



EXERCISES OF THE FRATERNITY OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION

# **"CHRIST, THE LIFE OF LIFE"**



APRIL 29–MAY 1, 2022



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OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION



2022

On the cover: *Icon of Christ*, Museum of the Cistercian Abbey of Poblet, Catalonia, Spain.

*“On the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation on the theme, ‘Christ, the Life of Life,’ the Holy Father is glad to send his cordial greetings to the participants, with the prayer that these days of spirituality will be a providential opportunity to renew your decision to follow the divine teacher and for an ever more fruitful presence in the Church and society in the footsteps of the charism of the Servant of God Fr. Luigi Giussani. In front of the individualism and indifference that marks our times and provokes the discarding of so many lives, the Holy Father exhorts you to consider that the Christian response is not resigned observation of today’s poverty of values or sad nostalgia for the past, but charity animated by trust in Providence that loves one’s own time and with humility makes all things new. With these wishes, His Holiness assures you that you will be in his prayers and gladly imparts his apostolic blessing, the pledge of every desired good.”*

**Cardinal Pietro Parolin**, Secretary of State of His Holiness,  
April 11, 2022



# *Friday evening, April 29*

*During entrance and exit:*

*Sergei Rachmaninoff, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, op. 31*

*Valerij Poljanskij—The Russian State Symphony Cappella*

*Spirto Gentil n. 21 (Claves Records), Universal*

## ■ INTRODUCTORY GREETINGS

### **Daide Prospero**

Let us call upon the Holy Spirit to accompany us during the journey of these days, asking with all the strength and humility of which we are capable for the grace to be open to His action, so that once again we may taste the sweetness of Christ present among us and return home reborn and recreated.

### *Come Holy Spirit*

As our first gesture, I will read the Holy Father's telegram to us:

“On the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation on the theme, ‘Christ, the Life of Life,’ the Holy Father is glad to send his cordial greetings to the participants, with the prayer that these days of spirituality will be a providential opportunity to renew your decision to follow the divine teacher and for an ever more fruitful presence in the Church and society in the footsteps of the charism of the Servant of God Fr. Luigi Giussani. In front of the individualism and indifference that mark our times and provoke the discarding of so many lives, the Holy Father exhorts you to consider that the Christian response is not resigned observation of today's poverty of values or sad nostalgia for the past, but charity animated by trust in Providence that loves one's own time and with humility makes all things new. With these wishes, His Holiness assures you that you will be in his prayers and gladly imparts his apostolic blessing, the pledge of every desired good. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness.”

Following the Spiritual Exercises together with us in Italy are friends in forty-two countries, and in the coming weeks another forty-eight countries will experience the Spiritual Exercises. There is simultaneous translation of the Exercises into seven languages. This is the breadth of our gesture.

Why are we here this evening? Why are we planning to stay together for these three days, some in person and some online, but in any case, together? What convinced us once again to come together, together after two years of a pandemic that has plunged us into solitude and also the pain of losing many loved ones, together after the tribulations and shakeups that have touched our Movement, together in front of the uncertainty of tomorrow, threatened by the shadow of the death and evil brought by war?

Fr. Giussani, introducing the 1992 Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity, answered such questions in this way:

“What is truly important in this companionship here present is something that is unavoidably common to all of us. We all have our own personality, face, heart, temperament, and character; relatively few of us know these details about each other, but even the people I have never seen before, who disappear in the dark that is increased by these enormous lights that are burning my eyes, even those I have never seen before, share in common with me life as a task to achieve, to carry out; a task not identified or desired by me or by them, a common, identical task for me and for the last person among us, the furthest geographically—an assigned task. What we have in common is that we want to know, we desire to know, we demand with all of our hearts to know the ‘why’ of this task, and we also want to know where all of our vitality, all of our expressivity, all of our dedication, all of our living will end up, what the *purpose* of living is, with all the weariness there is to bear, the contradictions to cope with, and the shame we feel about ourselves to endure (‘pray for us sinners’). These things are common to all of us, are the most important things for each of us. We gather together again only to reexamine these essential words for our lives, which are always the same and yet never so when we repeat them to each other. This is the miracle and mystery of a life that is life, that expresses itself on the level of these words that are dramatically crucial for a face that lasts forever, that is destined to last forever: the eternal face of our ‘I.’”<sup>1</sup>

Each of us this evening is called to ask ourselves personally the question we have been educated to pose every time we gather: Why am I, Davide, and you, whatever your name may be, why are we here this evening?

I am here because I had an encounter many years ago. In the beginning it was nothing more than an experience of fascination with a humanity charged with promise, the promise of meaning for life, the promise of a task, of an ideal capable of making life a hundred times fuller and great-

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<sup>1</sup>Luigi Giussani, *Un avvenimento nella vita dell'uomo* [An event in the life of man] (Milan: Bur, 2020), 86–87. Our translation.



er, an ideal capable of explaining the joys and sufferings, the justice and injustice, the happiness and unhappiness that inexorably mark my life and everyone's. This encounter plunged me into a flow of life that took on the form of our companionship, a human companionship whose greatness and power I was able to experience, a power to valorize and nurture the seed of good that was in me and a power that kept me from being scandalized by my own evil and wretchedness. To summarize in one word the sense of the history that led me here this evening, I would say "mercy," because I understand that if I was able to remain faithful to this story up to today, it was possible above all because of the Lord's faithfulness to my life, a faithfulness that took the shape of the faces of the many traveling companions He set alongside me on this journey. As Fr. Giussani taught us, mercy is such a bottomless word that it should be ripped out of the dictionary. Based on my experience, mercy means that we are not the outcome of our calculations. If someone were to have told me that one day I would be here now speaking to you, I certainly would have burst out laughing. But we are not the outcome of our calculations. As the Lord said to Saint Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>2</sup>

Allow me another thought. In being here this evening, what exactly are we saying yes to? What am I saying yes to? To return to the word Fr. Giussani used in the passage just quoted, what "task" are we saying yes to? As we begin this central gesture of the life of the Fraternity, I think it is important to indicate clearly to everyone the responsibility that the Spirit, through the authority of the church, is entrusting to us in this moment of our history. Many have asked me this in these weeks, both verbally and in writing, so it is right for us to begin helping each other to look at this step.

In brief, we are asked to participate with passion and in a spirit of filial obedience in the renewal of the church in our time. In the late 1990s the church, in the person of Pope Saint John Paul II, solemnly recognized that the lay movements have been and continue to be a fundamental resource for the renewal of the church and her mission in the world, above all in the context of an increasingly secularized West. On May 30, 1998, in Saint Peter's Square, as many of us well remember, almost all of the founders of the best-known ecclesial movements were present. Many of them, including our dear Fr. Giussani, are no longer alive. In accompanying the movements in the delicate transition from the foundational phase to the next one—a shift that all of them have had to face, not just our own—the leadership of the Church was able to gain an increasingly mature aware-

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.

ness of how precious the gifts of the charisms are for entire Church, and of how these realities need pruning in order to bear fruit. An initial outcome, certainly not definitive, of this work of reflection, a work that did not begin with Francis's pontificate but during that of John Paul II (as you can see in the important report by then Cardinal Ratzinger on the occasion of the May 1998 World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements), was "Iuvenescit Ecclesia," the letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a document that would be worthwhile to read and reflect on. As we know, this letter was followed by the general decree "The International Associations of the Faithful" and Pope Francis's talk last September 16. So, is the Church asking us to become something different from what we have always been? A number of us have asked or are asking this question, and I want to answer it. When I was confirmed as president of the Fraternity for the coming years, Cardinal Kevin Farrell asked me, "Do you want to be this factor of renewal, to contribute to being this factor of renewal from within the entire ecclesial experience, bringing all that you are? This is very important, because if you become something different from what you are, it will no longer interest anyone, not you or anybody else, and consequently it will not build the Church."

Therefore, we are being asked nothing less than to be fully ourselves, bringing our originality within the life of the whole Church, more and more with this awareness. This is what the Church is asking us to say yes to today. This is what Fr. Giussani wrote us after the pope's great meeting with the movements. "Thank you my friends! What happened last Saturday, 30 May, happened because you, you too, are there, *together*. It is only togetherness that operates. Indeed, God is where unity is. For me, the meeting on Saturday with John Paul II was the greatest day of our history, made possible by the Pope's recognition. It was the 'cry' that God gave us as a *testimony to unity*, to the unity of the whole Church. At least, that was the way I felt it: we are one. I said so, too, to Chiara and Kiko, who were there next to me in Saint Peter's Square: how is it possible not to cry out our unity on such occasions? And then I perceived—more intensely than ever before—the fact that we are *for* the Church, we are a factor that builds the Church. I felt myself taken into God's hands, Christ's hands, those hands that mold history. These are times in which I have begun truly to understand—and all the more on Saturday—the responsibility to which God has called me. I had not understood, but on Saturday it was clear. And this responsibility is such insofar as it communicates itself to others precisely as responsibility. This is true when it is for the whole Church, and therefore for the whole movement; when it is an obedience to the fact that—as Saint Paul says—'We

do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Rom 14:7–8). It is God who is at work in what we do: 'God is all in all.' Our responsibility is for unity, to the point of valuing even the smallest good that is in the other."<sup>3</sup>

I am here for this. For this same reason, Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, abbot general of the Cistercians, accepted our invitation to be here today, for which I thank him.

"Christ, the Life of Life" is the title of these Spiritual Exercises, and it is a providential one, I would say. In fact, where can our enthusiasm for the history that seized us, where can the yes we are called to say come from, if not from looking Christ in the face once again, if not from the renewal of the wonder that began it all, that was the beginning of our whole history; that is, the wonder of a man, Fr. Luigi Giussani, in front of the face of another man, the man Jesus of Nazareth?

I would like to add the last and perhaps most important answer to the question posed as we began. Why am I here? Why are we here? I am here for You, O Christ, the life of life. We are here for You. We are here to know You more, to recognize You again.

Let us collect ourselves so that we can listen, following those who are ahead of us on the journey.

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<sup>3</sup>Luigi Giussani, Letter to the Fraternity, Milan, June 3, 1998, in Luigi Giussani, *The Work of the Movement: The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation* (Milan: Società Cooperativa Editoriale Nuovo Mondo, 2005), 280–81.

■ INTRODUCTION  
Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori

*“There is need of only one thing”*

**The silence that listens**

“To follow Christ, to love Christ in everything: this is what must be acknowledged as the principal characteristic of our journey.”<sup>4</sup>

Fr. Giussani’s statement in his 2002 letter to the Fraternity, reacting with emotion to Saint John Paul II’s letter for the twentieth anniversary of the Fraternity itself, came immediately to mind as the simplest and most encompassing summary of the awareness that a gesture like the Spiritual Exercises calls us to reawaken together. Together! The Spiritual Exercises are not a monologue, not even if led by a monk. On the contrary. A monk should be a humble reminder of a desire for silence, an attitude of silence, a humble reminder of the awareness that silence means listening, opening “the ears of the heart,” as Saint Benedict says in the prologue of his Rule, which he begins in this way, “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice [that is, make experience of it]. The labor of obedience will bring you back to Him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience.”<sup>5</sup>

Obedience is not primarily something to do. Rather, it is listening that becomes a task in the degree to which it is lived as an attentive and devoted openness of the heart, “attentive” as Benedict says here, like a beggar asking for what is necessary for life. If the silence that listens and desires life from an Other penetrates into life and makes space for itself in life, time, and things that need to be done, in the worries, joys, and sufferings of all of life, if the silence penetrates into life even just a little bit, then this listening silence becomes the broad road by which all of your life immerses itself in silence, immerses itself in listening, leans deferentially toward and bows to ask for and welcome life. As expressed in the stupendous lines of Clemente Rebora, “My song is a

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<sup>4</sup> Luigi Giussani, Letter to the Fraternity, Milan, February 22, 2002, in *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Prologue, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1982), 15.

sentiment / that from the wearied day / tired the night hours: / and asked for life.<sup>6</sup>

But the silence to which we are called in these days should not tire us. Rather, it should give us rest from the disorder, the agitated searching and the exhausting anxiety of our demands and claims that muddy the purity of the profound and true desire of the heart. This simple, childlike desire does not pollute our true need with our demands upon ourselves, others, the Church, those in positions of responsibility, and those who are not. This pure, true, and simple desire does not sully the true need we have inside of us, the true need of everyone and that are part of all of the situations in which life and our history unfold, including the history of a Fraternity, or an order like mine, or other ecclesial realities.

So, first of all let us ask Our Lady for this true silence, this true desire, because her heart was free from any stain of sin, any craving due to original sin; that is, from autonomous possession of the meaning and fullness of life, a possession that is seized or grabbed rather than accepted and welcomed. Mary's heart lived this desire always, in everything. In her, it was spontaneous to ask for everything, even without words, because the entreaty, the desire for life was the constant beat of her immaculate heart. It is not so for us. We need at least a moment of awareness that this is not so, an instant of acknowledgment that the silence that listens with the desire of the heart is not there, is too distracted, too saturated with other things, too deafened by other noises. But deep down, all that is needed to create the silence that entreats, that begs, is a moment of awareness of our distraction and superficiality that becomes an instant of pain, confusion, and humiliation, like when Martha heard Jesus tell her she was too full of noise, agitation, and demands, that she was too sure of "already knowing what was needed." Here, this is the point! We lack silence, listening, and desire when the *claim that we already know what is needed* dominates in us, the claim that we already experience what is needed, what suffices for us, what suffices for me and everyone, or perhaps me without everyone, or everyone without me.

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<sup>6</sup> Clemente Rebora, "LXXII. Son l'aratro per solcare" [I am the plow to cut a furrow], I. *Frammenti lirici* [Lyrical fragments] (1913), in *Le poesie 1913-1957* [Poems 1913-1957] (Milan: Garzanti, 1988), 123. Our translation.

## **Listening is the only need**

Being silent does not mean resetting our life. This never happens. If at the end of times Christ asks us to give account of what we have or have not done to one of His little sisters or brothers, if even the hairs of our head are counted, if not even the gift of a glass of water will be forgotten in heaven, if every word we say will be judged, well then, not even we can be silent, forgetting life. But even agitated and disordered life enters into silence when it listens to what is needed, when it lets itself hear, as Martha did that day, that “there is need of only one thing,” that there is only one “better part” that will never be taken away. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing [only one thing is needed]. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”<sup>7</sup>

We should live the silence of these days, at least in our intention, at least as our desire, the way Martha did after Jesus’s correction. She stood there, saying nothing else, struck and wounded by His words. She returned to the hearth, the food she was cooking, the bowls she was putting on the table, the service of all those guests who came with Jesus and invaded her home. She did not return like a beaten dog. Jesus never beats anyone. Jesus announces, educates, and reveals Himself, and in revealing Himself reveals us to ourselves. Martha returned to the kitchen wounded, certainly, but feeling right away that the wound did her good, had lanced an abscess and purged an infection that had poisoned her heart, life, and relationships, even her relationship with God, with Jesus, their great friend. There was something wrong and disordered in her that had even led her to get angry with Jesus, something she never would have wanted or imagined before that evening, before that scene.

Let us seek Martha’s silence and listening, allow it to enter us, this “better part” that Martha chose that evening, maybe first with sadness, maybe wanting to cry out even more than before, to leave and slam the door. Instead, she held her tongue, and let Jesus’s words enter and work inside her, like a plow that makes the earth more fertile, capable of welcoming the seed that is capable of bearing fruit.

We need Martha’s silence, not only individually but also as a community, as a Fraternity, as the Church. We need it so that our lives, and the life of the community, the life of the Church, may become fruitful, fruitful with what Christ says, what Christ wants, what Christ, the Word of God, is. We

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<sup>7</sup>Lk 10:41–42.

need Martha's silence in order to fully welcome the presence of Christ, who has reached us even to the point of sitting there in our home talking, to the point of being there waiting to have dinner with us, waiting to share with us the food we are cooking for Him and then to the point of spending the night in our home because He needs to rest and is our friend and loves us so much, appreciates our company so much that He chose our house, our life, our heart, as a resting place in the course of His mission of salvation of the whole world, in the course of His coming from the Father and returning to the Father, making Himself man to redeem all of humanity! He comes to rest in my home! Do you understand what a great thing this is? What an incredible thing it is?

### The dwelling place of the friendship with Christ

There is a line of a Latin hymn for the memorial of Saint Martha that always reverberates inside me. It is a prayer to the saint, that she may share her friendship with Christ with us: "*Magistri felix hospita, / corda fac nostra ferveant, / ut illi gratæ iugiter / sint sedes amicitiae.* (O blessed hostess of the Lord, / make our hearts ardent / so that they may constantly be for Him / a dwelling place of grateful friendship)."<sup>8</sup>

In becoming flesh, the Son of God came to call our hearts to be for Him "*sedes amicitiae*,"—a dwelling place of friendship—not only in the heart of Mary His Mother, but in every human heart reached by His presence and love, even the hearts of sinners like Zacchaeus. Jesus called Zacchaeus to welcome Him into his home, but actually Zacchaeus was welcoming Jesus into his heart, a heart that, at Christ's coming, first was filled with joy, then with repentance, and finally with a love that causes him to give not only his goods to the poor and to those he himself had robbed, but also a grateful love for Him who came to him in his own home to "seek and save what was lost."<sup>9</sup>

We need Martha's silence in order to live this experience, or better, this grace—this event of God who comes to make of our life the dwelling place of His friendship. We must observe silence in order to listen to this offering of the presence of the master.

<sup>8</sup> Vespers hymn, memorial of Saints Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, Hosts of the Lord, July 29, in the monastic breviary.

<sup>9</sup> Lk 19:10.

## **The core message**

What does Christ tell us? I hope we will listen to Him in these days, I hope and pray, for me and for you, as I hope that you too will pray for me and for all of us. This evening, as we think of the episode of Martha, let us also think of the message that she meditated on in silence, that filled her with silence and filled her silence. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”<sup>10</sup>

As I said, maybe in the beginning Martha brooded over those words, putting the accent on the reproof she perceived in them. “Martha, calm down, you’re too agitated about a thousand things. Don’t disturb your sister. Let yourself be educated by your sister’s relationship with me, you who always think you are, and above all, *have to* be the best and most indispensable....” Maybe in the beginning she meditated on this with resentment and sadness. But this only confirmed Jesus’s judgment and increased her agitation. Fixating on those things only made her more restless and agitated.

For us too, when we receive a judgment, a gaze on us that reveals to us an inappropriate position in our life, a judgment that corrects us, that often is not initially clear to us, it is normal that the wound hurts and that maybe we scratch it. But it is like receiving an injection, a vaccine. There is the puncture hole and the pain in your arm, some symptoms, but the goal of the injection is not for this; the purpose of the injection is not the hole in our skin or the bruise that forms. What did Jesus inject into Martha, wounding her superficially, wounding her self-love? What sense of well-being did Martha gradually perceive after that painful puncture? What words calmed and consoled her, made her feel better, gradually made her happier with a new joy that did not come from her but from the words of Jesus?

If we take away Jesus’s words about Martha and her sister, what core message remains? It is that “there is need of only one thing.”<sup>11</sup>

This is the word that Jesus wanted to penetrate into her heart so that she might meditate on it and assimilate it, so that it could do her good, do good in her life, heal it, save it, unify it from its fragmentation. The meaning of this message is not a bit of psychological or spiritual hygiene, or an invitation to commit herself to bringing order into her life, starting by getting her bad character under control. The meaning of this word is Christ Himself, the meaning of Christ for Martha, the gift of Christ for Martha, which is

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<sup>10</sup> Lk 10:41–42.

<sup>11</sup> Lk 10:42.



already a shared gift even before Martha becomes aware of it. The meaning of this message is that *only Jesus responds to the fundamental desire of the heart and of life*: the desire for unity, the desire to find a meaning that holds everything together, that keeps us all together, that saves communion, a unity that embraces everything and everyone, in which we feel embraced by everything and everyone, embraced by the everything in everything and in everyone that is God, that is the Father, that is Christ, Christ who is the incarnation of the mercy of the Father and thus the incarnation of the embrace of the good Father, the one who welcomes back with infinite joy the prodigal son who returns to Him.

### **A treasure that is already shared**

Only one thing is necessary, “There is need of only one thing.”

As I said, Jesus offered Martha this word that puts everything back together again in the one thing needed, which is Jesus Himself, as a gift already present and shared, as a gift that He gives to everyone. Her sister Mary was already welcoming it, and perhaps also her brother Lazarus and the disciples who arrived with Him and filled up her house. This gift had already been shared with all those who had already received and welcomed Him, from the Virgin Mary to Martha. It had already been shared with John the Baptist, Elizabeth, Joseph, the shepherds of Bethlehem, Simeon and Anna, and the Magi, and for some time with Andrew and John, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel, Matthew the publican, and then with Mary Magdalen and the other women who were already following and serving the Lord. But not only these—it had already been shared with thousands of people, with pharisees and publicans, with prostitutes, the sick of all kinds, and the possessed. It had already been shared with the children who jumped up on Jesus’s knees. There was already an entire people that shared the one thing needed, which Jesus was now offering to Martha.

And us? You and I? When this word reaches us, when it reached us and continues to reach us always anew, always new, think of the immense number of people with whom we already share it. Two thousand years of Christianity, of saints and sinners, of sainted sinners. But it is not a question of numbers, it suffices just two or three people who discover they share the belief that Christ is the one answer, total and universal, to the need of the human heart that it be filled with wonder, with wonder that this awareness happens to us, that it happens to each of us, to me!, to us who certainly do not deserve it more than billions of other people to whom it has not yet happened. What

wonder and responsibility! What gratefulness and contrition! Because if you find in your home, eating and drinking with you, sitting right there where you and your siblings sit to eat and chat every day, if you find in your home the one reality, the one presence that every human heart needs, that is needed in this precise moment by eight billion hearts beating on this earth, how can you not feel a dizzying responsibility? In one way or another you become a debtor to all of humanity by the fact that you have been given freely what everyone, absolutely everyone!, is awaiting expectantly.

### **Embrace Christ now**

But we do not need to think about this now. We do not need to think about those to whom this reality is outstretched, offered. Now we have to think about the reality itself because He is here and if I do not open myself and welcome Him, there is no use worrying about the universal need that awaits Him. Old Simeon immediately recognized that baby as the “salvation of all peoples..., a light to illuminate the peoples,”<sup>12</sup> but did so as part of taking that baby into his arms, holding Him close.

So then, we have to help each other understand how this word to Martha comes to save each of us now in the situation in which we find ourselves today, now, in the life of each of us, the life of the community, of the Fraternity, of the orders, of the Church, and of the world.

Let's put ourselves in Martha's shoes that day, that evening. Let's think how she withdrew into herself in front of the hearth where she was cooking something. Let's think of how she needed to go someplace quiet with this word that had wounded her. As I said, probably in the beginning she needed to cool down from her rage at not being listened to and understood by Jesus. This was the skin-deep, psychological, sentimental impression that invaded her at the moment and filled her with sadness. Before that evening, she could always at least blow up, which released her pent-up energy and freed her from her bad mood and did her good. Then she would return to her work knowing full well that her outburst had changed nothing, that her sister or whoever would continue like before, like always. But at least she had had her say; she could tell herself that she had said what she thought, even if she did not always think about what she said.

This time, it was as if Jesus had made this explosive reaction impossible. It had become subterranean and instead of blowing fragments and

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lk 2:30–32.

radiation over a radius of a thousand miles, the atomic energy invaded all the underground crevices of the subterranean level of her humanity.

In reality, Martha had begun to realize that Jesus's message revealed her to herself, not superficially, not simply by saying that she was an anxious person who always wanted to make a good impression and dominate everyone in every situation. She knew this already and probably her sister and brother had already told her so a thousand times. No, Jesus's words revealed her heart to herself, which is something quite different, much deeper than her superficial psychology, character, or temperament. For that matter, she knew that Jesus liked her temperament, that He always looked at it with fondness and probably joked about it, and she pretended to be offended but took delight in being made fun of by the Lord because in this way she felt she was the object of His affection; she felt understood and embraced. Otherwise, Jesus would not have come so frequently and willingly to their home that was so dominated by Martha that the Gospel does not say that Jesus was hosted by Lazarus or Mary, but by her.<sup>13</sup>

But Jesus's message, "Martha, Martha... there is need of only one thing," was not a joke or a small sign of impatience at her agitation. This word revealed her heart to her, exposed its deep, essential, total need, and revealed to her that she was attempting to fool this deep, essential, and total need, was not taking care of it. Or better, she was clogging it up with things, worries, activities, judgments, fears, irritations, preconceptions, and dislikes—just as we do!

### **The heart is a need for Christ**

What is the heart? When Jesus says that only one thing is necessary, we need to realize that "necessary" translates a Greek term that means "need," "poverty," and "lack." In fact, the new translation says "there is need of only one thing." When we say a thing is necessary, we think above all of the value of this thing and that it is important and at times vital to possess it. But often we do not think of the fact that the necessity of this thing is defined by *our* need, by the lack we feel or are. Our absolute need for Christ implies a mysterious "definition" that is inside us, that we are, that is our heart, our heart that needs Him, our heart that needs only Him, that lacks only Him. Without an awareness of ourselves as need, we cannot in truth welcome the gift of Christ, the encounter in which Christ reveals that

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lk 10:38.

He is for us, as for Martha, the only One necessary for the heart, the only One we truly need, of whom we *are* in need.

How could I not quote the great verse of Mario Luzi that we meditated on at the 2015 Meeting of Rimini: “What is this lack a lack of, oh heart, of which all of a sudden you are full?”<sup>14</sup>

That evening, Martha had exactly this experience; she was filled with this question that the heart asks itself. Our heart is a question, an entreaty that questions *itself*, an entreaty that fills us with wonder, first of all as entreaty, as lack. And we say to our heart, “How can this be? I give you everything. I fill you with so many things, so many cravings and anxieties, so many vanities and presumptions, so many judgments and prejudices, so many brilliant ideas and so many silly things. How can you need something else? How can anything else fill you? How can you fill yourself with a void, a lack, a need that is so imposing, so powerful that all of a sudden it sweeps everything else into a corner? As if all the other things were only an appearance, a ghost, a mirage, waste, trash. All the rest seemed so important! How is it that all of a sudden, like the blow of a sword, the desire for something else fills you?”

As we were waiting for this encounter we listened to *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*, op. 31, by Sergei Rachmaninoff. In his commentary for the *Spirto Gentil* CD series, Fr. Giussani highlighted the passage we listened to just before the beginning of this encounter, in which for fully eight minutes the composer repeats the expression “*Gospodi pomiluj!*” (“Lord, have mercy!”) Giussani wrote, “Why, brother Rachmaninoff, do you make us repeat, for eight minutes, ‘Lord, have mercy!’ ‘*Gospodi pomiluj!*’? Because our time has had no meaning, it has not had the meaning it could have had, it failed to achieve that total meaning which is called Destiny, it has totally ‘lost its memory.’ Destiny has not been a presence that molded something, it has not had influence on anything; everything in us has derived from instinctive reactions, from the indolence that has kept us from moving, from the irritation or resentment that breaks through the floor and makes anger go down into our innermost being, creating a bitter whirlpool revealing that there is anger inside you, even if it is not proclaimed and expressed.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mario Luzi, “Di che è mancanza...,” in *Sotto specie umana* [Under the human species] (Milan: Garzanti, 1999), 190. See also Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, *Si vive solo per morire?* [Does one live only to die?] (Siena: Cantagalli, 2016), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Giussani, “So That Your Joy May Be Complete,” notes accompanying the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, op. 31, by Sergej Rachmaninov, *Spirto Gentil*, CD 21. Claves Records, 2002.

I think this is the awareness that Martha came to that evening. Destiny reached her there, deep in her heart, at the “bitter whirlpool” of her heart penetrated by irritation, resentment, and anger.

### The encounter that reveals desire

But this question of the heart to itself, this awareness of the heart as entreaty for Christ, of the heart as a wound that only Christ can salve and heal, did not just come to Martha’s mind all of a sudden, out of nowhere, without anything happening to prompt it. This awareness was born in Martha because that evening she had encountered Jesus. Maybe she had known Him for some time, and perhaps had hosted Him many other times; she might have heard Him spoken of, perhaps by her sister, who had probably met Him before her, and who perhaps was the sinful woman who had washed Jesus’s feet with her tears and received forgiveness of her sins for having loved greatly.<sup>16</sup> Martha knew Him; they had spent time together and appreciated each other, but she had never *encountered* Jesus.

Fr. Giussani captured this in the passage that suggested the theme for these Spiritual Exercises, taken from *To Give One’s Life for the Work of Another*: “Christ, this is the name that indicates and defines a reality I have encountered in my life. I have encountered: I heard of it when I was a child, as a boy, and so on. It is possible to grow up knowing the word Christ well, but for many people He is not encountered, He is not really experienced as being present. In my case Christ bumped into my life, my life bumped into Christ, precisely so that I should learn to understand that He is the central point of everything, of the whole of my life. *Christ is the life of my life*: in Him is summed up all that I would desire, all that I look for, all that I sacrifice, all that develops in me out of love for the persons with whom He has put me, that is, out of love for you.”<sup>17</sup>

That day, that evening, Martha *encountered Christ; she had an encounter as event*. The Gospel describes in Martha and Jesus’s dialogue that leap of awareness that defines a true encounter with Jesus Christ. An encounter with Christ that changes your entire life happens when a man, a woman, are in front of Him just as they are, with all the humanity that defines them, the good and the bad, and it does not matter whether there is more good or

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lk 7:36–50.

<sup>17</sup> Luigi Giussani, *To Give One’s Life for the Work of Another* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022), 37.

more bad; it does not even matter if there is only bad. The important thing is that you find yourself just as you are in front of Him, in His presence. You can be entirely pure like the Virgin Mary, or a rascal like Zacchaeus and the good thief, or a woman with a messed-up life like the Samaritan woman, or a roughneck with a heart of gold like Peter, or a fine religious intellectual like Nicodemus, or a fanatic and violent pharisee like Paul—it does not matter! The encounter happens when a man, a woman, just as they are, find themselves in front of Him and in that moment Jesus manages to penetrate into the heart of this person, even if only with a whisper, maybe only with a gaze, in order to make the great announcement that all of life awaits expectantly: “All you need is me! You only need me! I am the fullness that the need of your heart thirsts for!”

And there, truly, “*Abyssus abyssum invocat*”—“deep calls to deep,” as Psalm 42 says<sup>18</sup>—the deep of the mercy of God calls, responding to the deep of poverty that is the heart of the human person.

Martha encountered Christ that day because on that day her heart was pierced by the consciousness of her vanity and vacuousness, and at the same time by the surprise that what filled that void was there, was given to her, in Jesus.

Each of us, and all of us together this evening, must start anew from there, and embrace Jesus’s words to Martha and Jesus’s gaze on Peter—they are the same because it is always and only the event of an encounter that comes, and always comes anew, as the only thing the heart needs, our heart and the heart of every person. I invite you to relive in your life, in your heart, in the awareness of your “I,” in the silence that you manage well or badly to offer, I invite you to relive this dialogue between Martha and Jesus in Luke 10:38–42. I invite all of you to go to Jesus and complain about everything you have to complain about, about yourselves, those at your side—husband, wife, children, your work, health, community, your Fraternity, the Movement, the Church, the entire world. And then I invite you to let yourselves be looked upon by Christ, and let yourselves be told in the words you want, in the words He encountered you with on a particular day, that your heart needs one thing alone: Him, present. Let’s allow ourselves to be called by name, like Martha, Abraham, Moses, and Saul of Tarsus, by our name repeated twice, so that we can become aware again of the attention paid specifically to us, to me in person, with which Christ looks at us, with which He calls us. And I invite you to pay attention to what happens in you and in your relationship with everything you

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<sup>18</sup> Ps 42:8.

complained about, even rightly. In other words, I invite you to discover or rediscover how life changes, all of life, in the light of His gaze and of the grace of being aware that our heart needs Him alone.

Tomorrow we will start again from there, to take up again together the journey to follow Him, reviving the awareness of the fullness of humanity to which Christ wants to lead us.

Now let us pray the *Memorare* together.





# *Saturday morning, April 30*

*During entrance and exit:*

*Johann Sebastian Bach, Credo, Mass in B Minor, BWV 232*

*Karl Richter–Münchener Bach-Chor und Orchester (Archiv Produktion) Universal*

*Angelus*

*Morning Prayers*

■ FIRST MEDITATION

**Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori**

*To be born in the encounter, to grow in following*

Fr. Giussani testified that “Christ bumped into my life, my life bumped into Christ, precisely so that I should learn to understand that He is the central point of everything, of the whole of my life. *Christ is the life of my life*: in Him is summed up all that I would desire, all that I look for, all that I sacrifice, all that develops in me out of love for the persons with whom He has put me. . . . Christ, life of my life, certainty of a good destiny, and companionship in everyday life, a familiar companionship that transforms things into good. This is His efficacy in my life.”<sup>19</sup>

## **The encounter is a birth**

On the evening of my encounter with Christ on February 25, 1976, in my town near Lugano, when I entered the home of a family of immigrants from the Friuli region who were members of Communion and Liberation, he a carpenter (like Saint Joseph), his wife who, only three years after I met her, went to heaven, full of faith and gladness in Christ who fulfills life, and their three children, on that evening in the course of a couple of hours, I was first seized by very deep sadness, then by a joy I had never experienced before. Like Fr. Giussani, I had heard Jesus spoken of ever since I was little, and at nearly seventeen, I was still Catholic, without particular doubts about faith or morality but, as Fr. Giussani always said, “It is possible to

<sup>19</sup> Giussani, *To Give One's Life*, 37–38.

grow up knowing the word Christ well, but for many people He is not encountered, He is not really experienced as being present.”<sup>20</sup>

This is the true problem of life, of Christian life, of the life of the Church, of the mission of the Church. If Christ is not encountered, if He is not truly experienced as present, it is as if He does not exist and as if there is no sense in the Church existing.

That evening in that home, with those people, everything took on meaning, my whole life—my faith, my Catholic family, the parish, the parish priests, the catechists, the Scouts; in a word, all of the Church I had belonged to ever since my birth. And everything happened essentially between my heart, certainly dissatisfied but little aware of the nature of its dissatisfaction (Martha was also dissatisfied when she complained about her sister and the housework she had to do alone!), between my dissatisfied heart and the evidence of a presence that said to me, too, “Mauro, Mauro, look, all you need is me! And here I am, I am here, so all in all for you that I fill your heart and cause it to overflow with a joy that you have never even imagined before.”

*Encountering Christ truly present is a birth, a childbirth.* For this reason, and I only understood this years later when I was writing Fr. Giussani about it, that evening I passed from an abyss of sadness to total joy because I was born! As Jesus said at the Last Supper, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy. When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world.”<sup>21</sup>

Then, like me, you may disown Him a thousand times, you may go a thousand times through this childbirth, which will only end when you are born into eternal life in Christ on the day of your death, but the crucial encounter, that day, that hour, will remain fixed like the day of your birth, a beginning that nothing can erase, a “first love,” as the Book of Revelation says,<sup>22</sup> which you can certainly abandon and betray, but not erase. It remains in life like a judgment that calls you to continual conversion, but a judgment full of tenderness, like when Jesus turned and looked at Peter in the High Priest’s courtyard,<sup>23</sup> and Peter saw again in that gaze the first immense and eternal love present in his initial encounter with

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>21</sup> Jn 16:20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Rv 2:4.

<sup>23</sup> Lk 22:61.

Jesus. He could not deny this. He had denied Jesus in His absence, in front of the inquiring faces of the doorkeeper and the guards, but he could not deny Him in the presence of His very gaze; that is, *in the present event of Christ's love for him*, because in that gaze full of tenderness and mercy there was the whole reality of Peter, or better, the whole of reality. What can there be for us outside the love-filled gaze of the Lord who loves us, makes us, calls us, sends us, and forgives us? If Jesus had denied Peter in that moment, Peter would have dissolved, because Peter did not exist for Christ only existentially but ontologically. But an encounter had happened in his existence and a friendship was born that had enabled him to become existentially conscious of the relationship that was making him, a friendship in which he lived his ontology, his being, in relationship.

Excuse me if for just once in these Spiritual Exercises I relate a scene from my book, *Simon Called Peter*, because it speaks about this mystery, and I could not describe it better than the way I did in this book from over twenty years ago; I still do not know where it came from.

Peter felt like he was done for. He trembled as each man came up close to inspect him, pointing an accusing finger at him. Desperately, he screamed and swore, "I'm not one of His followers! I don't know what you're talking about! I don't know that man!"

The guards were about to arrest him, but at that very moment the dignitaries and guards came out with Jesus tied up in their midst; so when he shrieked his last denial, Peter wasn't looking at the harsh and menacing faces of the guards. He was looking right at Jesus, who was looking back at him. There was enough daylight that Peter could see every nuance of the Lord's expression.

For a moment—but how long is a moment before the gaze of the Eternal?—everything around Peter disappeared. The guards, the servant women, the courtyard, the residence of the high priest, the fire, the chill . . . everything vanished. There was nothing but the Lord's face—and in it, Peter saw again everything he had lived through with the Master: the lake, the boat, the first catch. He could hear all of the Lord's words, and his own words to Him: "Put out into the deep"; "But upon your word"; "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"; "Henceforth you will be catching men"; "You shall be called Cephas"; "Bid me come to you on the water"; "Lord, save me!"; "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"; "Blessed are you, Simon. . ."; "Get behind me, Satan!"; "It is well that we are here"; "For me and for yourself"; "How many times must I forgive?"; "Lord, to whom shall we go?"; "You shall never wash my feet"; "I will lay down my life for you"; "Remain here, and watch with me"; "Simon, are you asleep? Could

you not watch one hour?"; "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the chalice which the Father has given me?"; "The cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times"...

But all of these words, all of these events were, in Jesus' eyes, nothing other than a story of love, and for the first time Peter understood, even saw, how much Jesus loved him, how great a friend He was. The words of his denial—"I do not know the man"—were reflected in the Master's eyes, so full of love and suffering, and fell back into Peter's heart like salt on a wound. He had never truly loved the love of Jesus, and he measured within his own heart all of the solitude, all of the abandonment of his only Friend and Father. No, it was not the Jews, it was not the Romans who wounded Jesus that night, but him, Peter! The abandonment of friends is a wound more painful than the hostility of enemies.

Now Peter really would have given his life for the Lord. Now he understood that he was willing to lose everything for Him. And in that endless instant—which will never end—Simon asked Jesus, with his eyes, if he could die for Him. And in that endless instant, the Lord answered with His eyes. Not now! Later! And in that endless instant, Peter did not object; he accepted the gift of powerlessness, the gift of being unable to do anything, the gift of the failure of his will, the grace of the powerlessness of his love. Simon, called Peter, accepted the wound of seeing Jesus with no one to love Him and felt the bitterness well up inside of him.

The cock crowed.

Jesus was gone.

Peter was already outside, shedding the blood of his tears for Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

## **You are born to grow**

So then, the encounter causes us to be born, but with respect to the encounter, we are structurally immature, like every child that is born. How does this encounter cause us to grow and mature? If the encounter with Jesus did not make us grow, did not lead us beyond ourselves, beyond the shell of dissatisfaction where our "I" is enclosed within our complaining, what would be the point of it? In this brief but very intense confession of the event of Christ in his life, Giussani emphasized right away that the encounter with Jesus who reveals Himself as the life of our life is a birth, like

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<sup>24</sup> Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, *Simon, Called Peter: In the Company of a Man in Search of God*, trans. Matthew Sherry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 103–6.

every birth, followed by *growth*, followed by a journey, a transformation, an evolution, a process of learning. “My life bumped into Christ, precisely *so that I should learn* to understand...”; “in Him is summed up all that I would desire, all that I look for, all that I sacrifice, all that *develops in me* out of love for the persons with whom He has put me. . . . Christ, life of my life, certainty of a good destiny, and companionship in everyday life, a familiar companionship *that transforms things into good*. This is His efficacy in my life.”<sup>25</sup>

Yes, there is an efficacy of Christ in our life, and all the work of conversion and following consists of allowing it to operate, permitting the Lord to re-create us, to reshape in us the new and true Adam out of the clay of our life, relationships, capacities, and fragilities, the material that from baptism onwards is in the hands of Christ Pantocrator, the Lord of everything who can do everything, whose efficacy is total and infinite, and who restores and renews us.

“Behold, I make all things new,” says the Lord in chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation.<sup>26</sup> He makes all things new beginning with us, above all with us, with me, with my heart that is attracted to Him because I need nothing other than Him.

Peter felt to the extreme the total immaturity of his relationship with Christ, to the extent that he denied Him out of pure cowardice, and this after three years living with Him day and night! What would the risen Lord propose in order to lead him to the extreme maturity and authoritative-ness of the Peter described in the Acts of the Apostles, a man who did not fear witnessing to Christ in the midst of town squares, courts, in prison, in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome, all the way to martyrdom? What would the Risen One propose to Peter to lead him to such an identification with Him that he would heal the sick with his shadow?<sup>27</sup>

Everything is summarized and condensed in the last dialogue between Jesus and Peter in John’s Gospel, chapter 21:15–19, a dialogue summarized in Jesus’s words: “Do you love me? Follow me!” The encounter with Him grows and makes us grow and becomes fruitful through following Christ with love.

Remember what I quoted yesterday from Fr. Giussani’s February 22, 2002 letter: “To follow Christ, to love Christ in everything: this is what must be acknowledged as the principal characteristic of our journey.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Giussani, *To Give One’s Life*, 37–38. Our italics.

<sup>26</sup> Rv 21:5.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Acts 5:15.

<sup>28</sup> See note 4, p. 10.

## **Martha, Martha!**

Let's return to the example of Martha, which teaches us a great deal about the dynamic of conversion implicated in the encounter with the only One we need. What journey began for her that evening? What was the impact of Christ's message that she withdrew to meditate on in silence? Maybe at first she withdrew to brood or grumble, but later above all to meditate, because Christ's words had a mysterious sweetness, a tenderness for her that she had never experienced before.

"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing."<sup>29</sup>

Jesus repeated her name twice. What attention He showed her! What esteem! It is precisely like when God called Abraham to ask him to sacrifice Isaac,<sup>30</sup> or when He called Moses from the burning bush;<sup>31</sup> that is, in the crucial moments of salvation history. Or it is like when Christ called Saul of Tarsus, who was wholly intent on his mad mission of persecution: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"<sup>32</sup> Martha also found herself in front of the God who seizes you in the place where you think you possess your life and asks you to have a preference for Him. In that moment Abraham was sure he possessed his posterity forever. Moses encountered God in the burning bush, and Saul was sure that he was doing what was right and true, the rightest and truest thing a man can do. Right there, where you think you possess your own life, right there, God asks you to have a preference for Him. Actually, He not so much asks you as proposes it to you. And immediately there is a mysterious attraction in God's proposal of Himself as the all of your life, as the life of your life. For this reason, Abraham even obeyed the proposal to sacrifice his son; Moses removed his sandals and approached the burning bush; Saul let himself be led like a baby and entrusted himself to the small Christian community of Damascus he had wanted to destroy.

For Martha it was the same call, brought down into her daily existence, but it was the same call. What difference of value can there be between the call of Abraham or Moses and that of this woman harried and busy in the kitchen, if the call comes from the same Lord and God? Actually, I would say that Martha's call was even more extraordinary, because the

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<sup>29</sup> Lk 10:41-42.

<sup>30</sup> Gn 22:1.

<sup>31</sup> Ex 3:4.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 9:4.

Eternal One did not call from heaven or a burning bush, or from Mount Sinai, but He was there, sitting in her house, there, speaking, a man like us who arrived tired and sweaty with dusty feet, and who then sat down to eat and drink like us. This is more extraordinary than the burning bush, more extraordinary than Mount Sinai smoking and trembling and causing the people to tremble. As Jesus said of John the Baptist: “Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”<sup>33</sup> We are greater because the proposal God makes us in His incarnate Son is more extraordinary. The way God offers this proposal in the incarnate Son, and thus in the flesh, in the daily life of our human existence, is more extraordinary. Martha’s kitchen, like the Virgin Mary’s little room or cave in Nazareth before it, were even more sacred places than the oaks of Mamre for Abraham, than Sinai for Moses, than Oreb for Elijah, because God had never been so present as He was in Jesus Christ. “And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us;”<sup>34</sup> literally, came to “pitch His tent,” to place His tent in our midst, to set up His tent in our midst, to encounter us up close, familiarly, within our life, and in this way with disarming simplicity to offer us in Himself everything for which the human heart is made, of which the heart of every human being in human history is made.

### The great decision

When someone is surprised by this, by this event, like Martha that evening at the words of Jesus, What happens? What should be done? What reaction is asked of the freedom provoked and attracted by such a proposal of fullness made by God?

For Martha, a journey, a following began. The Eternal One revealed to her that He is everything, not only in Himself (even the pagans knew this!) but *for her*, precisely for her—“Martha, Martha!”—just as for Mary and Lazarus, as for Peter and the other apostles. Jesus was everything specifically for her!

But when Christ reveals Himself to us as the only One necessary, as the only One we need, this first of all asks a decision of us, because if it is true that I need only Him, then I can no longer separate myself from Him. If this

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<sup>33</sup> Mt 11:11.

<sup>34</sup> Jn 1:14.

is true, I must necessarily verify this thing. If I do not do this, if I do not verify that He gives Himself to me as everything I need, allowing me to perceive this with the mysterious resonance that His gaze, His voice, His words make me feel in my heart; in short, if I do not verify this, I would betray myself, I would betray all the thirst for happiness, truth, beauty, and love with which my heart has tormented me since my birth, and maybe even before my birth. If I do not verify the totality of Christ for me, all my life would be lived in a shadow of sadness, the sadness of the rich young man<sup>35</sup> described in all the synoptic Gospels and in particular in Mark 10, a shadow that would make everything gray, all my possessions, all that before had been open to a desire for fullness, but that now would become only a suffocation of the desire of my heart, like a tomb in which I allow myself to be buried alive.

Before encountering Jesus and saying no to Him, the wealth and moral integrity of the rich young man (who said truly, “I have obeyed all the commandments. What am I missing?”) gave flesh to his desire for eternal life; it was like they were reaching out to Christ, crying out their insufficiency to satisfy the thirst of his heart; they were possessions and virtues that pushed him toward a mysterious point sensed by his heart but whose face was still mysterious because it had not yet encountered Him. Up to that day, the wealth, talents, and moral virtues of this young man were not closed in on themselves, did not dampen his enthusiasm, but drove the yearning of his heart toward something infinite. But then came the encounter, Jesus’s gaze of love on him, and Jesus said to him, too (with different words than to Martha, but they are always the same): “Only I can be enough for you! Your heart needs only me!” And Jesus did nothing other than make the young man see that he did not have to leave his wealth, talents, and virtues because they had become something bad, had become defects or vices, but simply because they had attained their purpose and fulfillment in his encounter with Christ. By now they had completed their task of making him desire a fulfillment that they could neither guarantee nor produce. *The tragedy of this young man was that he did not follow.* It was not that he was incapable of leaving his wealth. The tragedy was not following Jesus, not being with Him, not recognizing Him truly as the one thing he needed.

*He had the encounter, but he did not embrace following.* The encounter certainly happened. Otherwise, Why did he leave with such sadness? But then (excuse the play of words), following did not follow. Not following Christ does not mean that the encounter never happened. It means that the encounter did not continue, that it was aborted, did not become commu-

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<sup>35</sup> Mk 10:17–22.



nion with Jesus, familiarity and friendship with Him, a journey with Him. Sadness, the really ugly kind that suffocates our heart, is the disappointment of our heart that glimpses its fullness, the satisfaction of its deepest desire; it rips this fullness and satisfaction away from the heart (in and of itself, this is also a good sadness because it is good in the heart, true in the heart). It is like ripping a newborn away from its mother; the child loses the desire to live, grow, and set out on the journey of life.

*It is as if freedom disassociated itself from the desire of the heart.* This is the true drama of the rich young man and all those who encounter Christ but do not follow Him. I do not say that they encounter Christ but do not become saints right away. No, they encounter Christ, but they do not remain attached to Him. Even with all their sins, even with the wealth they cannot detach themselves from, they could still remain attached to Him, but they do not. It is as if freedom disassociates itself from the desire of the heart. The heart encounters, desires, and wants to embrace, but freedom or what we consider our freedom, through a calculation that lacks self-awareness, through fear provoked by ghosts or false projections, says no and does not allow the embrace. Then this false freedom, its own assassin, drags away the child heart that was about to embrace Jesus, despotically and in an authoritarian way imposing other ways leading toward other forms of fullness that will all prove to be false, both the ways and the forms.

## Shepherds of life

Many years ago, on February 20, 1995, I was at the deathbed of Bishop Eugenio Corecco, the priest who encountered Fr. Giussani when he was a young professor and brought Communion and Liberation to Switzerland. I was in the company of Fr. Giussani, who had come that day to visit Bishop Corecco for the last time.<sup>36</sup> Giussani wanted to return, but Corecco died nine days later. The bishop was under sedation for severe pain and could not stay awake, so for an hour, Fr. Giussani and I talked about life, death, limitations, charity, everything. It was maybe, or it was certainly, the most intense hour of my life, in the presence of these two holy friends and fathers, in front of the spectacle of their communion on the brink between life and death, between earthly life and eternal life. When Bishop Eugenio apologized for his sleepiness, saying, “Excuse me, today it’s hard for me,” Fr. Giussani said, “It is the

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<sup>36</sup> Antonietta Moretti, *Eugenio Corecco: la grazia di una vita* [Eugenio Corecco: The grace of a life] (Siena: Cantagalli, 2020), 295–96.

experience of limitation. But limitation has been overcome. Christ overcame nothingness!” And while Corecco slept again, Fr. Giussani told me, staring at our friend on the verge of death, that he thought the most impressive page of the Bible was the first chapter of the Book of Wisdom, and he was struck above all by the ending, where it says that man chooses death, even though God chooses life for him. “Because God did not make death / nor does He rejoice in the destruction of the living. / For He fashioned all things that they might have being / and the creatures of the world are wholesome. / There is not a destructive drug among them / nor any domain of Hades on earth. / For righteousness is undying. / The wicked reject immortality and righteousness alike. / It was the wicked who with hands and words invited death, / considered it a friend, and pined for it, / and made a covenant with it, / because they deserve to be allied with it.”<sup>37</sup>

It seems like a photograph of so much of the dominant culture in the world today, friend to death, desiring death as if it were a friend, as if it were a fulfillment of life. This is the bitter judgment expressed in Psalm 49 on those who live to gain the whole world without listening to the true desire of the soul, of the heart. “Like a herd of sheep they will be put into Sheol, and Death will shepherd them.”<sup>38</sup>

I told Giussani that this reminded me of Jesus’s words to the Jews, words full of sadness, when He wept over Jerusalem, “But you do not want to come to me to have life.”<sup>39</sup>

And there, in the gaze of this old father, already enfeebled by illness but very lively in heart and spirit, I saw and understood what charity is, the charity of those two men in front of me and of all those in my life I had recognized as friends and shepherds of life, not of death, the universal charity of all the popes who have been given to us, up to Francis, and the charity of certain shepherds who in front of every person, all of humanity, in front of the culture that follows death because it is led by mercenaries who care nothing about the sheep, do not give up, do not yield to the flat-teries of death, do not, as the Book of Wisdom says, accept it as a friend. They are shepherds—fathers, mothers who die rather than renounce being shepherds of life, shepherds who lead people to life, who lead people to Christ so that all can have life in Him, and have it in abundance. “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly,” says the Good Shepherd in John 10:10.

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<sup>37</sup> Ws 1:13–16.

<sup>38</sup> Ps 49:15.

<sup>39</sup> Jn 5:40.

## Within the great drama of humanity

This is the great drama of humanity within which we are called to decide for ourselves, too, first of all for ourselves, consciously, and ourselves also for others, as unworthy but real protagonists of the love and passion for the human person that are entirely Christ's. The great drama is that Life exists, came, is here and we can encounter it, but we can decide not to go to it. We can decline to decide to go to it; we can decline to follow it, not accept its proposal even though the heart recognizes it as fascinating, as the one thing it needs.

So then, the vital choice for everyone regardless of state of life or form of vocation, is between living with Christ or without Him, between living following Christ or living apart from Him.

This vital choice is not the choice of a "particular vocation," as is often said. It is *the fundamental decision of Christianity*, the choice asked of every baptized person in thousands of ways, or better, billions of ways, however many women and men there are, because it is about Christ Himself, what Christ is in Himself and for us. It is a decision in front of being, the being that is the most being that there is, the "I AM" who revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai but, as I said, became the daily presence in Christ, who comes to tell us, "I AM WITH YOU always [hence today as well, April 30, 2022, here or there wherever each of you is], until the end of the age!"<sup>40</sup> It is striking how Matthew's Gospel ends like this, with these words, because it means that the Gospel never ends, but continues forever, until the end of the world!

What Jesus is in Himself, the I AM of Jesus Christ, becoming a man, living as a man, dying on the cross, rising from the dead, *is all for us*, is everything needed to save us, gives Himself to us as Him whom we need absolutely, as He who responds to all the needs of our heart, life, relationships, work, the dish I am cooking like Martha, the night of fishing in vain that, like Peter, I spent with my companions. Christ gives Himself to us as the only One who responds to all the needs of all our humanity.

The encounter with Christ gives and proposes this; that is, everything. So, freedom faces a choice of Christ that is not limited to His words, doctrine, example to follow, love for the poor, the miracles He can do, and everything that you want. The choice of Christ is the choice of Him in the totality of His Person; that is, the choice of Him present, of Him asking to be present in all of my life, asking to be welcomed.

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<sup>40</sup> Mt 28:20.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me.”<sup>41</sup>

If we were aware of what this meant, if we were conscious that this word of Christ in the Book of Revelation is not a lovely pious image but a real description of His relationship with us, with me, we would tremble at the thought of how much we neglect an offer like this, the offer of everything, of everything that is at my door, like a beggar who comes to ask us for some money, when instead *He comes to ask that he be allowed to give us life*, to give fulfillment to our heart and to everything that composes, weaves, and molds my existence, even to every single hair on my head.

Thanks be to God that we are created in time and are not an angel, who for an instant of mistaken and prideful decision become damned for eternity. The Lord gives us the choice to make and remake continually, to renew continually. He knows that if we do not open the door to Him, we live without meaning, without the life of our life, and He does not resign Himself to this but returns over and over again to seek us, always returning to knock on our door. I am sure that the rich young man was Saint Mark himself, who converted and returned to Jesus because Jesus was not resigned to seeing him leave like that. In fact, immediately after the episode of the young rich man Jesus hurried to His Passion because He wanted to save him, wants to save every person.

However, those who agree and begin to follow Him, well or badly, those who want to remain attached to Him at every step of life, grow! They grow in life, in their humanity, in all that the presence of Christ makes different, more beautiful, gladder, more intense, more mature, meeker and humbler, more courageous, more capable of tenderness, peace, and the courage to affirm the true and the just decisively, to affirm Him, even to die for Him. Those who agree and follow Him grow in the holiness that is the fullness of humanity made possible for everyone, in every state of life and condition, by Christ’s presence and love. There is nothing of humanity that Christ did not come to redeem and give fulfillment to. For this reason, we need only Him.

What a wonder to see this growth of true humanity among us. What an even greater wonder to see my own self change, change in the friendship with Him, even if the wretchedness remains and maybe with time and age grows. Because the human truth of saints is so true, so founded only on Christ, that it does not matter if they continue for a long time, and maybe forever, to live alongside their own fragility, weakness, and even sin. The

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<sup>41</sup> Rv 3:20.

holy live even their own sin with truth, are sanctified even through their own sin, like Peter who cried bitterly. Maybe I am saying something heretical, but the pope says it too! Because the substance of Christian holiness is not in us, not in the person, not in the saint. The substance of holiness is the attachment to an Other, and everything comes from Him; everything *subsists* in Him, as Paul expressed it in the canticle in the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians.

“All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead [Christ, the life of life!], that in all things He himself might be preeminent. For in Him all fullness was pleased to dwell [of the whole universe, but first and foremost of my heart, of Mary’s heart, of the heart of everyone] and through Him to reconcile all things for Him [from Martha’s many tasks to the relationship with her sister, all the way to the war in Ukraine, to the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians], making peace [how dense with meaning is this term today!] by the blood of His cross [through Him], whether those on earth or those in heaven.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Everything gathers behind Christ**

But it is as if this cosmic, universal role of Christ must begin in Martha’s kitchen, Peter’s boat, Matthew’s tax-counting table, as it began before in the home of Mary of Nazareth, in Saint Joseph’s workshop, in the Bethlehem stable for the shepherds. By His choice, the Word of God’s choice, all of this recomposition of the universe mysteriously begins with me, with us, with the encounter of each of us. If the encounter is followed by your abandonment to His attractiveness, if you react to the encounter with an abandonment to His attractiveness that makes you decide over and over again to stay with Christ, step after step, circumstance after circumstance, encounter after encounter, betrayal after betrayal, then all of your life becomes a caravan of relationships, moments, gestures, and experiences that gather behind Christ, that follow Christ because your heart follows Him, because your heart heard the fundamental call that was sufficient to justify every other choice, every other renunciation, every possible sacrifice or embrace: “Martha, Martha, only I am necessary for you, only I give infinite and eternal fulfillment to the desire of your heart!”

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<sup>42</sup> Col 1:16b–20.

This following broadens and amplifies the “I.” Saint Benedict spoke of this maturation at the beginning of the Rule, so that the monks who followed it would understand that all the discipline it entails, all the toil of conversion it demands, is for the growth of the person in his capacity to love God and others with freedom, and in this way to welcome the broadening and expansion of the heart that Christ promises and gives to those who follow Him.

Benedict wrote, “Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.” He created communities that teach in order to serve the Lord and above all to follow Him. “In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness [as with children... every so often you have to be severe if you want them to grow] in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation [the rich young man]. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith [that is, in the following of Christ], we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”<sup>43</sup> Those who agree and accept, who follow step after step, will realize at a certain point that they are running, that they have the energy to run, because their hearts are broadened, amplified, filled to overflowing by the inexpressible sweetness of love and charity because they feel loved.

### **A humble and certain “I”**

When we read the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus in the eleventh chapter of Saint John’s gospel, a scene that evidently took place after the one narrated by Luke, maybe a couple of years later, we are struck to find a Martha characterized by her same temperament but with an “I” that is infinitely more mature, ardent, and at the same time serene.

“When Jesus arrived, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home [nothing had changed—psychologically they had remained the same, one works and the other sits there]. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not

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<sup>43</sup> Prologue, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 45–49.

have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus told her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.’ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, ‘The teacher is here and is asking for you.’<sup>44</sup>

What a harmonic contrast between the Martha in Luke’s episode and the one in this scene! “Contrast” because it is evident that this woman had made an immense journey in her following of Christ, in her conversion provoked by the first encounter. And “harmonic” because it is also evident that she was the same woman and that the conversion of her “I,” the growth of her heart, was not a leap outside her humanity but a journey of her humanity, temperament, relationships, and even her defects.

This is so much so that the first thing she said to Jesus almost seemed like a reproof, like that time before. “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died!” But it was entirely different, because it was a sweet reproof full of entreaty, full of the confession that truly only Jesus was necessary to Lazarus and to them. Then it seems Martha corrected herself right away and translated the veiled reproof into an act of faith that, without a shadow of demand or caprice, asked and begged everything of Christ with a certainty she lacked before. “But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.” What power, an “I” that says “I am,” not with an arrogant affirmation of her own capacity, wisdom, and competence, but of the Lord’s. Martha said “I” while totally entrusting herself to Christ, and for that matter, with the awareness that the “I” of Jesus as well is entirely founded on trust in the Father and thus is a sure “I,” a point of certainty for her as well, for us as well. What a great and mature consciousness Martha had of herself and of Christ in affirming that Jesus’s presence is the Father’s presence, that Jesus’s love is the Father’s love, that what Jesus does is what the Father does. The “I” of Martha, the little wretched “I” of Martha, confessed with total transparency the “I” of Christ, the way Jesus said “I,” knowing that He was defined totally and eternally by a relationship of love with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

In front of such a humble and certain “I”—and this is what fascinates us in the saints, and also in many people among us, the humility and

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<sup>44</sup>Jn 11:17–28.

certainly united by the love of Christ—Jesus felt free to reveal Himself totally, to manifest to Martha all of His divine nature, His divine power. The greatness of an “I” grounded in faith, with humility and trust, lies in the fact that it permits the Lord to manifest His own “I AM” totally, to manifest what it truly means that He alone is needed. Martha’s position permitted Christ to manifest Himself in all the greatness and tenderness of His being.

### **Step by step toward total faith**

“Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise.’ Martha said to Him, ‘I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus told her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.’”<sup>45</sup>

Jesus led Martha step by step to total faith. I remember that my “father,” Bishop Corecco, said before dying that he asked for only one grace: to die with total faith. Jesus led Martha step by step to a total faith. It is like a mother prompting her child with half a word so the child will learn to complete it and remember the whole word, learn to express herself not like a parrot, but like someone who knows how to express her “I” as an “I,” as identity, as freedom that affirms itself. If the mother told her the full word, the child would parrot it back, but instead she says half a word so the child becomes aware she is the one saying the word, she is the one discovering that she expresses herself. Martha, following faithfully as if she were reciting the answers from the catechism, said, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day,” a perfectly correct, exemplary answer, but Christ led her further—or better, He revealed that her faith in Him went well beyond the traditional faith of Israel. Following faithfully, her eyes on His eyes, her heart reaching out to Jesus’s heart, Martha received the revelation of everything, of everything she had begun to encounter a couple of years before in her home on the evening of her well-known little scene. “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

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<sup>45</sup> Jn 11:23–27.



Let us remember Fr. Giussani's words, "Christ, life of my life, certainty of a good destiny, and companionship in everyday life, a familiar companionship that transforms things into good. This is His efficacy in my life."<sup>46</sup>

"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." This, only this, is what we need, what everyone needs. This is the only thing necessary. We need a life that raises us from the dead, from every death, from every face that death and evil take on in our personal life, family, community, and the entire world. All the rest is a thousand things that worry us and make us anxious without being necessary, because they never respond to the true need of the heart, of every heart.

Not even life on this earth is truly necessary for us, because it is the theatre in which we perceive the need of the heart, but not what satisfies it. Lazarus would not be satisfied by the few years more he would live after his resurrection. We do not need not to die, or to survive—as Jesus told Martha, we need not to die in eternity, that is, we need eternal life, the life that only Christ can give us, that only Christ is for us. Jesus would raise Lazarus to life, but Lazarus was not made, wanted, and loved by God only for this. None of us is wanted and loved by the Father only to live a more or less long life. We are made by Him for Him, by God for God, and the heart finds no peace until it rests in eternal communion with the life that is Christ, in the bosom of the Father, in the breath of the Holy Spirit.

### **"Do you believe?"**

"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

What can be added to this total testimony of Christ to Himself? What can there be that is more than these words? What is there for us that is more than the complete revelation of the ontology of God given to us by Him present, looking us in the eyes, present here in flesh and blood, face to face with us? What more needs to be added?

It would seem that nothing needs to be added. And yet, no. Something is missing from this complete testimony, this total revelation, this definitive theophany of God to the human person. Jesus Himself made Martha understand, and us. "Do you believe this?"

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<sup>46</sup> See here note 19, p. 23.

There is no use in God coming into the world to announce Himself as the life of our life, as eternal life that no death can overcome, as eternal life here and now, not only on the last day but now, and not only for our dead but also for us who live; all this is of no use, Christ Himself and His death and resurrection are of no use, *if I do not believe*, if I do not see myself as a believing “you” in front of Christ, who encounters me in this way, revealing Himself in this way.

What esteem God has for women and men, for our freedom, if the manifestation of what He is as God stops humbly at the threshold of our heart, consciousness, reason, will, intelligence, and freedom, and lets a request to believe in Him pass toward us almost like the groan of a beggar, a request to be able to be Himself for us, to be able to be God, to be able to be the resurrection and the life, to be able to be He who makes and redeems us, He who gives us life and resurrection in eternal life!

“Do you believe this?” This question is not an examination of the Inquisition. It is the heart of God begging of the heart of the human person, the freedom of God begging of the freedom of the human person, the being of God begging of the being of the human person.

But we do not need to look for the answer to this question in ourselves. The substance of faith, the seat of trust, is not in us—it is in the Lord Himself. It is the Lord Himself. For this reason, Martha’s answer did not come so much from her memory or reasoning, but from her transposition into words of what she saw, what she had in front of her, what Jesus communicated to her about Himself looking into her eyes with love, with the desire to fill her life with meaning, to fill her life with Himself. “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world!”

Martha echoed what she saw, the experience of Christ she had in that moment. Jesus was manifesting Himself to her—it was a theophany in front of her. She saw and recognized it, because starting with the evening of her famous outburst, Martha had never stopped verifying the words that Jesus had said to her, the reality He had manifested to her, that He was the only thing necessary, the only thing that the heart desires, that fulfills everything, that fills everything. And now Martha was mature; she had grown in this experience of life, in the experience that Jesus really was the life of her life.

Above all, Martha confessed that this fullness was present, was a presence “that is coming into the world.” Not a presence standing there like a pagan idol, like a statue. *Christ is the presence of God who is coming where He is recognized, welcomed, and loved.* Martha had and continued to have this experience; for this reason, her heart was certain and authoritative in

the certainty that if Christ is everything for us, if He is the life of our life, all the work of our freedom consists in corresponding to the freedom of God to come into the world, so He can give Himself to the world in flesh and blood, and fill the world with the resurrection and be the life of the life of every person in any situation or condition, even if he has been dead for four days and is decomposing, like Lazarus.

### **The great verification**

Faith is acknowledging this, living for this with gratitude and hope. Thus every situation of existence, even one of death and sin, or of destruction and evil like the war in Ukraine, or of pain and suffering like all of the situations of trial, illness, injustice, and misery that continually touch us, directly or indirectly, is nothing other than the question proposed again to our freedom by Christ, the resurrection and the life, who is begging for our faith, our yes to Him, the life of life, the life of the world. “Do you believe this?” “Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life of your life?” Of the life of everyone?

Life asks nothing more. God asks nothing else of us. He does not ask us whether we cook well, or manage to serve dinner on time or to budge the inertia of our sister. Life asks us for faith in Christ. Life, the whole world, asks whether we recognize that Christ truly is the one thing we need, asks whether Christ is the resurrection and the life of our life. Life asks us to be the space of this verification, in which faith permits the presence of Christ to be the mysterious and always surprising resurrection and life of everything and everyone. We are surrounded by so many testimonies to this! As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.”<sup>47</sup> How many friends of ours form this cloud of witnesses, this multitude of witnesses who make us understand, who tell us that Christ is truly the life of life, in death, illness, and suffering, in everything.

Those who live this are authoritative. In this Gospel scene, Martha is the authoritative person who serenely orders everything and everyone. She is far from the aggrieved and exasperated woman of a few years ago! She is authoritative because she brought order to herself, first of all by allowing

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<sup>47</sup> Heb 12:1–2a.

Christ to create order in her. When you set a fixed and stable center, and agree to verify its substance, everything orders itself around it. Life becomes ordered with harmony and beauty, even in the midst of great turbulence, when we truly welcome Christ into ourselves, our life, all of life, as the one thing necessary, as He who alone responds to our heart's need for meaning and life. Everything falls into place around Him, in relation to Him. Only Jesus knows the right place for each of us and for everything that makes up our life, be it your hair or your wife, your shoes or your work, coffee or politics . . . everything.

In his Rule, Benedict ordered everything and molded all of the humanity of the monks into a harmonious order that spread from the monasteries into European and world culture. But he let all this harmonious order happen, to be generated from a center, a center that he could not impose, that every monk is called to choose and welcome freely because it is an affective center, a center in which my freedom corresponds to a love that asks it for love, a preference that asks for preference, a gaze fixed on me that asks for a gaze fixed on Christ. Benedict expressed this center by telling his monks that “the love of Christ must come before all else.”<sup>48</sup> In another part of the Rule, he said that the unhesitating obedience of the monks “comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”<sup>49</sup> And finally, when Benedict summarized in the next-to-the-last chapter what is essential in the life of the monks, he concluded by urging, “Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may He bring us [here is the following] all together to everlasting life.”<sup>50</sup>

All of life grows and is ordered in relation to this center, in a continual comparison with this center, always readapting everything to the central preference of Christ. This is how Martha grew, how her person became a spectacle of the harmony of the human, of all of her exuberant humanity that she demonstrated in the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus.

## **The strange people who prefer Christ**

When Fr. Giussani testified that Christ was the life of his life, he felt concern for all those involved in his charism, a concern he had already expressed many other times. For example, in the years when I was at the university,

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<sup>48</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 72:11–12.

he insisted a great deal on the famous (I hope it is still so!) passage from *The Tale of the Antichrist* by Solovyov.

“Now, in a grieved voice, the Emperor addressed them: ‘What else can I do for you, you strange people? . . . Tell me yourselves, you Christians, deserted by the majority of your peers and leaders, condemned by popular sentiment. What is it that you value most in Christianity?’ At this, elder John rose up like a white candle and answered quietly: ‘Great sovereign! What we value most in Christianity is Christ Himself—in His person. All comes from Him, for we know that in Him dwells all fullness of the Godhead bodily.’”<sup>51</sup>

At times I wonder whether those in power still regard us Christians, laypeople, priests, monks, and religious as “strange men” and “strange women,” and whether the powerful of the moment, the ideology of the moment, perceive us as strange, as not conforming to them, not easily absorbed into their interests, projects, and plans. Pope Francis is far from wrong in often denouncing the worldliness with which we live, even those who should be consecrated to the preference of Christ in a way that, if not exemplary, is at least meaningful, as a sign of the new life possible for everyone. But the new, different, “strange” life for the world begins with the “I,” with the heart that truly encounters Christ and lets Him announce and demonstrate in our life that truly He is the only One needed, the only One I need, the only One I hold dearest, and thus what we hold dearest and most precious, the last thing we would give up if everything were taken from us, even life. The martyrs testify to us that Christ, because He is the life of life, is the dearest thing in life.

This was the testimony given to us by Bishop Corecco, my father in the faith, who lived his years of illness radiating with truth and gladness the peace he received from Psalm 62:4 from the Morning Prayer of Sundays or feast days: “Your grace is worth more than life.”

Everything reminds us of this, calls us to this maturity of the “I” in the faith that allows the Risen One present to be the fullness of the heart in all of the circumstances of existence. Those who follow Christ, verifying in everything that He is the resurrection and the life of life, grow in a new relationship with everyone and everything, a relationship that is free because those who hold nothing dearer than Christ are freer than the emperor; they dominate everything more than the emperor of the world.

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<sup>51</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ*, trans. Alexander Bakshy (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1990), 183–84.

But there is an aspect of this verification that we must look at more deeply this afternoon. Martha did not travel this road alone. Alone, she would not have made it, and neither will we.

Let's sing the *Regina Caeli*.

# *Saturday, April 30, afternoon*

*During entrance and exit:*

*Johann Sebastian Bach, Cantata "Christ lag in Todesbanden," BWV4  
Karl Richter–Münchener Bach-Chor und Orchester (Archiv Produktion) Universal*

## ■ SECOND MEDITATION

**Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori**

*"The teacher is here and is asking for you"*

### **Gladness and freedom**

"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying: "The teacher is here and is asking for you."<sup>52</sup>

This morning we spoke about the journey Martha made after her furious effort to verify Jesus's provocation when He told her that He was the only reality she needed. Martha made a journey because she verified this judgment, but above all this presence, within all the nooks and crannies of her life. She undertook a task within herself, living with Jesus's announcement within herself, and discovered more and more clearly that it was true, that Jesus truly was infinitely more necessary to her than all the needs and demands that filled and, above all, enslaved her life and heart. She experienced liberation; her heart swelled and was filled to overflowing with the meaning and gusto of life. Now, nothing closed her in on herself, or if it happened again, the memory of that presence and that message, and the experience it generated in her, reopened her heart and freed her from the anguish and complaints that continually tried to submerge it again. And so she was glad. Even in the face of life's drama, even in pain like that caused by the death of her brother Lazarus, Martha felt she was glad; that is, free from the closing in upon herself that had previously suffocated her.

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<sup>52</sup> Jn 11:25–28.

## Renouncing the falsity of the “I”

This work was not easy because with the temperament she had, her verification that an Other was all that she needed, her renunciation of procuring on her own what she thought she and others needed, meant and continued to mean a denial of herself, a renunciation of herself that frankly was not pleasant for her.

As you know, the logo of the Fraternity depicts Saint Benedict. It was the work of the Brazilian artist Claudio Pasto (1948–2016), whom I had the grace to meet in San Paolo only a few months before he died.<sup>53</sup> An artist full of faith, Pasto did the most important Marian shrine in Brazil, Our Lady of Aparecida, for me one of the great marvels of contemporary Christian art. Around his figure of Benedict, Pasto wrote half of a line taken from Benedict’s Rule: “*Ut sequatur Christum*” (“in order to follow Christ”). The medal does not quote the first half of this verse from chapter 4 of the Rule, which is apparently negative: “*Abnegare semetipsum sibi, ut sequatur Christum*” (“renounce yourself in order to follow Christ”).<sup>54</sup>

It almost seems as if Benedict wanted to totally crush the “I,” because he did not just say renounce “yourself,” but “*semetipsum sibi*”—“yourself to yourself.” Evidently this was part of the monastic ascesis in Benedict’s era that did not fear disciplining the body. However, when we see how often we live as slaves to an alienated “I” full of lies and ideologies, full of caprices generated by a brazen well-being that forgets the poverty of too many others; when we see how we are infected by what Pope Francis calls “the culture of consumerism, the culture of [indifference and] waste, the throwaway culture”;<sup>55</sup> when we see how much our individualism and instinctive disposition shape our approach to our lives, communities, fami-

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<sup>53</sup> This image of Benedict in the logo is taken from the medal Pasto created in 1980 for the anniversary of the birth of the Patron of Europe. That same year, the abbot of Montecassino, Martino Matronola, conferred the first ecclesiastical recognition on the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation. In the medal (and logo) Benedict holds up his right thumb and index and middle fingers to indicate the three persons of the Holy Trinity, an invitation to dwell in communion. His left hand points to his heart, where the ideal of the Rule—evangelical life—is realized. The spirals of jewels and the round form of the medal symbolize the dynamic of the divine that becomes incarnate in women and men. *Ut sequatur Christum* (“to follow Christ”—*Rule of Benedict*, 4:10) is written along the border to indicate the path of the journey. See also Giorgio Feliciani, “A Note of History,” in Giussani, *The Work of the Movement*, 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:10.

<sup>55</sup> Francis, “Homily at the Holy Mass for the Opening of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 4, 2015; Francis, “Message for the Celebration of the 54th World Day of Peace,” January 1, 2021.



lies, husbands, wives, children, and work or vocation, well, maybe it would not be so bad today to have, if not a mortification of the “I,” which can be misunderstood and lived badly, but at least a work on oneself that makes us conscious that viewing the “I” as the all-in-all in life—which is a problem of individualism, conceiving of the “I” as the god, the idol of your life—is not a position that leads to happiness, that leads us to embrace a more important meaning in our lives. In fact, as we see in children, joy is an experience in which the heart “explodes” beyond itself, so to speak.

I believe that Martha undertook this task of renouncing an “I” that was full of itself, a self-centered “I” that demanded that everyone else center on it too. But she did not undertake this task and make this journey by means of her own determination and strength. This would have been worse! I imagine that the demons are convinced they are the most good-hearted and altruistic beings in the universe, only because they do everything by themselves and for themselves. No, Martha was able to make this journey because she looked at Christ and allowed herself to be attracted by Him, even though He had contradicted and irritated her. In contradicting her, He touched a raw nerve; that is, her idea that she could fulfill her own life, an idea that closed her in on herself and caused her to suffer and suffocate, poisoning everything in and around her—relationships, work, religiosity—everything.

### **A shared provocation**

However, Martha did not make her journey alone, and on that evening she was not the only one Jesus had called and to whom He had revealed Himself. Martha made this journey of working on herself in the context of a companionship, together with others who decided to take up this journey, doing this same work on themselves together with her.

That evening, what happened, what Jesus said and revealed, was not about a simple quarrel with Martha or a moment of spiritual direction for her. Their conversation became Gospel because it is a question that concerns everyone and immediately touched and involved all those present that evening in Martha’s home. I am certain that all three siblings had an encounter that evening with Christ that gave new meaning to their life together. In fact, after Jesus corrected Martha, Lazarus and Mary remained in silence. Mary and Lazarus could have winked at each other with an ironic little smile because Jesus had agreed with them about Martha’s unceasing and exasperating anxieties and demands. Worse still, they could have

said in chorus, “We told you so! Even Jesus sees that you upset everyone with your worries and demands, with your obsession to control everyone and everything!”

Instead, for them too, silence! They also listened and reflected on themselves because what Jesus had told Martha, that He was the one essential reality needed, was something too great, too important to concern only Martha! Each of them reflected on themselves—even Mary who had been praised by Jesus and could have felt that she was alright. Lazarus and Mary certainly asked themselves, “And me? Do I truly live my encounter with Jesus recognizing that He is the one necessary answer to my need for happiness, peace, fraternity, beauty, and fulfillment of life? Is it true or not that for me He is everything, the best part? That He is my peace, that everything in my life is ordered and rests around Him and in Him?”

I confess that when laypeople battered by the world’s tempests say that we monks have chosen the better part, feeling almost guilty for not having done so themselves, it really makes me reflect. I have the impression that for those in a monastery, the best part is often not as dramatic a choice as it might be for those in the midst of a shipwreck in their work or family, or in society and politics. In the scene of Martha and Mary, it seems as if Mary was given the better part on a silver platter, too easily. Instead, Martha was called to a dramatic choice and as we will see, she truly made the choice, truly sacrificing the false position of her “I.” For this reason I have the impression that Mary understood that evening that she, too, had to renew her choice of Christ, to choose truly, and like Martha, to follow Jesus’s provocation.

Let’s think about that evening or the next day, after Jesus and the apostles had left, and Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were alone in the silent house putting things away and cleaning up after the dozen Galilean men, mostly peasants and fishermen who were little accustomed to fine manners. Certainly, the siblings looked at each other in silence, with a mixture of sadness and serene, grateful, and glad peace. It was a glad sadness because it was desirous of a good they had experienced with gratitude, but could never possess in full. The three looked at each other in a way that they had never done before, with a tenderness in their gaze they had never had before. It is clear from every scene in the Gospel in which the three appear that they loved each other, but that this tenderness was not there before. It was evident to all three, even without saying it—though later they must have said it—that things were no longer the same among them, that they had entered into a different

fraternity, a different familiarity, and that their home, so familiar to them, where maybe they had lived with their parents and grandparents since they were little, where they had grown up together, had become a new place, a new space, something holy, like a temple, a space to live in like in a temple. They sensed that the newness among them and in their house began exactly at the moment when Jesus, taking the opportunity of Martha's complaint—though He could have taken an opportunity afforded by anything—revealed to Martha and to all those listening that every human heart is made for Him as the only One necessary, as the one answer to the need of life, of everything human that constitutes us.

This is always what happens in an encounter with Christ, if you truly encounter Him. Jesus says it in a thousand ways, but it is always this experience. Here are three examples from the Gospels.

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For My yoke is easy, and My burden light.”<sup>56</sup>

And, “Jesus answered and said to her [the Samaritan woman at the well], ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”<sup>57</sup>

And, in another passage from John, “On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, ‘Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: rivers of living water will flow from within him.’ He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in Him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.”<sup>58</sup>

## **The newness of fraternity in Christ**

That the three siblings worked together on this event, that they simultaneously corresponded to this newness, and that they made a journey together, can be seen not only in the maturity Martha demonstrated when Jesus came to Lazarus's tomb, but also and above all in her new relationship with her sister Mary. Just one detail is enough to show that the two sisters had a new rela-

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<sup>56</sup> Mt 11:28–30.

<sup>57</sup> Jn 4:3–14.

<sup>58</sup> Jn 7:37–39.

tionship. After the encounter and conversation with Jesus when He revealed Himself to Martha as the resurrection and the life of life, she went to call her sister in a way that denotes their new relationship, the new relationship that grows in those who are verifying together that Christ is the only One necessary for the heart and for life, the new relationship present among those who are together because Jesus Christ is there, because Christ is everything. She said to Mary: “The teacher is here and is asking for you.”<sup>59</sup>

This expresses all the newness that Christ brought into the world, a newness in relationships, a new fraternity and kinship, a friendship that is inconceivable for the world, and above all impossible without Christ. Martha called Mary to tell her that Jesus was asking for her; she transmitted the call of the Lord who was present. He is here and is calling you, is asking for you, wants to encounter you. By now, both knew that Jesus was the only One necessary, the life of life. They were united in this awareness, in finding the total satisfaction afforded to the heart in Christ.

“The teacher.” For Martha, this title was full of all the authority of Christ, His *auctoritas*, which etymologically means “to cause to grow;” that is, she was full of the fact that the relationship with Him and listening to Him makes us grow, makes life grow, makes the heart swell and overflow, introduces the truth of everything, from relationships, work, affections, and human frailties to death, the pain caused by the death of Lazarus, or one’s own death. By this point, for Martha the “teacher” was “the resurrection and the life,” He who is present to resurrect us, so that we can live with fullness. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, Jesus the teacher is “the Life—to be lived, the Love—to be loved,”<sup>60</sup> and many other qualities and attitudes that we are called to assimilate and absorb from the authoritativeness of the grace of His presence, His love for us, and His gaze upon us.

There can be no deeper and truer communion, no more beautiful and solid fraternity than sharing this faith and desire, this faith that is a desire for Him, a desire for and embrace of Him. There can be no greater reciprocal gift, no more indestructible unity, than reminding each other of the presence of Jesus who desires us, to give an answer to and satisfaction of our fundamental desire for life. Martha and Mary were so tacitly and deeply united in the consciousness that the presence of Jesus was the life of life, for them and everyone, even for the dead like Lazarus, that when they met Him at

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<sup>59</sup> Jn 11:28.

<sup>60</sup> “Let us all become a true and fruitful branch on the vine Jesus, by accepting Him in our lives as it pleases Him to come. . . . As the Life—to be lived; as the Love—to be loved.” Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Vardey (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 35–36.

different times, they said the same thing, expressed the same consciousness, the same desire of the life of life that He is: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”<sup>61</sup>

## Sharing the verification that He is everything

I emphasize all of this because it seems to me that these episodes and words, these people of the Gospel show us the existential paradigm of the Church, the companionship of people, the friendship and fraternity in which each of us is granted the opportunity to and asked to go deep into an encounter with Christ, to the point of reaching a fullness of humanity, a fullness and maturity of the “I” that changes the world, that renews all things by corresponding to the event of Christ and bearing witness to Him. Nothing testifies to Christ and the fact that He is everything for women and men than a person whose life is thrown into verifying Christ’s proposal to the heart, Christ who says to the heart, “I am everything for you and for everyone!”

But even more than this, or indissolubly tied to this, nothing testifies to Christ and the fullness He is for the human heart than *a companionship of people united in this verification*, than this experience of hearing yourself called by the only One needed and verifying that truly the heart and life need nothing other than Him. *Christian communion is sharing the verification (verification literally—to make something true and real) that Christ is everything for the human heart.*

Nothing more precious and dear can unite people, and nothing should make us more responsible for our unity in the face of the entire world. The reason for the unity of the disciples is the experience that Christ is everything for every human heart, that Christ is the life of the life of every person, and if I have this experience, so surprising and gratuitous, which I do not deserve, I am immediately responsible for every human heart. And if I experience that the fraternity I share with those God has set alongside me makes truer and more real the verification that Christ is the one reality necessary for people, then the same unity with my sisters and brothers becomes a universal responsibility toward the whole world. In other words, if I say to the person next to me, “The teacher is here and is asking for you” or “Christ, the resurrection and life is present and is calling you,” in reality I am saying it to everyone, I am transmitting the presence and call of Christ to the whole world. Not because I am good or because I am known by everyone, or because the per-

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<sup>61</sup> Jn 11:21, 32.

son to whom I communicate Him is important, but because of the nature of Christ, because of what Christ is when He is sitting in my kitchen, even when He is present in my crazy community or family.

Ecumenism lived this way is a universal responsibility that all Christians owe to the whole world. In fact, the more you share in this experience, the more you verify together that Christ is truly everything, that He is everything for everyone, everything in everyone. The sharing of this experience and verification does not diminish, but rather accentuates, the totality of Christ for each person, for each heart.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while He spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”<sup>62</sup> the disciples of Emmaus asked each other. What a deep and tender communion united these two disciples of Emmaus in sharing the experience that only when Christ is present, when the teacher is present, does the heart of each person burn with fullness! Their friendship had never been so intense as on that journey with Jesus, and there are those who would not exclude the possibility that they were husband and wife, or in any case two disciples bound by years of a relationship, maybe of work, home, kinship, or friendship. But they were not so united before. In fact, before, there was lamentation over and disappointment in Christ, who died in that ignoble way without keeping the promises they had attributed to Him so that He would meet their expectations, good ones like the liberation of Israel. “We were hoping that He would be the one to redeem Israel.”<sup>63</sup> It was the same for Martha, who that evening expected only that Jesus would make her sister help her; she only wanted Jesus to give Mary a kick to make her get up and work.

How little we expect of Christ when we do not allow Him to reveal to us that He is everything needed for our deepest desire!

### **The mission of fraternity**

In transmitting to Mary the call of the teacher present, Martha shared with her sister an openness to Christ that allowed Him to give us everything, everything in Himself, all the life that He is for us. They shared a faith and hope that placed no limits on Christ’s gift to the world. Only by living a communion like this are we truly missionaries. Christ came to us, came to call us, to save the world, without limits. He did not come just to free Israel

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<sup>62</sup> Lk 24:32.

<sup>63</sup> Lk 24:21.

or just to put order and discipline into Martha's house. And yet we almost always set these limits and reduce the event of Christ in the same way. We do not reduce it in and of itself because in words we believe that Christ is the Son of God, who became flesh, died, and rose for the salvation of the whole world. We reduce it in how little we allow this event to change our life, to fill our life. We would like it to correspond to us in the measure of our delimited desire, which is nothing compared to the desire for unlimited salvation that Christ has in His heart, a desire that He also has for me! Christ does not want to use us to save the world while skipping our own need for salvation. The opposite is true. Christ saves the whole world through the salvation of my life, through the fullness of my heart, the resurrection of my life. "I am the resurrection and the life," but not only for Lazarus, for you, Martha! And starting with you, for all those you will meet, like shortly your sister. "I am the resurrection and the life" in person, in absolute, and thus for everyone, everyone! If my life explodes in you, you will not be able to live it without embracing the world, without longing for universal salvation, which is my yearning, the one that made me die gladly on the cross for you!"

What extraordinary human growth happened in Martha and Mary, who passed from competition and reciprocal demands, such that it seemed that Jesus was also a point of contention and jealousy between them, to the mature awareness that sharing the value of Christ made Him even more precious and present for each of them; this is the experience that in sharing Christ, I myself receive Him more.

By this point Martha no longer complained if Mary was sitting around when there was so much to do to offer hospitality to all the people who came to console them after Lazarus's death, nor did she complain when Mary soon after poured all that precious nard on Jesus's feet.<sup>64</sup> Martha was at peace with the contemplative gratuitousness of her sister, as she was at peace with her role as do-it-all woman, because she understood, or rather, experienced, that in all things they shared the most precious treasure, which gives infinite value to her housework and to the inactive contemplation of Mary. Nothing distracted her from finding the fullness of her heart in Christ present—all the rest was just the background of this experience.

However, we have to make this verification in our life of fraternity, of communion and friendship, and not only within our community, but also with our husbands and wives and children, our friends and colleagues, and even our enemies and rivals. We should always ask ourselves: Is there space in all these spheres for Christ present who is the life of life, the fullness of the

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<sup>64</sup>Cf. Jn 12:1–11.

heart and of all our humanity? Is there a prominent space for Christ in our life, relationships, and get-togethers, even recreational ones, and in our tiffs and conflicts? Is there a prominent space for Christ in the crises of our relationships? Is there a prominent space for Christ really present even in the crises of our conception of our relationships, the meaning of our being together, our journeying together? Is there a prominent space for Christ, for example, in our conflicts of interpretation over a charism, a mission, or a vocation?

Bearing witness to the Risen One, which is the substance of every missionary presence, even within the four walls of a monastery or a home, shines out when we recognize, or at least beg to recognize, that in the midst of everything, Christ, the teacher, the Lord, the resurrection and the life, is here and is calling us.

Archbishop Montini, the future Saint Paul VI, wrote at the beginning of his ministry as archbishop of Milan a pastoral letter for Lent with the title, taken from Saint Ambrose, “*Omnia nobis est Christus*”—“everything is Christ for us.”<sup>65</sup> I regret that we lack the time now to read it all, because it affirms with an ever-current clarity that the urgent need for the Church and the world is to regain the awareness that Christ alone is necessary for us and to have this experience again. It is striking to think that Archbishop Montini published this letter a few months after Fr. Giussani, in the preceding October, had walked up the famous steps of the Berchet High School to begin, without knowing it, the movement for which the Holy Spirit had destined him. I can imagine how the words of his archbishop on the absolute necessity of Christ must have reverberated in Fr. Giussani’s heart.

In this letter, Montini gave an extraordinary definition of Easter, extraordinary because it makes us understand how it must involve us. “Easter [is] the proclamation of our need for Christ, our life.”<sup>66</sup>

## **True friendship**

“The teacher is here and is asking for you.”<sup>67</sup>

We need to grasp the full intensity of these words because they define the substance of Christian community, of the friendship and fraternity that are only made possible by the event of Christ and that make us those

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<sup>65</sup> Saint Ambrose, *De virginitate*, 16:99.

<sup>66</sup> Giovanni Battista Montini, *Omnia nobis est Christus*, Lettera pastorale all’arcidiocesi di Milano [Pastoral letter to the Archdiocese of Milan], Quaresima 1955 [Lent 1955].

<sup>67</sup> Jn 11:28.



“strange people” of whom Solovyov’s emperor spoke, those who value nothing as much as Christ. As I mentioned earlier, Martha expressed everything, her full encounter with Christ the resurrection and the life in this line: “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”<sup>68</sup>

In calling her sister in the way she did, Martha translated her personal acknowledgment of Christ into a new relationship with her sister. It is very beautiful to see the correspondence between what she had just told Jesus, “I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world,” and what she then went to tell her sister, “The teacher is here and is asking for you”; that is, He came for her. Those who recognize Christ alive and present have a new relationship with everything, and above all with everyone, beginning with the relationships that already form the weft and warp of their lives.

Andrew immediately demonstrated this same new relationship with his brother Simon. “Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. [They had been together a lifetime; they had worked together, shared all of each other’s joys and pains, argued and told each other to go to hell thousands of times!] He first found his brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated ‘Anointed’). Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John; you will be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).”<sup>69</sup>

What changes the usual and often worn relationships, damaged by time and routine and by the way we take each other for granted, even and above all the people we are bonded to by vocation—husbands, wives, children, the monks or nuns in your community? What changes these relationships? Maybe the fact that I have become a better person, less unpleasant, more generous, less boring? That I hold my tongue rather than criticizing all the time? But often holding your tongue is what allows the mold, if not the poisonous plants, to grow between me and others. No! *What changes my relationships is the presence of Him who fills my heart.* Andrew encountered One who responded to all the thirst of his heart, and meeting Peter he realized that Christ filled him so much and had become so dear and precious as to fill even everything that was missing or ruined between him and his gruff older brother. He managed to give Christ to Simon Peter because the presence of Jesus was so great and real in his heart that Peter was absorbed by it, with all his heart and life, and became another person, so himself as

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<sup>68</sup> Jn 11:27.

<sup>69</sup> Jn 1:40–42.

to be another. “You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas.” It was not that he would no longer be Simon, son of John. Peter would remain himself for better or for worse, even after Pentecost, but he was another because the eternal identity he had in front of Christ emerged in his life, what he was for Christ, from all eternity and for eternity. And if Christ is present, what I am for Him *happens*; it is more me than myself. It defines me more than anything, more than myself. If Christ is present, He makes happen what I am for Him in His relationship with me. If I keep him present, I allow Him to make me be what I am for Him.

“The teacher is here and is asking for you.” Christ transmits Himself among us, was transmitted to us and transmits Himself among us *in the echo of His call that our relationships become new*, even the most familiar and intimate ones. Christ called Mary, but Martha became for Mary the temporal, in-the-flesh transmission of the call of the eternal. Christ was present, and Martha told Mary, “He is here!” Christ called Mary, and Martha told Mary, “He is asking for you!” She added nothing, made no comment, interpreted nothing. Her person, body, voice, gaze, the somewhat labored tremble in her breath, the sweat on her forehead, her glistening eyes, everything about her became the transmission of Christ who was calling her sister. Martha became the incarnation of the presence and call of Christ for her sister, of the love of Christ, of the love of God for each person.

“And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”<sup>70</sup>

The experience of the Virgin Mary immediately after the Annunciation, in her going to visit Elizabeth, becomes the daily experience of the ecclesial community, of the Church. Elizabeth remarked on it with wonder, moved in her own flesh as a woman and mother: “For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.”<sup>71</sup> The presence of Christ is so real among us that we also experience it physically.

### **Not proselytism, but attraction**

But the transmission of the presence of Jesus among us is not mechanical. Why? Because it is a transmission between Christ present and the freedom of the other. Martha did not go to her sister and say, “Go right away, Jesus is here! Don’t miss your chance!” No, she did not propose

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<sup>70</sup> Jn 1:14.

<sup>71</sup> Lk 1:44.

Christ like a talisman you have to touch or else you will have bad luck. She proposed Christ as He who first proposes Himself to our freedom, attracting us to Him with a humble ardor, with His love thirsty for ours, thirsty for our heart, thirsty for the thirst of our heart. It was the same with the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, and the good thief. As Pope Francis and Pope Benedict would both say, Christ did not convert these people through proselytism but by attraction, by how our freedom is attracted by Christ. Christ attracts our freedom; He does not attract us by enticing us through other things, through what would interest us or our caprices, but rather through our freedom. This attraction proposes steps that respect your questions and hesitations (He spent a night talking with Nicodemus), until you yield not to force but to infinite love, the evidence of infinite love. Think of the patience of those who generated us in the faith, in the Christian experience, what patience there was in waiting for our freedom to grow and say yes!

Martha went to her sister already permeated by an attraction to Christ. Imagine the beauty of the Lord, His attraction to her heart, when He said, looking her in the eyes, “I am the resurrection and the life”!<sup>72</sup> Imagine the absolute beauty that icons try to express. He says this as the attractiveness of God to women and men; He does not say it so much to define Himself, but to define His relationship with us, the sway over us of this absolute beauty. In fact, He added right away, “Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”(!)<sup>73</sup> He offers us a life that does not die, that does not die in eternity! This life is Him. What can attract us more? Rather, what else can attract us if not this?

So, testimony, as the substance of true relationships, true friendship, true fraternity, as the substance of ecclesial communion, transmits this reality to the freedom of the other, proposes this reality from my freedom attracted by Christ to the freedom of the other attracted, called, not by me, but by Christ. “The teacher is here and is asking for you. [He!]”

If we had this awareness of relationships, this judgment on our instinctive disposition in relationships, what a splendid sun our communities would be, even the least, the smallest, the craziest, in the midst of a world in which attraction and freedom are slaves to each other and thus do not breathe, create friendship, or expand and overflow the heart and life. In the world, attraction and freedom are fused and thus do not move, do not change life.

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<sup>72</sup> Jn 11:25.

<sup>73</sup> Jn 11:25b–26.

Thanks be to God, we have so many positive testimonies to this! What a wonder it is that realities like this are spread throughout the Church, in the Fraternity, the movements, and the orders. This is how the Church lives and transforms the world, how the Church is salt and leaven in the dough of the world, not so much because we love each other, but *because we love each other in this way*, in a way that can also be seen in a husband and wife's embrace, that embodies our telling each other, like Martha to Mary, Andrew to Peter, the Samaritan woman to the people of her city, that Christ is present and is drawing you to Himself, is calling your freedom to go to Him, to be the resurrection and life of your life. Loving each other in this way makes the Church the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

No embrace, friendship, or fraternity is deeper or more intimate than this. Why? Because it means that what unites us, what holds us tightly together (also husband and wife) is, as Saint Augustine says, that which is most intimate to me of myself, that which is most intimate to you of yourself, that which is most intimate to us of ourselves, of our intimacy<sup>74</sup>—the fullness for which the heart is made and satisfied by Christ, by God, by God in Christ.

This intensity and profundity in relationships vanquishes death and the separation among us that death seems to create, because it is the presence of the Risen One, of Him who resurrects us, who is the life of life; it is the presence of the Risen One who calls even through death, through separation. He who attracts my heart to Himself is the same, the same presence, that attracts the beloved to Him in death, through death. He who attracts my heart to Himself is the same One who attracts the person I love to eternal life. *Death is the mysterious sign of the definitive nature of our vocation, the definitive sign that we need nothing other than Him to live.* And if this is what unites us, if this reality is what unites us with the heart and not with the head, then even in the pain that the human condition cannot help but produce, the reality is that we find ourselves even more united in Christ, in life. It may be that I am the one who still has to make a journey in this sense, that I still have to make the journey that Martha made toward Christ and thus toward her sister or brother, but the reality is that those who are more in the presence of Christ are more present to me than myself, closer to the truth of my heart than I am myself.

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<sup>74</sup>“*Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.*” Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

## The wellspring of the charism

This fraternity that communicates the call of Christ present, the fullness of the heart, is both the *ad intra* and *ad extra* mission of the Church, of every community, of every ecclesial reality. The task of the Church is to live this fraternity. This fraternity is also the substance of every charism. If we reflect well, we see that every ecclesial charism is a particular modality, a particular incarnation of the transmission of Christ's call to the freedom of women and men, so that those it reaches can rise up like Mary of Bethany from their mute pain to reach the presence of the Risen One who fills our life with life.

Every ecclesial charism is a particularly suitable modality of going out, as Martha did to Mary, to tell everyone that the teacher is present and is calling us to Himself, so that He can respond to our desire for eternal life. For those who are involved, every charism is the bearer of the fascination of this call, a fascination because it corresponds to everything my heart desires even without knowing it. The charism that God chose for you is the one in which this call reaches you with more beauty, concreteness, and truth. It is the one in which this call continues to resound in you, above all if you follow the method that every charism entails, of making this call a constant reminder of the presence of Christ and thus of the fullness of the heart, of the presence of Christ, and thus of the resurrection and life of your life.

The renewal of a charism is always the return of attention and affection to this wellspring experience. The source of a great river is not a thing of the past but rather a continuing origin; returning there does not mean following the river upstream for hundreds or thousands of miles, but regaining the awareness that the water flowing now, in the present moment of your life and community, is always fed by the source, even if it is always possible that dirty water may infiltrate the river or that debris may enter it because we are sinful human beings and we are always persecuted. The presence of dirty water or debris in the flow of the Church has happened since the first Christian communities. But if the water flows, it always comes from the source and we, too, are called to "flow" now in the section of the river we entered, with this awareness. The awareness of the origin, the wellspring, maintained and taken up again in the flowing of the river, also helps us to discern what does not come from the wellspring, or to recognize that, thanks be to God, there are tributaries that arrive to reinforce the flow of the river without muddying the water. This is how the Church "flows" through the centuries,

as does every charismatic family born within it, be it a movement or an ancient order like my own.

The important thing is not to lose the awareness that every new charism is basically always a tributary that comes to reinforce the flow of the great river of the Church, whose wellspring and origin is the open wound in the side of the Crucified One, the wind blowing in the Cenacle at Pentecost. When the Church recognizes that a charism is hers, she does so by recognizing that the charism's flow into the great river of the Church has the same wellspring water, the same "living water" of the origin of the Church herself. For this reason, it is important that every charism always allows the Church to verify its faithfulness to the origin of the charism and to the Church herself, an origin that ultimately is always and only the Risen Christ, the life of the life of the world.

### **How John followed**

For this reason, we always need Peter's charism. We always need Peter, to be confirmed by him in the faith and in the faithfulness to the origin, because the origin is the Risen One, and notwithstanding all Peter's hesitations and human wretchedness, from the beginning of the Church he has been the privileged witness to the resurrection, to the fact that Christ is the life, the resurrection and the life of women and men; he is the witness that the Risen One is present and that we can encounter and follow Him. Since the origin, since the primitive Church, a cry of joy has rung out: "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!"<sup>75</sup> and the liturgy repeats it. Jesus appeared to the women first, and He appeared to the disciples in Emmaus, and to all the apostles, etc., but the ultimate guarantor of the resurrection was above all Peter. It is as if all the apparitions of the Risen One were all guaranteed, verified, by the apparition to Peter. And all those who received an apparition of the Risen One ran to tell him about it (Mary Magdalene, the women, the two disciples of Emmaus, everyone ran to tell Peter). And today it continues to be so. All the manifestation and work of Christ and the Spirit that the Risen One blows on the disciples, all the charisms (because charisms are the life of the Risen One in the life of the Church and the world)—everything is certain if Peter confirms it with his experience of Christ present and alive.

The great scene of Peter's yes in John 21:15–19 is in essence the investiture of Peter in his pastoral charism, rooted in his triple and humble confes-

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<sup>75</sup> Lk 24:4.

sion of love for Christ followed by the Risen Christ giving him the mission to become universal shepherd. “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.”<sup>76</sup> But all this happened between the Risen Christ and Peter; it was the work of the Risen One, and it was as the Risen One that Jesus asked Peter to follow Him. “You follow me!”<sup>77</sup> Jesus had announced the primacy of Peter before the resurrection, but it was after the resurrection that Jesus consecrated Peter in his mission; that is, He made him what He called him to. He made Peter “sweet Christ on earth,”<sup>78</sup> as Saint Catherine of Siena defined the pope, the presence of the Risen One on earth, the guarantee of the presence of the Risen One on earth.

John, perhaps the most “charismatic” of the apostles, the most acute, mystical, prophetic, and ardent in love and friendship with Christ, did not feel superior because of this, but understood that in the teacher’s choice of the primacy of Peter, there was the sure way to live out his own charisms that followed Christ. When they ran to the tomb on Easter morning, John arrived first but stopped and waited for Peter. Why? Because he wanted to enter the tomb *following* Peter. He wanted to believe within a following, as he had learned following Jesus Himself. At the end of his gospel, we see that as Jesus walked off with Peter, whom He had asked to follow Him; John followed them, that is, he followed Peter who was following Jesus. *He followed Peter’s sequela, Peter’s following.*

“Peter turned and saw the disciple following whom Jesus loved, the one who had also reclined upon His chest during the supper and had said, ‘Master, who is the one who will betray you?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘What if I want him to remain until I come? What concern is it of yours? You follow me.’”<sup>79</sup>

It is as if Jesus was saying, “Don’t worry about what will become of him and his charism. I’ll take care of ensuring that his charism will always be present in the Church, until the Parousia! It’s sufficient that you see that he follows you following me. This is enough for his charism, and all the Church with it, to be fruitful, to bear fruit for my glory and the salvation of the world.”

But the important thing for each of us is that John’s attachment to Peter gave John the possibility of believing, to be solid in his faith in the Risen Christ, to answer the question, “Do you believe this?” as Martha did, not so

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<sup>76</sup> Jn 21:15–17.

<sup>77</sup> Jn 21:22.

<sup>78</sup> Saint Catherine of Siena, “Letter to Gregory XI.”

<sup>79</sup> Jn 21:20–22.

much with words of faith but with a position of his “I” that was solid in its attachment to the Lord. After John followed Peter into the tomb, he “saw and believed.”<sup>80</sup> He experienced a grace of faith, the experience of being bowled over by the event of the resurrection, of the presence of the Risen One, and understood that this grace was linked to his following Peter. So from then on, in the appearances of the Risen One, like the one on the Sea of Galilee, and in the mission described in the Acts of the Apostles, we will always see John following Peter, experiencing together with him the Risen One and how Christ is the life of life. His miracles and proclamations were all performed in the context of his attachment to Peter, and this in turn would allow John and his charism to make Peter’s ministry more fruitful, to help him recognize the Risen One, as when John told him, “It’s the Lord!”<sup>81</sup> after the miraculous haul of fish. And here *Peter obeyed the charism of John*, because John helped him recognize the Risen One present, to whom Peter went first, throwing himself in the water so that all the others could follow him, still and always, to Jesus.

I say this because trying to imagine and relive the Gospel scenes helps us to situate our lives, what happens to us and the circumstances we experience, everything, within the event of the Risen Christ. This is not just an exercise of our imagination or a waking dream because in the Church, the sacraments and the Gospel of the Risen Christ remain present events, and thus encounterable in a real way, events we can conform to and become one with in a real way, thus finding the right position in life, a right position that, insofar as it introduces us to the event of the paschal Christ, is a glad, certain, fruitful position full of peace and fondness for all of humanity, a humanity anxious for the announcement that the Risen One is here and calls everyone to salvation in communion with Him, the life of life and the mercy of the Father.

## **What overcomes the tempest and shipwreck**

The last scenes of the Acts of the Apostles, written wonderfully by Saint Luke, narrate Paul’s journey to Rome and his arrival in the eternal city, where he would pass two years under house arrest waiting for his case to be brought before the imperial tribunal. The last scene referencing Paul in Acts is summarized in two verses, “He remained for two full years in his

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<sup>80</sup> Jn 20:8.

<sup>81</sup> Jn 21:7.



lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>82</sup>

Though Paul was confined and waiting for judgment, persecuted by the Jews and prey to the slowness of Roman bureaucracy—not much has improved in two thousand years!—he was a free man, free to receive everyone and bear witness to the event of Christ that had bowled over his existence. Paul was free from fear. He could not move about the city, but nothing chained his desire to transmit the meaning of life that he had encountered, the meaning of life that also gave meaning to suffering and death. All of Paul’s freedom was in his heart, which consisted of faith, hope, and love, the possession of which only requires a poor heart that does not claim to own anything without receiving it from God. Paul was free because he needed nothing other than Christ, and Christ was with Him, lived in Him. To use Montini’s words, he welcomed Easter as “the proclamation of our need for Christ, our life.”

I think of the testimony of many women and men whose faith and attachment to Christ have been victorious in the midst of violent waves that were destroying everything, with the position of their hearts, the substances of their “I,” entirely grounded in Christ.

In these scenes, Paul reminds me of the great saints we are learning about; for example, Cardinal Van Thuán in his years of prison, or Takashi Nagai, the Japanese doctor of Nagasaki whose autobiography about the years before the bomb will, I hope, come out soon in Italian (*Ciò che non muore mai* [What never dies]) because there you can see the testimony of a man whose life is Christ, only Christ. (In addition, there are his very beautiful reflections written from his shack after Nagasaki had been destroyed by the bomb.) Even when he had lost everything, when everything had been destroyed, he was like a little plant that flowers again, and with his faith in Christ he began a new life, not only for himself but for everyone.

This scene of the stability of the apostle Paul in his house in Rome was almost immediately preceded by a tragic experience, a terrible journey. Sailing from Caesarea to Rome, Paul was shipwrecked in the Mediterranean. Luke was with him and offers us a first-person plural chronicle to match any of the most attentive reporters, and maybe also the best adventure novelists.

The story of this shipwreck is not only a sublime page of literature and documentation of the art of navigation in the Greco-Roman era, but also

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<sup>82</sup> Acts 28:30–31.

a page of sacred scripture that announces a perspective of faith on history and its tragedies that enables us to better interpret and live what we are experiencing today in our lives and in every sphere, and to receive light to orient us for living every experience as an opportunity for growth in what is truly of worth in human life.

While the ship was being driven by the storm and then when it wrecked near the island of Malta, Paul, even though he was a prisoner, dominated the whole situation and became a kind of *director of the salvation of everyone*. I'll read you this page, which will give you a rest from your effort of listening attentively to me, and also because it is an adventure story, but above all because it is very rich and speaks to us of the present time.

"We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they jettisoned some cargo, and on the third day with their own hands they threw even the ship's tackle overboard. Neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days, and no small storm raged. Finally, all hope of our surviving was taken away. When many would no longer eat, Paul stood among them and said, 'Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss [here he's a bit like a Martha of the situation!]. I urge you now to keep up your courage; not one of you will be lost, only the ship. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood by me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to stand before Caesar; and behold, for your sake, God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you.' Therefore, keep up your courage, men; I trust in God that it will turn out as I have been told. We are destined to run aground on some island.' On the fourteenth night, as we were still being driven about on the Adriatic Sea, toward midnight the sailors began to suspect that they were nearing land. They took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on, they again took soundings and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we would run aground on a rocky coast, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. The sailors then tried to abandon ship; they lowered the dinghy to the sea on the pretext of going to lay out anchors from the bow. But Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.' So the soldiers cut the ropes of the dinghy and set it adrift. Until the day began to dawn, Paul kept urging all to take some food. He said, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting, going hungry and eating nothing. I urge you, therefore, to take some food; it will help you survive. Not a hair of the head of anyone of you will be lost.' When he said this, he took bread, gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat. They were all encouraged,

and took some food themselves. In all, there were two hundred seventy-six of us on the ship.<sup>783</sup>

We should meditate on this scene, thinking of our own shipwrecks, the shipwrecks of our time, from the pandemic to the war in Ukraine, with all of the political, economic, social, psychological, and also religious chaos it is provoking in the world. We should meditate on this scene, thinking of the more personal, or familial, or community shipwrecks we are involved in or that involve our loved ones and friends.

The ship Paul was traveling on symbolizes the world and the society in which we find ourselves, traveling toward the destiny foreseen for each of us. And Paul realized, it was revealed to him, that all these traveling companions were not unimportant to his personal destiny, to the journey of his life following Christ. It was revealed to him that God would save all of them with him, that He would not save him without these people, who were totally ignorant and unaware of Christ. Paul realized that in order to save everyone, the Lord had Paul follow Him onto this ship that was now in danger of shipwreck. Paul understood that he had to communicate his certainty to everyone, communicate to everyone that he was certain because he was attached to Christ and he was sensitive to his shipmates' need for life and their hunger, because his hunger was sated by Christ present, because his heart was sated by the one Bread of Life that we truly need.

Paul did not preach a powerful sermon to convert those sailors who were desperate for life. Paul clung to the presence of Him who is all of his substance, and he was tranquil and glad, without a flicker of fear, because Jesus was enough for him, the Risen One who had given Himself for Paul to the point of dying for him and for everyone, becoming Body and Blood to eat and drink, in the midst of the long and terrible storm, to nourish our life with His life.

But in living this, Paul realized with a wonder that cannot be gotten used to, that in sating him, Christ was sating everyone, and in saving him, Christ was saving everyone. *Christ, the life of his life*, precisely because He is the life of his life, *is the life of everyone*.

And there is not one person on earth who is not, forever, a sibling!

Let's listen to the *Regina Caeli* sung by the choir.

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<sup>83</sup> Acts 27:18–37.



# *Sunday, May 1, morning*

*During entrance and exit:*

*Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov, Russian Easter Festival, op. 36*

*Ernest Ansermet—L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande*

*Spirto gentil n. 29, (Decca) Universal*

*Angelus*

*Morning Prayer*

## ■ ASSEMBLY

***Davide Proserpi.*** We have reached the end, the final act of this gesture of the Spiritual Exercises, which I must say have truly been something to be grateful for because of the moment we are going through and the questions we have. In fact, the word “gratitude” dominates the contributions that arrived by email last night: gratitude for the testimony of Fr. Mauro, gratitude for these Spiritual Exercises, gratitude for still being together, gratitude that the Movement still exists. This is not something to be taken for granted; all this exists because God wants it to continue to exist. If He did not want it to exist, there would no longer be any of this. We have arrived here today (as we said the first evening) with many questions and worries of both a personal and community nature, about the life of the Movement, the current situation we are going through, the world, the war, the pain and suffering, but what has happened, what we have participated in has filled all of the space of our hearts, crushing all the rest into a corner, or rather, throwing a new, unexpected light on all the rest, and, at least for me, calming it.

In this regard, I would like to bring up again something that Fr. Mauro said yesterday morning: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’ This, only this, is what we need, what everyone needs. This is the only thing necessary. We need a life that raises us from the dead, from every death, from every face that death and evil take on in our personal life, family, community, and the entire world. All the rest is a thousand things that worry us and make us anxious without being necessary, because they never respond to the true need of the heart, of every heart.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See above, 39.

So then, let's ask ourselves, as I have asked myself, why this happened. Why could it happen? What does this testimony given us consist of?

There's an affirmation by Péguy that expresses the point well. "When the student does nothing but repeat not the same resonance, but a poor repetition of the master's thought; when the student is no more than a student, even though he be the best of all, he will never generate anything. A student does not begin to create unless he introduces a new resonance (in other words unless he is no longer a student). Not that he should not have a master, but one must descend from the other by the natural ways of fathering, not by the scholastic ways of discipleship."<sup>85</sup>

In 1989 Giussani commented on this passage by Péguy with these words: "This is the need of a true companionship, so that it be the source of mission throughout the whole world—not discipleship, not repetition, but *sonship*. The introduction of a new reverberation, a new resonance is proper to a son, who has the father's own nature. He has the same nature as the father, the same stock, but he is a new reality. So much so that he can do better than the father, and the father can look with delight on the son who has become greater than he is. But what the son does is greater precisely inasmuch as he better realizes what he has seen and heard from the father. Therefore, for the living, organic nature of the Christian companionship there is nothing more contradictory than, on the one hand the affirmation of one's own opinion, of one's own measure, or one's own way of feeling as the ultimate criterion, and on the other hand pure repetition. It is fathering that generates. The blood of one, the father, passes into the heart of the other, the son, and generates a new capacity for realization. Thus, the great Mystery of His Presence multiplies and spreads, so that all may see Him and give glory to God."<sup>86</sup>

Well, I believe that in these days we have been able to participate in this experience, what it means to be children. For this, we thank you.

A great many questions have arrived, and we have chosen some of those asked most often.

"Only one thing matters. And yet continually this one thing remains in the background, forgotten and thus in the end little-loved, little-known, and sometimes doubted. How can we allow the presence to become familiar, present, true, concretely nourishing life?"

<sup>85</sup> Charles Péguy, *Cahiers*, VIII, XI, February 3, 1907. English translation taken from Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 52.

<sup>86</sup> Luigi Giussani, *L'avvenimento cristiano* [The Christian event] (Milan: Bur, 2003), 50. English translation taken from Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces*, 52.

“If Christ is enough, what is all the rest? Hunger, desire, work, politics, passion, sentiments, war: What are all of these things?”

**Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori.** How does the presence become familiar? I think of the wedding at Cana, to which they invited Jesus as well. There is an invitation to enter into our family life, into the familiarity of our life, and Jesus’s coming, which is certain, is also the fruit of the freedom of those who invite Him, but it is something gratuitous. They did not really know whom they were inviting when they invited Jesus to the wedding, but if He had not come the wine would have run out, the water would have remained water, and the family life of that couple, our family life, our everyday life would have remained what it is, a reality that runs out. It is really important to realize that Christ lets Himself be invited with extreme easiness (it is easier to invite Him than the abbot general!) because He is already at the door. We invite Him but He is already at the door of our life, knocking—He is already here. All that is needed is the yes of a freedom that says to Him, “Come in!” (“Come in, move along!”<sup>87</sup> as was said in the song earlier), but this “come in” is said to Christ: “Come in, please!” All that is needed is this yes. If His presence had to become familiar to us in a more complicated way than saying to Him, “Come in!” we would betray the gratuitous nature of this presence. Instead, it is absolutely gratuitous.

“If Christ is enough, what is all the rest? Hunger, desire, work, politics, passion, sentiments, war: What are all these things?” All of this is longing for Christ, all of this is the concrete face of a cry, of the need for Him, the thirst for Him, the emptiness in life if He is not there. So, in embracing Christ I am not renouncing all of these things; I am not saying that all of this is nothing. I am affirming even more that all of this truly wants to be full of reality. If I do not embrace Christ, if I do not let Christ enter my house, my house remains empty as a home, and nothing has meaning any more, not the table, not the chair, nothing. Acknowledging that all of this is reaching out to Him makes every instant of our daily life the place of the verification of His presence, that He is present.

**Prosperi.** “You said that there was unity among the disciples because Christ is everything for the human heart. At times in the community, the desire for unity risks being theorized as something that we have to attain and build with our own efforts and strength, neglecting the happening of

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<sup>87</sup> Fabrizio (“Zot”) Ferrari, “Avanti, Forza.”

Christ, and thus living the encounter with others and their experience in a lukewarm way.”

**Lepori.** We really have to accept the fact that our unity is the work of Someone, of a presence. It is not something we build among ourselves, like a bridge; it is not a pact among us, but it is generated by Someone. This is everything in the experience of the Church and also in the experience of ecumenism: realizing anew that we are not the ones who build our unity, but that it happens if we recognize that He is in our midst, that He is here.

This holds for everything—we do not have to build the presence of Christ, just recognize it. When Mother Teresa said that we need to recognize Christ in the poor, she was not saying it in the sense that you have to make an effort of will to tell yourself, ‘This person in rags or that leper is Christ,’ but you need to recognize that Christ is in the poor, manifests Himself in the poor, comes to us in the poor and in every sister and brother. This creates an infinite unity with everyone and everything because what I recognize in the other is Him whom I truly need. Saint Benedict said, “When pilgrims or poor people arrive, the monks should meet them and adore Christ in them”;<sup>88</sup> that is, recognize Him as present in the other, recognize that He comes, that He is there, that this is an ontological reality. This is what makes everything, that makes all of the substance of charity and communion; that is, recognizing that the presence of Christ is ontological and that I am not called to evoke Him like a spirit, but to recognize His presence as present, and in recognizing it, manifest it.

**Prosperi.** “You defined silence as the main road for facing the disorder of our lives. What does it mean for someone to observe silence daily? How can we laypeople, immersed in the world up to our necks, learn this practice so we, too, can listen to the teacher who speaks to us?”

**Lepori.** Observing silence first of all means recognizing that we do not make silence—it is created by Christ speaking to us. Since there is only one word worth listening to (as it says in *The Imitation of Christ*, “In a word there is everything, and everything expresses just one word.”<sup>89</sup>), I observe

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<sup>88</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 53:1–7.

<sup>89</sup> “*Ex uno Verbo omnia et unum loquuntur omnia, et hoc est Principium quod et loquitur nobis.*” (“From one word everything, and everything cries one Word alone. This Word is the Principle that speaks within us.”) Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book One, 3, 8.



silence. If I know that there is only one thing I must listen to, I tend my ear to listen only to it, and this is silence.

I believe that every vocation, every form of life must find and live its form of silence, its form of listening to Christ, and also its discipline of listening to Christ. Each of us should ask ourselves, “What helps me to listen to Christ always? What is that gesture, that moment, that discipline through which I learn always to remain open, or to continually come back from my distraction, my noise, my chatter, everything?” It is the listening to Him, to Him who is here and speaks to me. “I am He, the one who is speaking with you,”<sup>90</sup> Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well. Archbishop Filippo Santoro spoke to you about doing ten minutes a day of School of Community—maybe this is exactly the yes to the word and the silence that is asked of those who live in the world, of laypeople. Members of the *Memores Domini* are asked to observe an hour of silence a day, and monks maybe all day long, but it is the same thing, identically the same. The goal is not to be silent—the goal is to live, listening to Christ. Nowadays I almost never live consistently in a monastery with all the silence it entails and all the discipline of silence that it offers, but I realize that the discipline I have cultivated since I was a novice and a young monk, and then for twenty-six years in my monastery, accompanies me, and that I listen to Christ even in the midst of the noise of trips, of airports, because it is a need of mine. Those who have listened to just one word of Christ that truly comes from Him cannot help but yearn to hear Him speak again. “I think I could no longer live if I no longer heard Him speak.”<sup>91</sup>

This creates silence, and we need it! We do not need silence—we need Christ to speak to us!

**Prosperi.** “Martha made a journey of awareness, a task within herself that caused the growth of her humanity in the certainty of Christ as the answer to her need. What are the steps of this journey? What is this task? If the growth of one’s humanity happens over time, how can I be sure I am doing this work and not still following myself?”

“In your lessons, you stressed how crucial it was for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus to verify the encounter with and the words of Jesus. Can you explain for me the terms of this verification? What does it consist of?”

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<sup>90</sup> Jn 4:26.

<sup>91</sup> Johann Adam Möhler, *L'unità nella Chiesa, cioè il principio del cattolicesimo nello spirito dei Padri della Chiesa dei primi tre secoli* [Unity in the Church, that is, the principle of Catholicism in the spirit of the Fathers of the Church of the first three centuries] (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1969), 71. Our translation.

**Lepori.** I would say that to make Martha's journey you just need to ask yourself about what you do with the dissatisfaction you feel in everything, especially in the things you do that fulfill your expectation for satisfaction for a while but that always, always, show that "it's not for this, it's not for this!" as in the poem by Reborà.<sup>92</sup> What are we doing with the daily dissatisfaction that we feel in everything, in all our relationships, in everything we do? Do we drag it into a continual complaint that dominates our life, or do we make it into an entreaty, make it a place of silence in which we verify that an Other fills my life, that I need something new to happen?" Well, the dissatisfaction becomes a teacher if it makes us ask, if life becomes filled with entreaty. I imagine that from that day on, every time Martha felt dissatisfied about what she was or how the others were or what her life situation was, she stopped herself suddenly and said to herself, "No, now I've seen that complaining is not a good use of my dissatisfaction." Complaining does not correspond to me. It only makes the dissatisfaction drag on, and we are not made for dissatisfaction—we are made for happiness. I am sure that this question and entreaty to Christ immediately happened again in her. "Lord, You are here. Call me. Speak to me Your words again. Show me again that You alone are necessary for me!" And so the dissatisfaction becomes a journey. The structural limit of our life becomes the ladder, the steps of our asceticism. As Benedict said, the ladder of humility is built on the rungs of our humanity, so one rises toward God on the rungs of one's own humanity, which is always insufficient by itself, thanks be to God.

"In your lessons, you stressed how crucial it was for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus to verify the encounter with Jesus and His words. Can you explain for me the terms of this verification?" The community helps me and becomes a place of verification if it constantly repeats for me Martha's message to Mary: "The teacher is here and is asking for you." We need the community objectively as a place where there is always someone who reminds me of this, someone who, when I complain and am lost and am wasting my life, makes me remember that instead the thing my heart desires is truly present. The community is the sign that this presence is ontological because it is something other than me; it reminds me that I am not the one who creates what is necessary for me. Christ is necessary for me, but He is given to me within an objective sign of flesh. Jesus decided on this way so as to give us the objective sign of His real presence. If I live the com-

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<sup>92</sup> Clemente Reborà, "Sacchi a terra per gli occhi" [Sacks of earth for the eyes], in *Le Poesie* [Poems], 141. Our translation.

munity and my relationship with others in this way, this relationship itself becomes a verification that Christ fills the heart.

**Prosperi.** This may already answer the next question. “What does it mean that communion is sharing the verification?” For that matter, if I may be permitted, what you said earlier, that limitations are rungs on the ladder toward God, Fr. Giussani also said many times. This shows that our history is part of a great history.

**Lepori.** I am struck that when Jesus told Martha that her sister had chosen the better part, He did not do so to say, “Look how your sister is better than you.” He told her this to create a companionship with her sister based on the better part; that is, a way of being with her sister, a relationship that verified this between the two of them, that created true fraternity between them, a true community. It made them become a Christian fraternity, a place where the fact that my sister chose better than I did, chose what is more necessary for me, makes me live a true fraternity and makes the relationship with my sister no longer one of competition but of sharing Christ, sharing the verification that only He responds to the thirst of the heart. The fact that my sister is ahead of me in this verification is a gift for my life because it makes me advance. This is the great beauty of the Christian community, like the first Christian community that truly shared everything in common. But more important than having money in common is having Christ in common, Christ who is more important than money, so for the first Christians sharing money was no problem, since they had in common the one thing that the heart needed.

**Prosperi.** Excuse me, Mauro, if I ask you to develop this further, because maybe this question also contains a request for help in understanding how to be open to being questioned or challenged, as Martha was. As you were saying just now, Martha acknowledged and accepted Jesus’s suggestion (maybe after initial grumbling and difficulty, as you said yesterday) that she look to her sister about this better choice that might make Martha grow. For us, however, at times it is difficult to be open to criticism or questioning because we are attached to our image of how we should be.

**Lepori.** Yes, maybe because we have inherited original sin, and think the thing that we hold dearest must be grabbed “for me,” that I have to privatize it, that if I do not have exclusive possession of it, I cannot truly possess it. Instead, with Christ the complete opposite happens. The more I possess Him with the other, the more I share Him and the more I possess Him for what He

is, for the reality He is. This is why the unity among us and the belonging to Christ, the possession of Christ are the same thing. Therefore, you understand that if out of respect for the other's journey you have to sacrifice so the other can progress at her own rhythm, you progress more too. Benedict said that the community's journey must keep a rhythm that does not mortify the zeal of the stronger or demoralize the weaker, causing them to remain behind. It is a kind of reciprocal sacrifice. Why? Because we know that one thing unites us, and thus my effort to acknowledge and adapt myself to the rhythm of others is an effort I have to make to follow Christ, not to be good or patient, but because Christ is in our midst. I don't know if I have explained this well.

**Prosperi.** Very well! Thank you.

"We would like to understand better how even saints live their sin with truth. In daily life our sin often crushes and depresses us. What does it mean to live it with truth?"

**Lepori.** The truth of sin, of being a sinner, is the merciful gaze of Jesus. This is what reveals the truth of sin to us. The sin in and of itself is not what is true. The problem is that in front of sin we stand aside and measure it, its gravity, its effect on us, etc., but we do not permit Christ's gaze to tell us the truth about the sin, which is perhaps even graver. Maybe this truth is even more painful than the one I measure. For example, certain sins are graver than those that bother me the most. Instead, the truth of sin is precisely the gaze of Christ, that is, mercy. This is what the saints understand: they are sinners who have allowed Christ's gaze to reveal to them the truth of their sin, every sin. Thus, they saw more shadows in themselves, much more wretchedness in themselves than did others, but they saw it without separating it from forgiveness and thus from holiness, because saints are saints because of grace, because God redeems us completely. Saints are totally redeemed people who allow themselves to be redeemed totally, and thus are humble. They do not have a prideful relationship with their sin ("I have erred!" "How low I have fallen!" "Where is my honor, my self-image?"). No. Sin is "I have erred, I have abandoned the Father!" and Christ says to us, "Return!" Christ's merciful gaze tells us to "return to the Father who embraces you, and in the embrace your sin becomes holiness." This is what we sing in the Easter *Exultet*: "O happy fault, that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!"<sup>93</sup> The

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<sup>93</sup> "*O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum méruit habère Redemptóre.*" *Exultet*, available at <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/easter/easter-proclamation-exultet>.

redemption of Christ is such an incredible event that we consider happy the fault that permits us to live the embrace of the mercy of God, to experience the embrace that the angels do not. An angel does not experience mercy—it's incredible! Surely they are conscious of it but they do not experience that embrace, and this is something out of this world! This is the great truth of our sin.

**Prosperi.** “It was said that the renewal of the charism is a return to the origin. What does this mean? How does this happen? How is this not reduced to our own interpretation?”

“We would like to understand better the wellspring that continues to nourish our experience today as long as it is not reduced to a nostalgic return to the past. What guarantees faithfulness to the source and how is our contribution to the Church and the world actualized?”

**Lepori.** You know that charism means gratuitous gift of God, and that the wellspring of a charism is the gratuitousness of God. If you understand this, you understand that the source is guaranteed and never runs dry; it is impossible for it to run out. If God were to withdraw His gratuitousness, it would be like nullifying Himself, mortifying Himself. As Paul said, God's gifts are without regret; God cannot regret being gratuitous because God is gratuitousness. Like all gifts, a charism comes from this source. There are times when a charism must regain an awareness of itself. It can happen that the people through whom the charism must pass are no longer as perceptive and transparent as they should be. (Since the beginning of the Church there has been a lack of openness to the gratuitousness of Pentecost.) Maybe the charism is not understood, and maybe it is treated or looked upon in a way that does not understand its source. In all of these moments, it is important that those who live the charism begin to regain an awareness that the wellspring is the gratuitousness of God. The problem comes about when I think that the origin of the charism is an interpretation, what I think, how I live it, how I understand it, how I have lived it, and not this openness to the gratuitousness of God that in the beginning was clearer, and that remains a living testimony in the founders. Even if the founders are dead, their testimony to the gratuitousness of the charism remains and does not become less clear or fresh. So then, the important thing is not to betray this testimony.

Above all, I think we betray the charism when we are afraid that it will die or be lost, that something can be enough to annul it, or that our own coherence must guarantee it. Instead (thanks be to God! thanks be to Him!), He surprises us by always showing us that there is a gratuitous well-

spring that maybe finds a way to manifest itself through rivulets we never could have imagined. Or it can even happen that the people we would have least imagined become the witnesses to the gratuitousness of the charism, much more than the person in leadership. This is the case in the Church. There are saints who brought the Church back to the purity of her origin in ways no one could have imagined. Think of Saint Catherine of Siena—this simple, uncultured woman who became a greater witness to the gratuitousness of the charism than the entire Church, than the pope, and for this reason the pope listened to her. This is the mystery we must not betray—the gratuitousness of the wellspring of the charism. We must not betray it with our fears and above all with our diffidence toward God, the Church, ourselves, or this or that group. This diffidence obscures the sentiment of the gratuitousness of the charism, because in it the founder is truly betrayed, the person who gave his life for this, who gave it and gives it today, and will give it in the future, so that the charism may live.

***Prosperi.*** Thank you.

“You told us that Martha’s answer of faith is not to be sought in her, that her faith did not depend on some capacity of her own, but echoed what she saw. Instead, it seems like faith depends on us, on our own effort. What can help us have Martha’s experience?”

***Lepori.*** We have to look at Jesus. Faith grows as we cleave to and follow Jesus. Faith is this hewing to and following Jesus. I remember that in the beginning (I was still in high school) there was a booklet by Jacques Leclercq circulating, and I remember this line: “The core of faith is hewing to and following Christ,”<sup>94</sup> and it is true. I really like this scene in which Martha expressed her faith, looking at Christ, echoing what Christ is and says of Himself. She was not parroting it back; it was a loving repetition. She understood that faith is not a dogma I recite, but my saying yes to Christ in His looking at me and revealing Himself to me as the resurrection and the life of my life. This is why we must look at Christ, look at Him also among us, in us, in the community, in all His presences, because there we see that He is there, that He is truly the savior of the world, like the Samaritan woman at the well, who was brought to faith through her dialogue with Jesus, which made her dig deep into her whole life, and which reached the point that He was able to tell her, “I who am speaking to you,

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<sup>94</sup> Jacques Leclercq, *Il problema della fede e gli intellettuali del XX secolo* [The problem of the faith and the intellectuals of the 20th century] (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1966), 10. Our translation.

I am He who saves you.”<sup>95</sup> This holds for all the encounters in the Gospel—there is always a gaze on Christ that fills the person with faith, true faith. In fact, the Samaritan woman went to tell the people in her city, “I’ve encountered one who told me this.” She gave a testimony of faith, still immature, but she gave a testimony of faith. This holds for everyone—faith grows in the experience of an event, and the event that faith must experience is the presence of Christ who looks at you, loves you, and saves you.

**Prosperi.** “I have the impression that people confuse the following of Christ with things and gestures to do. What does it really mean to follow? How can I understand whether I am truly following Christ in my life or just following my idea of following Christ? Can I follow without participating in the activities proposed by the companionship?”

“Why was it necessary for John’s faith that he enter the tomb after Peter? Why is it necessary to follow Peter?”

**Lepori.** Following does not mean doing things or even just a spiritual relationship with Christ. It means following a personal presence, following people, following a person, Christ, in the sign of His personal presence; namely, the people who have followed Him and whom He, since the origin, has indicated as the incarnation of the possibility of following Him, following Him truly: Peter, the apostles, etc. Always. The Church is this sign, and following the Church means acknowledging this sign, that the Church is the place where following Christ happens and remains incarnate within personal relationships. None of us has followed Jesus Christ by following an apparition of Jesus Christ. You follow Jesus because you have encountered authoritative people (even those living in total simplicity, like my carpenter who introduced me to the Movement forty-some-odd years ago). You recognize that there, Christ asks you to follow Him. There is an attraction, for the Church goes forward by attraction, attraction to Christ. For my part, we must always ask ourselves whether we are following people, not things, whether our following is incarnate in the sign of people whom Christ has left as the possibility of following Him until the end of the world. This is always guaranteed by Peter, because in giving this investiture to Peter and telling him, “Follow me” (so that John could follow Him and then thousands of others could follow Him), Jesus instituted this sign, this verification of the truth of a following that is not the following of people I choose because I like them, but in which I am chosen, in which

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<sup>95</sup> Jn 4:26.

the Church gives herself to me as a place where I can truly follow Christ and not myself, my interpretation or my feelings. I don't know if I have explained myself well. It is perhaps a subject to be explored more deeply.

**Prosperi.** I like this emphasis. "I do not follow because I choose, but because I am chosen." This also grounds the criterion of the authority to follow, doesn't it? Is this so?

**Lepori.** Yes because in the encounter with Christ, within the encounter with Christ, God also gives us the place where we follow Him. He causes you to be born, but He does not leave you on the side of the street like an abandoned newborn. He has you born into a family, a companionship of people, and later it is clear that you have to follow—this is given to you. I remember that from the very beginning of the encounter, I understood that I had to follow and obey out of love for myself, because I did not want to lose the event that had filled my heart, even after time passed and I saw all the limitations of the people who had been the means of the encounter. It is obvious that sooner or later the limitations will emerge; they exist and cannot help but exist. And yet I always understood that following was a good for me, and this has always saved me—following and obeying notwithstanding everything because I understood that only in this way could I remain faithful to what had been given to me, to the fascination of my encounter with Christ.

**Prosperi.** Thank you.

"You said that if I tell the person next to me, 'The teacher is here and is asking for you,' I transmit this to the whole world. Could you explain better how this becomes ecumenism, a universal responsibility for believers?"

**Lepori.** The true problem is to let an event happen and not calculate its efficacy. In mission, in being a witness, in the mission of the Church, it is not important to measure the efficacy, the strengths, or the means, but to let an event happen. This method began with the Virgin Mary, the breath of freedom of Mary who said, "fiat" and transmitted the event of Christ to the whole world. If there is a person who transmitted the event of Christ to the whole world, it is the Virgin Mary, Our Lady, but also Peter with his yes. I can only transmit it as an event, and thus if I do not experience it myself and I do not let myself be saved, then I do not transmit it to the whole world. I do not transmit the event; I transmit a theory, a morality, I don't know what. If I myself do not experience that the teacher is here and



is asking for me and saving me, and I do not communicate it to the people around me, I do not transmit the event. The event is like a fire. I can transmit even the little flame of a small candle to the whole world, but only by lighting it in the people around me, transmitting it as fire, and not sending a message to Australia that there is a flame in Italy. If there is no contact, I transmit nothing. This is why it is fundamental to live the event with those around me, because if I do not do so it means I do not live it myself and do not transmit it as event. I don't know if I've explained myself well.

**Prosperi.** Yes. We are called to set a fire!

**Lepori.** Certainly! "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!"<sup>96</sup>

**Prosperi.** This question in various facets was the most frequently asked, so we have saved it for the end.

"What is the cause of the disassociation between freedom and desire? What can heal this division?"

"You said that the heart encounters, desires, wants to embrace, but because of a calculation that is not self-aware, because of timidity projected by ghosts, freedom says no and blocks the embrace. You said that this false freedom, 'its own assassin, drags away the child heart that was about to embrace Jesus,' proposing other ways and kinds of fullness that will all prove to be false. How is it that this false freedom at times seems to vanquish the superabundance experienced with Jesus? How can we avoid being scandalized at ourselves and becoming blocked?"

**Lepori.** I think that here is original sin, seen in the fact that we have an absurd tendency not to cling to the good, an absurd tendency to reject the evidence of the good and the beautiful, to renounce our joy. This absurd tendency creates the disassociation between freedom and desire. Desire desires only Christ, and yet there is this play of freedom that, out of a calculation of self-realization that is absurd because it is autonomous and false, does not obey the desire that shows it the reality that fills the heart; freedom rips desire away from what it desires. As Paul put it, "For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want";<sup>97</sup> that is, he feels inside himself this wounded freedom, wounded in pride, as a proud position in

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<sup>96</sup> Lk 12:49.

<sup>97</sup> Rom 7:18–19.

front of life, a freedom that does not bow to the desire of an evident attraction and of an evident present that attracts and fascinates us, that gives us everything. Jesus said, “But you do not want to come to me to have life.”<sup>98</sup> He lamented, “How is this? I give you life and you do not want to come to me; your freedom chooses not to come to me, not to welcome me, not to love me, not to receive me, not to welcome me!”

However, being scandalized by freedom’s tendency is the final bulwark of sin and pride, because it is like saying, “I am scandalized by this and so I go even further into this absurd dynamic of sin.”

What saves us? The mercy of God, the evidence that He always comes to take us back. In the experience of my whole life, every time my freedom yielded to the point that something did not correspond to me, Christ always came to take me back. This is evidence of His gratuitousness, the gratuitousness of His gratuitousness, the gratuitousness of His salvation, of how His salvation is stronger than we are, stronger than sin. Thanks be to God, Christ listens more to the desire of our heart than to our freedom. In His infinite mercy, when God sees that our freedom is so crazed that it contradicts the evidence of a desire, of an attraction, He has Christ pull us out, as He did for Peter. In this way, as we were saying before, He even makes our sin become an extreme call for help: “Save me!” Christ causes us to dig deep into ourselves and our condition, and puts our freedom with its back to the wall so it can no longer lie, and so there it cries out and becomes truly free: “Save me!” and it happens. I do not say this because I know this, but because we have this experience—it is an experience. God’s continual pulling us out of our wretchedness and pride is the extreme face of His mercy, like the Good Shepherd who searches far and wide for the lost sheep that totally ruined its life because it chose to disassociate its freedom from the desire for fullness that its heart cries out for.

***Prosperi.*** This image of mercy is very beautiful—Christ listens more to the desire of our heart than to our freedom.

And here is the question that won the “prize” for the most-often asked. “I was very struck by the passage Saturday afternoon about attraction and freedom. You said that in the world they are slaves to each other, and I identify a lot with this description. Could you talk more about this passage?”

At a certain point you added that attraction and freedom are “fused,” and many asked what you meant.

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<sup>98</sup> Jn 5:40.

**Lepori.** I said it off the top of my head; don't take everything as dogma!

**Prosperi.** Ooh! I feel better when you say someone can even say something that just slips out!

**Lepori.** However, I don't think it is stupid to say that in the world attraction and freedom are fused, that there is a "fusional" relationship between attraction and freedom. I believe that this does not happen in the Christian event, that this is not the reason God gives us the experience of attraction and gives us freedom. It is as if God created a space between them—between what attracts me and my freedom there is not fusion but a space of desire. Maybe "desire" is the third word that should be added because it makes us understand better: when freedom and attraction fuse, there is no longer space for desire, so there is no longer space for freedom, no longer space for freedom to make a journey toward something other than itself. I think this is what I meant to say, because when attraction and freedom are fused they can no longer . . .

**Prosperi.** . . . generate tension.

**Lepori.** . . . decide; they can no longer choose each other, say yes to each other, and so they are slaves. It is like certain figures in Dante's Hell, who hate each other but are fused and can never separate, cannot help but devour each other. I believe it is important to understand this because it leads to the whole issue of virginity and chastity, to the issue that between what attracts me and my freedom there is a space of desire, choice, and respect that makes the embrace truly an act of freedom and not something that closes me off. It is an act of love and not simply abandonment to an embrace that squeezes you, suffocates you, and ultimately kills you, suppresses you. This is an infinite subject, so we have to keep thinking about it.

**Prosperi.** Good thing it just slipped out, eh!

To conclude I would like to read a question, which is also a testimony, from a friend in Kharkiv, who wrote:

"The experience of the life of the Movement has given me the opportunity to make Martha's journey that you talked about, and to experience the constant desire for Christ that flowed from it. Thanks to this experience I see His mercy every day. But in these months, the evil has become so great that for the Ukrainians the issue is not Martha's dissatisfaction with

the fact that humans are destined to die. My city is being bombed every day. Many women have had to leave their homes, have lost their family members, have seen their husbands leave for the war. They are afraid. They are suffering. They feel hatred. In this moment, because of the siege of Mariupol, there are women and children who are dying of hunger or are wounded and suffering terribly. They are buried alive. It is as if Martha's experience is asking me to detach myself from my reality or to content myself with the memory of Christ. Now Ukraine is not living the experience of Martha, but of Christ on the cross crying, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Many of us know that He was not abandoned, because we know Christ risen. But how can we live today in this totalizing evil, in which even Christ had trouble seeing the Father?'

**Lepori.** Surely, this is the question, the message that evidently provokes me the most. I have to say that in preparing for the Spiritual Exercises I have never forgotten for one moment the grief we have all been feeling ever since the war broke out. In a sense this grief has inspired all of the Spiritual Exercises because you can do nothing anymore without thinking about this, sharing this tragedy, this moment when death and evil seem to be winning. I was thinking of Ukraine when I decided to end the second lesson of the Spiritual Exercises with the scene of the terrible storm and shipwreck, because a war is that, not only for Ukraine and not only for Russia, but for Europe, for the whole world, a storm and shipwreck of humanity in every sense, for humanity, the human, and humanity understood as all people living on this planet today. For this reason, it was helpful for me to see how Paul lived that experience. Certainly he told his shipmates, "We will not save the ship," and this made me think a lot because it is something we cannot help but rebel against. He added, "However, your lives will be saved."<sup>99</sup> And to manifest this, Paul—it's incredible!—took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and ate. He celebrated a Eucharist in the midst of the tempest; that is, affirmed the real presence of Christ in the midst of that terrible storm. The Christ he affirmed is certainly the only One we need (the Christ of Martha), but He is also the crucified Christ, the Christ risen from the dead, the Christ who descended (as our friend said) into the depths of the human, which is the despair of God. Jesus wanted to descend all the way, into the Hell of the human shipwreck, all the way to where people despair of God. Jesus did not despair of the Father, but people do. Jesus descended to embrace even our despair—just as He embraced our death, He

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<sup>99</sup> See here, pp. 64–65.

embraced our despair. So there remains nothing for us but to ask to what extent we are conscious of Him who is the One thing necessary to fill our heart, of Him who is truly this man who tells us, “I am the resurrection and the life,” and who promises and also says, “Those who die will live.” This Christ crucified, this Christ who dies for us, this infinite love of God, is no stranger to the shipwreck of the world. He is no stranger—He is inside it. In this moment, Jesus is suffering in Ukraine. He is dying, abandoned by His loved ones, raped in the women; He is undergoing everything. We must only recognize Him. We can only truly renew our yes to Him where we are, in the life we are living, so that this may be manifested to our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, so that this may be manifested to everyone, even the Russians, to Him who in this current moment is experiencing this, undergoing this, is being shipwrecked with everyone. Precisely because He is there, this shipwreck is overcome. Precisely because He is there, this death is resurrected, this evil is vanquished, does not dominate, does not and will not have the final word.

A friend pointed out to me that today is the anniversary of the death of Takashi Paolo Nagai and of Saint Riccardo Pampuri—both of them died on the first of May. What providence! Takashi Nagai, whom I mentioned yesterday, in the book for which I wrote the preface and which for editorial reasons has not come out yet, his autobiography *Ciò che non muore mai* [What never dies] (an incredible testimony!), described the scene after the bomb had destroyed everything and he found himself in front of the destruction of his entire life—his wife, work, students, university, city, church, everything, everything had been annihilated. He had a moment of despair and then he had something like a vision and heard Jesus tell him, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away”; that is, Jesus gave him the certainty that He overcomes, that He never dies. From that moment on, Nagai chose to live only for what never dies; that is, for Christ, and he would spend the last years of his life in illness (you know, you’ve read about it), affirming with gladness and faith what never dies and that Christ is the resurrection and the life in every way, through his writing and his relationship with his two children, in meeting many people, and offering his illness. In everything, he would affirm that only Christ is the resurrection and the life of women and men, and that this is what never dies in any shipwreck. Well, our responsibility is to live this with our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, this yes to Christ, this yes to Christ who never dies, thanks to whom death and evil are never victorious.

I have not really responded to our Ukrainian friend’s message; I just wanted to embrace it. I can just say that I feel I receive and live it in this

way, like a message that will become a task that these Spiritual Exercises leave me to live in my life. I cannot, we cannot, live without the consciousness of this cry that our friend has transmitted to us. That is all.

***Prosperi.*** Thank you, thank you truly! We will have time to respond to all these things.

Let's pray the *Regina Caeli*.

## MESSAGES RECEIVED

Dearest ones,

I want to be present to all of you on the occasion of the annual Spiritual Exercises. “Christ, the Life of Life,” as the Servant of God Fr. Luigi Giussani taught us, is the root of our substance. Nothing, not even our fragilities, can change this state of things. So with humility we beg for new eyes to see Him in our lives and relationships. Let us ask the Virgin, in this month of May, for the simplicity of heart to recognize the gift of the encounter and the task that derives from it: to love the Movement and the Church and to communicate their beauty.

I bless you in the Lord.

*His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Scola  
Emeritus Archbishop of Milan*

## TELEGRAMS SENT

*His Holiness Pope Francis*

Your Holiness,

Over forty thousand people gathered in groups by video link from ninety-four nations have participated in the annual Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL, meditating on “Christ, the Life of Life.” Just as we are, accompanied by Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, who offered us his personal testimony of a man seized and transformed by Christ, we have looked at Jesus and let ourselves be attracted by Him, who has reached us within a vocational companionship together with people who have decided to follow Christ, the only One who is necessary to us for living, the complete answer to our need for happiness, peace, fraternity, beauty, and the realization of life.

In these days we have looked more deeply at the value of our Fraternity, in faithfulness to the charism that the Holy Spirit gave Fr. Giussani—a place to verify that Christ is everything for the human heart, the foundation of a friendship that would be impossible without Him, so that we, too, can say, “*Christ is the life of my life*” (Fr. Giussani).

With hearts full of gratitude for your apostolic blessing, and needing to be constantly confirmed in the faith by Peter, we ask you to use us as you believe best to collaborate in Christ’s work of salvation, aware that Christianity is not communicated by proselytism—how many times have you reminded us of this!—but by attraction.

More responsible for our unity toward every human heart we encounter and animated by the charity that makes all things new, we continue to pray for you, an unshakeable witness to Christ alive, who in this time of war is the only source of true peace.

*Davide Proserpi*



*His Holiness Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI*

Your Holiness,

During the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of CL, followed by over forty thousand people by video link from all over the world, we have experienced the encounter with the living Christ. The meditations of Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori on the theme, “Christ, the Life of Life” (Fr. Giussani) have enabled us to look at Christ, who comes to our humanity in need of Him alone, the One thing necessary. In His companionship we can make a human journey for the good of the Movement, the Church, and the world.

As we pray to Our Lady to fill your days with peace and gladness, we ask for your prayer for the journey of our Fraternity.

*Davide Prosperi*

*His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell  
Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life*

Dearest Eminence,

The Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation have been attended by over forty thousand people, connected by video link from all over the world to meditate on the theme, “Christ, the Life of Life,” an affirmation by Fr. Giussani that Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori reflected on during the meditations, offering the testimony that the encounter with Christ is a new thing that changes the existence of those who welcome and follow Him as the only One necessary for living.

We resume the journey with the desire to take on ever more responsibility for the charism, placing everything we are by grace in the hands of Peter, that our faith may be confirmed in order to collaborate with the material reality of our existence in the life of the Church, sign of hope for all our sisters and brothers.

As we ask for your prayer for our journey, we entrust to Our Lady your task of accompanying the journey of the lay faithful.

*Davide Prosperi*

*His Eminence Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti  
President of the Italian Episcopal Conference*

Dearest Eminence,

Over forty thousand people all over the world, most of them in Italy, have participated in the annual Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, once again held by video link. Under the guidance of Fr. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, who led the meditations on the theme “Christ, the Life of Life” (Fr. Giussani), we gained a greater awareness that Christ is necessary for our life and that only His presence now responds to the infinite need of our heart.

In faithfulness to the charism received and deeply bound to Peter, we continue to journey together in the life of the Church in Italy in order to collaborate in communicating the faith to all those we encounter, who, even unconsciously, expectantly await meeting Him who fills life with gladness and peace.

As we pray for you, we ask you to continue accompanying us on our journey with your fatherly love.

*Davide Prospero*

*His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Scola  
Emeritus Archbishop of Milan*

Dearest Angelo,

Grateful for your message, in these days of the Spiritual Exercises we have been filled with silence in front of the happening again of “Christ, the Life of Life,” who has reached us through the testimony of Fr. Mauro and his yes to the event present that makes it attractive to live like him and Jesus. Thank you for reminding us that no fragility can lessen the humble certainty that He is the foundation of our substance in front of everything and everyone.

As we pray to Our Lady for you, we ask you to keep all of the Fraternity in your heart.

*Davide Prospero*

## ART IN OUR COMPANIONSHIP

*Prepared by Giovanna Parravicini*

*(Guide to the images drawn from art history that accompanied selections of classical music during entrance and exit)*

“Art is a foretaste of the eternal,” Fr. Giussani reminded us at the Spiritual Exercises of the Fraternity in 1994. Few forms of art offer such an immediate testament to this as the icon, a window that opens out upon the infinite. The images here offer an itinerary of education of the gaze that starts with a rereading of the history of salvation, in order to reach the contemplation of the good face of the mystery as the goal of life.

1. *Conception of the Mother of God*, 1294–95, Fresco, North Macedonia, Ohrid, Panagia Peribleptos
2. *Conception of the Mother of God*, XVIII century, Russia, Soligalič (Kostroma) Museum
3. *Conception of the Mother of God*, XVII century, Russia, Arkangelsk Museum of Decorative Arts
4. *Nativity of the Mother of God*, 1314, Serbia, Studenica Monastery
5. *Nativity of the Mother of God*, XVI century, Russia, Moscow, Vorob’ev Collection
6. *Presentation of Mary at the Temple*, XVI century, Russia, Vladimir-Suzdal Museum of Art
7. *Presentation of Mary at the Temple*, XIV century, Russia, Novgorod School, Saint Petersburg, Russian National Museum
8. *Annunciation of Ustjug*, XII century, Russia, Moscow, the State Tretyakov Gallery
9. *Annunciation*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Vladimir-Suzdal Museum of Art
10. *Annunciation*, XVI century, Russia, Vladimir-Suzdal Museum of Art
11. Dionisij, *Visitation* (the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth), 1502, Russia, Ferapont Monastery, Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God
12. *Nativity of Christ*, 1192, Cyprus, Lagoudera
13. *Nativity of Christ*, 1410–30, Russia, Rublev Workshop, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery

14. Andrej Rublev, *Michael the Archangel* (from the *Deisis* of Zvenigorod), 1410–20, Russia, Moscow, the State Tretyakov Gallery
15. *Mother of God Hodegetria*, 1260–70, Serbia, Monastery di Chilandari, Athos
16. *Mother of God Hodegetria*, IX-XIII century, Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgian National Museum, Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts
17. *Mother of God Hodegetria*, XIV century, North Macedonia, Ohrid, Icon Gallery
18. *Mother of God of Tenderness*, XVI century, Russia, Vladimir-Suzdal Museum of Art
19. *Mother of God Arakiotissa*, XII century, Cyprus, Lagoudera
20. *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, XII century, Cyprus, Lagoudera
21. *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
22. *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, XVII century, Russia, Yaroslavl Art Museum
23. *Jesus Among the Teachers*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
24. *Jesus Among the Teachers*, XVI century, Russia, Pskov Museum
25. *Baptism of the Lord*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
26. *Baptism of the Lord*, 1408, Russia, Moscow School, Saint Petersburg, the State Russian Museum
27. *Saint John the Baptist Precursor, with scenes of his life*, XVI century, Russia, Rostov Museum
28. *Christ Pantocrator*, 1260–70, Serbia, Monastery of Chilandari, Athos
29. *Christ Pantocrator*, 1192, Cyprus, Church of Panagia Araka, Nicosia Byzantine Museum
30. *Christ Pantocrator*, XIII-XIV century, Georgia, Church of Saint George, village of Svipi
31. Andrej Rublev, *the Saviour* (from the *Deisis* of Zvenigorod), 1410–20, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
32. Theophanes the Greek, *Transfiguration*, ca. 1403, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
33. *Transfiguration*, 1470–80, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
34. *Christ Pantocrator*, VI century, Egypt, Monastery di Saint Catherine of Mount Sinai
35. *Resurrection of Lazarus*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
36. *Entrance into Jerusalem*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Moscow, Private Collection

37. *Entrance into Jerusalem*, ca. 1430, Russia, Novgorod School, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
38. *The Washing of the Feet*, 1509, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
39. *Last Supper*, XVI century, Russia, Rostov-Suzdal' School, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
40. *Communion of the Apostles*, 1520–30, Russia, Moscow, Private Collection
41. *Scenes of the Passion (Last Supper, Washing of the Feet, Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Betrayal by Judas)*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
42. *Scenes of the Passion (Flagellation of Christ, Christ Mocked, the Ascent to Calvary, Crucifixion)*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
43. *The Ascent to Calvary*, ca. 1497, Russia, Moscow, Rublev Museum
44. *Saviour Acheiropoietia*, XII century, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
45. *Crucifixion*, XI-XII century, Georgia, Village of Svipy
46. *Crucifixion*, 1208–9, Serbia, Studenica Monastery
47. Dionisij, *Crucifixion*, 1500, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
48. *Deposition from the Cross*, XV century, Russia, Northern School, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
49. *Lamentation over Christ*, 1164, North Macedonia, Gorno Nerezi, Church of Saint Panteleimon
50. *Lamentation over Christ*, ca. 1140, Russia, Pskov, Mirozh Monastery
51. *Descent into Hell with Saints*, XV century, Russia, Pskov School, Pskov State Historical-Architectural and Art Museum-Reserve
52. *Descent into Hell*, 1502, Russia, Dionysius Workshop, Saint Petersburg, The State Russian Museum
53. *Descent into Hell*, XIV century, Russia, Moscow School, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
54. *The Myrrhbearers at the Tomb*, before 1228, Serbia, Mileseva
55. *The Myrrhbearers at the Tomb*, ca. 1140, Russia, Pskov School, Mirozh Monastery
56. *The Incredulity of Thomas*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
57. *The Incredulity of Thomas*, XVI century, Russia, Arkhangelsk Museum of Decorative Arts
58. *The Ascension*, 1410–20, Russia, Rublev Workshop, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
59. *The Ascension*, 1542, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts

60. *Pentecost*, XV-XVI century, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
61. *Dormition of the Mother of God*, 1263–68, Serbia, Sopočani
62. *Dormition of the Mother of God*, 1470–80, Russia, Novgorod School, Novgorod State Museum of Architecture and Fine Arts
63. *Mother of God of Tenderness*, XV century, Russia, Vladimir-Suzdal Museum of Art
64. *Mother of God of Tenderness by Vladimir*, XII century, Byzantium, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
65. *Mother of God (Praying)*, ca. 1224, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
66. Dionisij, *Mother of God Hodegetria*, 1482, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery
67. *Synaxis of All Saints*, XVI century, Russia, Rostov Museum
68. Andrej Rublev, *Trinity*, 1425–27, Russia, Moscow, The State Tretyakov Gallery

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Translation from the Italian by Sheila Beatty

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