

**“I HAVE LOVED YOU WITH AN EVERLASTING LOVE.
I HAVE HAD PITY ON YOUR NOTHINGNESS”
(Jer 31:3)**

**Spiritual exercises of the fraternity of communion and liberation
Rimini, April 29, 2016**

Notes from the Introduction by Julián Carrón

No act of our conscious life is true if it does not start out from the awareness that we are sinners. “We are here because we acknowledge first of all this truth: that we are sinners. If you feel virtuous, this is not the place you should have come to: it would be entirely useless,” Fr. Giussani used to tell us, because “the awareness of being sinners is the first truth of the person who acts in life and in history.”¹ Sinners, that is, needy. From this need arises the cry, the entreaty, like that the one we have just listened to in Mozart’s *Requiem*, “Salva me, fons pietatis.”² As the publican said, standing off in the distance, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”³

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to grant us the awareness of this need for His mercy.

Come Holy Spirit

Let’s begin these days by reading the message Pope Francis has sent us:

“On the occasion of the annual Spiritual Exercises for the members of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation held in Rimini, entitled “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have had pity on your nothingness” (*Jer* 31:3), His Holiness Pope Francis, in sending you his cordial and well-wishing thought, desires to remind you that the Jubilee of Mercy is a propitious occasion for rediscovering the beauty of the faith that places at its center the loving mercy of the Father made visible in the face of Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit, who guides the steps of believers in the vicissitudes of history. Mercy is the way that unites God and man, opening the heart to the hope of being loved forever, notwithstanding the limit posed by our sin. The Holy Father augurs that all those who follow the charism of the late lamented Monsignor Luigi Giussani may bear witness to this mercy, professing it and incarnating it in their lives through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and may be signs of God’s closeness and tenderness, so that modern society may also discover the urgency of solidarity, love and forgiveness. He invokes the celestial protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, as he asks for your prayer to support him in the ministry of Peter, imparts a

¹ “*Questa cara gioia sopra la quale ogni virtù si fonda*” [This Dear Joy Upon Which Every Virtue Is Founded], Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, Notes from the meditation [by Luigi Giussani], Rimini 1993, supplement to *Litterae communionis-CL*, n. 6, 1993, p. 5.

² W.A. Mozart, *Requiem in D minor, KV 626, III. Sequentia, n. 3 Rex Tremendae, CD “Spirto Gentil” n. 5.*

³ *Lk.* 18:13.

heartfelt apostolic blessing upon you and all the participants, extending it to all those following by satellite link up and the entire Fraternity. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness.”

“So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’. When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea.” There with Him, “none of the disciples dared to ask Him, ‘Who are you?’ because they realized it was the Lord.”⁴

“While He was with them at table, He took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, but He vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?’.”⁵

The stories of the apparitions of the risen Christ constantly report the amazement of the disciples at seeing Him alive in front of them. His living presence dominates, determining their existence and actions.

It is moving to see how Jesus bends over their need and bewilderment caused by His passion and death: He responds to the disciples’ fear, tears, solitude, doubts, and longing with His presence. What is the source of this urgent need of theirs? After all they had seen and experienced for years, why is their need so strong? They feel this way because the entire story they had lived with Jesus, the three years spent with Him, the events they had seen, the words they had heard, are not sufficient to meet their present need.

The memory of the past, no matter how fascinating, is not enough for facing the present hour. In fact, the disciples of Emmaus said to one another, “We were hoping that He would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place.”⁶ All the signs they had seen, the time they shared with Him, eating and drinking with Him, could not overcome the bafflement, fear, and solitude. The tears of Mary Magdalene will document this forever. Only His living presence constitutes a response that adequately meets their need. And so the very nature of Christianity is revealed to the disciples through their experience. Christianity is not a doctrine, a system of ethics, or a feeling, but the fact of a present Presence that dominates the gaze of those who perceive it, a Presence whose one concern is to show Himself, to invade the life of His friends and make them experience a life without fear, without sadness, even though He is not with them as He was before dying.

That living Presence is what they have in common. That Presence constitutes the one true foundation of their communion. And precisely this experience makes them more aware of their differentness.

1. The style of God

God’s way of acting, this revelation of Himself to them after the resurrection, that made them so different from all others, makes even more pressing the question that Saint Jude Thaddeus asked Him during the Last

⁴ *Jn.* 21:7,12.

⁵ *Lk.* 24:30-32.

⁶ *Lk.* 24:21.

Supper, “Master, what happened that You will reveal Yourself to us and not to the world?”⁷ Taking up this question in his book on Jesus, Benedict XVI adds, “Why, indeed, did you not forcefully resist your enemies who brought You to the cross? [...] Why did You not show them with incontrovertible power that you are the Living One, the Lord of life and death? Why did You reveal yourself only to a small flock of disciples, upon whose testimony we must now rely? The question applies not only to the Resurrection, but to the whole manner of God’s revelation in the world. Why only to Abraham and not to the mighty of the world? Why only to Israel and not irrefutably to all the peoples of the earth?”⁸

And here is his response: “It is part of the mystery of God that He acts so gently, that He only gradually builds up *His* history within the great history of mankind; that He becomes man and so can be overlooked by His contemporaries and by the decisive forces within history; that He suffers and dies, and, having risen again, He chooses to come to mankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom He reveals himself; that He continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to Him,”⁹ and, thus, enables us to understand.

At this point Benedict XVI observes, “And yet—is not this the truly divine way? Not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and elicit love. And if we really think about it, is it not what seems so small that is truly great? Does not a ray of light issue from Jesus, growing brighter across the centuries, that could not come from any mere man and through which the light of God truly shines into the world? Could the apostolic preaching have found faith and built up a worldwide community unless the power of truth [the power from on high] had been at work within it? If we attend to the witnesses with the listening hearts and open ourselves to the signs by which the Lord again and again authenticates both them and himself, then we know that He is truly risen. He is alive. Let us entrust ourselves to Him, knowing that we are on the right path. With Thomas let us place our hands into Jesus’ pierced side and confess: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (Jn 20:28).”¹⁰ This turns our world upside down now as it did then.

The point of departure of the disciples was this ineradicable fact. Their consciousness was defined by the manifestation of Christ, by the living encounter with the Living One. But precisely this fact awakened this question in them: why did You choose *us*? This question threw them open to the awareness of the method of God—choosing some (election, preference) to reach all—and His way of acting: a gentle style. The divine style is not to intervene with external power, but to elicit freedom without forcing in any way. Péguy reminds us of this in a stupendous way, “To that liberty, [...] I have sacrificed everything, God says, to that taste I have for being loved by free men, freely.”¹¹

This method of God—the awareness of this method—is particularly important in this moment, because

⁷ *Jn.* 14:22.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week. From the Entrance in Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2011, p. 276.

⁹ *Ivi.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.

¹¹ Ch. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents, and Other Poems*, Harvill Press, Glasgow, 1956, p. 121.

“today we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change.”¹² In recent years we have often returned to this theme of change. The new situation, characterized by the collapse of so many ancient sureties, provokes in us as it did in His disciples bewilderment, fear, and doubts about how to face it.

In a recent and stunning interview, Benedict XVI identified the key of this epochal change, the crucial dimension. “For the man of today, compared to those of the time of Luther and to those holding the classical perspective of the Christian faith [dominated by the concern for eternal salvation], things are in a certain sense inverted [...]. It is no longer man who believes he needs justification before God, but rather he is of the opinion that God is obliged to justify Himself [to man] because of all the horrible things in the world and in the face of the misery of being human, all of which ultimately depend on Him.”¹³

This turns the burden of proof on its head. Now God is the one who must in some way justify Himself, and no longer women and men who must do so. This is the situation in which we live, the “underlying trend of our times.”¹⁴ In a certain sense, God is the one who must justify Himself to women and men, and not vice versa. Paradoxically, God is the one who—expressed in positive terms—must show He measures up to the human person, to our request, our cry. “Things are in a certain sense inverted.” The burden of proof has been inverted: this burden of proof now lies on God. He is the one who must demonstrate that He is for the human person, that He is indispensable for living.

It is amazing how Fr. Giussani grasped the signs and the import of this epochal change long before, and made this inversion the cornerstone of his method. It is as if God, God made man, and His presence in history, the Church, had to justify Himself to women and men or, in more familiar words, it is as if God, the Church, “had to appear at the tribunal where you are the judge through your experience.”¹⁵

Precisely this inversion characterized the beginning of our movement. Unlike many others, already back in the 1950 Fr. Giussani realized that although Christianity was everyone’s traditional background, it no longer had a hold on the young people with whom he dealt in Milan and at high school. It was clear to him that God made man, Christ, once again had to “justify Himself” to those young people who wanted nothing to do with God, and rather, held that they needed to free themselves of Him. Therefore, Christianity had to be proposed anew according to its nature: an event that bowls over life now and changes it.

Without wanting to impose anything external, from the first day of school Fr. Giussani submitted himself to the tribunal of his students, entrusting his proposal to their judgement. “I’m not here so that you can take my ideas as your own. I’m here to teach you a true method that you can use to judge the things I will tell you.”¹⁶

The characteristic element of this method is the announcement of Christianity as an event that proposes

¹² Francis, *Address at the meeting with participants in the fifth convention of the Italian Church*, Florence, 10 November, 2015.

¹³ *Interview with His Holiness Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI on the doctrine of justification by faith*, in Italian in *Through Faith: Doctrine of Justification and Experience of God in the Preaching of the Church and the Spiritual Exercises*, edited by Daniele Libanori, SJ, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo-Mi, 2016, p. 127. See also *L’Osservatore Romano* and *Avvenire*, March 16, 2016. Available online at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview-26142/>

¹⁴ *Interview with His Holiness Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI on the doctrine of justification by faith*, op. cit. p. 128.

¹⁵ L. Giussani, *L’io rinasce in un incontro (1986-1987 [The “I” Is Reborn in an Encounter])*, Bur, Milan, 2010, p. 300.

¹⁶ L. Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 2001, p. 11.

itself to the verification of our experience. Therefore, since the beginning, as documented in the first chapter of *The Religious Sense*, Fr. Giussani has made his young interlocutors aware that they have within themselves the criterion for judging the proposal he will make to them: the heart.

In the third volume of the PerCorso (*Why the Church?*) he re-affirms that the proposal of Christ, which reaches people today through the Church, “wishes to measure up” to this criterion of judgement, “placing itself at the mercy of authentic human experience. It leaves its message to the actuation of our heart’s original criteria. It does not require certain conditions to be mechanically respected. Rather, it entrusts itself to the judgment of our experience, and indeed, it constantly urges that experience walk its path in completeness. [...]. The Church repeats with Jesus that it can be recognized as credible because of its correspondence to man’s elementary needs in their most authentic flourishing. This is what Jesus meant by the expression we have already cited, by that promise to His disciples of a ‘hundredfold’ on this earth.” Fr. Giussani continues, “It is as if the Church is also telling man: ‘With me, an experience of fullness of life that you will not find elsewhere will be yours.’ It is on the razor-edge of this promise that the Church puts itself to the test, proposing itself to all men as the prolongation of Christ.”¹⁷

So then, what is God’s justification of Himself to the human person, to us? The justification of God is called “correspondence,” an otherwise impossible correspondence to the profound and ineradicable needs of the heart of the human person, of every person, of real people, those needs that persecute us, in spite of ourselves, through an incurable restlessness after any achievement. God justifies Himself to women and men through the “better,” the flourishing that He generates in life, through the fullness of humanity that He introduces into existence and that we cannot obtain by our own strength alone.

So then, as Fr. Giussani insists, the Church does not cheat, because “everything she says and does is totally open to anyone’s verification. Her formula is: test me, test me! She totally abandons her proposal to the content of your experience: you are the one to judge.” And he adds, “You can’t get any more open than this! [...] The Church does not cheat, in the sense that she does not impose anything that you, if you are not persuaded, are forced to observe anyway.”¹⁸

2. “Sign of the times”

So then, how can the Church justify herself to us and to all women and men? It is necessary to identify the question well, as Fr. Giussani often repeated, quoting Niebuhr, “Nothing is so incredible as the answer to a question that is not asked.”¹⁹ It is necessary to grasp what the problem of today is, so that each of us may perceive the answer as credible.

What is the question today, the question of women and men today? Pope Benedict XVI, in the interview

¹⁷ L. Giussani, *Why The Church?*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2001, pp. 205-206.

¹⁸ L. Giussani, *Una presenza che cambia [A Presence That Changes]*, Bur, Milan, 2004, p. 294.

¹⁹ R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. A Christian Interpretation*, II, London/NY, 1943 (1964), pp. 6-7.

quoted earlier, identified it as “the perception that we are in need of grace and forgiveness.”²⁰ Consequently, the Church will be able to justify herself to the people of today if she responds to this need for grace and forgiveness.

This is the reason Benedict XVI states, “For me it is a ‘sign of the times’ the fact that the idea of the mercy of God should become more and more central and dominant.” Earlier, “Pope John Paul II was deeply impregnated by this impulse. [...] Starting from the experiences which, from the earliest years of life, exposed him to all of the cruel acts men can perform, he affirms that mercy is the only true and ultimate effective reaction against the power of evil. Only where there is mercy does cruelty end, only with mercy do evil and violence end.”²¹ John Paul II did nothing other than propose mercy as the one true response to evil and violence. “Pope Francis is totally in agreement with this line. His pastoral practice is expressed in the fact that he continually speaks to us of God’s mercy. It is mercy that moves us toward God [mercy is what attracts us], while justice frightens us [...]” “In my view,” continues this acute observer, Benedict XVI, “this makes clear that, under a veneer of self-assuredness and self-righteousness, the man of today hides a deep knowledge of his wounds and his unworthiness before God. He is waiting for mercy. It is certainly no coincidence that the parable of the Good Samaritan is particularly attractive to contemporary man. And not just because that parable strongly emphasizes the social dimension of Christian existence,” but also because, Benedict observes, it speaks of how “men in their intimate consciences expect the Samaritan will come to their aid; that he will bend down over them, pour oil on their wounds, care for them and take them to safety. In the final analysis, they know that they need God’s mercy and his tenderness. In the hardness of the technologized world in which feelings no longer count for anything, the expectation however increases of a saving love that is freely given. It seems to me that in the theme of divine mercy is expressed in a new way what is meant by justification by faith. Starting from the mercy of God, which everyone is looking for, it is possible even today to interpret anew the fundamental nucleus of the doctrine of justification and have it appear again in all its relevance.”²²

Benedict XVI’s description was embraced fully by his successor. Grasping deeply this need that we all have for the mercy of God, the genius of Pope Francis was to indict a Holy Year of Mercy. In the Pope (as in John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as we have just seen) there is a profound sensitivity to modern women and men, an understanding of their condition, a heart-thawing compassion for their restlessness and their wounds, that often surprises us and knocks us off balance, inside and outside the Church, because it breaks with the usual measurements, the consolidated frameworks, on one side and on the other.

When the interviewer asked, “*Why, in your opinion, is humanity so in need of mercy?*”, Pope Francis responded, “Because humanity is wounded, deeply wounded. Either it does not know how to cure its wounds, or it believes it’s not possible to cure them.” Today, there is also the burden of “considering our illness, our sins, to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven. We lack the actual concrete

²⁰ *Interview with His Holiness Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI on the doctrine of justification by faith*, op. cit. p. 128.

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 128-129.

²² *Ibid.* p. 129.

experience of mercy. This is also the fragility of the time we live in—believing that there is no chance of redemption, a hand to raise you up, an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet.”²³ One sees in this Pope an understanding of the problem and of the road, what the wounds are and what can heal them, how they can be healed.

Contemporary women and men need “the concrete experience of mercy.” In front of the confusion of thought, which also wounds many people, the Pope knows that the ontology cannot be recovered—that is, the truth of the human being, the clear awareness of it—simply with a correct discourse about the human person or with a repetition of the content of the moral doctrine. This will happen only through the experience of mercy, which can open a person to understanding the doctrine as well.

Therefore, to respond to the deep wounds of contemporary women and men, the Pope has not organized a conference on mercy. He has not limited himself to proposing a reflection on the theme, but has promoted a gesture that first of all allows us to experience mercy during a full year, accompanying us with his continual guidance to help us live it.

In order to intervene in a real way in humanity’s toil, to respond to concrete women and men in all their fragility, the Church—and therefore each of us—first of all needs to experience the embrace of God’s mercy, in order to be able to communicate it to all our sisters and brothers we meet along the way.

This is the goal of the Jubilee of Mercy, in continuity with the “gentle” method of God: to reach everyone through His own, that is through the Church, the companionship of those He chooses and who acknowledge Him. In proposing the Jubilee of the Church, the Holy Father shows that he does not succumb to the error of taking for granted the subject who must testify to mercy and the “place” where this subject is generated.²⁴

This awareness of the goal and the method is seen at work in the very fact that he asks the question, “*Why have a Jubilee of Mercy? What does this mean?*”, and in the way he answers. “The Church”—that is, each of us—“is in need of this extraordinary occasion. I am not saying: this extraordinary occasion is good for the Church. I am saying: the Church needs this extraordinary occasion. [...] In this era of profound changes, the Church is called to offer her particular contribution, rendering visible the signs of the presence and closeness of God. The Jubilee is a favorable time for all of us, because by contemplating Divine Mercy, which overcomes all human limitations [...] we are able to become more certain and effective witnesses.”²⁵ The goal is to testify. The method is contemplation, in other words, immersion in the experience of mercy, because the Christian people is the first to be in need: we are in need, each of us.

So, in the final analysis, what does all this mean for us? “Turning our gaze to God, merciful Father, and to our brothers and sisters in need of mercy, means focusing our attention on the *essential contents of the Gospel*, Jesus, Mercy made flesh, who renders the great mystery of the Trinitarian Love of God visible to

²³ Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, translated by Oonagh Stransky, Bluebird Pan Macmillan, London, 2016, pp. 13-14.

²⁴ “Faith, in fact, needs a setting in which it can be witnessed to and communicated, a means which is suitable and proportionate to what is communicated. For transmitting a purely doctrinal content, an idea might suffice, or perhaps a book, or the repetition of a spoken message. But what is communicated in the Church, what is handed down in her living Tradition, is the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion.” (Francis, Encyclical letter *Lumen fidei*, 40).

²⁵ Francis, *General Audience*, December 9, 2015.

our eyes.” Therefore, “celebrating a Jubilee of Mercy is equivalent to placing once again the specific nature of the Christian faith, namely Jesus Christ, the merciful God, at the center of our personal life and that of our communities.”²⁶ In this way, the Pope insists in the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in Him.”²⁷ It is a Holy Year, then, “so as to *live mercy*. Yes, dear brothers and sisters, this Holy Year is offered to us so that we may experience in our lives the sweet and gratifying touch of God’s forgiveness, His presence beside us and His closeness especially in the moments of great need.”²⁸ It is Jesus, risen, who bends over our wounds today.

“This Jubilee, in other words, is a privileged moment for the Church to learn to choose only ‘*what pleases God most*’. What is it that ‘*pleases God most*?’” Pope Francis asks himself. “Forgiving His children, having mercy on them, so that they may in turn forgive their brothers and sisters, shining as a flame of God’s mercy in the world. [...] The Jubilee will be a ‘favorable time’ for the Church if we learn to choose ‘*what pleases God most*,’ without giving in to the temptation of thinking that something else is more important or primary. Nothing is more important than choosing ‘*what pleases God most*,’ in other words, His mercy, His love, His tenderness, His embrace and His caresses!”²⁹

And anticipating a possible objection, as if reading our thoughts, Pope Francis adds, “Of course, someone could object: ‘Father, shouldn’t the Church do something more this Year? It is right to contemplate the mercy of God, but there are so many urgent needs!’ It is true, there is much to do, and I for one never tire of remembering this. However, we must bear in mind that whenever mercy is obliterated *self-love* is at the root. In the world, this takes the form of exclusively seeking one’s own interests, pleasures and honors joined with the desire to accumulate wealth, whereas in the life of a Christian it is often disguised in hypocrisy and worldliness. All of these things are contrary to mercy. Surges of self-love, which make mercy a stranger in the world, are so abundant and numerous that we are often unable to recognize them as limitation and as sin. This is why it is necessary to recognize ourselves as sinners, so as to strengthen within us the certainty of divine mercy. ‘Lord, I am a sinful man; Lord, I am a sinful woman: come with your mercy.’ It is a beautiful prayer. It is an easy prayer to say every day: ‘Lord, I am a sinner: come with your mercy’.”³⁰

3. “I have awaited you day and night”

Each of us now has the opportunity to compare ourselves against these authoritative words of Pope Francis, which coincide with those of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as the latter stated. “Whenever mercy

²⁶ *Ivi*.

²⁷ Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015, 1.

²⁸ Francis, *General Audience*, December 9, 2015.

²⁹ “The necessary work of renewing the institutions and structures of the Church is also a way that should lead us to make a living and vivifying experience of God’s mercy, which alone can guarantee that the Church is that city set on a hill that cannot be hid (cf. *Mt 5:14*). Only a merciful Church shines! Should we forget, for even just a moment, that mercy is ‘*what pleases God most*,’ our every effort would be in vain, for we would become slaves to our institutions and our structures, inasmuch as they may be renewed. But we would always be slaves” (Francis, *General Audience*, December 9, 2015).

³⁰ Francis, *General Audience*, December 9, 2015.

is obliterated, *self-love* is at the root.” Other interests dominate. Prophets always shift us from our position. Our hope lies in our willingness to be shifted.

Re-reading these texts, I could not help but think of how Fr. Giussani, in the particularly challenging situation of the early stages of the student protests of 1968, just after the occupation of Catholic University (in which many protestors were members of GS), identified the essence of the question as the fact that we did not await the Lord “day and night.” We had other interests and more important things to do than “to await Him day and night.” In reference to that situation, Fr. Giussani stated in no uncertain terms, “We so easily lacked” “the intelligence of the situation and of things to do [...] because we do not await Him day and night.” Why? What does it mean that we did not await Him? It means that we awaited something else, that something else was more important than this, that our center was not Christ. “So, to my mind, if we had awaited Him day and night, the attitude of our students in their life at Catholic University would have been different; it was so generous, but how true was it?” In fact, for Fr. Giussani, “The truth of the gesture is not born of political cunning,” but from “awaiting Him day and night, otherwise our discourse will be confused with that of the others and will become an instrument of the discourse of the others. We can do our things and without realizing it, take on everyone else’s paradigm, the paradigm offered by everyone else. Our discourse and actions must be distinguished by our awaiting Him day and night.”³¹

It is not a matter of coherence or having everything clear already, because you can “await Him day and night” even in the approximation of all your attempts, even discounting your own smallness. It is a question of desire, of expectant awaiting. In fact, a person always awaits, desires, affirms something as the “ultimate” in every moment, “for by the very fact that he lives five minutes he affirms the existence of a ‘something’ which deep down makes living those five minutes worthwhile.”³² If we are not awaiting Christ, if our desire is not for Him, then obviously, it is for something else. But this means that we expect a change of things, of the situation, be it personal or social, from this something else, not from Christ and the living encounter with Him, the communion with Him, the building of His presence in the world. The problem is not the immaturity of our attempts, but whether the desire and expectant awaiting for His presence are the origin of our action.

“Maybe [Fr. Giussani said on that same occasion, in November 1967] you do not articulate it explicitly, but your desire is for something else more than this. This [desire] is not a principle—pay attention here. You cannot affirm it just as a principle once. It must be a principle reclaimed every day. It must be a mental *habitus*. It must be a mentality. It must underlie everything, the just and the unjust, merit and error, day and night. “I have awaited You day and night.” In this sense, think, please, how the origin of everything—whether it be a possible defection or the lack of this expectant awaiting, or the fact that this desire does not create a mental *habitus*, a mentality—how everything depends on the fact that you stop up your ears in response to what is prophesied to us. God sends prophets to call us to Himself. Vocation always happens through prophecy, through the voice of a prophet, always. Do you understand how not listening to our communion is

³¹ Advent Retreat of the *Memoires Domini*, Milan, November 19, 1967, in A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani*, op. cit., p. 391-392.

³² L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 1997, p. 57.

at the root? Our communion is how the desire, the ‘Come’ we spoke of before is concretized, without being trivialized. The group is the prophecy, the place where you are called back to God. Here is the bitter, rotten root. Strangely enough, we can take an equivocal position concerning our communion as well, because valorizing the group is not a sentimental valorization. It is not a valorization based on mutual affinity or time spent together, but one based on the discourse,³³ that is, based on a judgment.

Fr. Giussani did nothing other than constantly remind us of and call us to this expectant awaiting for Him day and night, which is essential for living. How many times, in front of the continual failure of each of us, the betrayal, did he remind and call us, without being scandalized? “To understand what betrayal is, my friends, we have to think of our own distraction, because it is a betrayal to spend days, weeks, months... what about last night, when did we think of Him? When did we seriously think of Him, with our heart, in this last month, in the last three months, from October until now? Never. We haven't thought of Him as John and Andrew thought of Him while they watched Him speak. If we asked a lot of questions about Him, it was out of curiosity, analysis, the need for analysis, for research, for clarification, for clarification. But we need to think the way one who is really in love thinks about his beloved (even in this case it happens extremely rarely because everything is calculated to get something in return!) solely in a way that is absolutely totally detached—a sole desire for the good.”³⁴ How rarely do we think of Him as a present Presence, as One beloved! Just compare our experience with that of the disciples in the days after Easter, after they had seen Him risen: what dominated their thought? What prevailed in their gaze? They were all seized by a Presence that took away their fear and sadness. Someone wrote me, “I just happened to read this simple letter from Emily Dickenson to a friend. I was struck because it seemed to describe very succinctly the longing for Christ: ‘*Morning without you is a dwindled Dawn*’.” Within all the confusion, only affection for Him changes life, and without Him life has less gusto—a *dwindled Dawn*.³⁵

At the first Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity in 1982, looking at the faces of the many people present, thinking of the freshness of the encounter that had won them over and brought them to that point, he said, “Who knows if we are still stirred, as we were stirred at Varigotti,” that is, at the beginning of GS. And he continued, “You have grown up, and while you have secured a human ability in your professions, there is the possibility of drifting away from Christ (in contrast with the emotion of all those years ago and, above all, certain circumstances of all those years ago). [...] It is as if Christ were far from our heart”.³⁶

And what about us? Do we feel the urgent need to be forgiven and embraced again for all our falls, our distraction, the complicit forgetfulness that invades our days, for our betrayal, our wretchedness? What dominates our life—our thought and our gaze—in this period of confusion and bewilderment? Do we feel the

³³ ASAEMD, Audiovisual documentation, Advent Retreat of the *Memoires Domini*, Milan, November 19, 1967.

³⁴ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible To Live This Way? An Unusual Approach to the Christian Experience*, Volume 3: *Charity*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2009, p. 11.

³⁵ Cf. “April 1885, (L 981)”, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Associated Editor: Theodora Ward, Cambridge MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958.

³⁶ L. Giussani, “Familiarity with Christ” in *Traces*, n. 2, February 2007, p. 2.

need for His mercy? Saint Bernard expressed it well with this line, “Man begins his truth in the acknowledgement of his own wretchedness.”³⁷

But recognition of our wretchedness is not enough: it marks the beginning of the truth about ourselves, but it is not enough. In fact, we often realize how insufficient it is. We need someone who brings forth our need to be forgiven.

This is what the Year of Mercy calls us to. It is an opportunity to make us aware of how much we need Him to bend over our distraction, our wounds, to attract us again, like His disciples after the devastation of His passion and death. It is as if we needed what Dostoyevsky described, “But do you want to punish him fearfully, terribly, with the most awful punishment that could be imagined, and at the same time to save him and regenerate his soul? If so, overwhelm him with your mercy! You will see, you will hear how he will tremble and be horror-struck. ‘How can I endure this mercy? How can I endure so much love? Am I worthy of it?’”³⁸ This is what God does with us. He “overwhelms” us for a year with His mercy, so we will come to the end of the year more certain of this mercy and thus better able to bear witness to Him.

We must become “ever more convinced of God’s mercy.” This is why it is in our best interests to listen to the voice of the Pope, the prophet God has given us to guide His people in this time of upheavals. “This Extraordinary Year is itself a gift of grace. To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is He who seeks us! It is He who comes to encounter us! This will be a year in which we *grow ever more convinced of God’s mercy*. How much wrong we do to God and His grace when we speak of sins being punished by His judgment before we speak of their being forgiven by His mercy (cf. Saint Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, 12, 24)! But that is the truth. We have to put mercy before judgment, and in any event God’s judgment will always be in the light of His mercy. In passing through the Holy Door, then, may we feel that *we ourselves are part of this mystery of love, of tenderness*. Let us set aside all fear and dread, for these do not befit men and women who are loved. Instead, let us experience *the joy of encountering that grace which transforms all things*.”³⁹

We must become ever more certain that mercy is the one true response to the situation of the human person today, to the violence, the wounds, the toil and contradictions we find ourselves facing.

The Pope emphasizes the urgent need for mercy in this way: “A Holy Year to experience strongly within ourselves the joy of having been found by Jesus, the Good Shepherd who has come in search of us because we were lost.”⁴⁰ He explains that this “is the objective that the Church establishes for herself in this Holy Year. In this way we will strengthen in ourselves the certainty that mercy can truly help build a more human world. Especially in our time, in which forgiveness is a rare guest in the spheres of human life, the call to

³⁷ “Primus veritatis gradus est, primum seipsum attendere, seu propriam miseriam agnoscere” (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, PL 182, col. 948).

³⁸ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. Constance Garnett, The Lowell Press, New York, p. 846.

³⁹ Francis, *Homily, Holy Mass and Opening of the Holy Door*, December 8, 2015.

⁴⁰ Francis, *Homily, Celebration of the First Vespers of the Second Sunday of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday*, April 11, 2015.

mercy is made more urgent, and this is so in every place: in society, in institutions, at work and even in the family.”⁴¹

Only by reaching this certainty, which enables us to move through all our fear, solitude, and doubt, will we be able to face the enormous challenges of this epochal change with the one effective weapon, testimony, the ultimate goal of the Holy Year. “For this reason I have proclaimed an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* [...] a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective,”⁴² as Jesus did with His disciples.

“Is it naïve to believe that this can change the world?” The Pope seems to anticipate our questions! “Yes, humanly speaking, it is foolish, but ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men’ (1Cor 1:25).”⁴³ Saint Paul’s conviction prompted Pope Francis to tell the bishops of Mexico, “the only power capable of conquering the hearts of men and women is the tenderness of God. That which delights and attracts, that which humbles and overcomes, that which opens and unleashes, is not the power of instruments or the force of law, but rather the omnipotent weakness of divine love, which is the irresistible force of its gentleness and the irrevocable pledge of its mercy.” However, “If our vision does not witness to having seen Jesus, then the words with which we recall Him will be rhetorical and empty figures of speech. They may perhaps express the nostalgia of those who cannot forget the Lord, but who have become, at any rate, mere babbling orphans beside a tomb. Finally, they may be words that are incapable of preventing this world of ours from being abandoned and reduced to its own desperate power.”⁴⁴

In these days, let us allow our hearts to open to this mercy, listening, respecting the silence, so that we may be changed by what we hear and His presence may dominate in us, as it dominated the life of the disciples after His resurrection. We have come together here to support each other in this.

⁴¹ Francis, *General Audience*, December 8, 2015.

⁴² Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015, 3.

⁴³ Francis, *General Audience*, December 9, 2015.

⁴⁴ Francis, *Speech at the Meeting with the Bishops of Mexico*, Mexico City, Mexico, February 13, 2016.