

APRIL 2016

GS TRIDUUM
The Embrace That Saves

GS Easter Triduum
Rimini, March 24–26 2016

GREETING, JULIÁN CARRÓN
March 24, Thursday evening

Alberto Bonfanti. Let us begin this gesture with gratefulness to Pigi who accepted Fr. Julián Carrón’s invitation to speak at the Exercises, since José Medina could not be with us this year. Let us also thank our friend Carrón who this year wanted to be with us from the beginning with this message that he sent us and that I will now read.

“Dear friends,

How moving that Jesus calls us friends.

What does this mean?

A friend is someone who loves my life, my fulfillment, the fullness of my life.

It’s this fullness that I want, that I’ve secretly awaited from the moment the desire for happiness first sparked within me.

However, even though this is such a burning desire—cried out by every fiber of our being—it’s such a struggle to be true to it in daily life!

In fact, sometimes it even feels like it’s against us, because it’s so piercing.

Other times we ask ourselves if we wouldn’t be better off if it were less insistent.

We all know from experience that it’s not easy to find someone who lives at the height of his or her desire.

In the same way, we know that without the presence of a great friend, we’d quickly give in before life’s pressing challenges.

This is where the meaning of friendship with Jesus becomes clear.

Without a friend like Jesus, who accompanies and sustains us, it would be almost impossible not to throw in the towel.

So then, we can understand the truth of His words, “Without me you can do nothing” (*Jn 15:5*), and so say to Him, “Without You, we can do nothing.”

It’s His embrace that saves us. With Him beside us, life is different, more full.

Think of how the disciples must have felt His friendship, to be able to respond to Him, as Peter did, “Master, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life” (*Jn 6:68*). You alone have the words that fill our lives.

In this Holy Year of Mercy, and in these days of His passion, death and resurrection, I hope that the question that arises in the hearts of those touched by His friendly gaze will become ever more yours: Who are you, Christ; who are you without Whom we cannot live, once we have encountered You?

Happy Easter!

Your friend Julián”

INTRODUCTION, PIGI BANNA
March 24, Thursday evening

“He is here as on the first day”
(Charles Péguy)

“WHAT PROFIT IS THERE FOR ONE TO GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD YET LOSE OR FORFEIT HIMSELF?”

“What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?”¹ Or as one of you wrote: “How do you not lose your life in living?” Already at the age of fourteen or fifteen, one realizes that he has lost too much time. Let us hope that we do not wake up in two days and realize that the Triduum happened and we were not present, that time has passed and we have not grown. For this reason we must ask to have the same attention, the same availability of heart and reason, the same silence, full of affection, that Mary had. She did not know what was going to happen after the angel’s visit, but she knew that she did not want to waste time, that she wanted to be fully present. We too do not know what is going to happen, but we do know that we want to be present. Let us repeat with her: “Let it be done unto me according to your word.”

Angelus

I welcome all of you, especially those of you who came from further away, for the sacrifices you have made to be here and because you do not want to waste time. None of us wants to waste time. None of us wants to be unhappy. So many people tell us that they want us to be happy! But how many of them are able to make us truly happy? A lot of people say that they know where our happiness lies, but often make us pay a high price, too high, even before we have experienced any of that promised happiness. They tell us, “You will be happy, but only if you do this or that, if you behave in this way, if you obey me, if you repeat what I tell you, if you follow me...” We could keep listing things, but we do not often see happiness. We don’t only hear this from our parents and teachers, but also from each other, friends. Sometimes even among us there are unwritten rules to follow. Why? Because in this way we will be friends and we will be happy. But how many people actually succeed in truly being our friends and in understanding us? Everyone insists that they know us well, but who truly understands us? Who is truly capable of understanding us?

This incapacity of being understood comes from the fact that in each one of us there is a “polar privacy,”² as Emily Dickinson says in one of her poems. Or because, as the writer Alessandro Baricco says, “you are infinite,”³ you are an infinite mystery, and because of this no one can understand you. This morning I took a walk on the beach of Rimini and saw a stormy sea (that then became calmer throughout the day), a truly stormy sea, that the barriers placed one hundred meters from the beach were unable to contain. As I looked out over the water, I thought about how each one of us is like this stormy sea, infinite and irrepressible. This is the reason so many people fail to understand us, and so we try to put up walls, put up barriers. And what is the outcome of our efforts? At times we burst, like sea foam, in anger against ourselves. Like Nietzsche says, “This penchant and passion for what is true, real, non-apparent [...] how they exasperate me, I hate them!”⁴ We become angry, like waves breaking against the rocks. Sometimes we are a little bit lifeless, a little bit depressed (we are even afraid of saying “depressed”), a little bit depressed like the still water that remains on the shore after the wave. But whether we are depressed or angry, all this cannot contain that infinite sea that each one of us is. None of us can contain that infinite that is part of us.

Like Julián wrote in his message, “However, even though this is such a burning desire—cried out by every fiber of our being—it’s such a struggle to be true to it in daily life! In fact, sometimes it even feels like it’s against us, because it’s so piercing. Other times we ask ourselves if we wouldn’t

¹ *Lk 9:25*

² “There is a solitude of space / A solitude of sea / A solitude of death, but these / Society shall be / Compared with that profounder site / That polar privacy / A soul admitted to itself— / Finite infinity” (Emily Dickinson, *There is a Solitude of Space*, n. 1695).

³ Alessandro Baricco, *Novecento*, trans. Ann Goldstein (Islington: Oberon Books, 2011).

⁴ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175.

be better off if it were less insistent.” Our being infuriatingly presumptuous and angry, or annoyed and lifeless, are manifestations of that infinite sea that each one of us is, and not indications of something that is wrong with us. The first time you feel alone and misunderstood, the first time you feel truly helpless, is the moment in which you begin to be human. You are not messed up because you have this fire within you; rather, you have this infinite and irrepressible sea inside of you because you are truly human. Like Fr. Giussani tells us, “the more we discover our needs, the more we become aware that we cannot resolve them on our own. Nor can others, people like us. A sense of powerlessness accompanies every serious experience in our lives. It is this sense of powerlessness that generates solitude. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others. [...] We are alone in our needs, in our need to be and to live intensely, like one alone in the desert. All he or she can do is wait until someone appears. And human persons will certainly not provide the solution because it is precisely their needs that must be resolved.”⁵

One of you, whose contribution I will now read, understood this well: “In life I have so many things in the sense of friends, interests, and people who care about me. But the most valuable thing I have is my profundity, my capacity to look at all of myself, to the depth of myself, always, continuously, in such a way that I can never lie to myself. Bitterness dominates my life. After School of Community, a talk, a day together, I always have this bitterness inside. Nothing can make me in the least bit happy. And the conclusion that I more and more often come to is that there is no happiness for me, no way out for me. Why then, if I feel so terrible, am I unable to curse [like Nietzsche does] my insistent profundity? I cannot curse this part of myself because it makes me great, it makes me true, it makes me sad, because it is the only truth of my life.” If I could, I would hug this friend of ours, because he/she said an amazing thing. This infinite that cries within us, this irrepressible sea, this poor voice that pleads for eternity and asks love for life is the only truth of our lives. Let us sing *Povera Voce* together.

Povera Voce

“I have called you friends”

Tonight, the Church remembers that night, the last night when Jesus spoke these words: “I have called you friends.”⁶ Let us listen to some of the words that John the Evangelist wrote about that dinner a few years later: “I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name He may give you. This I command you: love one another.”⁷

What does it mean that he called them “friends”? If we had asked Peter, John, Andrew, and Philip, who were sitting around the table that evening: “What does it mean that he did not call you slaves, but friends?” they would have told us that from the very beginning they felt preferred, chosen, and loved by Jesus in a way unlike anyone else. Maybe, like the singer Kaos One, they would have said, “your every look, every sentence: precious things.”⁸ Every gaze of His was a precious thing. Why? Because he had re-awakened them, had begun to love them, had begun to love that infinite that they were, and in front of which we always try to put up barriers. With Jesus, there was no need to put up barriers, there was no need to pretend that everything was OK. There wasn’t even a need to be afraid of being angry or tired, because He always looked at the infinite sea, like Julián wrote to us:

⁵ Luigi Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience* (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University, 2006), 55.

⁶ *Jn* 15:15.

⁷ *Jn* 15:15-17.

⁸ “In the darkness you walk with me, / you are the reason I survive because / you gave me a goal until / red tears fall on the pavement. / I will see your face, I will understand why you chose me. / In the darkness you walk with me, / you are the reason I survive because / you gave me a goal until / my battles will be won. / Your every look, every sentence: precious things” (Kaos One, *Precious Things*).

“without the presence of a great friend, we’d quickly give in before life’s pressing challenges.” Or like one of you wrote, describing what it means to meet a friend: “What always tortures me and shakes my heart is that in front of this reality, all so precious and purely given, I feel an abyss inside me. And I carry around a wound, a piercing drama, looking at the boy I love is not enough, the warm embrace of my friends is not enough. Nothing fills my heart [nothing!]. The need for something ‘more’ which I cannot name, but that makes my heart so nostalgic that it tears my chest and makes me cry to the point of exhaustion in bed at night, remains constant and powerful. But I am certain, firmly certain, and will be certain until they rip my heart from my chest that in no place besides this Companionship have I been welcomed with this question; nowhere else have I found people, friends, who look at me as I truly am. And this is why I remain attached to my friends and the gestures of GS with 200% of myself. There is no other place I could go and, crying out, ask my question of this something ‘more.’ I remain attached because this is the only place where I have felt wanted like this, wanted for myself.”

This is what it means to be a friend. As Julián reminds us, “a friend is someone who loves my life, my fulfillment, the fullness of my life,” and does not put words in my mouth, does not give me a speech to memorize. If we are here tonight it is because we too, like our friend, in some way found someone in front of whom we were not afraid of being ourselves, in front of whom we no longer felt “messed up.” This is what it means to be a friend. A girl, after her first time at Radius, wrote to her friend: “In a world where everyone tells you ‘forget about it,’ you say ‘try it.’” A friend is someone who believes in you. This in the end, is the reason I am here talking to all of you. When I was thirteen-and-a-half (the age of the youngest among you), a religion teacher at my school invited me to dinner at her house and, between one thing and another, I let a comment slip: “I think that we can no longer trust anyone in this world.” These were my exact words. I was already cynical at the age of thirteen, so do not be afraid! And she answered, “It’s beautiful that you say this.” She began discussing with me and asking me questions. So I thought, “I said that almost by accident, and she is more interested in me than I myself am.” She was more interested than me in something that I had already locked away. Finding a friend means finding someone for whom your uneasiness and your sense of inadequacy is a treasure. And even if you do not understand you think: “what a grace that someone came and found me, that I am important for someone.” Like the words of the song we will now listen to, you think: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”⁹

Amazing Grace

“No one has greater love than this, than to lay to down one’s life for one’s friends”

In a few minutes we will celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass, during which we will remember the first Mass, that last supper which Jesus celebrated with his friends. He had become the center of their affection, they had left everything to follow Him, and the end was drawing near. What could Jesus do for his friends? He could give His life for them, offer His body and His blood so that they might finally be themselves. A friend is truly a friend if he gives his life so that you might *be*, not because you agree on things, but so that you might *be*. Like Pavese says, “What do I care about someone who is not willing to sacrifice his whole life for me? [...] From him who is not ready—and I do not mean to give you his blood, because that is quick and easy—to bind himself to you for life [...] you should not even accept a cigarette.”¹⁰

After the fear that has taken hold of us in these past few days because of what happened in Brussels, let us imagine that a terrorist walks into this room. We would all be overcome by fear, and if one of us tried to be brave and threw himself on the terrorist to defend everyone else, it would not

⁹ “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, / That saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost but now I’m found, / Was blind, but now, I see. / T’was Grace that taught, / my heart to fear / And Grace, my fears relieved. / How precious did that Grace appear, / the hour I first believed. Through many dangers, toils and snares, / I have already come. / Tis Grace has brought me safe thus far, / and Grace will lead us home. / The Lord has / promised good to me, / His word my hope secures. / He will my shield and portion be, / as long as life endures” (J. Newton, *Amazing Grace*).

¹⁰ C. Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere [The Business of Living]* (Torino: Einaudi), 81, 98.

help. The terrorist would still blow himself up because for him, his life is worth your death, he is ready to die in order to kill you. And if more of us threw ourselves against him, more of us would die, our gesture would not do anything! What then can change the situation? What can change this situation is the fact that there is One willing to die so that the terrorist might live, so that the terrorist might fall in love with his life. This is what Christ did for each one of us. He died so that we might live. He died because He was so passionate about each of our lives that He willingly accepted death.

Like Carrón wrote today in the *Corriere della Sera*: “Christ [...] gives us that energy without which we cannot recover and without which we cannot follow the only path to defeat violence. The mercy that we need is the same mercy that others need. [...] Mercy [this love ready to give one’s life so that the other might be] is the only true and ultimate efficacious reaction against the power of evil.”¹¹ In many of your letters you asked (maybe after a betrayal or disappointment in love) what it means to love. Love is not what the other gives you, the pleasure that he/she gives you, the joy and excitement that falling in love makes you feel. Love means loving the other even when he/she refuses you. Historically, this began with Christ, when One died so that we might live. Listen to the words of this Portuguese song in which the lover says, “If I knew / if I knew that with my death / you would feel / you would feel the desire to cry / for a tear / for one of your tears / what happiness / I would allow myself to die.”¹² If I knew that in dying I would move you, I would accept death. For that tear that would make your heart less rough and hardened, I would die.

Lágrima

Let us try to put ourselves in the apostles’ shoes, the apostles who that night recognized that the Master was giving His life for them, and listen to the Gospel: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”¹³

“Remain in my love.” For one who discovers that he is so loved, loved until the end, what desire will be greater than the desire to never leave such a love? We can see this in Mary Magdalene, whom Giussani describes thus: “When she looked at herself in the mirror, her physiognomy was dominated, determined by those eyes. Those eyes were in there, understand? Her face was shaped by them.”¹⁴ He remained in her and she remained in Him. We never want to tear ourselves away from this look, as one of you recognized in your contribution: “After an evening of singing I wasn’t feeling well. I tried to sing, but I felt like nothing was for me. Maybe stupidly, I left, and this sense of the inadequacy of things became more and more present [the stormy sea I mentioned at the beginning, thank God, never goes away, no matter how many barriers you put up!]. So I went and talked to an adult friend, who after my long explanation told me, ‘That is beautiful.’ [Here is an example of the friend who does not tell you ‘don’t worry, it will pass,’ but rather, ‘that is beautiful.’] I thought he was crazy. How could he say my experience was beautiful? How can something that makes me feel terrible be beautiful? I felt as if he had brushed me off before even talking to me, before giving me an explanation! But then he told me that God is betting on me! God is slowly expanding the measure of my heart so that I can see everything under a new light. Everything that made me happy before is not enough now, so that my heart, however ephemeral and miserable, can

¹¹ Julián Carrón, *Only Mercy is the True Reaction to Evil* (*Corriere della Sera*, March 24, 2016), 35.

¹² Full of aches / Full of aches I lay myself down / And with more aches / And with more aches I arise / In my chest / I have in my chest / This way of doing things / Of wanting you so much / Despair / I have for my despair / Inside me / Inside me the punishment / I do not want you / I say I do not want you / And at night / At night I dream of you. / If I consider / That one day I shall die / In despair / That I have to not see you / I lay my shawl / I lay my shawl on the floor / I lay my shawl / And succumb to sleep. / If I knew / if I knew that with my death / you would feel / you would feel the desire to cry / for a tear / for one of your tears / what happiness / I would allow myself to die” (C. Gonsalves, *Lágrima*).

¹³ *Jn* 15:9-13.

¹⁴ L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo* [*From Temperament, A Method*] (Milan: Bur, 2002), 5-6.

love even more that sincere Love which is constantly renewed. God re-opened my wound so that I might come to Him again, and He is betting on me! I could very well think ‘to hell with everything’ and leave, but I don’t want to. I want to go back to Him. I can’t tear myself away.” One who re-opens your wound is one who loves you, who accepts even the fact that you leave, as long as you are looking at your wound in the face, as long as you no longer feel messed up.

How can we tear ourselves away from One who is willing to let us leave, who is willing to let Himself be killed, who is willing to bet everything on our freedom so that we might finally be ourselves, so that the stormy sea might express itself, so that the wound which is our treasure might be re-opened? Our friend continues with a beautiful poem that I will now read to you. When someone writes a poem, when someone writes a song, it means that he is present in it, it means that he carries this Presence within him, that it has taken hold of him and even penetrated his creativity. When one writes a poem or a song, this Presence remains in him and he remains in it. The fact that this Presence reached you in terms of money strikes me, because some of you asked friends for help in order to come here, even if your parents did not want you to come. This means that you care, that this is something dear to you. Even more striking is the fact that this Presence affects your creativity, because it means that it has truly conquered you. Here is the poem: “Abandon yourself to the arms of the One who gave everything for you / Raised up by a higher light but the same source you will be a soul weary and joyful in the arms of He who is now for you / Rest desirous soul / Awake where everything is clear / Where everything has an answer and where the faces of those most beloved to you have their resting place in the Love of the Father’s heart / Now / Today / Like two thousand years ago.”

Today, now, like two thousand years ago, this love that gives all of itself in order for us to be, reaches us. As Carrón concludes in his message: “It is His embrace that saves us. [...] Who are you Christ; who are You without Whom we cannot live, once we have encountered You?”

We want to remain in the wave that Christ’s gesture generated that night, in the wave that unleashed that infinite sea that we are and that reaches us tonight, that reaches us today. For this reason, as we wait for Mass in silence, we will sing a song that says the same thing that our friend expressed in his poem. Here next to you, Lord, I wish to stay! I want to remain here, I do not want to go anywhere else, because if I go away from you, where can I be myself?

We wait for Mass in silence. What does it mean to wait “in silence?” Let’s say you fall in love with a girl and she makes you suffer for one month, for two months, she makes you await her answer and finally after two months tells you that she’ll go out with you. You go out and you start talking about school and homework, and then the conversation becomes more serious. She begins, “Remember what you said two months ago? Well I’ve thought about it and...” At that moment, your phone rings. Who is it? Your mother! Your mother, now?! You would rather punch yourself than have that phone ring. You want to take your phone and throw it away because that girl is about to tell you what she thinks of you, she is finally giving you an answer. Very well, in these days Christ is giving all of Himself for us. Don’t we want to be ready to grasp what He says to us without someone else calling us and distracting us? This is silence. It makes sense to be in silence if someone has something to tell you. But if you are not waiting for anything, you might as well waste your time. This is why we wait for Mass in silence. Now let us sing *Qui presso a te*.

Qui presso a te

Homily, Fr. Pigi Banna

“He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.”¹⁵ Is it possible to love “to the end,” or is every love destined to have an end, condemned to end? For the disciples, the most beautiful story of their lives was about to end. It seemed that everything was coming to an end. One of them

¹⁵ Jn 13:1-5.

had even betrayed them, and Jesus had told them that His death was approaching. It was the end. Even this love that seemed eternal was destined to end.

What would we have done at that dinner? Maybe we would have tried to not think about it. We would have sat there and talked about how at least it had been beautiful—the miracles, the words, the people—and tried not to think about what was going to happen. Or maybe we would have said that we knew that Judas should not have been trusted. We would have become lost in useless discussions. Or we simply would have been silent. Not silent in the way we are asked to be silent in these days, but silent like those who feel useless in life.

But Jesus, “knew that his hour had come to pass [...] and loved his own [He does not become distracted by these discussions. What does he do?] [...] he loved them to the end.” That is, he does not allow the word “end” to be written on that relationship. He loves them in such a way, until the end, that that relationship can last forever, until today. He takes the bread and wine and says, “this is my body [...] this is my blood [...] do this in remembrance of me.”¹⁶

For the past two thousand years, all the way up until today, we do this in remembrance of Him. Repeating those gestures, He makes Himself present among us with His body and His blood. This is how He loved until the end, until today and forever. He found a way to be present in the world and present among us still today. We are not celebrating Mass tonight as a formality, but for this very reason. We celebrate Mass because the gaze that reached those of you whose letters I read, the gaze that reached me, that reached all of you, and that embraced our limits has an origin, and its origin is that night in which He loved until the end, instituting the Eucharist. Without that night, the gaze that reaches us today would not exist. Without that night, nothing would be present among us. That is why in celebrating the Mass now, we understand why that night happened. That night happened so that it would be possible for the same thing to happen among us.

He loves you until the end. Today, He puts in front of you Someone who bends down to wash your feet, who bends down to look at what you do not want to see about yourself. Will we allow a companionship that reaches us today and that carries the same gaze, gestures, and words of Jesus, who loves you until the end, to wash our feet?

¹⁶ *1 Cor* 11:23-26.

Lesson, Pigi Banna
March 25, Friday morning

“What worth does life have except to be given?”
(Paul Claudel)

“What worth does life have except to be given?” But who is worth giving our lives for? “My father and mother forsake me,” we said in the Psalm (*Ps 26(27):10*). To whom then should we abandon ourselves? What embrace will not abandon us? The Psalm continues, “the Lord will take me in.” The Lord took me in, in the midst of the nothingness of being abandoned. In fact, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” To whom should we give our lives if not Christ who lowered Himself, who humbled Himself by becoming flesh, to the point of giving His life so that we might have life.

Angelus

“I am troubled now”

“I am troubled now.”¹⁷ Today we will be put in front of this fear, in front of Christ’s fear. We will be confronted with the emptiness and abandonment that we all know so well, and that He first looked in the face, He first experienced. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the great Companion of this day, listening to the description of the battle He faced in the Garden of Olives.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also my servant will be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father save me from this hour?’ But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”¹⁸ Standing, we now listen to the song of Mary suffering. We try to identify with Mary’s sorrow, which is the best way to enter into understanding the suffering of Christ. As we listen to the words, let us place our fear, our anxiety, our feeling of emptiness and abandonment in the fear that Christ lived.

Ognun m’entenda

In the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Christ lived out His agony. The word “agony” means battle. Battle against what? He lived His battle, like I said before, against the sense of emptiness and abandonment, that same sense of emptiness and abandonment that many of you talked about in your letters. The night before, all His disciples had been ready to die for Him, all of them were moved by Him. But only a few hours later, He was left alone. While Judas bargained to have Him arrested and Peter, James, and John could not stay awake to watch with Him, He was left alone. There are those who betray Him, those who deny Him, and those who run away. And He remains alone.

Being abandoned is possibly the worst thing that can happen to a person. We are willing to do anything in order to not be abandoned. We are willing to do anything for a gaze full of attention and tenderness. Sometimes, we are even willing to sell ourselves. We say things we do not agree with or do not fully believe and dress differently than we would like in order to be part of the group, to not be left alone. We have different personalities in different places. Like Carrón says: “it is as if each of us bends to what is asked in every circumstance. So we are one person at work, another with our

¹⁷ *Jn 12:27.*

¹⁸ *Jn 12:23-28.*

friends, another still at home, etc. Where are we truly ourselves? How often we feel suffocated by our daily lives, without the slightest idea of how to break free, only waiting for our circumstances to change! In the end we find ourselves stuck, longing for a freedom that never comes.”¹⁹ A mask at school, another mask Saturday night, another mask with our friends from GS, another mask with our classmates. Why? Because we do not want anyone to abandon us, to leave us alone. Like a song that many of you know and listen to says: “Tell me are ya trying to play with me or would you spend your whole life with me? Tell me would you die for me?”²⁰

After being fascinated by someone, after being attracted to someone, after having started to believe a person, after having begun to give more than this person asked for, we greatly fear that this same person will abandon and betray us. We do everything to avoid the awful experience of emptiness that assails us when we are abandoned and feel trapped and humiliated. Dostoevsky says that after having killed our freedom in order to not be abandoned we find ourselves “in a total isolation.”²¹

If you truly care about what we are saying, not only when there is silence but also when you have some free time—when you are with your friends, before lunch, coming in to the meeting room, going to the Way of the Cross—look at the texts proposed in the booklet, try to identify with the experience of a singer or writer, with what they say about themselves, because this is also a way to learn how to study. Starting from these things that are more real, one learns to identify with them, and then one can even learn to identify with a text from the 18th century that he does not like.

Now we come to the critical question, the question that sums up all the others: Is there someone who will never abandon me? Or, as one of you wrote: “Does anything (a passion, a friendship) exist that will last forever?” On Wednesday, before leaving for the Exercises, one of you told me, “You know, I’m tempted to not come this year, because I know that I get excited when I’m there but then it doesn’t last.” Why become excited if we know that it will not last? This is what we are afraid of. We are afraid of being disappointed and of being abandoned. Let us look at this fact in the face. What if even GS and the encounter with Christ (like I read in a letter) were a big joke, were the greatest illusion I could have experienced? This is the doubt that swallows us.

Like Giussani says, a question creeps in: “what if it were not true?”²² This question, like Montale says, terrifies us: “nothing at my back, the void behind me, with a drunkard’s terror.”²³ The thought that there is only nothingness, that nothing is true, that nothing lasts, that everything is destined to delude us and then disappoint us, begins to take shape.

Judas had this same impression. He had been conquered by Jesus, had been enthusiastic about Jesus, but then salvation did not come in the way he hoped it would. I will read a letter from one of you that expresses this impression and sums up many questions: “I always felt uncomfortable around people. I felt inadequate and strange and had big questions that I carefully hid. It seems childish, but I felt misunderstood until the ninth grade when I met GS. There I breathed freely for

¹⁹ Julián Carrón, *La bellezza disarmata* [*Beauty Disarmed*] (Milan: Rizzoli, 2015), 181.

²⁰ “All I want is somebody real who don't need much / A gal I know that I can trust... / To be here when money low / [...] / Gal, meh need fi know / Now tell me would you really ride for me? / Baby, tell me would you die for me? / Would you spend your whole life with me? / Tell me would you really cry for me? / [...] / If I showed you my flaws / If I couldn't be strong / Tell me honestly / Would you still love me the same? / Tell me, tell me, would you want me? / Tell me, tell me, would you call me? / [...] / Tell me, tell me, do you need me? / Tell me, tell me, do you love me yea? / Or is ya just tryna play me?” (R. City feat. Adam Levine, *Locked Away*).

²¹ Cf. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 934.

²² “Fear is the breath of the nothingness we come from, which results in, like the Book of Wisdom says, the exaltation of pettiness, of meanness: the meanness of the embrace, the meanness of possession, the meanness of appropriation, the meanness of anger, the meanness of laziness. [...] And so the whole world is made up of lies. The world is entirely set in deceit (thank goodness Jesus said it!). It is an exaltation of pettiness that always ends in disaster. The way the world exalts petty things (sex, politics, money, health), always ends in an either personal (the destruction of the I) or collective disaster [...] It creeps in and takes the form of this question: ‘what if it were not true?’” (L. Giussani, *Un evento reale nella vita dell'uomo* [*A True Event in the Life of Man*], (Milan: Bur, 2013, 292-293).

²³ Eugenio Montale, “Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,” in *The Collected Poems of Eugenio Montale: 1925-1977* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

the first time. There I was finally home. They talked about all those questions that I had learned to suppress. I was no longer alone. I had more than I had ever asked for. Meeting GS saved my life. There, I saw people who faced their lives with desire, and I was lucky enough to call them my friends [everything we spoke about last night, summed up in ten lines. Everything we spoke about on Holy Thursday, the friend, finally someone who understands me]. Then [this *then* is the question we are addressing today] one of my friends became distant and started using drugs. He made us go into crisis because we did not understand how after having met something so great he could abandon it. Mind you, he's not stupid. I started to think that maybe what I lived was an illusion and that I convinced myself that it was something great and beautiful. I did not know how to be in front of what was happening, and I still don't know how to be in front of this. I gave everything to this place but I was cheated because I have never experienced such suffering before, a suffering that is too much for me. I feel unfit for this life that is asking me for things I do not have and is slowly consuming me. When I ask this question, people tell me that it is just a bad time, a bad age, but I am not interested in living waiting for a hypothetical better tomorrow. I want a reason for living now. If I don't have a reason to live now, I am not interested."

Dear friend, I do not think it is just a bad time. It is not a bad time, but a time for you! The question of life that we want to look in the face is whether everything ends or whether we can trust in something that lasts forever. It is time to understand what truly matters. Otherwise we become like Judas, frightened by the feeling of abandonment and by disappointment to the point where all we can do is run away. In front of our fear, in front of our limit, we run away, we betray. Sometimes we betray what we've met by running away. Sometimes we betray what we've met, because after the initial enthusiasm, we keep going to GS out of habit, to repeat what everyone else says. Other times we betray what we've met by living in a perfect dualism between meetings and "fun" (as the world sees it). Our betrayal is that we run away like Judas. Let us now sing *The Monologue of Judas*.

The Monologue of Judas

"Not what I will, but what You will"

Christ did not run away in the face of fear. When faced with abandonment, He did not feel betrayed like Judas did, He did not flee the cross, He did not chase down Judas. He realized that it was not just a "time," but that it was *His time*, the time to give His life. He looked fear and abandonment in the face. Let us stand and carefully listen to the Gospel story that speaks of this event: "Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch.' He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what You will.'"²⁴

How did Christ face this challenge? Why did He not run away? With cries and tears He was able to say, "Not what I will, but what you will." We would all like not to run away in front of the doubt that frightens us like drunkards, but rather learn to stay in front of it like Christ did.

I have a fellow student, an African from Tanzania, who has a very shy face and looks like the sweetest person in the world. One day, a friend of his, who is also a Franciscan, came up to me and said, "Did you know he killed a lion?" He killed a lion with his bare hands! I asked him, "How did you kill a lion?" He answered, "It takes a lot of practice. You have to learn to look at the lion in the face, because it makes the lion afraid of you. If he sees that you are scared, he will kill you. If instead you look him in the eyes and show him that you are not afraid, as soon as he jumps towards you, you strike his neck with the knife hidden in your hand and—bam!—you kill him." Wonderful! We can kill the lion of doubt that assails us. This is the good news that I would like to give you

²⁴ Mk 14:32-36.

today. Thanks to Christ, we do not have to be afraid to face the question “And what if it were not true?” and, in confronting it, we kill and defeat fear. Wouldn’t you like that?

The crucial point is not running away. The important thing is to start facing our fears. What is the point of our friendship if it does not help us stay in front of fear, take it by the scruff of the neck, and look it in the face? Is it a place for discussions among Christians? Is it a place we can go to for group therapy? Many other groups exist for these things. When friendship becomes this, it is reduced to something sentimental or formal, but does not help us live. Our friendship, born from Christ, helps us face the fear that paralyzes us, helps us kill the lion, helps us sail through all the difficulties of life without drowning, helps us not run away and not feel the need to wear a mask. We can look everything in the face. Because of this, let us sing *Favola*.

Favola

There is a way to face fear, to grab the lion by the scruff of the neck. This way is called “judging.” Judging means that you start saying what you think, start saying how you feel about things. Think about the first time you said something or did something because you wanted to and not because your parents or friends told you to. Think about the first time that, going against everyone, going against the trends, even going against your friends, you said, “I want this.” Maybe you have never experienced such a moment. Why? Because the world, and by “world” I mean the “common mentality,” is bothered by the fact that a person who is free, that a person who is not afraid of facing fear and saying “I want this,” is making a judgment. People do not like this because you are no longer a slave, you are finally a person with your own appearance, your own freedom, and your own capacity for judgment. Even if the whole world says something is red, you say, “No! I saw it, it’s white.” This is making a judgment. When was the first time you made a judgment? Many people are afraid that you will start making judgments. Many people would rather you simply followed the common mentality. Note that even the most nonconformist things are very conformist. When did you do something that went against what everyone else thought because you recognized that it was true? Judgment is the beginning of freedom from your feelings and the world’s opinions.

The first man in history to not be afraid of judgment was Christ himself. Like Carrón says, quoting Fr. Giussani, “Christ submits Himself to verification by our heart. He does not ask to be believed *a priori*,”²⁵ in the same way that He did not ask His disciples to believe Him *a priori*. When everyone left because they did not understand what he was talking about when he said he would give them His body and His blood to eat and drink, he pressed his disciples, “Do you also want to leave?” He invites them to make a judgment on Him: “Do you also want to leave?” Someone who loves you so much that he wants you to use your heart and reason because he is not concerned with binding you to himself and having you repeat what he says, must be truly free.

As we were saying last night, he wants you to be free, and this is why he invites you to look your fear in the face, to judge, to see things as they truly are, to understand what you truly need, what is and what is not necessary to look fear in the face, to face the chaos of my life and of your life. One

²⁵ “No one can take our place, not even Christ did so. [...] ‘Faith cannot cheat, it cannot tell you ‘It’s like this,’ and win your approval just like that. No! Faith cannot cheat because in some way it is tied to your experience. In the end it’s as if it were to appear in court with you as the judge, using the criterion of your experience. But neither can you cheat, because in order to judge it you have to use it, in order to see whether it transforms your life you have to live it seriously; not faith according to your interpretation, but faith as it was handed down to you, authentic faith. This is why our conception of faith is directly connected with the hour of the day, with day-to-day life as we live it. ...If you fall in love with a girl, or have had a few experiences of being in love, and have never perceived how faith changes that relationship, if you have never said to yourself, ‘How faith throws light on this tentative relationship, how it changes it for the better!’ If you have never been able to say something of the sort (and instead of a girlfriend, you can substitute anyone else—father, mother, and so on), if you have never been able to say, ‘How faith makes my living more human!’ If you have never been able to say this, then faith will never become conviction, will never become constructive, and will never generate anything because it has not touched the depth of your I” (Luigi Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987. [The “I” Is Reborn in an Encounter. 1986-1987]*, (Milan: Bur Rizzoli, 2010, 300-301).” (Julián Carrón, *Christ Is Something That is Happening to Me Now*, in *Traces*, 2/2012, XI-XII).

of you wrote to me, referencing a song:²⁶ “What is the fixed point among the waves of the sea, in the midst of everything that happens, what is the essential point that allows me to move forward and not run away in front of myself?” Answering this question, verifying what is truly good, beautiful, and right according to you and not according to others, understanding what corresponds to your heart, this is making a judgment.

A few weeks ago, at a GS Assembly in Milan, I quoted an example from Giussani where he talks about how at a certain point in life, we find ourselves weighed down by a backpack filled with things we’ve learned, with know-hows, with things to do.²⁷ Think about your parents and how much they have taught you, from how to talk to manners: “Don’t pick your nose, don’t stick your fingers in your ears.” Then, “one day you have to become richer than me, you have to get a good job;” or, “study or you’ll be poor;” or, “you’re talented but if you don’t try...” In short, everyone fills your backpack with things. Even your friends do it: “what do you mean you don’t have that shirt?” So then you wear that shirt. And so you fill your backpack with things, with knowledge, with destinations, with shirts. Oh my goodness! It’s so heavy! So much so that at a certain point what do you do? You put down the backpack and run away. But no! We can stop, open the backpack—this needs to be done at your age and if you don’t, the worse for you—and see what is essential for walking, what is essential for living. This is making a judgment.

Do all the speeches we make to ourselves, all the reprimands from others, do anything for us? No! In front of the problems of life, when life is difficult, you realize that you do not need them, they are useless. This is making a judgment, that is, saying “this is not useful.” If you’re going to the beach in Rimini do you put skis in your backpack? No! “Yeah, but all my friends are bringing skis.” And all of us, like idiots, bring skis to the beach. “Well, yeah, but we’re water skiing!” What are you talking about?! We get to the point where we think it’s OK like this and say, “I don’t know. If everyone is bringing skis, it must be a new thing.” And so, weighed down, we go to the beach. Get rid of some of that unnecessary weight! You can look at what is in your backpack in the face and judge what is or is not necessary.

Otherwise, like one of you correctly pointed out in your letter, what is our companionship? It becomes a beautiful castle in the clouds that, when problems arise, is useless. When problems arise we go to a shrink, or better, go and get drunk on Saturday nights and end up in the Hyperuranium. Or, like another one of you wrote, you take a breath of air and then re-emerge in the confusion of life. No! We have to understand if what Christ brought us can be for life, can be forever. We have to be honest in recognizing that the majority of the things that we say, that we propose, bring only lack and nothingness, as Leopardi said.

“We can do what we like, but we cannot escape this verification: how many times in one day have we lived a true experience of freedom, that is of fullness, of satisfaction, in our particular situation, in the contingency of our everyday decisions, in the adhesion to good and partial attractions? Usually, suffocation prevails, the feeling of being cramped on all sides, only waiting to run away. So many people escape through their imaginations to endure the ‘lack and nothingness!’ Without the recognition of the Mystery present, night advances, confusion advances—and, at the level of freedom—rebellion advances, or disappointment so overcomes us that it is as if we were no longer waiting for anything, or as if we were living without desiring anything, except the furtive satisfaction or furtive answer to a simple request. [...] Only the relationship recognized and lived with that which satisfies us and frees us from our whims, from the dictatorship of our desires—which is a reduction of desire—makes us consistent in any circumstance and irreducible by any power.”²⁸

Many of the things we fill our backpacks with are useless. But sometimes we think, “If I had that thing, that girl, those good grades...” We have to look these things in the face and recognize that they are banal. Because then we get the girl and the good grades and realize how many people with

²⁶ Claudio Chieffo, “Parsifal” in *Songbook*, 233.

²⁷ Cf. Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001).

²⁸ Julián Carrón, *La bellezza disarmata [Beauty Disarmed]* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2015), 199-200.

perfect grades are unhappy. The circumstances change and it is still not enough, yet we are not honest when we say that it is not enough.

Instead, one of you writes: “For the first two weeks after the winter vacation, praying and re-reading the witnesses, I was able to keep my desire alive. But as time passed [...] everything lost its taste, so I buried myself in achievements at school. However, I immediately found myself even more sad. So with this deep sadness inside, I threw myself into this companionship looking for an answer and was truly happy. The next day though, I’d go back to school bored, things would happen and I would not hold onto anything. What I have recognized is a lack, a profound lack.”

This friend of ours is great because although we all live like him, we are afraid to admit it, and so we drag ourselves away from the companionship to pray, we try to be pious, but it’s not enough, and maybe we go smoke a joint, but it’s also not enough. Man’s greatness lies in saying, “I did all these stupid things, but they leave me feeling empty.” Our friend isn’t great because he did something “pious,” but because he finally recognized that nothing is enough for him. Making a judgment means recognizing when things are not enough for the infinite need of your heart. You’re all afraid—I am too, it happens to me too—that saying “it is not enough” is the end of the story. This is exactly the reason we are afraid of saying these words to each other. Often, we say “Well, yes, no, in the end it kind of is enough, it’s possible to live anyways.” Instead, saying that something is not enough is the beginning of an adventure. Saying that something is not enough is the beginning of freedom. Putting down your backpack and looking at what’s inside it is the beginning of freedom. When someone asks us, “Are you weighed down?” we can answer, “No!” But if you’re dying?!? Free yourself from the weight, recognize that it is not enough for you!

If lots of things come to an end, are not enough, and leave us empty, what then truly corresponds? What truly corresponds to the need for beauty, truth, and justice that is our heart? Is there someone who can fulfill these needs? We recognize that we cannot do it on our own, and that alone we cannot make this thing last. Yes, we went on the vacation, went to the Exercises, and then what? What happened? It passed, every time. But let’s look the problem in the face. Was there something that lasted even when you failed? Is there an embrace that continues to sustain you in the moment when everyone leaves? In the moment you think that you can’t do it anymore is there someone who continues to embrace you? We sang: “A hand greater than yours, will lift you up; abandon yourself to that hand.”²⁹ Christ understood this. When everyone abandoned him, He was not afraid to say, “My soul is troubled now,” I’m afraid, but there is One, my Father, who even now does not abandon me. Like one of you wrote: “It’s as if I, with all my desires fulfilled, am content with reaching a certain level, while instead for my friends there is no limit. They have experiences of complete fullness, overflowing, contagious.” You don’t get it. It’s not enough for you. You fail. But there is Someone who will come back for you.

We are facing a critical challenge. Giussani writes, “In only one case is this point in the circle, this single human being, free from the entire world, free, so that the world together and even the total universe cannot force him into anything. In only one instance can this image of a free man be explained. This is when we assume that this point is not totally the fruit of the biology of the mother and father, not strictly derived from the biological tradition of mechanical antecedents, but rather when it possesses a direct relationship with the infinite, the origin of all the flux of the world...that is to say God.”³⁰ Either we go to those who promise us heavy things to put in our backpacks and who make us wear masks and whom we still follow so as not to be abandoned, or we abandon ourselves to Him, to that Presence that never abandons us, even when we abandon it. St. Ambrose

²⁹ “Don’t be afraid / my son, / but it’s the rougher road / that will bring you there; / so leave behind the easy path, / take to the road / and go through that forest / that you needn’t fear / because *there’s someone with you, / he’ll never leave you, / don’t be afraid, / take to the road and go...* When you come upon the wolf, / fox, and lion, / don’t be afraid / and don’t be confused: / they belong to another tale / that ends badly, / they can’t touch you; / don’t look back because *there’s someone with you, / he’ll never leave you, / don’t be afraid, / don’t look back, just go...* Don’t give into the darkness that devours things; / now it’s night, but the day will come again...” (Claudio Chieffo, “Favola” in *Songbook*, 215 [trans. 296]).

³⁰ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 91.

says that either we are slaves of many or servants, sons, of One,³¹ the only One Whom we have judged, recognized, and verified will never abandon us. Is there someone who has never abandoned you (this is the question of life), who has never betrayed you, who even when you betrayed Him has not betrayed you? Is there someone who can love you forever? For anything less than this we do not walk. The only thing I want to bring with me in the backpack of life's journey is the Someone. Then, I can go anywhere. Now let's sing *Liberazione n. 2*, because it talks about how there is this You that never leaves us, even when we have reduced our friendship to politics, and our feelings to instinct and exploitation. Therefore we can sing, "But you, only you / can fill up the emptiness of my mind."³² Let us begin to desire with all of our hearts and all of our reason that we discover who is this You who never abandons us.

Liberazione n. 2

There is a You, a Presence, that fills my life. Peter understood this when everyone left and he said, "Master, to whom shall I go? You alone [that You had a face, the face of Christ] have the words of eternal life."³³ Even I, in the moments when I have felt most alone, when I have felt most misunderstood, have said, "You are the only one here," and I have seen that He never abandons me. You too, once you recognize the weight of all the masks they make you wear and begin to judge things for yourselves, will recognize that there is One who never abandons you. Like one of our friends wrote: "I have to confess that I am very moved by how far I have come, by how much I've changed since I first started to understand that there was something here for me. I come to the Triduum, therefore, full of gratitude for what this friendship has given me. I come with eyes full of grace—even before arriving!—because the path I've traveled has made me more human, more myself. It has allowed me to discover what it means to live feeling loved. My expectation and desire are to discover again what it means to live following a Presence, a You that shows itself to me through the circumstances of my life, a You that I have slowly learned to call by name, Jesus. I want to discover and understand Him again because often I forget Him and try to live pursuing success and others' approval, forgetting about the event that happened to me. But, if I am honest with myself [see, this is the beginning of judgment], it is clear that this Encounter with a capital "E" is evermore radically changing my life. I want to keep Him present. I want to keep present Jesus, the Encounter that made me experience true fullness through specific faces, in specific places, and who also promised me that that fullness is forever. My expectation is precisely that the Triduum be an occasion to rediscover this relationship once again. I know that also this time it will not be enough, that I will never be tired of rediscovering and deepening this relationship. In the past few months many things have not made sense to me. I have had many questions about myself and what I really like, also because I have to make an important choice soon [so you see there is confusion]. However, I feel confident because I am certain that there is Someone who will never abandon me, who will love me even if I make the wrong choice, who would love me even if I wasted my whole life. How can we be afraid? Rather, with this perspective, even all my questions become positive, because they are a sign that I am alive, that I am truly living. Living with this awareness is incredible, simply

³¹ "Look how many masters those who do not recognize the One Lord have" ["Quam multos dominos habet qui unum refugerit!"]. Ambrose, *Epistulae extra collectionem, Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina (PL)*, edited by Jacques P. Migne, 14:96 (Paris: 1844-1864).

³² "Tonight, neither a book, / a song / nor a woman's love will do. / Confusion can't even / drive away the boredom / of a life that is lacking. *But you, only you / can fill up the emptiness of my mind, / only you can open the heart of one who can't feel it; / and you can play with my thoughts, / make me feel as if I were born anew.* I won't give my life, / unique yet empty, / to stupid politics / or to a false ideal / that I invented, / one to which I remain both master and slave. // But you,... // This strange love / was born just like a child / that no one expected. / But why in this moment / do we want to make ourselves lords / of a love that was given us? // But you,..." (Claudio Chieffo, "Liberazione n. 2" in *Songbook*, 227 [trans. 301]).

³³ Cf. *Jn* 6:68-69.

incredible. The ways I've changed in the past four years are due to this companionship, and so, with tears in my eyes, thinking back on everything I have learned, all I can say is thank you."

Even if I wasted my whole life, I am certain that there is someone who would love me. I can see why our friend says that this is incredible, because living like this, all our questions are not stopping points or something we should escape from, but a path.

This is what Christ understood that night, what He understood first in order to then help all of us. When everyone betrayed Him, He understood that the Father would never abandon Him. He understood that even if He, the King of the Jews, wasted His life in a shameful way, with a shameful sentence on the cross, it would be for good. That is why He was able to say, "Not my will, but yours." Christ's recognition of "not my will, but yours" has a name that scandalizes people and that no one tells you because we adults are the first to be scandalized by it. This name is *obedience*. Obedience is not the forced compliance of the child, but the attitude of the adult man who uses his reason and freedom and understands who is the only One worth obeying. The opposite of obedience is not freedom. The opposite of obedience is slavery. Either we are slaves, or we obey, with all of ourselves, the One who frees us and does not abandon us. Don Giussani says, "In obedience you affirm something you have encountered, that is greater than you, that you hope will save you, and that you hope will show you an even greater truth and capacity to love."³⁴ I know that in following You I blossom, because I have seen it happen. I know that in following You I am more and more free. I obey You because of this and in order to not be a slave to everyone. In order to enter into the drama of Christ's freedom, let us listen to *O côr soave*, the first song that Giussani taught the GS students.

O côr soave

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"

"Not by a sharp knife, / but by the arrow that created love."³⁵ At the center is not the "sharp knife," or pain or suffering. At the center is all of the love for the Father that brings Christ to want our salvation and to die for us. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."³⁶ He who is totally conquered by a relationship that frees him, like Carrón says, is able to arrive at the humanly inconceivable possibility of giving his life so that the other might live: "Remaining amazed by Christ's pity on our nothingness, his lowering of Himself to the point of becoming one among us, is what overcomes every type of confusion. It is what overcomes every sense of powerlessness and fills us so that we can accept every sacrifice. We can thus even accept the humanly inconceivable sacrifice of giving one's life so that another can live. This is exactly what Jesus did with each one of us and what a Christian mother would do for her child."³⁷ This is what Jesus did with His life. Until the end, He gave himself completely so that we might live. He was certain of His relationship with the Father, which made Him able to face fear and abandonment. "What is life worth if not to be given?" Who is worthy of an offer as precious as our life? I'm not only talking about the future when you might have three, ten, fifteen kids, I'm not talking about the future when you might be a missionary in Oceania, I am talking about now. To whom should I offer this difficult homework assignment? To whom should I offer the face of my father who does not understand me? To whom

³⁴ Luigi Giussani, *Occorre soffrire perché la verità non si cristallizzi in dottrina ma nasca dalla carne* (Esercizi della Fraternità di Comunione e Liberazione, Appunti dalle meditazioni, 28-30 Aprile 1989, pro manuscripto, 49) [*It is Necessary to Suffer In Order That Truth Not Be Crystallized into Doctrine, But Be Born From the Flesh* (Spiritual Exercises of Communion and Liberation, Notes from the Meditations)].

³⁵ "Oh sweet heart, heart of my Lord, / gravely wounded, not by a sharp knife, / but by the arrow that created love, / that created love. // O sweet heart, when I gaze at you / in so much agony, my soul is faint, / no voice is heard any longer, nor any sighs, / no more and never sighs" (Anonymous, 16th ct., "O côr soave" ["Oh Sweet Heart"] in *Songbook*, p. 201).

³⁶ *Lk* 23:46.

³⁷ Julián Carrón, *Carità, dono di sé commosso*, in *Tracce*, 2/2010, VIII [*Charity, A Moved Gift of Self in Traces*, 2/2010, VIII].

should I offer the incomprehension that I feel? If I am certain of One who wants only my good, all of my life is a dialogue offered to Him. There is no circumstance, not even the cross, that cannot be offered.

What does it mean to offer? I have a very banal example in mind. I have a younger cousin, who is now taller than me because she has grown, who is a fencing champion. When she was little, she would play ball in the hallway. This ball was everything for her and the game she played with it occupied all of her attention. One day, as I was watching her play, her dad walked in. Her eyes lit up, she looked at the ball—I felt her hesitate (the ball, dad)—and what did she do? She took the ball and brought it to her dad. This is what it means to offer. In bringing things to Him, you are certain that He will never abandon you. This is the only way to fully live that circumstance.

And thus, there is no circumstance that can stop us; rather, what strikes us more than anything is that in this way we can truly live everything, every circumstance. A friend we recently met wrote to a girl in GS: “It’s clear that you don’t live if He doesn’t live, if He doesn’t exist you don’t exist. Somehow, you’ve completely let go of yourself [...] The beautiful thing [...] is that you, like all the GS students, live now, you don’t think about tomorrow. You live here and now. What is important for you is what you are living now.” This is the most beautiful thing she could have said. Sorry if I scandalize you, but I’m not interested in simply saying “Those of you who are in GS pray a lot and go on lots of retreats. You’re so good! You are consistent, you never do anything wrong, if only everyone were like you!” I’m more interested in someone who tells you, “You live now.” I’m more interested in one of your classmates telling you, “How is it possible that you listen to that teacher who everyone hates because, objectively speaking, she is not a good teacher? Yet you do not throw in the towel.” You too feel the weight of having a bad math teacher (I’m not sure why this hypothetical teacher is now a math teacher; I’m sure math teachers are very good, otherwise they’ll get mad at me!). I also feel the weight of everything, but since everything can be offered, everything can become interesting and an occasion for dialogue with the Mystery that makes all things. This morning, someone was telling me about our friend who even lives the difficulty of a disease that is immobilizing him at an impressive rate, starting from his legs and now his respiration, as his mission. Something like this begins striking others: “How is it possible that someone so sick lives now?” Because, like Carrón told you in his letter for the Triduum last year, he experiences reality as an ally because he is certain of the One behind that reality. This is what our friends from Lugo told us about how they faced the death of one of their classmates. This is what our friends from Bologna told us about how they were in front of the illness of one of their classmates. The way they went to the hospital to visit him and studied and played cards is impressive. In the hospital! They prayed together even in the hospital. One could object: “This a place where you come and cry. What are you doing?” And they would answer, “We are people who love the present. Whether it be playing cards, an illness, a cross, we live it because we are certain that there is One who doesn’t cheat us in life.”

All of this is possible because Christ embraced His cross, because that night Christ judged that abandonment and understood that He did not have to run away, that through that path, through that obedience to the Father, He would open a way for all of us.

Because of this, from now on and throughout the Way of the Cross this afternoon, all we have to worry about is verifying whether the love He brought into history is capable of never abandoning us. Because of this we all have to carry our cross, all of the suffering we carry, all of the sense of emptiness and abandonment we feel, in order to see if He can respond, or if it’s only a beautiful fairy tale from 2,000 years ago.

Today’s Way of the Cross is not a masquerade party or a historical re-enactment but instead has one value: verifying whether that cross changes me today. Otherwise, just stay in the hotel and give space to those who want to live this gesture following Christ. We want to verify if His cross, His obedience, can open a path for my obedience, can allow me to face the lions of my life and free myself from the weight others put on me and the masks I put on myself. This is why silence is necessary. Silence means giving space to this cross that is passing through my life. It’s like when

your mother (mothers always come into examples when we talk about silence) has cleaned the living room floor and you see that that it is still wet and so walk through on tiptoe near the edges of the walls. Silence is walking on tiptoe because there is One who is entering your life. Christ is walking with His cross to take up your cross and you remain in silence, as if you were walking on tiptoe, to follow what He is doing.

This is why we need to be friends. Look for a friend with whom to live the Way of the Cross. A friend in the sense of what we said yesterday, who helps you stay in front of Him, who helps you remain in complete silence looking only at Him, because this is what we need today. We cannot do it alone. Alone we can't hold up and we get distracted. Instead, a friend helps us stay in front of it. Let's stand up and listen to the reading from *Miguel Mañara*. Although we might not have been able to follow everything today, I think that at least our affection for Christ grew, and so right after the reading, we will listen to *Dulcis Christe*.

“The sweat of death runs on His eyes. / He walks under the cross toward His last day. What thing of beauty is there here to be seen, tell us, son of Man? / The water of this country is like the eye of the blind man, the stone of this country is like the heart of the King, the tree of this country is a torture pole for You, Love, son of Heavens. / He has broken the bread, he has poured the wine. / This is the flesh, this is the blood. / Let he who has ears hear! / He prayed and got up: His beloved ones were lying under the olive tree. / Simon, are you asleep? / He cried and He got up: His dear children were dreaming under the olive tree. You can sleep now, says the Son of Man. They come with swords and lanterns: ‘I greet you, Master.’ The brother has kissed the brother on the cheek. The right ear was cut, and see, it is healed: so that man may understand. / The cock has crowed twice: there is no love left, all is forgotten. / The cock had crowed in the loneliness of Your heart, son of Man. / The crown is on Your head, the reed is in Your hand, the face is blind to the spit and the blood. / Hail, King of the Jews. / The clothes have been divided, the thieves are dead. / “I thirst,” the heart of life cries out. / But the sponge has fallen back and the side is pierced and all is accomplished. / Now we know that He is the Son of the living God and that he is with us till the end of the world. Amen.”³⁸

Dulcis Christe

Angelus

³⁸ O.V. Milosz, *Miguel Mañara, Mephibosheth, Saul of Tarsus* (COWA Publications), 22-23.

Way of the Cross *March 25, Friday morning*

*This is not so much a thought to follow as an event in which to enter. It is a form of remembrance, and, like any form of remembrance, draws its significance from the seriousness with which our hearts remain fixed on the contents of the event itself. The gestures, the walk, the words we hear, and the songs we sing make this remembrance more alive, more real, and more possible. Let us not be scandalized if we find ourselves getting distracted for a few minutes, but rather begin paying attention again as soon as we notice. Before beginning, let us ask the Lord who makes all things to give us the grace to understand. Let us ask the Father who is the origin of everything and therefore also of my thoughts, feelings, and desires, to give us the grace to comprehend more and more, to give our hearts the grace to understand more and more. Give us Your help so that we might resist, so that the ultimate evidence not grow dim in us, because there is a darkness that covers the evidence of Truth.**

[*The italics of this section of the Way of the Cross are from the booklet: *The Embrace That Saves*, GS Easter Triduum, Easter 2016]

Judas, Peter, Pilate: Our betrayal

We are the glory of Christ but at the same time we are His suffering. We are the suffering of Christ because we are not yet His glory. We are not aware of the fact that the goal of our daily life is the glory of Christ.

Pigi Banna: Judas, Pilate, and Peter. The doubt we were talking about this morning that terrifies us eventually becomes betrayal, the betrayal we know so well, because we can accept Christ until He asks us for a sacrifice and as long as He is within our measures. As soon as he starts asking us, like He does today, for silence during such a difficult gesture, we feel faint. We think that Christ is the one messing up, that He is not forceful enough with us. We certainly don't think that we are the ones incapable of following His footsteps and converting. We think He is the one messing up. These are the times when, like Judas, we run away and deny Him. These are the times when we wake up and, like Peter, say, "I am ready to die for you" and then by evening are exhausted and say, "I do not know him!" Or maybe these are times when, like Pilate, we are simply indifferent and think we already know what someone is telling us. This is our denial.

What does Christ do in front of this? He sees Judas and, as in the song (*Amicus meus*) we will listen to in a minute, says, "My friend." That gaze with which He first called him to Himself is the same gaze that He has towards him who betrayed Him. That same gaze with which he called Peter allows Him to look at Peter after his denial. With that same gaze, he calls Pilate and his clever politics into question. Even to us, who constantly betray Him, He says, "amicus meus," "you are my friend, for you I am mounting the cross."

And what do we do? Do we fall into the darkness of our evil like Judas? Or worse, do we get sucked in by the logic of power, by our friend who is distracted (and so we too feel authorized to become distracted), like Pilate? Or do we, like Peter, weep bitterly because You are our best friend?

Listening to this song and beginning again to walk, let's decide what position we want to take, how we want to respond to this gaze of Christ that still today calls us, "amicus meus, my friend." In re-reading the translations of the songs there will surely be a phrase, a word, to fix in our minds for this day, a word by which we are called again "amicus meus."

Mary, Simon, Dismas: Behind the Cross

The woman who was Christ's mother is the human person who most participated in the suffering mercy of Christ. Let us follow the figure of the Virgin in her feelings, in all of today's walk.

Pigi Banna: The hardest thing for me during the Way of the Cross, just as during the journey of life, is following, following the Son of Man to this point of desolation. Even on my lips, the objection of the Jews appears: if He is the Son of Man, if He is the King of light, why does He have to fall to this level? Can't He come down from the cross?

But we do see simple people who instead of making objections, followed. Mary followed Him from the beginning of His life. Simon of Cyrene followed Him, taking up His cross for some time. The good thief followed Him as he was nailed to the cross.

What is the difficulty in following Him, in following Him along the Way of the Cross and along the way of our life? This difficulty is called *sacrifice*. I am not afraid to use the word sacrifice. Sacrifice means giving up the way you imagined your life would be, just like Mary had to give up the image she had of herself as a woman and mother in order to follow Him. The good thief had to give up the image of a Savior who would pull him down from the cross in order to follow Him. If we didn't follow him... do you know what the opposite of sacrifice is? The opposite of sacrifice is not your own pleasure, but tragedy. The opposite of sacrifice is the tragedy of my sin, your sin, that cannot be forgiven. Instead, in following Him and in accepting the sacrifice of walking behind Him, Mary, Simon of Cyrene, and the good thief saw the beginning of eternal life in this world. Mary saw a possibility of being a woman, of being a mother, and of being the daughter of her Son that she could never have imagined. The good thief recognized salvation and saw Paradise opening up before him. He was the first to enter into Paradise.

If we accept the sacrifice of walking along a path of crosses (like the path you just traveled), a path made up of sacrifices for a good, it is to follow Him and not because we are strong. If we agree to follow Him, even now we are promised eternal life. It is not a question of ability. From Mary, a pure woman conceived without original sin, to the criminal who was justly crucified, everybody (without exclusion) can walk behind Him. It is possible for everyone to follow. There is no sin that prevents us from following Him. Let us ask that the question of the song we will now listen to urge and sustain us as we walk. Mary cries out to us, "Will you leave Him for another love? Christ goes to die, He goes to die for you. Will you leave Him for another love?"

He is here among us, as on the day of His death

To understand the Mystery we have to recognize the human. What makes the mystery of Christ's death familiar to us is recognizing the human feelings that were part of his martyrdom.

Pigi Banna: The cry, "My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?" (*Mk 15:34*) resounds eternally. Christ took upon Himself all of that abandonment we spoke of this morning. He took that abandonment into His relationship with the Father, He cried it out to the Father. And from that moment, that cry resounds eternally and can no longer be made in vain.

What makes us suffer is not breaking the law or disobeying the commandments, but seeing that the cost of our sin is His death. However, thanks to that cry, thanks to that death, there is no longer any suffering that is not embraced by the relationship between Christ and his Father, there is no longer any woman's pain, any man's pain, any unjustly killed child's pain that is not embraced by Christ's cry to the Father. With His death, with His cry, Christ makes it so that we no longer need to cry out desperately.

He thirsted. What did he thirst for? He did not thirst for water, but thirsted for our cry. He thirsts for the fact that we can finally cry out all our suffering and all our desperation to Him. He wants us to cry them out to Him. He thirsts for this because in His cry, every cry of ours is embraced. Because of this, we can sing the *Caligaverunt* without fear, and, with Mary, cry out our pain at the death of Christ.

The great vocation of the Son of Mary comes about as the defeat of a poor wretch. Every day in history seems to affirm this, but His permanence in every day of man's life cries out a still-hidden victory. And yet it is not completely hidden because a sign reveals it. The unveiling of this sign is the happening and growth of a human companionship generated exclusively by faith in Him, actually given birth to by Mary's flesh. The world begins to become experience. It is possible to live life with Christ.

Pigi Banna: The Father responded to Christ's cry. How? He responded to this cry first of all through the centurion's cry. He did not respond to it in the cry of one of His disciples, but in the cry of one of His killers: "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Mt 27:54). The Father responds to this cry if today at least one of us has said, "Truly, this is the Son of God!" The power of the Resurrection lies in the fact that still today one of us can say these words, that at least one out of the five thousand people on this Way of the Cross has said in his heart, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" This is the power of the Resurrection. Christ is like an explosive that reached all the way down to the depths of the earth, all the way down to the foundation of the building which represents our limits, and which, having made it all the way down, blows up everything. He reached the bottom of our limits and blew up everything, restoring life. How? Starting with you who says "Truly, this was the Son of God!" He breaks through time, the present, the past, precedes the future, and comes to me and you. This is how we know he is alive. Now let's sing *Allora saprete che esisto*. [*Then You Will Know That I Exist*].

Witness by Joshua Stancil
March 26, Saturday Morning

Morning Prayer

Pigi Banna: “Even should a mother forget, I will never forget you” (*Is* 15:49). After yesterday, we can cry out before the world that there is One who came to save us from our solitude, who came to embrace us in our betrayal and fear with an outrageous preference for each one of us. The Easter poster quote from the Pope says, “When you feel his merciful embrace, when you let yourself be embraced, when you are moved—that’s when life can change because that’s when we try and respond to the immense and unexpected gift of grace, a gift that is so overabundant it may even seem “unfair” in our eyes.”³⁹ It is this overabundance that fills our hearts.

Angelus

Give me Jesus
Il mio volto

Alberto Bonfanti: Talking to Pigi and some friends who are teachers last night, reading the many very beautiful and very human questions we received, looking at your faces in these days, and thinking back on the either fleeting or more continuous dialogues we’ve had, the first thing that seemed clear to us is that each one of us has experienced being understood. Last night in an assembly, a student from Rome told Pigi, “How can you know my need, our need?” So many of you admitted, “What Pigi said is what I feel!” In my assembly, people were saying, “When he talked about the masks we wear because we are afraid of being abandoned he described exactly what I do.” There are so many examples that we can make, that you yourselves can make! In short, we have been understood at the level of our truest needs, the level of our “I.” This understanding is what we experienced. Who can understand us at this level? Only God—not an abstract God, but the divine incarnate, Jesus. We can compare our experience to that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. When they recognized Him, thinking back on the journey with Him, they asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He spoke to us on the way?” (*Lk* 24:32). Our hearts are burning. This is possible because of the experience of the divine, because of the experience of the divine among us, as it was present among the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This is the experience of an embrace that saves us, that understands us. Destiny, the divine, has aroused, re-awakened, exalted our questions. We have received more than one hundred questions. In every assembly, the adults told us, there was a flurry of questions. This is a confirmation of Carrón’s opening message that, “In the same way, we know that without the presence of a great friend, we’d quickly give in before life’s pressing challenges.” We were not afraid to bring forth all of life’s urgency, which if we look around, we recognize is not common in today’s world. Let’s be reasonable, like Giussani always taught us, and surrender our reason to what we have experienced. Being reasonable means surrendering our reason, not to our thoughts, but to our experience. Let’s look at what already happened in the face before attempting to intellectualize it or reducing it to a series of rules that weigh us down, when instead it freed us. This is the first indisputable fact of these days, of what each one of us has experienced. You need to ask, “How can I see God?” One of you wrote: “At the beginning of every experience with GS everything is beautiful but I always ask myself: ‘Where is Jesus in the end? I can’t find Him.’” God is there because your heart burns, because He re-awakened the questions you have today. We had an experience of friendship like the one Carrón described in his message: “A friend is someone who loves my life, my fulfillment, the fullness of my life. It’s this fullness that I want, that I’ve secretly awaited from the moment the

³⁹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (Milan: Piemme-LEV, Vatican City 2016), p. 50.

desire for happiness first sparked within me.” Yet there are people who think it is better not to have these questions and this wound, who think it is better to numb ourselves. People say things like, “I have no idea whether I prefer looking reality in the face or filling it with thousands of things and forgetting about it.” Or who even ask, “Why would it be advantageous for me to keep this wound open? Is it possible?” Carrón also pointed out this temptation: “Other times we ask ourselves if we wouldn’t be better off if [our desire for happiness] were less insistent.” Is it possible to contain that infinite that we are? Every time we try, we find ourselves dissatisfied.

So—and this is the second thing we want to tell you—to remain faithful to what you have experienced in these days, you have to recognize that you will not find the answers to your questions by parroting what we and others tell you, you will not find the answers to your questions by reducing them or by sticking on the answers to your wound like a band-aid; but rather, you will find the answers in a faithful and human path that begins from where you are now. One of us recognized this: “Pigi asked us if we have met One who does not betray us. I still haven’t. Pigi told us that the answer is Christ. This seems like a reasonable answer, but it’s not mine yet.” We will find the answers by walking the human path starting from where we are now, in relationship with the place that sparked those questions. We will find the answers in obeying (another word we need to discover) the friendship that re-awakened my “I” because the answer is first of all a place where we can ask our question, where we can begin a path together, because we see people who live at the level of their desire. This place is the Church. This place is GS, within the Church. It is not a machine of cheap answers, but a place to walk and find the answers to our questions. We discovered the Presence of the divine among us because it sparked our questions, but we still don’t know how this Presence wants to encounter us again, wants to call us again. In the end, what about Pigi struck us? What struck us about him was the fact that he has the same questions as us and has made a journey that showed us how he experienced the answer, that showed us how this answer made his heart burn, and still makes his heart burn now. Carrón also reminded us that, “We all know from experience that it’s not easy to find someone who lives at the height of his or her desire. In the same way, we know that without the presence of a great friend, we’d quickly give in before life’s pressing challenges. This is where the meaning of friendship with Jesus becomes clear. Without a friend like Jesus, who accompanies and sustains us, it would be almost impossible not to throw in the towel.”

We don’t want to close all of the questions that have opened up, but rather want them to become the content of our work together in the next few months. Therefore—third and last point we want to make to introduce this morning’s proposal—always out of faithfulness to what we have experienced, let us not stop at the emotional high we feel but instead judge, or better begin to judge, like Pigi told us to. Many of you asked us what it means to make a judgment. In order to make a judgment, you need a criterion. The criterion is inside of us, it is our heart, it is our elementary experience that makes us desire what is true, good, and beautiful, that makes us desire happiness. Only we can recognize what corresponds to us, nobody else can do it for us. And we are certain that He who sparked these questions put an unfailing criterion within us that will allow us to find the answer. We all know that many things get us excited, but only one thing corresponds unfailingly, that is, only one thing brings with itself a forever of the good, true, and beautiful. This experience happens through a personal journey within the place that awakened our “I” and that therefore is already the way toward the answer. This, like we said, is GS, a human journey in which we can be friends and challenge each other to go to the bottom of our questions. It was Jesus who awakened and revived these questions. We do not know how He will respond to each one of us, but we do know that He will answer. Only the how is to be discovered.

We have to be careful to avoid two mistakes. The first is passively waiting for someone else to give us the answers. The second is trying to give ourselves the answers through our reason and imagination. Instead, we will discover the answers in the place that sparked the question, because just as the question was sparked by Another, so too the answer is other than us, and we will never be able to pigeonhole it. Just as the question is the question of a relationship, so too the answer is

the experience of a relationship, of an embrace that saves us. What comforts us—and we see it in daily life and have seen it in these days—is having witnesses who show us the way. People like Pigi during this Triduum, and like many among us. People like our friend Joshua who comes from America specifically to tell us about his journey and about how he recognized what is true, good, and beautiful in his life, to show us—to use Pigi’s example—how he battled and defeated the lion.

Joshua Stancil: I am a little bit overwhelmed sitting here and looking at all of you. When they asked me to come here, I expected that I’d be speaking to 50 of you in the basement of a church. Although I did not expect such a large audience, I am very happy, even moved, to be here. They asked me to speak about mercy and the Resurrection, and to do so I’m going to give you a few concrete examples from my life. I spent 18 years in a prison in North Carolina. In prison one both tries to do one’s best and tries to deny reality by lying to oneself. One lie I constantly told myself was this: “What will I do during all these years in jail?” When I was sent to jail, the law changed, my sentence could have been reduced and I would have been allowed to go home. However, after six years I realized that this wasn’t possible and that I would be in jail for 18 years. In North Carolina, you do not remain in one prison permanently, but get moved from one place to another because they are worried about the relationships that arise among the inmates, whether they be affective relationships or trafficking of arms. The prison I was in was very strict and very violent. It was a destructive environment for my spirit and it took away a piece of me every day. In the summer of 2002, I even considered suicide, but reality is stubborn and always comes out on top. I told myself so many lies, but reality is stubborn, reality wins. The only thing that kept me going during the following months was reading Fr. Giussani. I had received a magazine called *Magnificat*, a daily missal that contains short meditations by saints or important figures in the Church. I could not resist writing to the director, a Dominican priest named Fr. Cameron, asking him for a monthly subscription to the magazine. He answered, “Don’t worry, I’ll send it to you for free.” Among the many meditations, *Magnificat* also contained some by Fr. Giussani. I had never heard of him before, and the magazine didn’t say much besides, “Fr. Giussani is the founder of Communion and Liberation” below the text. I have to confess that I wasn’t very interested in knowing about that movement he had founded. At that point, I felt very strong and independent, but I did want to know more about this Fr. Giussani, and so I wrote to various Catholic organizations to find out more. When you’re in prison and you write to people, nine times out of ten they don’t answer because they think you want money or are somehow trying to trick them. The only people who answered told me that they didn’t know anything about Communion and Liberation. And so I completely forgot about it, I blocked it from my memory. Like I said, in July 2002 I was contemplating suicide and was always on the lookout for isolated places where I could go kill myself because prisons are very open. One day, as I was cleaning up my things, I found a meditation by Maximilian Kolbe. The feast of the Assumption was approaching and so I told myself I would say that prayer. This is how on August 15, 2002, I consecrated myself to Mary. I didn’t really feel relief or anything like it because it was an act of total desperation. I did it, and then completely forgot about it. A month later, I received a letter from an organization that had found some information on Fr. Giussani and the movement. They sent me three names, John, Rick, and Barry, and their email addresses. In American prisons, you have no Internet access, so these email addresses were useless to me. Then I thought: “I’ll write a short letter, send it to my mom, and ask her to email it.” And so I did. I randomly chose a name, Rick, wrote a very short letter, sent it to my mom, and completely forgot about it. I love my mother, don’t get me wrong, but she has a tendency to enthusiastically say yes to everything and then forget. I only found out later that she had actually sent the email. My mom is not Catholic, so the things I wrote didn’t mean anything to her. In any case, she sent the email on October 7, the feast of the Rosary, but I did not know whether or not she had sent it. Rick received the email and contacted Elisabetta who is part of the *Memores Domini*. Together they prepared a package for me with a few issues of *Traces*, a couple of books by Fr. Giussani, and, unfortunately, some CDs. In North Carolina prisons, you are not allowed to have CDs, and so the package was

sent back. I had no idea that any of this was happening. Then one day, I received a letter from an Italian named Giorgio Vittadini. If you're in prison in North Carolina, it's not every day you get a letter from Italy. I had absolutely no idea why this person was writing to me. He seemed like a nice person, but I couldn't understand why he had written to me and didn't want to answer because I had nothing to say. In addition, as I said before, my attitude was one of being strong and independent, and so I didn't want any sort of relationship with anyone. Luckily or unluckily I am from South Carolina where we are taught to be very proper and polite, and so I had to come up with some sort of response. One night, I was watching TV and saw that Mount Etna was erupting and thought: "Yes! Now I have something to write about!" Displaying the geographical ignorance typical of Americans, I wrote to Giorgio saying, "Please be careful!"

A couple of weeks later, I was unexpectedly transferred to a prison in South Carolina that was much better than the previous one. There, I received a letter from the Elisabetta who had sent the package I had never received in which she explained everything that had happened. In the letter she also asked, "Would you mind if a friend and I came to visit you?" I wanted to say no, because like I said, I was independent and did not want any sort of relationship, but only a book by Fr. Giussani. But we southerners are really very polite and proper, and so I said yes. On December 29, 2002, Elisabetta and Tobias came to visit me in jail. I had no idea why they would have wanted to come. It was an incredibly beautiful visit, like I had never experienced. I even told myself it was beautiful when they left, while still expecting to never see them again. But they came back a few months later. And every month, someone new from Washington D.C. or New York would come visit me. Keep in mind that South Carolina is significantly further south, so they had to drive pretty far. I wanted to figure out what the trap was, what was behind these visits. I thought that maybe they wanted "my firstborn son," wanted money. I did not understand what was happening until about a year later when Rick and his wife Chiara, who is Italian, came to visit me. At that point, she was several months pregnant. They completely surprised me, asking me if I wanted to be the godfather of the son or daughter they were about to have. I remember looking at them wondering, "Are you aware that I'm in prison?! This is not how you win sympathy, they'll think you're crazy if you propose stuff like this." However, I responded differently because the first book I had read by Fr. Giussani was *Why the Church* (at the time, it was the *School of Community*). If you remember, in the beginning of the book, Fr. Giussani describes three ways to verify the Church's claim: the rationalistic approach, the Protestant method, and the Orthodox-Catholic view. He says that the Protestant attitude is one of inner enlightenment where one feels through an inner experience, but that the problem is that our feelings come and go. If my certainty about the Church and Christ's mercy were based on a feeling, what would I do when that feeling went away? When you're in prison with an eighteen year sentence and a married couple asks you to be the godfather of their child, it is something concrete, it is not a feeling! At that point, you understand that mercy has become flesh in front of you and is looking at you. A few months later, I received another letter from Italy. It was in Italian, but it was very short, so I'm going to read it to you now: "My dear brother, or better, my brother Joshua, we are truly grateful for the witness of your experience, the experience of our faith [and he underlined the words "our faith"]. I hope to embrace you before the end of our earthly journey." This letter was signed by Fr. Luigi Giussani. He wrote me this letter about two years before he died. I was extremely moved, because it was clear from the shaky handwriting that he was very sick at the time, but he had still taken time out of his day to write to a prisoner. I was also moved by the fact that he underlined the words "our faith" because I was surprised that he was in some way identifying himself with me. You never experience this when you're in prison, because no one wants to identify themselves with you, no one wants to have anything in common with you. And I think that when he wrote that he hoped to embrace me in this life, he knew that this would not happen and that this embrace would only happen through the letter.

And so, seeing that he was an old man and Italian and that I was young and American, that he was free and I was in prison, but that we were nonetheless experiencing the same thing, I began to understand mercy, or better, the fact of mercy that was helping me understand faith. I don't know

about in Italy, but in the United States, Pope Francis is a controversial figure. There is a lot of criticism of Pope Francis going around, some of it directed toward this Year of Mercy. One criticism I've heard is that Pope Francis talks too much about mercy and not enough about repentance. I don't think this is a well-founded criticism, because he does speak about repentance, but something else is more important. If the mercy I have received were proportionate to my repentance, it would no longer be mercy. If I have to earn it, it is simply a prize, an achievement, not mercy. Mercy is something undeserved. What strikes me about the story of the adulterous woman is that when she is brought before Jesus, He never uses the word "adulterous," He does not assign any adjectives, He does not throw sand in her eyes, because He knows that what she needs is not humiliation but a new beginning. And this is exactly what He gives her. The Year of Mercy is the same opportunity for us. My friend Rick and his wife Chiara did not ask me if I had repented before asking me to be their daughter's godfather; Fr. Giussani did not ask me if I had repented before writing me that letter; none of you asked me if I had repented before coming here today, and in this way everyone showed me mercy. It can be difficult to receive mercy, first of all, for me, because it forces me to recognize that I am dependent. And sometimes, we don't like this. However, the amazing thing about dependence is recognizing that we are not alone. If by definition we depend, it means we are never alone.

I came to Italy in December. I have met amazing people, including some of you. I have repeatedly heard objections along the lines of, "This all seems great but I'm not good enough, I'm not a good person." I particularly remember a woman who told me, "There's no need for Jesus to be merciful towards me today because I'm just going to mess up again tomorrow. I keep making mistakes, like a volcano that keeps erupting." I told her, "Yes, but the volcano gives us Hawaii. The Hawaiian islands, born in the midst of all the fire and chaos, ended up being one of the most beautiful places on earth. With Christ there are no objections, everything can be used." Jesus never tells his followers, "Go solve all your problems and then come follow me." In December, I went to Rome and found so much joy in seeing Caravaggio's painting of the *Calling of Matthew*. If you are familiar with the painting, Jesus is pointing at Matthew, calling him while he is counting money, because he was a tax collector. The point is that we too don't look at Jesus. He looks at us. Love and mercy always come first. We don't first do our penance and then go to the priest for absolution, it is the reverse.

On January 4, I went back to the United States. At the airport, there were some security issues. It was very hard to pass through the controls and I was last in line. My assigned seat, 43G, was in the back of the plane, which was packed. I was not in a very good mood. My seat was right by the bathroom and I thought, "Now I won't even get sleep on this flight!" As I walked toward my aisle seat, I saw that the woman sitting in the seat next to mine had her coat on my seat. She seemed nice and I assumed that she was Italian because everyone on the flight except me was Italian. My Italian is terrible, so I didn't even try talking to her. Like I said to my friends in December, I only know three words in Italian: "ciao," "buongiorno," and "melanzane." So I looked at this woman, pointed at her coat, pointed at myself, and smiled. She picked up her coat and, in English but with an Italian accent, said, "You might have trouble finding room for your bag, you should probably find a stewardess." I said, "OK, thank you." I found a stewardess, found a place for my bag, and went back to my seat. As I walked toward my seat, I saw the woman staring at me and thought, "Hm, maybe she's just a bit strange." I sat down and she said, "You're Joshua." I started wondering how she knew me, thinking that maybe she had been at one of the events I had attended. And, as if she were reading my mind, said, "No, I didn't go to any of the events you participated in, but I have a letter that you wrote me many years ago." I thought, "How does she have a letter from me?" She continued, "I lived in New York for a while," and at that point I remembered who she was. We had exchanged one letter, and then she had gone back to Italy. This letter dated back to 2003 when I was still in prison. That woman should not even have been on that plane, her flight was supposed to have been the day before, but there had been problems and she had been moved to my flight in the seat next to mine. The woman's voice you are hearing belongs to that person! (*Applause*) Her name

is Lorna. It truly is a small world. We are truly one thing. And the Resurrection truly happens now. Thank you very much for having invited me to be here with you.

Pigi Banna: Thank you Joshua, because, like you said, with Christ there are no objections and the world becomes small. Christ tries everything just to reach me and you, just to reach Mary Magdalene on Easter, an unknown woman, to make her feel more herself, “more Mary,” like Carrón says: “‘Mary!’ How all of Jesus’ humanity must have vibrated to be able to say her name with such a tone, accent, intensity, and familiarity that Mary recognized Him immediately, when just an instant before she had mistaken Him for the gardener. [...] All the humanity of the Risen Jesus vibrated with the fact that that woman existed. ‘Mary!’ [...] What is Christianity if not that Presence, all vibrating for the destiny of an unknown woman, a Presence that made her understand what He brought and what He is for life? [...] This communication of being, of “more being,” of “more Mary,” revealed to that woman who Jesus is. It is not a theory or speech or explanation, but an event that turned the lives of all those who entered into a relationship with Him upside down, in one way or another, and that the Gospels in their disarming simplicity communicate in the clearest way possible, simply by stating that He said a name: ‘Mary!’ ‘Zacchaeus!’ ‘Matthew!’”⁴⁰

Christ breaks down the walls that separate a man immobilized by disease in Italy from a young man immobilized in an American prison. He breaks down the walls of our culture, and the walls of prison transfers, laziness, and time, in order to reach us. He does not ask your permission for the Resurrection. Only at a certain point do we recognize that He has reached us. And when we notice, we realize how much trouble Christ went to in order to reach us, just like we might recognize all the trouble our mothers went to in order to bring us into the world when we are sixty or seventy. How can someone talk to six thousand people, all of whose names he wants to learn, when he can actually only remember thirty of them? How can a man from another continent touch our hearts now? He didn’t ask for our permission, He breaks down walls. He doesn’t ask us for prerequisites or penances but breaks down the walls of time and space. Above all, He breaks down the walls of my limits. At the center, like Albertino told us, is not the fact that we understood everything in these days, but the fact that He reached us. And this being reached has a name: mercy.

Mercy is the path that the Mystery is willing to travel, that Christ is willing to travel to reach you. This path passes through death, passes through time, passes through my sin. It is never scandalized and doesn’t stop until you say, “What makes me feel more myself? What is it that revives me? I am limited and he is limited. We are all full of limits and yet something passes through. What is it?” This is the Resurrection. This is why we shout the name of Him who, in some way, reached us during these days. Let us shout out our cry of joy by singing *Cristo risusciti*.

Cristo risusciti

With Christ there are no longer any objections. We repeat this and we thank you. I personally thank you first of all for paying attention in these days and being open to what was happening because you did not put up walls to block the incredible event that was happening among us. To conclude, I want to articulate two hopes I have for you.

The first is that your hearts burn more and more and that you not become calm but cry out these questions that you have to the world. Do not settle! As we wrote in our letter to Pope Francis, quoting him because he is spectacular: “Let’s make noise.” We want to make noise, and shout to the world that we *are* need. Because the more one encounters Christ, the more his heart is set on fire, the more passionate he is about everything, the more he is able to walk even in prison and love life even in prison, the more he is able to love an hour of math class. With Christ, if his heart beats, everything can become fascinating.

My second hope for you is that you become like Christ on this day, on Holy Saturday. In the Eastern tradition, on Holy Saturday Christ has not yet risen on earth but He has risen in hell. He

⁴⁰ Julián Carrón, *La bellezza disarmata* [*Beauty Disarmed*], op. cit., pp. 322-324.

goes down into the netherworld, into the bowels of the earth and opens the tombs of Adam, Eve, the patriarchs, and all those who were there mummified and tells them, “Wake up!” And you? After these days you will go home to your parents, some of whom do not even know what Easter is, you will see your classmates who probably entertained themselves in the usual way, and be able to tell everyone, “Wake up! Get up out of the grave!” because we can cry out our need. Our being in school or at home changes. It is not that we abandon our families and friends because we discovered GS. No! We can be with them like Christ was in hell. Like Pope Francis might say, it is a going out to the periphery. One cannot go out just to say, “Here is the flyer, come to the Exercises. You don’t want to come? Well then you’re not my friend anymore.” That would be the reaction of fools, of activists. One who has been reawakened goes and re-awakens other people. Maybe only after ten years will they ask you, “What was that thing you told me about? Circle? Radius? What was that thing?” It doesn’t matter because the point is re-awakening them like we were re-awakened in these days. You can do this by inviting them on a human journey, by inviting them to come out of the tomb, by bringing a breath of fresh air into your classes and your schools. This is the first and greatest sign of the risen Christ. Because if we have a question, we do not need to silence it but shout it in order to find an answer. And if we have begun to discover something, we cannot keep it in this room but need to bring it to the whole world. Happy Easter!

Alberto Bonfanti: I will now read you the letter we are sending Pope Francis. “Your Holiness, five thousand students and their teachers from Communion and Liberation participated in the Easter Triduum preached by Fr. Pierluigi Banna from March 24 to 26 in Rimini. The theme of the Triduum was *An Embrace That Saves*. The certainty that God’s love has no limits and is given until the end without an end, as you said at your general audience on Wednesday, has accompanied us. The Mystery is a love story that knows no obstacles. This happens today like it happened to the apostles. Christ’s love reaches us and takes seriously all the questions of our hearts and allows them to emerge in an embrace that gives life everywhere. With Jesus beside us, our lives are different, fuller. The beginning of fulfillment of the desire for happiness that we see blossoming in ourselves is our joy. It is also the hope that we bring into our schools, making noise, like you once instructed us in the simplicity of the witness that shines in such a fascinating and engaging way in you. As we ask for your special blessing, we assure you of our prayers. Best wishes, Your Holiness. Alberto Bonfanti and Fr. Pierluigi Banna.

Regina Coeli