead, but letting ourselves be struck. Over time, as with the disciples, slowly but surely, life changes. Through "being there" with our whole selves, life changes.

I'm Rossella from Florence. The Retreat began with a question about certainty, certainty about Christ. During this period, I've been especially helped in realizing the exceptionality of what I've encountered, and it's true that in shared life I become more certain about what I've seen. It's also true, though, that this is a period when I have to ask myself a lot of questions about my future, and I get lost in all the various options. This morning, too, the question came to me: does being certain about Christ have anything to do with my being certain about my future, the choices for my life, and what presses and is urgent within me?

Carrón: Are you certain about the love of your mother?

Yes.

Carrón: Does this have anything to do with the future? Can you think, can you imagine that she won't love you in the future?

No.

Carrón: The certainty you have about Christ also concerns your future, just as the certainty you have about your mother now also concerns your future. You can't think of anything that might happen, no matter how unforeseen, in which your mother wouldn't love you. You can't even imagine it. You're so certain, you can't even imagine it. This is why the certainty you have in the present is certainty precisely because it also concerns the future. Thank you!

December 10, 2006
Morning

SYNTHESIS

Julián Carrón

Do you realize what grace fills us every morning? In order to recognize it, just think of what we have experienced together today. By the fact of our being here, in a concrete, physical reality made up of faces—our humanity, just as it is, with all its desire, with all its drama, is already wholly embraced, struck by a new, intense gaze—from when we heard the music before beginning, from how the *Angelus* was proposed to us, from how we prayed the Psalm, “Your grace [your presence] lasts for ever,”³² for you and for me. Do we realize this? By virtue of belonging, of being in a place like this, just because of the fact of being here, our humanity is wholly embraced, regardless of how we are, of our evil, of our problems, of our incomprehension. How many others in the world have the same chance to feel their lives so embraced?

Now, is the prayer we have just prayed only a pious act of devotion for us, or is it the affirmation of reality, of the most intensely real, realer than all my states of mind, than all my problems? “Your grace, Your presence lasts for ever, Your truth is firmly established as the heavens.” The Church, even just through this gesture, educates us to broaden reason: “Look, reality is something more than what you are feeling at this moment; it’s something more than what’s worrying you; it’s something more than what you usually reduce it to.” It would be enough constantly to host His presence, so then every morning we would pine with desire for Him, we would be moved deep down in the marrow of our bones.

This Presence has turned to us poor wretches; we have been

looked at and we continue to be looked at with this intensity. Unless we become aware of this, we won't understand what we're doing; in fact, this is what enables us to set out anew on the road every morning. Before anything else, this is what strikes our "I." In the midst of this embrace, in the companionship of this Presence, we needn't fear looking at ourselves, looking at the day we have before us. With this gaze, we can set out anew on the road to certainty that we've sought to trace. The gaze of this Presence enables us to look at what we are. What are we? "I was looking for myself. What else can one look for?"³³ Pavese said. We look for ourselves. In every situation, whatever object man may desire, he is looking for nothing other than Himself. This is why we feel defined by the sentence we've used for the title of the Spiritual Exercises: "What good does it do a man to gain the whole world, if he then loses himself?"³⁴ We're here to accompany each other in becoming ourselves. Our companionship has no other purpose. This companionship is what allows us not to fear facing all the confusion we see around us, and that so often invades us too, to vanquish the violence with which many would seek to "silence" our heart. Violence and confusion can't succeed in destroying this search for ourselves, this desire of ours for fullness.

The first aspect of the road is therefore to realize the enormity of our desire, of what our heart desires. With what tenderness Jesus looks at each of us and says, "What profit does a man show who gains the whole world?" Indeed, you can gain the whole world and lose yourself, because the "yourself" of each of us is greater than the world. Our "I" desires much more. The whole world isn't enough. We can have everything and lose ourselves. What a grace, that there's someone who looks at us this way, as Jesus does, in all our truth, who doesn't just take us for a ride, throwing us little "bribes" to keep us happy, who embraces all the grandeur of the desire that constitutes us. So you can understand, then, what we were saying in the introduction: solitude is generated by the impotence we feel because neither we nor others can satisfy the desire for totality that constitutes us. So often, this can seem like a terrible misfortune; we don't understand that it's actually the most powerful affirmation possible of the dignity of our "I."

If we begin to love our humanity, nobody can take us for a ride. Those who are aware of their humanity and engage it, use it to judge any proposal, any gaze, any attempt, continually compare everything with the desire of their own heart. So they can't be taken

for a ride by anyone. If somebody does take us for a ride, therefore, it's because we're the ones who let it happen. Making us as He did, the Mystery has given us the instrument for the road, "Look, if you don't want anybody to take you for a ride, accept what I've given you, your heart, your humanity, your disproportion, this desire for fullness that constitutes you, take it in hand and use it, use your humanity and compare everything with it!" Lewis said, "What I like about experience [which is living anything, comparing it with the heart] is that it's such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings [there's no reason to be shocked], but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true when you fairly test it."³⁵ You can take the road to Bari when you want to go to Milan, but experience doesn't deceive you. You can't get very far before you see the signs saying, "You're making a mistake! Don't you realize you're going to Bari instead of Milan?" Experience doesn't deceive. Don't you realize that in the midst of this confusion, we have the most powerful weapon, the most *ours*? Nobody, not even what I'm telling you, can defeat it. The heart is yours—yours!—and at the same time, it's objective; you can't change it. You can fool yourselves, but (and this is the beauty of a road like ours) even if you make a mistake, it's useful, because you learn from it.

I will always be grateful to the Movement, to Fr. Giussani, for having put this instrument in my hands and made me aware of it. I obviously already had my humanity, but I wasn't aware of the importance that this heart of mine had as an instrument for traveling the road, as the capacity for comparing against everything. I knew—I had learned in the seminary—what humanity was; I had studied what the Church teaches us about man's disproportion, but I hadn't grasped the educative reach, the existential scope of all this. Discovering it was very exciting for me—it enabled me to have an instrument for traveling the road. This is why I told Fr. Giussani, "I'll always be grateful to you, because from that time on, I've been able to travel a human road, a human journey."

When somebody has his eyes open, if in the midst of hell there's something that isn't hell, he has the ability to discover it, to make it out; he has the capacity to judge, to perceive the accent of the truth, which is unmistakable. His position can be the polar opposite in terms of education or his personal history, but when he dis-

covers something true, it corresponds so much to him, it's so suited to his humanity, that he recognizes it right away. All of us—those of us who've been here for a long time, and those who are here for the first time—have been convinced of this. Christianity is encountering along your own road a different humanity, something that takes possession of you, a gaze, a presence, a newness, a human difference. In this way, a whole new horizon opens up before our eyes. It's easy to understand what this encounter suggests to us. Nobody has to tell us what move to make: if someone has a minimum of passion for his own person, for his own destiny, he wants to participate; he wants to be there.

So then, as we were saying yesterday, it's enough to “stay,” to follow. In these times, as Saint Augustine said, we need a faith that is certain, one seen in a different humanity, and we need good friends.³⁶ The two things go together; they're not separate. Staying, following. How? It's a staying together that cannot block our desire for totality, the curiosity to discover the reason for the difference we see. Therefore, it's a staying together at work, engaged in struggle, because the desire for fullness constitutes us. Our staying together cannot be mechanical, just to occupy our time. We can't kid ourselves; we're friends if we walk together toward destiny, if we give each other a hand in walking toward the realization of our desire for fullness. I assure you, if this isn't the case, then sooner or later you'll leave. If you and your girlfriend don't walk together toward destiny, sooner or later you'll lose her, as happens everywhere, because desire is the desire for totality. This is why we can't conceive of our friendship as just a nice set of friends to spend time with. Staying together is beautiful if it is a staying together in struggle, in striving. I don't want my staying together with you to reduce the intensity of my desire for fullness even by a millimeter. I don't want, I'm not interested in a companionship of that kind.

Instead, a companionship in which we consciously accompany each other... what a glorious thing! I was looking at you this morning with the consciousness that all of you have a heart that makes you desire everything. This stops me from reducing you, from taking you for a ride; it makes me enter into communion with you, permits me to feel close to you, as companions, friends, because we have this same vibration. All of us have been struck by the same event—that crashed into us and took possession of us—we are together to give it room. Here we have a weapon, and it's called reason.

We, who so often reduce ourselves to our mood, who close ourselves within our own little horizon, shut up in our worries, our problems, we have a weapon: reason. Let's use it. Let's unsheathe this weapon, so we don't let ourselves "close up"—reality and our need are much greater than our measure. Let's help each other to throw our reason wide open, so we don't suffocate. How can we avoid suffocating? Constantly giving room to the event. No matter what situation a person finds himself in, nobody can say that he can't open up to the gaze that reached him and that penetrated him. Who could have stopped Zacchaeus the day after, once his eyes had been opened, from making memory of it, from feeling entirely bowled over and possessed by the gaze with which Jesus looked at him? Nobody. No matter what his mood when he woke up, nothing could stop him from being himself, from giving space to what had happened to him, from letting that gaze enter into him. It is called "memory," memory of a present gaze: it is something present, not a recollection. It entered history in a moment, and remains today, reaches us today.

Let's not resign ourselves to reducing the faith to our ethical attempt to live a reality that we, like everyone, judge to be repugnant. This isn't reality; reality isn't reducible to this. Thus, we have to unsheathe reason. Look at all the ugliness, the darkness you're talking about, and tell me: is this all? Even in misery, even when you feel destroyed by your own evil, even when you feel oppressed by your worries—can you cancel this gaze? Let's educate each other to challenge everything, to unsheathe reason so we don't close ourselves into our own measure, so we don't suffocate in our cells, so we won't be forced—condemned—to flee.

Who can stop us, no matter what the illness, no matter what angst we're experiencing, from acknowledging His presence? In this situation in which I can't stand myself any more, in this situation of angst, of worry, or of sickness, I, who feel totally ugly, if I feel and am aware of it, it is because I am and, if I am, there's nothing more evident to myself—now—than the fact that an Other makes me. You can't avoid this: you exist. You can be angry at the world, but you are made in this instant, and you don't will it to happen. As it says in Baldwin's blues, "You know I don't believe in God, Grandmama," says Richard. "It ain't up to you."³⁷ You are made, and therefore, Someone loves you, embraces you. Who can stop us from constantly opening the window so we don't suffocate, and from experiencing this gaze?

In the December 8th issue of *Il Foglio*, Luigi Amicone wrote about when his nineteen-year-old daughter became ill with leukemia. In the midst of rebellion at this news, how did he help her? With what weapon? Using reason, reminding her that they had thought she wouldn't even be born, because of her mother's illness during the pregnancy. "This daughter is going to die," his wife told him through her tears. He replied, "This daughter is a gift. Life isn't ours. Let's trust." This is exactly what he reminded her. "The daughter who shouldn't have even been born—you're her. Instead, you were born. You exist. Here is the entire truth [not reduced]: we're not the ones who possess being. It's an Other." Lucilla remained silent. She said nothing, then nodded yes, and said, "Yes, it's so."³⁸

This is the weapon of reason. Hardly sentimentalism! It also changes my feeling about myself, my self-perception, because Something else enters. The whole of reality is this, not what we reduce it to. Van Gogh wrote, "When I'm gripped by my terrible need for religion [he calls the need for something other "terrible"], I go outside at night to paint the stars, and I always dream of a painting like this, with all the stars like a group of living friends."³⁹ There is Something else upon which we throw our gaze wide open: you can open your eyes to the stars, or tell your daughter the whole truth, or, like our friend Nicola, who died recently, you can live your illness testifying that nothing can stop us from opening our window. "I wake up in the morning and thank God for being alive, and the first desire is curiosity: how will Christ make Himself present today? Now! Right away! [Now, right away—it's not something you put off till tomorrow!] Then I see my father bringing in my medicine and my coffee, my brother, who helps me in everything, and the same for my other brother, and my mother who is always there, ready to do anything for me, and what can I say? I feel loved and embraced. When I go into the radiotherapy bunker, I never feel alone! It's like I've got the companionship of the other world, first of all that of Fr. Gius, and I always ask him for Grace."⁴⁰ We can brave everything, all the ugliness, all the sicknesses, all the situations, with what has happened to us. Those who don't walk this journey, those who are here only warming their chairs, cannot reach this certainty. So don't complain, then! Nobody promised you that you'd reach certainty just sitting here warming your chairs. No! Being together, but at work, helping each other in the journey we've spoken of! Those who don't travel this journey will

never get to know Christ!

If I say this to you, it's because I, too, thought I already knew it all. After all those years in the seminary—I entered when I was 10—after 10 years of priesthood and a doctorate in Theology, well, I thought I knew at least something. But, as I said earlier, the encounter with the Movement is what gave me the possibility of a human journey and a “reasonable” certainty that I hadn't even imagined before. I thought I knew who Christ was, but I didn't know Him. It was only in experience that it was revealed to my eyes who Christ is. I didn't know that He could demonstrate Himself so powerfully in reality, in circumstances. In fact, it is in reality that He shows Himself; you don't have to follow a user's manual or be pious. From then on, everything has become an occasion for discovering who Christ is. My desire has found its object, and it's no longer like a drifting balloon; His presence has so amazed me that it changed my desire. My desire has changed because it has found its object. It's not because I'm a priest; it's because I have encountered the object of the desire of my humanity. This made me reach a fullness that I couldn't have imagined before, and also “shifted” my desire, revealed it in its truth. When someone changes desire, when he begins to truly desire another thing, it can't be the result of any system of ethics. So many times, you don't do certain things because it's prohibited by morality. So many people think Christianity is a real drag because of this, because it prohibits certain things. Morality will never change desire: you don't do certain things because you can't, but if you could, you would. So the Christians who live this way are ripped off now and later, because they're like everyone else, but a bit less. I'm not interested in this at all, and I don't imagine it would interest any of you either. What I'm interested in is verifying whether there's something that fulfills desire, that fills life more than all the fantasies, all the acts of bravado, all the idiotic trifles that one can imagine; after a while, even these idiocies bore you, and precisely because you want satisfaction, fullness, happiness, you desire Christ. We're not crazy: we're people who want satisfaction more and more, and this is why we want Christ. You don't desire Him as an object of devotion. An object of devotion, like ethics, doesn't change desire, doesn't fulfill you. Only something real fulfills you.

This is the road we have before us. School of Community is the decisive instrument for accompanying us. In this moment of confusion, reading again *Traces of Christian Experience*,⁴¹ which is one

of the first three little books with which Fr. Giussani began, means succinctly describing the elementary factors of Christian experience. I'll add a question of method: we can't allow ourselves to talk in School of Community unless we speak from our own experience. There's no use in "discourses" from leaders or anyone else—they only serve to increase nihilism. Let's stay close to experience and measure ourselves against experience, because this is what will make us more and more enthusiastic about Christ.

Notes

- ¹ L. Giussani, "How We Become Christian", *Traces-Litterae Communionis*, vol. 8, n. 9 (October 2006), p. 2.
- ² Cf. *Lk* 9:25.
- ³ L. Giussani, "How We Become Christian", op. cit., p. 2.
- ⁴ P. P. Pasolini, *Theorem* (S. Hood, trans.), London: Quartet Books (1992), p. 175.
- ⁵ Novalis, *Frammenti*, Milano: BUR (1976), p. 41.
- ⁶ F.W. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude of Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, (Walter Kaufmann, trans.), New York: Random House, 1974.
- ⁷ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience* (J. Zucchi, P. Stevenson, trans.), Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (2006), p. 54.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 55.
- ⁹ Pope Benedict XVI's Homily to the Bishops of Switzerland (7/11/2006). *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), November 22, 2006, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ L. Giussani, *Why the Church?*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (2001), p. 8.
- ¹¹ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (J. Zucchi, trans.), Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (1997), p. 27.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p. 17.
- ¹³ I. Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, (Invisible Cities), Milano: Mondadori (1993), p. 164.
- ¹⁴ Cf. L. Giussani, *Si Può Vivere Così?*, Milano: BUR (1994), p. 39.
- ¹⁵ *Jn* 9:1-41.
- ¹⁶ Cf. L. Giussani, *Si Può Vivere Così?*, op. cit., p. 60.
- ¹⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
- ¹⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 41.
- ¹⁹ Cf. L. Giussani, *Generare tracce nella storia del mondo*, Milan: Rizzoli (1998), p. 25.
- ²⁰ C. Tresmontant, *Toward the Knowledge of God*, (R. J. Olsen, trans.), Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press (1961), p. 101.
- ²¹ L. Giussani, *Why the Church?* (V. Hewitt, trans.), Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (2001), p. 15.
- ²² L. Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* (V. Hewitt, trans.), Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (1998), p. 51.
- ²³ Cf. *Lk* 9:25
- ²⁴ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, (G. Walsh et al., trans.), Garden City, NY: Image Books (1958), p. 447 (Book XIX, Chp. 8).
- ²⁵ Cf. L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà*, Genova: Marietti (2002), pp. 95-96.
- ²⁶ Cf. *Jer* 31:3.
- ²⁷ Cf. *Lk* 19:1-10.
- ²⁸ Cf. *Jn* 6:67-68.
- ²⁹ Cf. L. Giussani, *Generare tracce...*, op. cit., pp. 32-33.
- ³⁰ Cf. *Lk* 19:5.

³¹ 1Cor 1:6-7.

³² Psalm 89:3.

³³ C. Pavese, *Dialogues with Leuco*, (W. Arrowsmith, D. S. Carne-Ross, trans.), Boston: Eridanos Press (1989), p. 91.

³⁴ Cfr. Lk 9:25.

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. (1955), p. 171.

³⁶ Cf. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, op. cit.

³⁷ J. Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, New York: Dial Press (1964), p. 19.

³⁸ Cf. L. Amicone, «La palpebra di Carlo e la leucemia di mia figlia Lucilla» [Carlo's Eyelid and My Daughter Lucilla's Leukemia], *Il Foglio*, December 8, 2006, p. 3.

³⁹ V. van Gogh, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh to His Brother*, 1872-1886. New York: Houghton Mifflin (1927), p. .

⁴⁰ "Incredible Things", *Traces-Litterae Communionis*, vol. 8, n. 11 (December 2006), p. 8.

⁴¹ Cf. L. Giussani, "Traces of the Christian Experience", in *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, op. cit., pp. 51-84.

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