

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

*Notes from the talk by Fr. Julián Carrón
at the GS Beginning Day
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Julián Carrón. Every morning, each of us resumes the road of life; we wake up to the interior turmoil of our unease and our worries about what we have to do that day. But there is something that precedes us. There is Someone who already thought about us before we woke up and who addresses Himself to our “I” just as it is, with all its worries, with all that churns within, to tell it: “You are not alone.” Someone who gives us the announcement heard by that girl two thousand years ago in Nazareth. Today, like then, each of us is in front of this announcement.

Angelus

Alberto Bonfanti. Hello to all of you present here and to all our friends joining us by satellite link up in Italy and abroad. “The one joy in the world is beginning. It is beautiful to live because living is beginning, always, in every moment. When this sense is lacking—prison, illness, habit, stupidity—you want to die.’ These words of Cesare Pavese hold above all for those at the beginning of the journey, when every fiber of our being cries out its desire to live and to be happy.” Our friend Julián—who we thank for being with us again this year—wrote this line at the beginning of his preface to the booklet (*La vita è mia, irriducibilmente mia [Life is Mine, Irreducibly Mine]*, edited by G. Mereghetti, Piccola Casa Editrice, S. Giuliano Milanese-MI 2014, p. 7) that collects some of the contributions that you and your companions sent us in these three years to prepare for the Beginning

Day and the Easter Triduum. It illustrates very well the reason we have gathered together this morning. We are not here for a rite, but rather because we want to tell each other, tell each other again, testify to each other and to the world the joy of beginning, the gust of the journey. Reading your contributions, which are always sincere and frank, I was really struck by the way many document this desire that moved them as they begin the school year. Marta writes: “I’ve never wanted the academic year to resume as much as I have this year. I wanted not only to see my friends again, but also to study and begin new topics, to have responsibilities and tasks, duties. I wanted to discover everything, to know everything; I was anxious to study and to understand. The first day of school was fantastic: I saw my dear classmates again, and the teachers I care a lot about. As they explained what we would do this year, listing the topics, I found myself thinking: how much beauty awaits us! Now, even the subjects I’ve always hated are fascinating, because I’ve realized that everything speaks of me. I decided to always say ‘yes’ to circumstances, to continue following that intuition of good that I saw, and that doesn’t depend on my situation, but rather, on my relationship with reality and with the infinite. I desire to continue seeing this good in school, too, as has been happening to me in this period, and every evening I am in awe discovering how destiny makes it happen again during my days. I feel loved and a fundamental part of something great.”

This joy that you communicate is the fruit of the positive experience you had last year and during the summer, during the GS vacations, and the Meeting. This joy is the expectation of something new, of something other that happens in our life; it is the expectation shown clearly by freshmen the first day of school. Many of you, in the contributions you sent, showed what this joy generated the first month of school, from the flyer distributed in Milan on the events in Iraq, to the various initiatives throughout Italy, in particular in Sicily, to the discovery of the truth about yourself in front of a mathematics question—as one young man from Rimini recounted—or in front of a lesson on Manzoni, or getting together with a classmate to put together a list of candidates for the School Council with the meaningful title: “Realist”. This joy arises when we experience how following another corresponds

to what we seek, when we see how the rule of life is to follow what fascinates you, as José Medina told us at the Easter Triduum this year.

But this joy, as many other have shown, and as we can also see in ourselves, often falls away. Maria Giulia writes: “After about two weeks, the fascination of this experience began to slip away, day after day, so much that I wondered what sense there was in having been happy for a certain period, if then in my daily life I could not continue to be so. Yesterday, reading an article, I found this line that describes my question better: does paradise manifest itself in single, fleeting instants of fullness, or in something lasting and stable? With the beginning of school this question has been increasingly present and urgent. Do I have to resign myself to the opacity of daily life, or is there something else?” Another asks: “How is it possible to live the extraordinary in the ordinary?”. So then, we ask you, Julián: what enables this joy to last? What makes our person unified, so that we can live all that is given to us with fullness and gusto, without yielding to the opacity of daily life?

JULIÁN CARRÓN

THE ILLOGICAL JOY

Hello, everyone. This morning when I woke up, as I was still lying in bed, I thought of you and already felt you were my companions on the road, having read your questions and contributions. I wondered how you would feel, what expectation you would wake up with today. I asked myself what united me with you all, with each of you. The same expectation, shared with everyone, of something so meaningful that it fills life with that gladness, that meaning we all need. It is the same expectancy felt by those two fellows who, going after someone who aroused their curiosity, were asked the question with which we all arrived here this morning: “What are you looking for?”. I felt a surge of tenderness for each of you, thinking of you: what point in the road

will each of them have reached? What concerns flood their life? What expectations will they bring to the Beginning Day? How I would like to hug you all, one by one, in this moment in which, for many reasons, each of you is stretched taut in the search for something, still groping in many moments. How I would like to communicate to you the same passion for your life that those two fellows felt when they were looked at by that stranger, because it is what each of us is looking for, more or less consciously, as Liviana writes: “I, too, want to ask myself: what am I looking for, what do I truly desire in this new academic year, what will I discover myself seeking, as I resume the regular days and responsibilities of life? First of all, I am always searching for that gaze that I have encountered a thousand times and I cannot pretend that never happened, because without it I am not complete.” It is the question everyone asks in one way or another: what are we looking for? Bianca says: “It was the question that has ‘haunted’ me all summer and ‘haunts’ me more and more every day that goes by.”

But why do we seek this gaze? Because, almost in spite of ourselves, we find this desire, this expectancy, this need within ourselves; because we need this gaze in order for us to be ourselves. This is why I was so struck by a line from a song by Francesco Guccini that a friend gave me this summer: “I am nothing when you are not present” (*Vorrei [I would like]* words and music by F. Guccini). I asked myself: of whom can we say such a thing? Of whom can we say it, now? I realize what is essential for living because when it is missing I am nothing, and this is seen in the fact that, as Guccini’s song continues, when it is missing “I am left alone with my thoughts.” The second reason is that that essential thing must be present. It is not enough that it was there in the past. It is not enough that I desire it for the future. If it is not present now, I am nothing. I think there is no other criterion for recognizing the essential thing for life that the Pope encouraged us to focus on in his Message to the Meeting of Rimini, than a presence that makes me exist. I recognize it because when it is missing I am nothing, I am truly nothing. Be careful, because it is not primarily a problem of coherence, but of belonging to a presence without which I am nothing. So then, my friends, the crux of living, the whole adventure of living is in responding to and discovering what makes me exist—exist, now!—in

this historic situation in which we find ourselves living. What makes me myself and makes me exist here, now, present to what I am living? It is what Giorgio Gaber describes in a song we’ll listen to now.

L’illogica allegria [The Illogical Joy] (words by A. Luporini, music by G. Gaber).

What makes us exist? Nothing can keep any of us from having Gaber’s same experience in our life. I can be “alone” in any place, “along the highway,” at any hour, “in the first light of dawn,” even knowing that “everything is going to ruin,” but none of this can keep this from happening to me: “just a little nothing suffices/ maybe a small glimmer / an air already lived / a landscape [...] / and I am fine.” The mere entrance of reality, any fragment of reality, even almost nothing, into the horizon of our “I” through any circumstance can reawaken and make possible the experience of this good. It is such a surprising good that it is almost unbelievable, and it seems like a dream; the good we experience is so disproportionate to what we have done that we are almost “ashamed” to feel so fine. But an evidence imposes itself: I cannot deny that “I am fine / precisely now, precisely here.” It is as if Gaber is excusing himself: “It’s certainly not my fault / if it happens to me this way,” finding himself in front of this surprise. Excuse me, it is not my fault if it happens to me this way. It is as if reality, an instant before we can defend ourselves from it, before we can raise a wall against it, succeeds in penetrating into the “I” to make itself, ‘precisely now, precisely here.’ And how do we see that reality has entered into our “I”? By the fact that I find inside myself “an illogical joy,” a joy that is illogical. And why does he define it as “illogical”? Because he finds no logic in what happens, and he is totally thrown off balance. In fact, it seems totally disproportionate that “a little nothing / maybe a small glimmer / an air already lived” can bring this joy to our life. “An illogical joy / for which I don’t know the reason / I don’t know what it is.” I cannot deny it, because I find it within, but I do not know the reason, so real is it, and at the same time so mysterious. If it were not real, what Gaber says next could not happen: “It’s as if suddenly / I was given the right / to live in the present.” Something enters

into life and makes me present to the present, “precisely now, precisely here.” A little nothing that seizes me so much that it makes me present to what I am living. When this presence is here, I am entirely whole, present. That intuition of good Marta wrote about does not depend on the situation I am in, but on my relationship with reality and the Infinite inside of it.

Friends, it is hard to find a song that better expresses the meaning of the tenth chapter of *The Religious Sense*, that better documents Fr. Giussani’s example: if each of us now, at our age, opened our eyes for the first time as if we were being born in this moment, fully grown, what would be our very first reaction to the presence of reality? We would be wonderstruck by the power of the presence of things; we would be speechless. A Brazilian friend told me about this happening with a group of Brazilian kids he had brought to Italy for a university students vacation, in which there were also some friends from Mozambique. One day he brought them to see Mont Blanc. During the hike everyone was talking, joking, and this friend was thinking of how he could make them be quiet once they got to Mont Blanc, to introduce them to that beauty. But he was the first to be surprised when the first group arrived and everyone remained speechless, in silence, in front of the grandeur of that beauty. In the meantime, the little group that was behind them continued talking and making noise, and my friend thought again, “When they arrive, I’ll tell them that...”. But he did not have to do anything, because this second group also became silent, and everyone discovered within a sense of gratefulness and gladness. This is precisely the experience that Fr. Giussani describes in the tenth chapter: “The ‘I,’ recognizing the inexorable presence of reality, “reawakened within its being by the presence, the attraction, the awe [at reality], is grateful, joyful” (*The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1997, p. 105). It is “the illogical joy” of which Gaber speaks, to the point of besting all our worries. As soon as it appears, I exist; I am nothing when you are not present. As soon as you appear I am entirely myself, as never before, as I went along the road distracted, with my thoughts.

Who would not desire this, regardless of the situation, no matter what one thinks he is living and how life should be fulfilled, who would

not desire this every morning, in every moment of life? A moment of fullness that one finds himself in awe of—as I am sure you too have experienced many times, so human, so simple is it. In that very simple elementary experience, within reach of everyone, in any moment, in any place, in any circumstances, there—there, kids!—lies the whole method of living. A presence that makes me exist. No attempt of mine, no effort, can give me that moment of fullness. Therefore there is no other criterion for recognizing what is essential for living: I see that a thing is essential in the fact that it makes me exist, and when it is missing, I do not exist—I truly do not exist! As soon as it appears, I exist, and I discover that I am happy. I find within myself an “illogical joy,” “precisely now, precisely here,” that enables me to live the present.

Instead, when this method does not prevail, what bitterness I find within myself! “What bitterness, my love, / to see things as I see them [it is not that reality changes: reality is always in front of us, but what changes is the way one lives, “to see things the way I see them”] [...]. // What disappointment [...] / to live life with this heart [so often shrivelled up]”, seeing that everything slips through your fingers. Let’s sing *Amare ancora* ([*To Love Again*], words and music by C. Chieffo).

Amare ancora

Were you able to avoid feeling a chill as we sang “what bitterness,” “what a disappointment” when we see things as we usually do, when, instead of being amazed by reality, bitterness and disappointment prevail at “seeing things as I see them”? At the same time, what a liberation it is to sing—with the words of the song—how easy it is to overcome this disappointment: “You just have to return to being a child and remember [...] / and remember that everything is given, that everything is new / and liberated.” Life is easy. We just have to let ourselves be struck and amazed by the reality that is given to us. We just have to understand what Fr. Giussani reminded us in that tenth chapter, that is, that our first activity is “passivity”; it is this accepting, this receiving, this acknowledging that everything is given. A mere glimmer suffices for us to be able to say that something is given to us. Nothing particularly exceptional is needed. You do not have to wake

to Mont Blanc every morning. Just a little glimmer, “along the highway,” in any moment, it’s enough; because anything, even the smallest little thing is evidence that there is something other than us. “Here is our method,” Fr. Giussani says in the last book of the Equipe, *In Cammino* [On the Journey]: “To clarify the problem of the human person as religiosity, which is the deepest and most totalizing problem of the human person: it is first of all necessary to personalize the relationship between the human person and reality, inasmuch as it is created” (*In cammino, 1992-1998*, Bur, Milan, 2014, p. 316), in other words, inasmuch as it is given.

The true challenge before all of us, young and old, is the same: what is the true relationship with reality? If we do not learn this, instead of that “illogical joy” that our lives could be, what often dominates is: “what bitterness...”, “what a disappointment...”. What is the difference? The difference is not that reality is different, because reality is the same for each of us. The difference is how we live this reality, our relationship with reality. For this reason, Fr. Giussani says this is “the deepest and most totalizing problem of the human person.” We cannot imagine anything more crucial to learn than this. If we do not learn it, we find ourselves in front of the challenge that we heard about before. We have all had this experience in certain exceptional moments, but then it fades away: “After about two weeks the attractiveness of this experience began to slip away, day after day, so much that I wondered what sense there was in having been happy for a certain period, if then in my daily life I could not continue to be so. [...] Do I have to resign myself to the opacity of daily life, or is there something else?” What enables this joy to last—you ask me—what enables the experience of the beginning to become stable? Or, to use an expression of Fr. Giussani’s: how can the relationship between the human person and reality that is created, given, be made personal?

THE ROAD FOR HAVING AN EXPERIENCE

At this point, the issue of the road emerges, because we have had these moments and we still have them now, but then we find ourselves wondering if we have to resign ourselves to opacity in daily life, as if we did not know how to live that initial moment in a stable way.

Without travelling a road, even after exceptional moments we can return to the same old daily routine, and everything can go back to being flat, squalid, reduced, unbearable. We are here, friends, precisely to travel this road and to help each other on this journey, because we have found a person who proposed a road to us. Every time we gather together, it is to continue the journey, to cultivate the gusto of the road, as we said before, because without a road, that is, without an education, the method Fr. Giussani gave us does not become a stable personal experience, that is, it does not become mine. Reality is there, in front of us all, but we feel it is extraneous, like something that is not ours, and then bitterness and disappointment prevail. It seems that reality no longer provokes that illogical joy and thus we wonder if we should resign ourselves to opacity.

But the beautiful thing is that some of us are already experiencing the beauty of the road. Maria Chiara says: “This summer I discovered the beauty of the journey. For years I always wanted to improve my abilities. I wanted to be more studious, more constant, more attentive and present in my friendships and relationships. I’ve always thought that in order to encounter again what I encountered in these years and that made me happy and free, I had to be capable of embracing it [we begin to realize that this is not automatic and that we must learn to embrace what is given to us]. I asked to be capable of everything, to succeed, but after a period in which good results and failures alternated, I saw that not even this was enough. We try to find passion in our studies, and it is not enough; we try to live true friendships, and it is not enough. Everything can end, including the enthusiasm for life, and we continually want new things, we want to run away, to travel, to change. I wondered how I could want to remain in the precise moment where I am, and somebody answered me: ‘What do you love?’. Well, I didn’t know. Rather, I answered: ‘What I have encountered’ [like a line I already knew]. I knew it could not be reduced to the companionship. So then, worn out because I could no longer find a ‘certainty’ or a sign that things could happen to me again, I agreed to go to the Meeting [a provocation, a suggestion that someone gives me. To respond to a provocation of reality, that can be this or something else], without expecting anything, because I had failed in all my plans

for the summer. That week, I truly lived the Meeting. Between the sacrifice of the work and the wonder within that same sacrifice, I lived everything with great freedom, that is, I asked to be there notwithstanding what I was, or rather, because of what I was. And I saw in others something great and unexpected that I could not understand, just as I cannot foresee my destiny. I did not have a miracle, but I travelled a road. There were no advantageous or disadvantageous situations: all of them were an opportunity. This year I have to face the national exams for high school seniors and the entrance test for medical school. The latter is really important to me, but by now I cannot sincerely ask merely to pass it. It is no longer enough. In all this, I want to embark on a journey [we begin to see that our success is no longer enough]. To face the year, I asked my school for permission to meet for Morning prayer before lessons start. I did this during the week at the Meeting and it was truly an opportunity to be attentive during the day [we begin to realize that certain gestures educate us to be attentive, begin to educate us on this journey; we can see what we did not see before and we begin to overcome the disappointment and bitterness of seeing things as we saw them before. We begin to discover the full educative value of something that seemed like just a habit or formal gesture before. We begin to pray in order “to be attentive during the day”]. I hope it is the same for the people with whom I share this gesture.” The awareness of a friendship is beginning to grow: may this be the same for everyone, may not be a formal gesture. As Fr. Giussani said, “Expect a journey, not a miracle” (L. Giussani, “Raduno nazionale maturati,” [National Gathering of High School Seniors] Rimini, September 28-30, 1982, CL Archives). This is the road.

La strada [The Road] (words and music by C. Chieffo)

The matter of the road is the most crucial question of living. We all know where we want to arrive, what fullness we want to live, what relationship with reality we would like to have so that everything might reawaken in us an illogical joy and overcome bitterness and disappointment. But if we do not find the road, everything remains a lovely desire that then fades away. Kafka sensed this very well when he

said: “The goal exists, but there’s no road” (F. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks, in Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings*. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, Schocken Books, 1954.) This is the challenge before us. Today many in our world, many of our classmates, say: “The goal exists, but we don’t know the way to reach it.” Without identifying the road well, we cannot reach that goal we all desire to achieve. This is why the matter of the road is “the” question. Here we see the importance of Pope Francis’ message to the Meeting of Rimini: “the Lord has not left us to ourselves [to the opacity of daily life, to the squalor of our daily survival], He has not forgotten us [and for this reason He began a journey]. In ancient times He chose one man, Abraham, and set him on a journey toward the Promised Land. And in the fullness of time He chose a young woman, the Virgin Mary, in order to take on flesh and come live among us” (Francis, *Message to the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 24-30, 2014).

So then, friends, as Fr. Giussani always reminds us, the issue is not one of intelligence, of who is wiser or more cunning, because even with all your wisdom and cunning you can lose yourself. It is a problem of attention, of discovering someone who brings us where we want to go but cannot arrive at by ourselves, where we want to reach but are unable to on our own. For this reason we must always ask to have the attention of which Maria Chiara spoke, because everything in life comes down to this. You can go to school, as Andrea recounts, and after “the first satisfying weeks of school, at a certain point nothing seemed to be enough for me, and I put together some plans thinking that in this way I could reach that happiness, but my plans did not go as I thought. [But precisely there, at school, at a certain point, something happens.] We read Leopardi’s poem, *Canto di un pastore errante dell’Asia [Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia]* and the question of Beginning Day re-emerged powerfully: What are you looking for? I have discovered that I am striving for that desire for happiness that makes me live and always drives me to aim for the beautiful, the true, to be amazed in front of a painting or listening to a song that makes life full.”

At a certain moment, a person who is drowning in his own nothingness finds himself in front of someone—in this case, reading a canto by

Leopardi—who reawakens all of his “I”. It has always happened, and will always happen this way. The encounter with that Presence that makes me exist, to use Fr. Giussani’s words, “makes the personality perceive, or perceive anew, makes it discover the sense of its own dignity. Since the human personality is composed of intelligence and of affectivity or freedom, in that encounter the intelligence is awakened to a new curiosity, a new will for truth, a new desire for sincerity, a desire to know how reality truly is, and the ‘I’ begins to tremble with an affection for existence, life, oneself and others that it did not have before. And thus one can say: personality is born” (*In cammino*, 1992-1998, op. cit., pp. 184-185). When You are present, I exist.

FOLLOWING WHAT I BEGIN TO SEE FOR MYSELF

So then, when something like this happens, the drama of living begins, because I have to decide: either I follow what I begin to discover in myself, what reawakens my “I,” fills it with curiosity, makes it tremble with affection for everything I have in front of me, or I remain alone to stew in my own thoughts. This is the drama that each of us must live, because once I have identified someone in whom I can see the realization, the fulfilment of what I desire, I have already found an answer to the matter of the road: the road is there, because I see it in front of me, incarnated in certain people, in the way they relate with reality, in the way in them the squalor of daily life does not win out, and instead the relationship with every circumstance becomes fascinating. The challenge then is to follow what I begin to see for myself, not only to imagine or dream it, saying: “Would that it were true!”. No. It is true. I see it in front of me, in someone. Here the drama begins. Do I follow what I have seen, what I have sensed, what I see for myself, or do I continue to complain about how ugly reality and life are? The problem is whether or not to follow what I sense corresponds to my heart.

So then, what does it mean to follow? Following, Fr. Giussani tells us, “is the desire to relive the *experience* of the person who provoked you” (*Il rischio educativo: Come creazione di personalità e di storia* [The Risk of Education: As Creation of Personality and of History], Società Editrice Internazionale, Torino: 1995, p. 64) so that what you see in

her or him can slowly become yours, so then your life begins to be different. “Over a month has passed since I returned from the GS vacation, and unexpectedly daily life has heightened my wonder and gratitude for what happened. In these days I continually return to the grace that exploded one morning when we woke to rain. Rain? Yes, rain. The true discovery wasn’t the rain in and of itself, or the sunny skies two days out of four, but the provocation that the leader of the vacation, Fr. Gigi, made of it. Taking as his starting point the psalm in morning prayer, he didn’t ask “What should we do, since it’s raining?”, but “What am I looking for? What do I need? Does Your strength sustain me, or does the sun?”. That Monday, staying in front of a man like that, I began to understand that the challenge for me was to realize what was happening in front of me, to be aware of myself and of reality [“for me to realize”. Reality is there, but I can be somnolent, distracted. The true newness is not that reality exists, but that I am aware of it]. I still have a very strong awareness that it is absolutely worth my while, and instead of stubbornly waiting for things to change, I have begun to read the circumstance [which at times can also change] in a different way, to look at it differently, going to its depth, judging it. The new academic year holds a number of problems, even serious ones, but I’m not afraid or worried about starting to solve the problems. The method of the vacation is becoming the method of my daily life.” This is the question: whether what we live when we are together in a vacation, which fills us with wonder at what happens, slowly becomes the method of daily life. What did this young man learn through the people who introduced him to looking at reality as he described? What the Pope reminded us of in his Message to the Meeting, inviting us “never to lose touch with reality; rather, to love reality.” Since the dominant culture often gives pride of place to appearances, the true challenge is to love reality. “Fr. Giussani left this legacy as a plan for life when he said: ‘The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious [that is, women and men], the formula for the journey to meaning of reality is always to live reality intensely without preclusion, without negating or forgetting anything. [Because] it would not be human, that is to say, reasonable, to take our experience at face value, to limit it merely to the crest of the wave, without discerning the core

of its motion” (Francis, *Message to the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples*, August 24-30, 2014). With this exhortation the Pope gives us again, “now,” what he calls Fr. Giussani’s “program of life.” And this program is not the repetition of the right definitions; it is the indication of a journey so the same wonder can happen in the face of rain or any other circumstance, because to be authentically human, Fr. Giussani tells us, we must “always live reality intensely” (*The Religious Sense*, op. cit., p. 150).

THE VALUE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

What is reality made up of? Reality is made up of all these circumstances: going on vacation and the possibility of rain, finding myself having to study a subject I do not like, not feeling at ease with my friends. The question is whether we stay on the level of appearances in all these things, or in each of these situations we look seriously at what the Lord wants to lead us to through the circumstance. From your letters it is evident that, for many of you, each thing becomes part of the road, because everything is given to us; everything that happens in reality serves to enable us to discover more and more what has happened to us in life. Yet, we often think that after the encounter with Christ everything is all resolved; having encountered Him, we have everything, and thus all of reality can be archived. Instead, Giussani tells us no, reality should not be archived—I am always struck by his response. Why should it not be archived? What does this reality, these circumstances that are not to be archived, have to do with the relationship with Christ? “Reality is not to be archived because we already know [or] have everything. [Yes, it is true that] We have everything, but we only understand what all of this is [...] in the encounter with circumstances, with people, with events.” This is why “nothing is to be [...] censured, forgotten, or rejected” (*L’io rinasce in un incontro. 1986-1987* [The “I” Is Reborn in an Encounter], Bur, Milan, 2010, p. 55. A few days ago a university student spoke about his activity-filled week (he had to staff the information desks for first-year students, organize the apartments for new arrivals, and study for his exams) but then Saturday he found himself infinitely sad. He began phoning all

those he could, but this did not help at all. So he sat down to re-read the text of the Beginning Day in which he had participated, looking again at the part he had read but not understood, when Davide Prospero said, “The beginning is a gift, a preference, just as the beginning of life is an unmerited gift, the greatest sign of the relationship with Him who wanted us” (“I am nothing when you are not present,” *Traces*, n. 9/2014, p. II). This made him comprehend what he had read before without understanding. I was truly struck because in the experience that each of us has, without having to invent great theories, we begin to see why in the world the Mystery at times has us go through certain circumstances. In fact, if he had not felt that sadness, if he had not felt all the vibration of his “I” in the search for meaning—to the point that the question “What are you looking for?” emerged again in him—that university student would not have been able to “intercept” the value of what he had heard but not understood at Beginning Day. He could have done School of Community with his comments on the text without having understood it, because without that sadness he would never have grasped all the import of what he had been given. This is what often happens to us. We can understand things, understand the gift that reality is, the gift that it is to have a friend, the gift that it is to encounter someone along the road who introduces us to the true, we can understand the import of what we find in front of us and intercept among many faces the face of the person whom the Mystery gives us to make the journey, only if we are able to intercept the difference of that presence as the answer to our question (to the sadness, in the case of that young man). It is crazy, because without this encounter between my need and something outside me, in reality, a presence, a friend or my beloved, without this encounter, I do not realize what the answer to my life is.

We often go through dramatic situations. For this reason, one of you asks me: “Do I always have to make mistakes to grow?”. No! As we have seen, we can educate each other to live reality; we can follow someone. We do not always necessarily have to make mistakes. As one of you says: “After the GS vacation, many of my friends were sad because they wondered how they could possibly experience again, during the rest of the summer, the happiness they felt in those days. I was so happy that

the question didn't even occur to me. What dominated my thoughts was the Beauty that had conquered me in that week and that passed through many faces, in particular through that of a teacher of mine. I spent the six weeks after the vacation in almost complete solitude, at the sea with my mother, my four-year-old brother and my grandparents. Also, I had failed math and had to do a make-up exam at the end of the summer, so my days were spent studying for it. There were 'normal' guys there [that he found there at the beach] who spent their days on the beach trying their luck with the girls, trying to convince them to go out with them in the evening, and among themselves these guys only talked filth, about how many girls they had had. This was the context I found myself in for a good part of the summer. And yet in all this I woke up every morning and the Beauty I had lived during the vacation was indelible. I couldn't pretend that that encounter hadn't happened. My desire yearned to experience again the joy I had lived. So one evening, while I was out with this group of guys, and, unable to bear their usual talk anymore, I turned to one of them and talked about the topic that was most important to them: love. With questions I provoked him not to remain on a superficial level, as he'd always done, but to go a bit deeper. He told me about his girlfriend, who had left him a couple of weeks before, and this pain provoked him so much that we spoke intensely for the rest of the evening. At the end, before going home to bed, he stopped me, saying: "Thanks, I'd never thought before about the things we talked about this evening. I'm really happy." And, even more extraordinary, this happened the next evening as well: this friend and I started talking again, and this time a girl who'd been invited out with us by one of the guys heard what we were saying and, curious about our conversation, approached us and joined the conversation; for the whole evening we talked about what love is. Even though the girl didn't know us at all, she started telling us all about her life, even the most private things. At the end of the evening the girl thanked us; she, too, was amazed by that time spent together, by the happiness she felt, a happiness she'd never experienced before that evening. I've told you about these two episodes because I was struck at how I changed after the vacation and continue to change every day. Something happened in my life that I can't

help but take it into consideration. Every morning I get up with this immense desire to experience again that Beauty that conquered me. This desire is making me move, is making me refuse to settle for less. I can't settle for anything less than that Beauty. I carry this desire with me in every hour of lessons, in the relationships with my friends, and at home. I am realizing that my days have a gusto that I couldn't even have imagined before [not only on the vacation, but also in daily life, in the opacity of daily life!]. I feel like I have new eyes now, and am beginning to see things for what they truly are [it is a problem of knowledge, not of being "good," because if we do not know reality well, then we suffocate. It is a problem of having new eyes to see things as they truly are]. I wake up every morning asking that this desire never die down, but burn more and more, so that I can continue to seek the Beauty that promised to await me in all my days."

THE PRODIGAL SON

But when we become stubborn and want to do things our way, the Mystery allows us all the time necessary to discover what we are, even through our mistakes. It is not that He pushes us to make mistakes. No. The fact is that, at times, we are so obtuse that we do not realize it. Precisely for this reason, the prodigal son will always be the image of the person who, having received everything (home, wealth, father), cannot resist the fascination of his own autonomy, of doing things himself, because, not having understood what he has in his hands, what he has received, everything seems an obstacle to his freedom, everything seems too tight. We can all imagine the father's feelings about the freedom of his son, who becomes stubborn, not recognizing what was evident. What can he do? As a father he must accept and give his son the time to understand. It is not that he invites him to make mistakes! The problem, kids, is that sometimes we are so stubborn that we return to ourselves only when we hit rock bottom, like the prodigal son: the Gospel says that only when he found himself eating with the pigs did he return to himself and begin to understand. When all seemed lost, the prodigal son found within himself something that was not lost: precisely in what was apparently the darkest and most confused moment, his heart emerged with its constitutive

evidences and needs. All of his mistakes could not eliminate the memory of his home, of his father, and the quality of life of his workers. And this enabled him to judge, to make a very quick comparison between his previous and his current situation: “How many workers of my father have bread in abundance and here I am dying of hunger!” And so he could recover—and we can recover too—from within his experience and also from his mistakes, what he thought he already knew. He realized the dimension of his need and of the good of having a father. He knew he had a father, but he did not know it truly; he had received everything, but unfortunately, he had to rediscover this in the clash with this stubbornness of his. It is not that the father kicked him out of the house and drove him to err. No. It is that we are so stupid that we think there is always another place, one we imagine, where we can be more fully ourselves. And so, finally the

prodigal son understood where freedom is found, discovered that freedom is a bond, a home, a father; recognized the good it means to have a father who embraces him again and welcomes him back as a son. The father, in turn, was happy to see how his patience with the freedom of this son had enabled him to find him again as a son, and was grateful and glad to have a son who was happy to be his son. At the same time, we will always have before us the fact that a formal remaining at home, like that of the other son, does not necessarily mean understanding what it means to be a son and to have a father, because one can stay home but complain. What was the discovery of the prodigal son? What was the truly amazing thing? His sincerity. At a certain point, he realized that his image of fulfilment, of freedom, did not correspond, and he had the courage to admit it to himself and return home, where there is always a father who awaits us. ■