"WHO IS THIS MAN?"

Notes from the GS Beginning Day with Fr. Julián Carrón and Francesco Barberis

Milan, October 6, 2019

Francesco Barberis

Hello to all those present: students, teachers and those connected by video all over Italy. "If you don't become like little children / you'll never enter." As we open this Beginning Day for GS, we ask for the same poverty and childlike heart that cries out for a meaning in the present, not for tomorrow, but this very instant. Because if something new is beginning now, at this moment, for me and for you, then I, and you, can also desire that newness at the dawning of the day tomorrow.

A child cries out, a child asks while being held in his dad and mom's arms. In that secure embrace he is not afraid, he is not scared to ask, so that life may be alive and throbbing within him once again. This is why I, and we, are so grateful that Julián is here today. Thank you for being with us to guide and support each of us in our personal journey.

Julián Carrón

What trepidation washes over me as I look at you and think of each of you at such a crucial time of your life, when you are growing as persons! You are now discovering that you are you are growing. You are beginning to grow up and are seeing the dimensions of your heart expanding. What is the sign that you are growing up? That you begin to perceive something mysterious inside you: there are things that were enough for you before, but now are not. "Childish" things are no longer useful as you face this new season of life. Your hearts are expanding, and therefore you begin to perceive

¹ C. Chieffo, "Canzone di Maria Chiara [Maria Chiara's Song]", in *Canti*, Soc. Coop. Ed. Nuovo Mondo, Milan 2014, p. 189.

1. THE MOST FREQUENT CAUSE OF ANGST

Many people's experience of life is what philosopher and psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti describes. To the question "What is the most frequent cause of angst?" he replies, "The one provoked by nihilism." What does that mean? That nothing is able to attract them, to motivate them, to "grab them." He goes on, "Young people are not well, but they do not even understand why." How many times have you felt this? "What is happening to me? Why do I feel so uneasy? Why can't I understand this new, changed perception I begin to have of myself?" When they asked Galimberti what the most fundamental issues are today, he answered that they "concern the void of meaning." Many of your contributions revealed a feeling of being tossed about, like stones caught up in the landslide of life.

"Once school started," one of you said, "I felt like nothing interested me. My question, then, is this: how can I wake myself up from this nightmare?" Another wrote, "I am like a big container of fear and anxiety, yet empty. An empty container, but overflowing with questions. Even so, why is there always someone to bring me back?"

"Sometimes," another said, "I feel alone, because I think the people around me form a kind of boundary and I am in a bubble I never leave. How can I overcome these fears that occasionally emerge and become all too concrete?" Yet another, "How can you be yourself at school? How can you keep the routine from sucking the life out of you? "How can we continue to be human at school?"

Lastly, another young woman wrote, "Why are we here?' That is the big question in life! I don't have an answer, but I want to know. I don't know which doors to go knocking on; I don't know who to ask. Someone must know! But what do I do now?"

Who could think of merely using lectures, or moral appeals, or an instruction manual to respond to these questions that emerge through these situations in which you happen to live? These questions

² G. Leopardi, "On the Portrait of a Beautiful Woman," in *Canti: Poems. A Bilingual Edition* (J. Galassi, trans.), vv. 22-23, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2010, p. 82.

³ U. Galimberti, «A 18 anni via da casa: ci vuole un servizio civile di 12 mesi [Out of the house at 18: What's needed is 12 months of civil service]», interview by S. Lorenzetto, *Corriere della Sera*, 15 September 2019.

that have come to the surface are too great to presume that one could respond with just an instruction manual.

Some may be able to content themselves with "half measures," as Galimberti said in the interview, but sooner or later they will have to verify in their experience if that is enough to live on, to wake up happy in the morning, to be able to look in the mirror, to be able to stand yourself, to live with joy, to satisfy the desire for life that constitutes you.

Our experience documents the presence of an irradicable desire for fullness. Houellebecq–a famous, present-day French novelist–confides that he has often tried to rid himself of that desire, because it seems absurd to him. "More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be loved," that is, to find something that could fill his heart. "On each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream. But [but!] this thought was powerless, the desire persisted–and, I have to admit, persists to this day."⁴

Each of us, whether we like it or not and in whatever situation we find ourselves, has to come to terms with the fact we are a mystery and so we have to decide whether to take ourselves seriously or not. Taking ourselves seriously is the first gesture of affection for ourselves. I am this mystery, I am this desire for fullness, I am this desire to live without fear! And even if we often say, "It is impossible to find an answer," we can't help but recognize—like the French novelist—that our desire persists, we still find it inside of us. So, does some kind of answer to our fears, our insecurity, our emptiness truly exist?

2. "EXPERIENCE" IS THE KEY WORD FOR EVERYTHING

How can I discover if there is an answer to these questions? Fr. Giussani proposes another method, a simple one within anyone's reach: experience. "The journey to truth is an experience." That means the only place we can discover if there is an answer is in our experience, if we see it happening in me, in you, in our life experience. It is easy to recognize when it happens: it enters into life and changes it so much that a person says, "I see it!" This is why Giussani underlines that, "experience is the key word for everything." It is within experience that we can encounter

⁴ F. Sinisi, "Michel Houellebecq. *La vita è rara*" book review. English edition of the book is *Unreconciled, Tracce-Litterae communionis*, n. 6/2019, p. 65; quoted in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 4, 2019 in "The 'Unbalanced' Power of Christianity, interview with Fr. Julián Carrón by Andrea Monda.

⁵ L. Giussani, L'autocoscienza del cosmo [The Self-Awareness of the Cosmos], BUR, Milan 2000, p. 274.

something, someone that holds up when we compare it with the desires we have burning inside, and in this way reveals its correspondence.

Let's look at what can happen to a person who agrees to follow the path of experience.

"Let me first say I am not part of CL, and that, even though saying so makes me more than a little uneasy, I am not even a believer. Or maybe it's better to say that I once was, when I was little and still took the things presented to me at face value and that was it, without questioning or doubting them, as it is normal for an 8 or 9 year-old girl to do, in the end. With time, however, as I grew up both physically and intellectually, I could no longer accept those things just as they were told to me. How could those truths be enough for me if I did not understand the meaning? I lost my faith, and for a long time I went on thinking that was fine, that I did not need faith for anything in life. That lasted up to the beginning of this summer [you see? Something happens along the journey of lifethis summer-a new experience imposes itself]. Around the beginning of June, I began to have a strange feeling, an interior discomfort that gave me no peace. It was like a vice squeezing my heart, my mind, and my brain that kept me from fully living in all the things I did. In the end, that is what summer is for, right? Having fun, having fun, and having more fun. Yet, no matter how much I buried myself in things to look forward to and continually filled my days with activities and going out with my friends, that vice still held me in its grip. I couldn't have fun anymore; it was as if I was empty inside. After a while, not knowing whom to blame for my unhappiness, I quickly dumped it all on to a boy with whom I had fallen in love but, only after a long, much too long, time, I realized he was leading me on. My friends and my parents backed me up: he was the cause of my unhappiness. All I had to do was let a little time pass, and I would forget that boy. But even in that, I was disappointed. In fact, the more I tried to convince myself that the boy was the reason for it, the more I realized it was not true. I could not take it anymore. I needed some answers. That is why I went on the GS vacation. Did I find the answer to my questions? I think I did. Especially thanks to one person who saw something in me that I had never seen [someone who looks at me in a way I have never before experienced], and from the depths of his heart told me that he understood me, and that I was not mistaken. He told me that what was happening to me [pay attention!] was really beautiful [the most beautiful thing that could happen], because God, through all of it, was giving me a clue of His existence, that existence that I, instead, had always doubted. I finally understood what was causing that emptiness."

Our friend is describing an experience—in which you can point to a where, when, the protagonists, through which the Mystery–God–gives her a clue of His existence, an existence that she had always

doubted.

This is the method. A girl may have even abandoned the faith thinking it's just for children, that she doesn't need it to live, but at a certain point something happens before her eyes: a fact. She runs into a presence. Perhaps she does not know, but her contribution is a perfect documentation of what Fr. Giussani writes, "Only through a true, objective experience [not by thinking] can men and women become aware of the presence of God in the world. St. John [...] writes [...]: 'That life [the meaning of life] was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony, telling you of eternal life [true life, one that lasts] which was with the Father and has been made visible to us.' The presence of Christ in His Church becomes manifest through a true, objective experience in the life of one who lives with awareness. Even the encounter with the Christian community [in her case, with GS] [...] is a true, objective experience." What I run into is something real: a group of people who live in a certain way, a person in flesh and bones who looks at me a certain way, who pierces right to the heart because he was exactly what I was waiting for.

"After the enthusiasm of the first days back at school, and after having said hello to all my classmates, when I went home I felt empty and full of sadness. I asked myself why I felt that seemingly bottomless nostalgia [she begins to use words she had never used before, like "bottomless nostalgia." That is the sign that she is growing, that she is surprised to find a bottomless nostalgia inside her]. Friendships at school or my Saturday night crowd are not enough for me [that nostalgia "becomes the judge" of all she lives]. I am nothing: I am looking for something more. I need a place like GS, not because it is GS, it's not a question of propaganda, but rather because this is the place where an Other can enter my life. I will never forget this magnificent encounter."

What did this girl meet that was so magnificent she would never forget it? How is it different from her previous friendships? Why does she talk about an Other with a capital 'O'? Why was it in GS that she encountered a place that finally corresponds to her expectations, the needs of her heart? And now, she can compare: her friendships at school or her Saturday night crowd are not enough to fill her nostalgia. She found that "something more" she was seeking in a place, GS, an objective reality where an Other became the object of her experience. It was easy to recognize Him. It doesn't take getting your Master's from Harvard, or performing some great intellectual effort, or being of above-average intelligence. It is simple to see. What did God, the Mystery, do so we could encounter Him?

⁶ L. Giussani, *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2006, p. 105.

"To be recognized, God entered man's life as a man." Not as a ghost, not as a feeling, not as something virtual, but as a man. A man! God enters the world through a man. One day, John and Andrew ran into a man, Jesus of Nazareth. What differentiates that man from any other? He is capable of attracting, or filling, of "blocking" all of "man's thought, imagination, and affectivity." Those two men who encountered him "were [...] magnetized by Him." This is the test of God's presence in history, that proves to us whether we have encountered the answer we were seeking: if we are "blocked," magnetized, seized by Him.

The Gospel is the stupefying account of the experience of those who encountered Jesus. "A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.' Jesus said to him in reply, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Tell me, teacher,' he said. 'Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?' Simon said in reply, 'The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven.' He said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' He said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' The others at table said to themselves, 'Who is this man, who even forgives sins?' But he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace."8 Here was a woman magnetized by Christ. She does not care at all what the others say about her, about what they thought in their hearts. She is totally attracted by that Presence, she is completely seized by Him.

⁷ L. Giussani-S. Alberto-J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2010, p. 17.

⁸ Lk 7:36-50.

The answer happened to that woman. She had sought in vain for an answer turning to many men. She, too, had been tossed about by life, a victim of nothingness, but at a certain point it happened that she ran into the answer. It no longer mattered what mistakes she had made. Something happened that changed her and she was totally glued to that man. If an encounter like hers does not happen, we are left at the mercy of nothingness. Nothing has the power or attraction necessary to magnetize us, and life becomes hard to endure. We are tossed about all over.

We know there is an answer because we have encounter it. It is not a theory or a thought; it is something that happened, just as it happened to that woman.

Just as the song *Come hai fatto? [How did you manage?]* by the Italian singer Modugno says: "How did you manage to make me fall so in love that I look in the mirror and ask myself if it's really me / how did you manage to make my life your possession, to transform time into waiting to see you again [...] how did you manage—I don't even know when it began, I only know that it never happened before—that for the first time I have truly said I love you."

The woman in the Gospel has been totally seized to her depths by an encounter that fills her heart's desire. Faith is this "being seized;" it is the recognition of Jesus' presence that welled up in that woman. That is why Jesus tells her, "Your faith has saved you." She let a Presence grab hold of her down to her depths.

Christianity is something that has to do with the depths of us, with the most intimate corners of our 'I.' It is only when He seizes us in that place that we can recognize Him. It is anything but an abstraction or an instruction manual! Christianity, the faith, has to do with this intensity of humanity you have never before experienced. Christianity is a fact that happened in history, a Presence that was capable of taking hold of that woman as never before, and that is capable of taking hold of you now and attracting you here.

So, then, once this fact has happened—once God has entered history to make Himself known to man—the one challenge for us today is to respond to Jesus' question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" Will He find someone who recognizes Him, someone who has been seized like that woman? The point is not whether He will find us talking about Him, having our meetings or certain big gestures. It is a question of whether any of us will still be magnetized by Him. Have any of us let Him grab hold of us down to our depths? That is our only possibility, friends, to avoid ending up in the nothingness of an empty, meaningless life.

⁹ Lk 18:8.

"On our summer vacation we spent a lot of time on the Easter Triduum, which I had forgotten. Having just returned from Africa, it was the first time I seriously considered the question, 'What can withstand the test of time?' And I realized that, on their own, the three events that most changed my life cannot hold up, because after my first encounter I had a terrible year, my boyfriend is not enough for me, and I am no longer in Africa. The last morning of the vacation, before the assembly, I sat reading the booklet from the Triduum and was struck by this sentence: 'This is what withstands the test of time: a Presence that is always contemporary, because His gaze "follows" you in new and unexpected ways, through ever-changing faces and places, with the same traits, with loyalty, even when you feel at your weakest.' The second I read it, I understood what was in common among all three events. What holds up is an absolute preference toward me, which is always repeating itself in different ways in my life. I struggle to call it a 'Presence,' but I am certain that there was something more in all three events [this is what we need to recognize: there was something more that made a difference] which withstands the test of time. I left the vacation, therefore, with the desire to find that preference, that Something more, everywhere and in everything, even in the things that cause suffering. This has created a dialogue with that Presence, God, whom I now think of as a friend. Still, I often end up betraying Him, but I am always sure I can go back."

3. WHO IS THIS MAN?

If this is not happening now, if we are not amazed by it now, it means that Christianity—even if we continue to use Christian words—is in the past for us, something that happened in history, but "now those things," as my students in Madrid used to tell me, "don't happen anymore." This is how, even though you are very young, your faith can be old and tired. Instead, Fr. Giussani says, "Alive means present!" And not as something we generate through our effort. He means a real, objective presence, one so clearly outside of me it could not be the work of my hands, like something a person can only recognize when she encounters it: "It's him! It's her!"

How do I understand that it's her, that it's him I am looking for? What is the simplest sign? The sign is when that presence corresponds to my heart like nothing else has, when it fills me with wonder and makes me ask, "Who is this man?" ¹⁰

¹⁰ Mt 8:27.

"Who is this man?" Think how many times you must have asked this about the person in front of you! That question did not arise in front of something virtual, it was in front of someone in flesh and blood: "Who is this man?"

Listen to how it happened in the beginning, two thousand years ago: "They came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught [they were used to going to the synagogue to hear someone preach, but this time there was a backlash]. The people were astonished at his teaching [he taught, like others did, but this guy was completely different], for he taught [...] as one having authority and not as the scribes [not like the men they were used to hearing. The people noticed the difference immediately. They had been to the synagogue many times, but this time was different]. [...] All were amazed [full of wonder] and asked one another, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority. [...] His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee."

"Who is this man?" We know we have come across something singular because we cannot stifle that question, "Who is this man?" Our friend testifies to this: "Who is this man who makes it possible for me to begin my last year [of high school] with this crazy desire to throw myself completely into play, for me to think of Manzoni, Kant, Wordsworth and even mathematics as my friends? Who makes such an interesting relationship with a few classmates possible now, after four years in class together? Who makes it possible for a person to finally begin to study for his or her own sake? Who makes it possible to face a friend's death? Who makes this Life possible? Surely one who is a great Friend! A Presence who is here now! [Something from the past cannot change life like this.] As we said at the Easter Triduum, it is a "radical newness" that is not the work of my hands or of my thoughts. When that newness happens, I recognize it because it opens up my heart again [it makes me interested in things I never dreamed I could care about, like Kant or math], my hope that I be won over is born again in me. This 'something more' corresponds to the expectation of my heart. It has become for me a living Presence, which returns in ever-changing circumstances to win me over again, even more today than yesterday. His gaze 'pursues' me in new and unexpected ways, always through different faces and places, but ones that also correspond more and more to my expectation."

In the time of Jesus, people heard many commentaries on Sacred Scripture (just as we, today, find many people who give their commentaries on life and other "good advice"), but they were not

¹¹ Mk 1:21-28.

amazed by those speeches. What made it different when Jesus stepped forward to speak in the synagogue? The fact that they saw in front of them a man who spoke with authority, who, in fact, inspired the question, "What is this? A new teaching [not limited to the past, to what was already known, but new] with authority."

This helps us to understand why meeting a person with authority is so decisive for our lives, as Fr. Giussani tells us: "The most important factor for a people as a people, for a companionship as a companionship, is what we call 'authority.' What is this authority? [...] Authority is the place where it becomes evident that Christ conquers. What does it mean that Christ conquers? That Christ demonstrates [...] that He corresponds to the needs of the heart in a persuasive way," enough to grab hold of you down to your depths. "Authority, then, is a place of paternity where new life—the life in which Christ responds to one's heart, [to] that for which man is made, where Christ responds to man's heart—is more transparent, clearer and more transparent. This is true authority." It may be an adult—a teacher, parent or priest—or a classmate in whom you see that a new life is possible, because his or her face "sings" of a newness.

Following this authority, Fr. Giussani says, "is [...] described by the word 'sonship.' An authority has sons and daughters." We are sons and daughters of those we recognize as authorities, attracted by the way they live. Listen to the beautiful image Fr. Giussani uses, "A son receives his family tree from his father. He makes it his own; he is made up of that family tree his father gives him, he is made up of his father. Therefore, he is entirely absorbed. Authority absorbs all of me [grabs hold of me, as we saw in the woman in the Gospel]. It is not a word I fear or dread or that I follow."

Think of how many people fear the word "authority" today! Not here, because Fr. Giussani says the word authority, "could have as its synonym the word 'paternity,' meaning generativity, generation, the communication of a *genus*, communicating a living family tree. That living family tree is my 'I' which is overtaken and made different by this relationship."

So, the truth we all seek is the happening of that relationship in me, it is my "I" seized by the relationship that generates me. But we recognize ourselves as sons and daughters of whom? What is the sign we have found true paternity or maternity?

¹² L. Giussani, "From a conversation of Luigi Giussani with a group of *Memores Domini*," in J. Carrón, "Who Is This Man?," supplement to *Traces-Litterae communionis*, n. 9/2019, pp. 10-11.

4. FREEDOM IS THE VERIFICATION THAT AUTHORITY IS TRUE

"The word 'authority,' which coincides with the word 'paternity,' [...] generates freedom. [...] Therefore, authority is true [we know it is true] [...] truly experienced [...] when it ignites my freedom, when it ignites my personal awareness and personal responsibility," in the face of all I have to do, in my studies, in all my affections, my relationships, in facing myself. How is it possible our friend was interested in Kant or in math, without taking some kind of class to reawaken one's appreciation for studying? It was because she met someone who generated her, who gave her new life until she was interested in everything, who brought out her "I" and her personal responsibility so much that even she was amazed.

It is precisely the relationship with authority, perceived by so many people today as an oppressive, limiting factor for one's freedom—the entire modern world is constructed in opposition to authority due to the presumption of absolute autonomy, because man wants to make himself—that Fr. Giussani indicates it as the condition to be truly free. Do you see the difference in thinking about authority in this way?

This is the underlying reason a person can encounter GS and immediately see the difference between it and their Saturday night crowd. It is the difference of the experience in which you find yourself, of the freedom you are surprised to see in yourself, and the total engagement of your "I" in all of life.

We verify this authority that frees us—this place where Christ conquers—in our experience, in any and every situation life sets before us. I am describing something I learned from what you wrote; I don't invent anything, or "imagine" something that is not present. I repeat the things I see that are confirmations of an experience I am already living. And in this way, I grow, just as you grow by learning from what happens to you. Listen to what these friends of ours wrote and see how what happened to them makes them able to experience this freedom anywhere.

"WHO IS THIS MAN? For me, this man is a friend, my best friend. A real presence that is here NOW, who is manifested in a face with a precise first and last name. This man has touched my heart and continues to surprise me ANYWHERE, even at school, where two teachers have started to really take an interest in us, in how we feel, in our concept of friendship; at school, where I spoke with my GS friends in my class about our experience with the Movement, and it was beautiful how some of our classmates were struck by what we said and started to ask questions. I had desired all of it for a long time, but I thought it was impossible [this is Christianity: something you thought

was possible that, instead, happens right in front of your nose, overtaking you down to the marrow] because I thought the teachers were only there because it was their job, and also because I had ruled out the idea that what was said about GS could be interesting for my other classmates since they talk about different things. Instead, I realized how we can bring the Movement anywhere, because it is a fact that continues to happen again independent from our thoughts, therefore it is for everyone. And if you have had an encounter that changed you, sooner or later, those around you will notice. It doesn't depend on us. The important thing is to keep our desire alive."

Another girl wrote: "Is it worth starting again? I think it is worth starting again not so much because I like being in class or [...] because studying is not tiresome for me. In fact, I think there are very few people who feel like that. I think it is worth starting again because living is worth it. Often, I hear people say, 'You can't live for less than everything," or "I want everything," but is it really true that I want everything if I spend nine months out of the year counting the minutes until the last bell? This is what I want: to arrive and look forward to every day of school the same way I look forward to the community vacation. Maybe I'll be anxious about a test, maybe I will have questions I still don't have answers to, but I want to live desiring and asking to go to bed at night as happy as I am when I come home from the Triduum." She already has her sign: it has begun to happen. In some moments of her life it has begun to happen. She only needs to verify if it can happen everywhere, anywhere, in any situation. In fact, she closes saying, "Only when (if ever) my life is that way will I know that what we say in GS is true."

To conclude, another friend offers a working hypothesis for the new year we have just begun: "We are a ragtag band, a simple group. Hardly anyone really believes and very few go to church regularly. Yet, this makes the question 'Who are you?' even more urgent and opens up an infinite curiosity about how this presence that is among us will show itself and amaze us this year."

Let our wish for each other be that we never lose that infinite curiosity—which belongs especially to youth, but I, too, who am "almost" old need it to live—if there is even one among us, wherever we are, who is curious to see how the Mystery will demonstrate its presence this year, that we all may see and recognize.

This is what each of us must verify, and only those who risk what they have encountered in their life can be surprised to see the impossible become possible.

This is the great adventure we have in front of us this year: to see whether the thing that seized us—that magnetized us in certain moments of our lives—can conquer anywhere and everywhere. To see if Christ, whom we have recognized victorious in a person we recognize as an authority, can also

conquer in us. Only those with the boldness to verify will discover the answer.

A happy journey to all of you!

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