

“ALIVE MEANS PRESENT”

Witnesses* - 3



Photo by Luigi Ghirri, *Caserta*, 1987. From the series *Un piede nell'Eden* [One Foot in Eden].
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Witnesses

Songs: *Eso que tú me das*
La strada [The Road]

Andrea Mencarelli. Is it possible to sing the heights and depths of life? This year’s “Easter Poster” says, “Ultimately, people—young and not so young—need one thing: the certainty of the positivity of their time and of their lives, the certainty of their destiny,” which is what allows us to sing the heights and depths of life, up to the end. It continues: “To say ‘Christ is risen’ is to affirm that reality is positive; it is to lovingly affirm reality. Without Christ’s Resurrection, there is only one possibility: nothingness.” This is what those women knew on Easter morning, the positivity of reality: Him alive, part of their experience, stronger than evil, victorious over death. But a question could arise, precisely from that fact, or even an envious objection: “This news is wonderful, good for them two thousand years ago, but what about us today, in the present?” In *The Radiance in Your Eyes* Carrón pushed even further saying, “Jesus taught the disciples the awareness of His relationship with the Father [...]. Who teaches us about it today? Christ is always the one who introduces us to the relationship with the Father. How does He do this?” Through the charism, just as we heard in School of Community and as we also heard described in the contribution I read yesterday. »

* The witnesses from Alfonso Calavia and Fr. Gabriele Giorgetti during the GS Easter Triduum, on Holy Saturday (April 3, 2021).

» Through the charism means through faces with first and last names, through human gazes we can encounter and who are—as it says in *The Radiance in Your Eyes*—“a powerful support, a moving and convincing reminder to live the Christian experience fully, with intelligence and creativity.”¹ We do not have to invent anything, we just have to welcome it. This is the reason we will see two faces this morning, faces with precise first and last names, and with whom you can have a conversation.

The first person we will listen to is in Spain (so many good things come from Spain!), his name is Alfonso and maybe some of you already know him. In the February issue of *Traces* - which is the most beautiful magazine in the world and know that if you see it at home, it is worth browsing and reading... it is not reserved for adults, is not the *Esselunga* catalogue, and it offers more valuable prizes—you can find an article about him. Today we have him, “live” and it is much more beautiful to hear his voice. Ciao, Alfonso.

Alfonso Calavia. Ciao, Fr. Andrea!

Mencarelli. Thank you for being with us and welcome! You will tell us about yourself later, I'll only say the reason that made me want to invite you. I read the beautiful article in *Traces* that describes the incredible work that you have been every morning doing for some time, with almost monastic patience: a daily press review. The curiosity that has arisen to me is this: these days, so many of us are allergic to reality, the world is allergic to reality, so it would seem that the less we know the better; instead, you take on a work that dives into reality. So, I'd like to ask you to tell us who you are first and then what you're looking for in this work.

Calavia. Hello everyone! I cannot begin without saying, Fr. Andrea, that your phone call to me (years after we last saw each other!) made me think back to the whole “love story” that I came looking for. I met you in La Thuile, at CLU (Communion and Liberation for University students) years ago and the story continued mysteriously, so that even the gesture of the phone call did me good. I don't know if what I say will help, but your phone call to me was a wonderful opportunity to think back on the “love story” that is my life. Fr. Andrea asked me to speak in Italian, so it's his fault if you don't understand two words out of three. It's all his fault!

To answer the first question: my name is Alfonso. Two years ago, I married a beautiful woman, Maria. I am a high school teacher and I have been in the movement for fifteen years, since exactly (I will tell the story later) 4:50 p.m. on September 21, 2006. Before getting to know the movement, I had never read a newspaper; that is a curious fact, but it can help to understand the scope of the proposal of the movement in my life. Before I read you some articles that I found impressive articles, I have to tell you that I really like being close to people's needs. I thought that newspapers only talked about politics, ideology, one party or the other, but I discovered that it is not true; you can verify it yourself. Many people write about what happens to them every day: they wake up and begin to write about what is in their hearts. Reading the newspapers, you can better understand how our need battles against nothingness. Maybe it's silly to say, but while I read certain articles that speak of the heart I smile and say: “Look, another one battling against nothingness, against skepticism!”

Often, we judge people for thinking what they think. I read newspapers from the left, the right, from progressives and every variety and I see how the need of the people writing is »

¹ J. Carrón, *The Radiance in Your Eyes. What Saves Us From Nothingness?*, Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Milan 2020, pp. 123, 127.

» truer than the ideology they profess. A person might slip in a derogatory remark about the Church—which is my home—but the next day, he talks about his daughter, and what he says interests me. Some people may say that’s impossible and you shouldn’t read someone who insults the Church. But I think each person is at a different point of the journey, and I think it is very interesting to see how this is expressed. Further, I often think of what Julián Carrón says, which is that the religious sense is the verification of the faith; it is in virtue of the faith I live that I can better see and understand, that I can look at the desire others have, and my own, with greater intensity.

The last thing I’ll say before reading a couple of articles is that certain people’s attempts are part of a really beautiful human path. I don’t think it’s necessary for every article contain a complete human journey, because having met this place—the movement—fifteen years ago allows me to recognize in those people’s attempts a cry, seeking for an ultimate meaning in life, that meaning that we, by grace, have encountered. Just imagine how we would be, otherwise!

Let me read you an excerpt from one article. It’s also in *Tracce* (the Italian edition of *Traces*).² At the end of 2020, one journalist wrote, “The year that is ending brought no beauty to the world. It does not push us to come and see the light. We seek it everywhere, but it is not there. Let’s hope that the next year will rain beauty from the heavens so that all men and women on this planet can see it.” You might say, “But we have encountered the light!” and close the newspaper. Not me, because this is a cry. For me, saying, “The year that is ending brought no beauty to the world,” is the same as saying, “Light, will you please come?” It’s like a cry: a person decides to say this in front of all the readers of this progressive newspaper. It’s striking! Another author, who is always talking about politics, wrote one day, “Where are the pictures of my grandparents? My tricycle, studying spelling and grammar, my tussles with friends, and with alcohol? What is happening to me tonight? What am I? Where do I come from?” He fills the whole article with questions for anyone who wants to hear them. Sometimes, I am amazed that the same person can write such profound things and the next day give political and cultural judgment I do not share. If I had not encountered the Christian fact, I would be in their same position; and in fact, sometimes I still am! The last article—really impressive—seems like a story from Julián. It’s like a little story you have to read. I will read it now, but then you should reread it. “A young man tells us that he lives with a strange animal, which he does not know how to define. He inherited it from his father, and something makes him talk about him as if he were part divine. He shows it to the kids in the neighborhood. Then, he tells us one of the strangest things it does: it jumps on him as if it wanted to tell him something, and he says yes to oblige. It’s an animal we all have, that we don’t know what to do with. It’s an animal that causes us sadness and happiness, and asks us to do things even when we are not capable of doing them. Why can’t I help saying yes? Because all the people who have loved me ask me about it and want me to show it to them. This absurd creature is the human heart.” One morning, while I was preparing the press review for the movement in Spain, I suddenly came across this author, who decided, on an ordinary day, to speak of the heart as an animal that asks you things and to which you can not say no. So, I said to myself, “What we have met is real, it’s really real and useful to understand our problems, the deepest and greatest concerns people have!”

With one of these journalists, it seems like I know him without every having met him; not *seems like*, I *do know him* without having met him, in the same way that I know Fr. Giussani, whom I never met in person. How? Because our experience is absolutely the same: I too »

² A. Calavia, “Spagna. In cerca dell’uomo [Spain. In Search of Man],” edited by P. Ronconi, *Tracce Letterae communionis*, n. 2/2021, p. 27.

» have this heart, this “strange animal” that asks me things, to which I cannot say no; this is the most beautiful thing I have, and also the strangest. He does not know that I know him, but we know each other! Sometimes I have tried writing to these journalists, and some have answered. It’s an incredible surprise. After the presentation of Julián’s book, *Reawakening Our Humanity*, here in Spain, I looked for a journalist’s email and wrote to her quoting what impressed me most in her articles. We had lunch together, and she told me that a communications firm had suggested that she stop writing about the heart because people are paralyzed by her articles, which are very deep and very serious, and she should be writing about trivial things so people will read more.” And she said to me: “You did the very opposite!” I had chosen twenty of her articles, out of the two hundred that I had read, which spoke precisely of the themes that get at the heart of each of us. For her, that was the first surprise: “Why do you ask me to speak precisely about the articles that I was told I must stop writing?” This is impressive. During that lunch she asked me to collaborate with her on social media. My first surprise was this: what makes me look at things this way? What makes reading these articles a good for me? The gift, then, was that she also realized it. Sometimes the Lord allows us to see that step, too, but for me looking at people this way is already a good in itself.

Mencarelli. Thank you, Alfonso. The second question comes out of all you’ve said: how is it possible? “Why did you do the opposite?” the journalist asked. What is the source of this difference? In the beginning, you had the precision of saying you’ve been in the movement since “4:40 p.m. on September 21, 2006.” “It was four in the afternoon,” I could almost paraphrase. So, this is my second question: What is the source? What happened to you?

Calavia. First of all, I ask you to excuse my Italian, and then also the fact I may cry. The source of the difference is an incredible love story. Briefly put: I have a beautiful family—really beautiful—but when I got to 14, 15, 16 years of age, I didn’t know what I was living for. I never did anything really stupid; I didn’t experiment with drugs; I simply was living without knowing why. When I was 15 or 16, I met a nice group of friends at school. It was the only friendship I experienced that made me wish it could go on forever, I’ll put it that way. I remember perfectly a few times we made promises of eternity, saying, “University can never separate us; we will be friends forever.” That happening the last three years of high school. But all it took was the three months of summer in 2005—when I finished high school—and nothing was left of what I had lived with those friends. When time and space changed, our friendship ended. When I started at the university, I thought, “If nothing lasted in high school, why should anything at university, any relationship that starts now, last?” So, I started making friends the first day at university, like everyone, but with the thought that everything would come to an end. That made me suffer, because I had felt just one clear need during those years, a single desire finally became clear: that there be something that lasted. But it didn’t happen, and that left an incredible hole inside of me.

Then September 21, 2006, came along, also my birthday. I was on the metro train (incredible: it happened on the Madrid Metro!) and there were about 20 or 30 CLU kids in my car (I didn’t know what CLU was at the time). One of them came up to me and said, “Hi, what’s your name?” I don’t know about you in Italy, but in Spain it is not normal, if you are by yourself on the metro, for a person to come up and ask your name. I answered, “My name is Alfonso,” but inside I was thinking, “I don’t know why the heck you’re interested in knowing who I am.” At the next stop, they got off the Metro, and I stayed on. It was only later that I learned that he was new to the group, and so he came up to ask me my name to get to know people. Mysteriously, the next day, on September 22, an unknown number called me. It was David (the guy who came up to me the day before). Obviously, I had not given »

» him my phone number, but he said that my name “resonated” with him and so, through my sister and a friend of a friend, he, who is really a remarkable person, tracked down my number, called me and invited me to a dinner that night with some friends to plan some charitable work. I didn’t know what charitable work was, but, out of either fear or embarrassment at saying no to him by phone, I said yes and I went. When I got there (on September 22) I found myself surrounded by a dinner that was totally new for me. Perhaps now we are used to this kind of a dinner, but at the time I wasn’t used to seeing 40 people of various ages eating together. There were a few Italians, another in his first year at university, another in the fifth year, others I didn’t know—it was a really strange group in my mind. One of them was discussing why to do charitable work with the homeless in a square in Madrid. I stayed at the edge of the room, standing, and said to the boy I had met on the Metro the day before, “I don’t know what it is, but it is like the beginning of an answer to what I have in my heart,” because it seemed like a true friendship, one that was possible between people of different ages. I had never had a friend who wasn’t my age. I went home and I didn’t sleep a wink that night. The next day, it was like I knew where should go. Incredible!

That week, the last week of September in 2006, I did everything together with them—really, everything with them. I started to relish life simply being with them, doing ordinary things. All of it seem absolutely impossible to me. Nine months later, that friend left. he entered the monastery at Cascinazza and I kept going to School of Community because he had gone; if he had gone any other place, I would’ve gone there, but he went to School of Community, he played soccer, he drank beer, etc. and so I did those same things. I was at a different university, but I went to study with them just to spend time with them. The impressive thing is that when my friend left - I don’t know how to say it—the people of CLU, surely with all good intentions, told me, “Don’t worry, because it is not him, it is Christ;” but I blew up at anyone who said to me, “Don’t worry, because it’s not him.” I was sad, because I was studying something I didn’t like and I didn’t have the guts to say: “I have to give it up; I met a man with a face, with a name and surname, and with him I began to be happy, really happy, to enjoy life truly, with an absolutely new intensity, and now I will never see him again.” For me, I still didn’t see the problem of whether if it was him or “another.” I just said, “I am not interested in this Christ or this ‘You’ of which you speak, I am interested in being with my friend and now I can no longer be with him.” The question was growing, of course. Before he left, I saw him for a minute and I asked, “How is it possible that I have spent my whole life looking for this and now you are leaving?” He replied, “Look at what happened to me ten years ago with a person in a specific place. And for him, it happened through another. And going back twenty or thirty times you reach Jesus, St. Paul, Peter and John.” It was the first time I heard Christianity spoken of as a love story, a human story: you see such a difference in humanity in a person that you can hardly help but to follow it.

Leaving me with that hypothesis, he left and I continued to follow the CLU. The amazing thing—I’ll finish quickly—is that I was able to have the same experience, not the same *way* as happened with him, but the same *thing*, year after year, month after month, always the same as that initial experience. Now I wouldn’t trade for a minute for the Alfonso from before, before that day. Because I met that man, I fell in love with life. I would also never trade a minute of what is happening now for the past, because what happened in the CLU after he left was like a journey learning more and more what happened when I encountered him: Christ has happened, and He is the one we celebrate today, and it is clear that He is the one who allows me to be happy each moment.

We can go to GS or to CLU thinking that it is a place with nice relationships—which is of course true—but that, when a friend leaves, doesn’t hold up. Instead, understanding that what happened is that the Mystery who makes all things became flesh, has come to meet you, »

» sought you out and allows you to be happy, that is another thing entirely. This is often manifested in a place with beautiful relationships, but without the journey of knowledge Julián, thanks be to God, is accompanying us to walk, that Nacho is accompanying you to walk, I really would've missed out on the best part! Do I still have a little time to give two examples of that?

Mencarelli. Go ahead!

Calavia. Ok, thank you! The first (it's not easy to tell): a month ago, my wife, who is a doctor, came home and said to me, "I have to tell you something." She looked very serious and I didn't know what happened. She told me that she had learned (curiously before I did, or my family did, because she works in the hospital) that my mom has 10 tumors in her lungs: five in each. And my mom still didn't know. In a case like that, you really can't pretend! It was up to me and her to go to my family to tell them. Imagine what must happen inside a son like me, who's 33, who comes home to tell his mom to tell her she has lung cancer. The first thing my mom did was look at my dad and say, "But I know where I am going, whether it's now or in five years, whether because of this or another disease, or another circumstance." I thought to myself, "How is that possible?" I'll describe the whole example. After the first lung surgery (because they had to do two, one for one lung and one for the other), which went well, I was really happy she was healthy, but when I got home, I wrote to my mom saying, "The real joy is for your faith," meaning that she knew where she was going. What we are celebrating this Holy Week is true, if when they tell you that you have 10 tumors in your lungs you can come to the point of saying, "I know where I am going." I had this experience in the movement, in that journey of knowledge Julián is proposing to us. This different humanity becomes hope, a different position—absolutely different and impossible to imagine before it happens—that causes you to be and to react this way when faced with illness. I am almost scandalized myself in saying, "Why should my true joy be for faith and not for health?" Because simply rejoicing in good health, deep down is fine, but only until the next bad news. On September 21, 2006, a face with such an evidently different humanity entered my life, one that transcends the limits of human possibility, and brought me to the point of saying, "You entered history. You sought me out and You keep me at peace. You keep my mother at peace in the face of something like this." Because of this, you can give your life, you can get married, you can work, you can be glad in every moment of the day. It happens, it is happening right now. Twenty days after the second surgery, I am totally glad for her faith. I wake up thinking of this; it may seem a little strange to you, but I wake up thinking of the movement. I wake up thinking of what has happened to me in life.

The very last thing is this: four years ago, I bought a spectacular car, and a week ago, the man who sold it to me called me. It was Saturday (I had met him two, maybe three times in my life over four years). I pick up the phone and I think: "Strange you are calling me on Saturday, you must want to tell me something about the car," but he started talking to me about his daughter. I say to him, "This is Alfonso Calavia, one of your customers; I think you have the wrong number. I don't know why you are telling me this." "But you are a teacher, aren't you?" "Yes, I am a teacher, but..." So, he tells me that three years ago, in the dealership, while he was selling me the car, I said two or three things about my work, and he begins to tell me that his daughter is sad, that she is not good at school and does not know what to do. Then, he asks me, "What should I do?" I thought, "Is this really happening?" First of all, he has no one to talk to about his daughter, his daughter's upbringing, and he calls a customer to whom he sold a car four years ago. But then he told me, "I saw you three years ago as so passionate about school so I said, 'I'll call him and ask him what I should do.'" It sounds »

» like the story of the Gemoll,³ the Greek dictionary that Giussani was waiting for when he was a seminarian; it didn't come and didn't come, then one day it finally arrived. So, he says to me, "I live 50 meters from this school"—a school of the movement; in Madrid there are only two; therefore, it was crazy that one was right near his home! So, he decided to switch his daughter's school because of a three-minute call, which makes me think, "You, Christ, who are so concrete that in 2006 you entered the Metro in Madrid, You changed everything. You made me change university (because after that meeting I left Economics, I enrolled in Spanish Literature and now I teach Spanish Language and Literature; everything changed, even way I look at newspapers or these relationships). What have You done in a car dealership manager to have him call me and tell me about his daughter who is sad, not knowing what to do?" I can only say to myself, "*Mamma mia*, what a story, what a love story!"

Fr. Andrea, you ask where this difference comes from. Simply from a love story, which was possible and never stopped maturing because I was following the charism. Nothing more, just because I followed the directions my friend gave me before leaving for to the monastery: "You simply have to follow this place, and you will understand all of it." And I have not just "understood;" I am happy. It is not ordinary for a person to be able to face things, to wake up and say, "Thank you!" It is not ordinary to be here with you and, with all the awe and trembling it causes in me, to say, "It is not me." Now I can say it from experience: "It is not I; I am 'You' who came to meet me and changed everything in my life up to today, and continue to do so." He came into my life, so now everything is in relationship with Him at the level of an absolutely different world.

I apologize if I spoke too long.

Mencarelli. Thank you! Earlier we sang (in Spanish), "*For everything I have received / Being here is worth it [...] Now I know that I am not alone*"⁴ That was my Spanish, go figure, much worse than your Italian! Thank you from all of us. Thank you for that spark of life you described to us and that we hope to come back to. Thank you, Alfonso! Happy Easter! Give my best to Maria!

Calavia. Thank you, friend.

Mencarelli. But that's not all, as a famous radio host used to say, because after Alfonso from Madrid, we have another friend: Fr. Gabriele from Milan—from Dergano, to be more precise, who we invited to come walk with us this morning. Welcome! I would like to ask him: How did your choice mature in time? What was life like for you in high school and what happened that set you moving?

Gabriele Giorgetti. If I'm here today it's because, in my life, I've always recognized someone who had an esteem, an affection, a love for me and a gaze on me that was greater more interesting than what I was capable of myself.

The opportunity to talk to you GS students is, for me, the opportunity to think back to my own high school years.

I grew up in Milan in a Catholic family, and attended a public science-focused high school. I was not very extroverted; I never "played offense" in relationships, I always waited for others to come forward. I was an average guy, a little uncool, maybe because »

³ Cf. A. Savorana, *Life of Luigi. Giussani*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal 2014, beginning p. 49.

⁴ Original Spanish, "Por todo lo que recibí / Estar aquí vale la pena [...] Ahora sé que no estoy" (Jarabe de Palo, "Eso que tú me das [What You Give Me]" from the album *Tragas o Escupes*, 2020 Tronco Records).

» with my temperament, it was hard for particular traits or talents to emerge.

I was probably not even very nice, the only obvious sympathy that someone had towards me from the administrative secretary. But that's certainly not something to brag about.

In a nutshell, my adolescence was not marked by any notable events, other than that I was made class representative in ninth grade; and here again it was not for my diplomacy or my debate skills, but just because I knew the vice principal, a good friend of the administrative secretary.

I remember spending evenings with my classmates: I am thinking of a place—I don't even know if it still exists—called "Indiana Caffè" and the strolls on Corso Buenos Aires and along the Navigli.

If there had been Instagram, I don't dare imagine what my profile would've been like...

In all this, however, I had a great desire for life, but that question was accompanied by a great feeling of loneliness. All my experiences seemed to confirm that I was alone: alone with my efforts, alone with my sadness, alone in my way of living the faith, and especially alone with my questions.

It felt like I was living in watertight compartments; I did not ask myself the slightest question about the reasons why I did things. Friends were like a filler, reduced to a pastime, and my experience at the parish oratory had no traction on who I really was. Even the girl I dated in ninth grade wasn't the answer to my sense of loneliness.

When evening came, I looked back and saw I did many things in a day, but I really didn't encounter anything.

At the end of my junior year—I'll just add that I even failed a class, but even that didn't faze—I had two encounters led to a real turning point in my life.

You see, friends, it's not the questions or the restlessness in themselves that can make you change; it takes a living, present encounter, something that happens. I thought I was alone, but there was always Someone who didn't leave me alone.

The first event was being with John Paul II for World Youth Day in Rome.

That summer—it was 2000—my parish offered the opportunity to participate in the world-wide meeting of young people: I did not really know what it was, but, perhaps out of interest in a girl or because of a friendship with one of the priests, I decided to participate. There, I discovered and met the person I believe is my greatest friend for life: John Paul II. Not a friend not of life, but for life! His words, and above all his gestures, were powerful enough to tear me out of my own thoughts and doubts: my life under anesthesia ended.

I don't know if you've seen any images of that day, but to give you an idea, you have to imagine two million young people huddled in a huge open space, with crazy heat and improbable songs in the background... And amidst all this, at a certain point, evening fell and you could see a white dot who struggles to walk to the center of the stage. The Pope began to speak, and he lit a fire in me with these words: *"It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be grounded down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal."*⁵ »

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Vigil of Prayer with Young People*, Tor Vergata, Rome, August 19, 2000.

» For the first time, someone was saying something that seemed to correspond to what I was looking for, said that Christ has to do with happiness, and, above all, that He does not disappoint. I could hardly believe someone was telling me I could be happy and pointing out the way.

You see, I was looking—and I'm still looking—for something, or better, someone who would not let me down! There, right in that moment, the possibility that I could give my life for an ideal was clearly planted in my heart!

I asked myself: "Is it possible to live for Christ, to proclaim him in every circumstance and in any condition? If the Pope is old and sick, why couldn't I do it when I'm 17? Does the fact I keep getting a bad grade in Physics prevent me from doing it?"

That night—in which the temperature went from 40 degrees Celsius down to 18 because of the humidity—I remember not sleeping: that man had filled me with too much the enthusiasm and adrenaline. I was ready to conquer the world! Or rather, I wanted those words of happiness to truly reach everyone! I was overwhelmed and I kept asking questions my priest friend questions! About everything! About really everything! About Jesus, vocation, seminary... But he wanted to sleep!

In the confusion and bewilderment of that evening, a thought began to grow in me: "If the intuition I had that day was true, it would reveal itself in all its beauty over time."

Along with that powerful, and in some way definitive event, I had another encounter that was decisive for me. After many teachers who never had a great esteem for me, along came a new Literature teacher, Mr. Rana. His gaze was different than the others'. I saw in him an interest in life, in reality and in humanity that I had never encountered at school. He was so interested in the question of life that I confided in him and told him about the question I had about my vocation.

And so, after one confession at the Duomo in Milan, provoked by a question the priest asked me, I began a journey of verification as to what form of life could allow my humanity, full of limitations and contradictions, to flourish in all its potential, following that desire for happiness that exploded in the square of Tor Vergata with John Paul II, and fueled by the encounter with my teacher.

I would like to make an analogy for that not-so-easy time in my life. I say not easy because I remember the new form my loneliness took: I had an enormous desire, a huge question inside, but all the people I saw every day didn't seem at all interested in what, for me, was the most valuable thing.

The comparison may not be perfect, but I remember that boring game during "puzzle week," in which you have to connect the dots: slowly a drawing comes together and you discover the image that another has thought up and laid out for you! That is, when you start connecting the first dots, you immediately get eager and curious to find the next ones, and at a certain point you can't stop until the all the details of the picture come to light and you see it. You see it!

So, the invitation of that priest in the Duomo began my time as a "secret agent:" the path of verifying my vocation was a real discovery of myself. Sure, that happened in the secret of my heart—I could not talk about it with anyone—but it came with a clarity and kind of evidence that I had never experienced. The discovery of who I was, of the fact that life only acquires a meaning when it is given and offered, has generated in me a great joy and an interest in reality—though, to be honest, not really for physics—that I had never felt before.

So, at nineteen I asked to enter the seminary! So young! I couldn't even grow a beard!

I took this step, not because I understood everything, because I knew everything, or because I was certain that things would go well for me in life! I think back to what Fr. Giussani says in the beginning of the book *Is It Possible to Live This Way?* I didn't go to the semi-»

» nary because I knew much about seminary or what it meant to be a priest. I started because there was something which made me say, "It is worth beginning." I started on a journey, not because I had was there with a balance weighing the pros and cons, but that was the step I was in, that step contained all the possibility in my life, and for the first time, this was what most correspondent for me.

I started a journey, taking a risk on something that went against everyone else's judgment.

First of all, against the judgement of my parents and my family: for them it was madness not to go to university or try having a long-term relationship with a girl. My mom went to the point of trying to change my mind by sending gifts on my behalf to a girl I knew. And my friends from school or that I hung out with also didn't understand what was happening to me. I remember my closest friend at the time wanted to take me with him at any cost to Sardinia over the summer, so I he could show me "the good life" between clubs and beaches and get these strange ideas out of my head (needless to say, at least that time, I did not go to Sardinia).

The years of seminary were beautiful and exciting, the blossoming of a humanity that I couldn't explain, and that was always offered to me in the relationship with an Other. Because it's always you who choose, but you always choose in front of someone who is calling you.

In the seminary, I discovered the beauty and strength of a companionship, a companionship to destiny, a passion for the Church. I discovered for the first time what it meant to have real friends: as I said before, friends of life and for life. Friends with whom you could not cheat, you were true to who you were, sharing discoveries, struggles and joy. Life together offered opportunities to both bring out your own questions, and to purify them at the same time. In those six years I lived in the seminary, I was able to experience again that gaze of care and esteem that, as I said at the beginning, has always accompanied and still accompanies me, and that for me remains inexplicable. In fact, I still talk to those friends often: we get together, go on vacation together. Simply put: we continue walking together toward destiny.

Two thoughts have developed in me that I'd like to share with you as a conclusion.

The first is that vocation is "today." If someone were to ask me, "When did you understand that you were supposed to be a priest?" the truest answer I could give is, "Today!" It is always today that I choose and decide to fully commit myself; it's not enough for me to say yesterday, and I cannot simply say tomorrow! Today, the present, becomes truly *present* if I say yes to what is valuable; that is, to the thing that brings out the value of who I am. The One who called me does not abandon me; He continues to call me every day, renewing His promise of happiness with Him.

The second thing is that I'm not ready: every day I realize that, rationally, I'm not ready to be a priest. Even twelve years after my ordination, it seems to me that there are many more things to learn and to understand than things I have already discovered. The evening before becoming a priest, I remember trying to use the missal alone in my room, and I kept saying to myself: "But I'm not ready!" The only thing held up, deep down, was the awareness that I did not create this call that happened to me: it was an Other who was calling me at His pace. The journey I walked in the seminary did not make me smarter or better so I'd be "ready" to be a priest; it made me more conscious of what I wanted in life. I understood more clearly the One to whom I wanted my heart to be attached.

What I am telling you now became even clearer to me one evening, when a one of the leaders of the clergy came to visit me, already a priest at the age of 27, and said, "Gabriel, wherever we send you, you will do well." It was not enough for me, not even the esteem of my superior was enough, because responding to your vocation is not like closing the book, as if to say, "Now I have understood who to spend life with, or what I am supposed to be, »

» and so I am all set in life." For me, it also did not mean, "Now you have gained a skill, you are ready to educate others in the faith."

In my first years as a priest, I did a lot of things; they were beautiful years. Every day was an opportunity to get excited about what I did. I filled my agenda with meetings, initiatives and proposals. I did a lot of things, and could even discreetly say I succeeded.

But then something happened, or rather, something kept happening over and over again. Both in my first parish and when I moved to Milan, I continued to meet and spend time with people who were living the Christian experience in a more interesting and truer way than I managed as a priest.

All these people—families, young adults, kids—were part of the experience of the Communion and Liberation Movement, and they all really struck me. In time, then, a certain urgency came over me to understand the origin of that beauty, of that intensity of life I saw happen again and again.

On March 26, 2014, after many failed attempts to attend School of Community, I finally decided to listen to Fr. Carrón's School of Community together with some friends. I still have the notes on my cell phone from that night, and I remember by heart what Carrón said that struck me, *"The issue is that making a judgment is the beginning of liberation; to judge is the beginning of freedom because it is only if you begin to judge that you can begin to distinguish the good from appearances, and therefore, gradually see the difference between a sentimental reaction and true correspondence. The Mystery became flesh and revealed to us what is true, what true humanity is. If you for any reason are still not able to discern this in experience, you have signpost, not to spare you the experience, but as a trail to follow in times of confusion: something is not adding up, the Church tells me something different; Jesus tells me something different. So, it is not that I simply submit to it, saving me from the desire to understand, but rather that I go to the heart of the question, because Jesus and the Church do not want to deceive me."*

That began a real journey of rediscovery for me, not because I learned theology better or because I discovered a new strategy to fill our parish activities with people, but simply because I began to understand that it was necessary to judge what I did. That meant discovering a method that helps me to enjoy the things I was already living, that were already there, even more. In short, it was the rediscovery of what was and what is my relationship with Christ.

The question to ask was no longer simply, "Is this thing right or wrong?"—as you who ask me, "Tell me the right thing for me to do!" so often do—rather every question is a chance to recognize and be amazed at what is true for me! Not a moralistic outlook! I was surprised to see how God was present in my life in an exciting way: Christ is the answer to the desire in me.

The experience of the movement, belonging to this companionship, was, therefore, a real rediscovery of the reasons at the origin of my call.

If I had to summarize these years since I joined the CL Fraternity, I would say that my life is, in the end, an ironic attempt. Where irony is not a cynicism that makes you think that nothing has value, but rather the idea that belonging to an Other, He who makes all things, matters much more than how small you and other things in life seem.

There is an image that Don Gius uses when he talks about ironic attempts that I like a lot: I will read it to you, and then conclude. *"The Christian, in the face of the fact that the more he loves, the more he wants to be perfect—wants to and is not capable—in the face of this, he smiles because it forces him to entrust himself to the goodness of the other [...] which represents God's mercy (just the way another person loves me is the sign of God's work, so another person's mercy on me is a sign of God's mercy). This is what explains our ironic »*

» *attitude toward ourselves, which is not belittling ourselves, but rather the opposite: it is fully investing oneself in the certainty placed in the good in another person, the strength and the mercy of another person. "Who knows why he loves me! [...] Not because I love him: I cannot say that is why! Actually, this is the point: I love him but I cannot manage to do anything that is good or perfect. Who knows how this guy manages to love me anyway!" But in the meantime, you never suspend your own effort, in fact you work even harder, that that is the source of an irony about oneself. Just like a father who sees his little child trying to pull his high chair around; he is there smiling, but he does not tease him. He goes and helps him to carry it. And the child says, "No, no, no; I'll do it!"*⁶

Well, in my life, I think I have managed to move aside the high chair of my anxieties, of my thoughts, of my ideas a little bit, because I have recognized, and continue to recognize, that the hand of Someone greater has always been there accompanying my clumsy attempt.

This is also why I like spending time with young people: to see all these ironic attempts you are living and with you, be surprised by the One who brings them to completion.

Mencarelli. Thank you, Fr. Gabriele. We have heard many things this morning, but we are not afraid thinking we need to memorize everything, because there will be time to come back to it all. Let's focus above all on letting ourselves be struck by what we've heard.

Reacting to what we just heard, I'd like to share with you some words from Fr. Giussani: "I can find no other index for hope if not the multiplication of [...] people who become presences. The multiplication of these people, and an inevitable fondness [...] among these people,"⁷ a fondness that includes great familiarity, even if we do not see each other every day.

When the Mystery, the Father, places brother by our side, older brothers who are walking, like Alfonso and Fr. Gabriele this morning, He does so not to show us how little we are moving compared to them, but to instill in us a desire to walk. So, let us desire, let us ask to be able to continue walking, helped in part by the witness of our friends, and by everything the Mystery will place along our way. It just like fruit: how can you get a green banana to ripen? Put it close to an apple! It ripens! Try it! This is the way the Lord continues to come to meet us, to place us close to each other that we may become adults, ripe fruit.

On this very theme of walking together (in any case we have no buses to take, so we can stay here another minute or two), I would like to hear from Francesco. We have been in contact with him regularly these days, since travel between regions is currently prohibited.

Francesco Barberis. Thank you, Andrea. Before reading the announcements, let me just say two things to express the joy that I felt and that I still feel this morning. The first thing is a special thanks to you, Fr. Andrea; apart from the Sticks/ Stretcher example that I didn't get, but then you can help me understand, I wanted to thank you for how you have really accompanied us in these days, in a gesture as decisive for our life as the Easter Triduum is. The intelligence that springs from faith can truly become intelligence in looking at reality, as we have seen at so many moments during these days. What great emotion we felt on Thursday evening when, to challenge us, you asked us the question: "How can a seed grow?" and Jesus answers, continues and will continue forever to answer: "If you want your joy to be complete, remain in me." So, the first thing is just thank you, thank you Fr. Andrea for the way you accompanied us.

The second thing, very short, I say thinking about all of you students, and also the many adults who have followed us in these days. Yesterday morning Fr. Andrea reminded us, »

⁶ L. Giussani, *L'attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, BUR, Milan 1999, pp. 270-271.

⁷ L. Giussani-G. Testori, *Il senso della nascita [The Meaning of Birth]*, BUR, Milan 2013, p. 116.

» "Let's not forget [...] that our hope is not in knowing how to act 'like' Jesus; it 'is' Jesus," as Fr. Gabriel reminded us before by showing us the video of John Paul II. Our hope is in being on our knees as we were yesterday afternoon in front of His presence, in love with Him, with His human gaze, so moved by our lives, so thank you.

Now, I'll read the telegram that we will send tomorrow to the Holy Father, Pope Francis:

"Your Holiness, over 4,000 high school students from Communion and Liberation, together with their teachers, participated by video connection from April 1-3 in an Easter Triduum entitled "Alive Means Present." "This is the time of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away," as you said to us all from St. Peter's Square on March 27th of last year. In this great adventure of living as men and women, as we become aware of our fragility as sinners, may we follow the journey Christ walked, living His whole life as a son, completely resting on the certainty of His relationship with the Father. The Resurrection of Jesus introduces us, too, into that dialogue of Trinitarian love where every question of our humanity is embraced and every part of us, having received God's mercy, is called to new life. By letting ourselves be embraced by the tenderness of the Risen Christ, living and present in the Church, we can go to out meet all our brothers and sisters, pilgrims like us and traveling together in the same boat. Asking for your special blessing, we assure you of our prayers. Happy Easter, Your Holiness! Francis Barberis and Fr. Andrea Mencarelli."

Mencarelli. Thank you, Francesco. Happy Easter! The best greeting we can offer one another, the best greeting we can give to our parents and to our friends is to sing out to them the thing we have encountered.

Regina Coeli