

Fraternity of Saint Joseph
Advent Retreat in video connection

November 21-22, 2020

Saturday Lesson

*Beethoven, Symphony No.7
Spirto Gentil CD No.3*

“The Seventh Symphony is like the description of a great party. The first movement brings us into the party itself, but at a certain point, someone, the most eccentric and bizarre of the guests, leaves the room and goes outside for a breath of fresh air. He looks at everything from the outside and becomes aware of its complete vanity. The man looks with irony and sarcasm at the nothingness that inside the room seems to be everything. From this perception arises the second movement. Another kind of music steps in; it is as if the music were telling the truth about what you enjoyed before.”

Fr. Michele Berchi. The Church introduces us to Advent, to this time of waiting, but awaiting for the One who has already inflamed our hearts, because otherwise we would not be waiting for anything or anyone. On the contrary, Advent is only Christian, because only the One who has come, the One who is among us, can continue to renew in us this awaiting. Our Lady’s entire life, from the beginning, consisted of waiting for something that was happening within her. We begin these Advent exercises by joining Her in her entreaty, and by asking Her to sustain our own entreaty to the Holy Spirit, the One who makes us fruitful, inflaming our hearts and our flesh with the presence of Christ.

1) Nothing at my back

Every morning when we wake up, as soon as we open our eyes, we reawaken within a drama, living a struggle. Were it only the struggle for a few more minutes of sleep! The real struggle in which we find ourselves is between two pulling forces. One is a fragmenting tendency — that we feel churning within us and in things, which is truly the call of nothingness, of that nothingness from which everything and everyone comes and from which we have been pulled out. A nothingness that in that moment is pulling us back again to being fragmented, to a life made of many pieces that are rolling away. The other is an instinct that instead documents the force with which God is creating us in that moment and continues to create us, instant after instant, for eternity, that is, the power of God joined with the Spirit of God which is quintessential life, and which acts in us as a unifying force. Every morning we face these two options: either to let ourselves be dragged by that fragmenting tendency or to follow this instinct, saying “yes” to this force and Spirit of God.

*Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,
I’ll turn and see the miracle occur:*

*Nothing at my back, the void
behind me, with a drunkard's terror.*

*Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
Will suddenly collect for the usual illusion.
But it will be too late, and I'll walk on silent
Among the men who don't look back, with my secret.*

"Nothing at my back, the void behind me." This is the fear of these days: the void behind me, the void around me, the void within me. A void in which we try to set the foundations of what we do, make, and organize, of our appointments and our responsibilities.

Locked in our homes, it is as if this question had been thrown in our face: If I cannot do what I used to do, what is the purpose of this day, what is the purpose of my life today? What sense, what meaning, does this day, my days, have? Then, is my day worthwhile when I do something useful? Is my value tied to doing something, and therefore I consist of what I do? Who am I then? What is my true value?

Thoughts and reasoning that until recently we were trying to straighten out, as we followed *The Religious Sense* by Fr. Giussani — always with a vague suspicion of being artificial, or at least of falling into intellectualism — now have surfaced violently in our experience. They have rushed through our veins every morning with the struggle that ensues, and have determined and continue to determine our energies, our mood, our desire to get out of bed and live.

How many times have we found ourselves looking for something to do (it is embarrassing to say it, but it is true!), like going grocery shopping to find a small, fleeting sense of relief, but seeing that the void within us grew in direct proportion, and with it our bitterness, fear, and discontent grew as well.

*Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
Will suddenly collect for the usual illusion.
But it will be too late...*

Nihilism, whether we like to call it that or not, is by no means an exaggeration or a fixation of the present time, much less something abstract. Rather, it is a daily temptation, which gives rise to the battle we must fight every morning. It is the great temptation that what we do, who we are, everything and, most painfully even our loved ones, is ephemeral. This ephemeral nature of everything tempts us all day long. It is as if we stumbled upon signs that continually document it: the suspicion that everything is like a scam, the feeling that things become indifferent to us, unattractive, no longer interesting. We think that ultimately nothing is worthwhile, everything passes, ultimately everything annoys me, bothers me, how boring! In the end, what is beautiful? We have this nagging thought in our head, like a "woodworm" within us — Fr. Carrón

calls it. With regard to this I refer you to the first part of Beginning Day, where Fr. Carrón introduces Azurmendi.

I do not want to twist the knife in the wound with too many examples, but I believe it is helpful to see the concrete consequences that this temptation of nihilism pours out into our lives, so that we can treat them precisely as consequences and not get lost in measuring things, in attempts at moralistic corrections, without realizing instead that we have to go to the root, to look at something else. It is interesting to help us see some of these consequences. For example, the fear that often grabs us in the evening, or in the face of yet another painful news, originates precisely in this breath of nothingness. It is the same with the apathy that keeps us removed from what is happening, to avoid the effort of being involved (“after all there is nothing for me there!”). Or the fickleness that makes us try to fill ourselves with some small consolation, and then the anger and discontent that we feel in the face of being incapable to change the situation, ours and that of others, because life continues on its own and not according to our plans. That’s it.

All these things originate from the temptation of seeing “nothing at my back.”

2) A struggle

We talked about a battle that is taking place in us. But to have a battle at least two contenders are needed. If on the one hand there is nothingness which tries to pull us into an abyss, the first contender, then what is the other? The temptation of nothingness that pervades us triggers some turmoil in us. *“I am not made for this; I don’t want this!”* Our heart remains restless. There is something irreducible within us in the face of this — as if everything wanted to prove that nothing is worthwhile, that there is nothing that has meaning. This provocation triggers in us a restlessness that we cannot get rid of, something irreducible, even if perhaps marred by the underlying vague suspicion that it is a bit abstract, intellectual. In this situation, just as on the one hand the temptation of nothingness emerges, on the other, the irreducibility of our desire emerges just as strongly. I do not want that nothingness! I will not have it! It is not possible! I do not want to! I am made to live; I want to live!

I will tell you something that struck me. Among the many videos that have been circulating lately, I came across one of a dancer — now a very old lady in a wheelchair, with Alzheimer’s disease — who, in listening to the music of *Swan Lake* through her headphones, was making again, as best she could, the graceful gestures of when she was a dancer. The video alternated moments of her now, sitting in the wheelchair with an enraptured gaze, with repertory images of decades ago, when she danced to the same music on stage. It was a moving video, but the cry I heard within me was: it can’t be that time always takes away everything! It is not right for such beauty to be taken away and become nothing! In this period, in the face of so many devastating experiences of mourning, sometimes because of the speed and merciless way in which many of us have seen our dearest ones die, the desire to live has emerged in all its power. This is

irreducible. We are not made for nothingness. There is something that resists within us. Yet, even in the most ordinary daily life this restlessness, this hunger for meaning, this need for meaning — which we have previously described by looking only at the dark side of the coin — emerges as never before, precisely because of the temptation of nothingness. The need for meaning has emerged in us as real as the pandemic. Anything but abstract! The need for meaning in every gesture proved each time to be the most concrete food we needed. We “are” thirst and hunger for meaning. This has been and is unavoidable in our current experience. I need to understand and to have a reason why.

The other side of fear is attachment to something that we do not want to lose. If there is fear, it is because I am attached to something. Fr. Giussani said it in *The Religious Sense*: first comes beauty, then the fear of losing it. They do not have equal standing. Fear does not exist unless there is beauty first, while beauty can exist without fear. That is why it is very important to become aware of this reaction that is unescapable, of this attachment to reality, to life, of this desire that emerges, of this need for meaning. It is fundamental, because it says who we are, what I am. If there were no fear, we would slip into nothingness without blinking an eye. Instead this does not happen, it is impossible. There has really been a reversal of our way of thinking, of our cultural or pseudo-cultural mindset. Before, we perceived that the “concrete” aspect of life was what we did, while we considered the meaning to be something abstract, tied to interpretation, at the very least subjective (everyone has always felt somehow free to invent their own “reason why”). Instead, in the experience of these times — how striking! — what has clearly emerged as our concrete need, like for water and air, is “meaning”, so much so that without that, without a good, solid, objective and concrete “reason why”, everything we used to do and do remains abstract, incomprehensible, empty and meaningless. It is nothingness. Now we have discovered that what is concrete, what gives concreteness to everything is the meaning. I have a constitutive structure that is unescapable: I am made of hunger, thirst, desire for meaning. This is the internal structure that keeps nothingness at bay, that counters nothingness, that fights it and that tries to resist it. From this point of view, the more we are aware of this, the more we see and recognize it in ourselves, the more we also know how to see and recognize what happens around us. Couldn’t what we denounced — at times with a little contempt — as immature and superficial expressions of many who stood on their balconies waving flags and chanting “everything will be fine”, have been instead a naive declaration of hope? Was it just optimism based on nothingness, truly on nothingness? Or could not it have been a cry, distorted as much as you want, but still documenting a humanity that does not know how, but tries to resist nothingness?

Certainly not everyone has had the Grace we have received of being reminded by what I felt was Fr. Carrón’s brilliant inspiration that put us in front of this objective truth: if there is the need, there is the answer. We were a little surprised. It seemed too simple. Or too abstruse, in the sense of intellectual, abstract. Let me tell you something. Among all the things we had to change to make confessions possible — like no longer

using confessionals, but entire rooms — we turned part of the sacristy into a beautiful room with a table, plexiglass, the required distance. While moving all the furniture we found a safe in the wall! No one remembered it. It was a safe that no one could open because nobody knew where the key was. One thing is sure, though, the key existed (or still exists)! It would make no sense to have invented a safe if the key had not been invented too.

The example is very figurative, but of such simplicity: no one doubts that the key to the lock of a safe exists. Maybe it was lost, but it must exist. In fact, reason could not accept that one had invented a safe with a keyless lock. So, from an existential point of view, if I feel nostalgia, longing, it is for someone I miss; you cannot feel nostalgia for an idea. Nostalgia is proof that someone exists, that someone has been present, that someone moved us, otherwise it would not make sense. So, if there is this desire for meaning within me, if I am this desire for meaning, the alternative is the same as with the safe for which a key has not been invented. It is absurd!

However, while in front of the safe, my reason starts to laugh, in front of the meaning of life, it goes crazy. If I am desire for meaning, it is because there is an answer. It is because I miss someone, I miss the meaning, I need it. In this simple step there is the great resource to resist nothingness.

You need to become aware of who you are in that moment: you are someone who is wanted. There is someone for whom you are worth it. Indeed, because He made you thirsty for Him, in this moment He is making you full of desire, nostalgic, thirsty, hungry, in need of Him, in order to be able to propose Himself to your freedom and your freedom may have a role in this awaiting, desire, welcoming and acceptance of Him.

Let us try to listen again to this song that describes the path we have followed so far, the path of our heart and of our desire.

*My God, I look at myself and discover
that I am faceless;
I look into my depths and see endless darkness
Only when I realize that you exist,
do I hear my voice again... like an echo
and I am born again like time is born from memory.
Oh heart, why do you tremble? You are not alone,
you are not alone;
You don't know how to love, yet you are loved;
You don't know how to make yourself, yet you are made.
As the stars up in the sky,
Make me walk in Being,
Make me grow and change, as you raise up and change the light,
from day to night.
Make my soul take on color, as the snow
on your precious mountain tops takes on the sun of Your Love.*

I look at my depths, I see the darkness, I realize that You exist. I look, I see, I become aware.

It is not mechanical. You have to decide to do it. Only when this is not the repetition of a formula, even sung, but when there is an “I” present, an “I” that rises in all its desire and in all its intelligence, in all its reasonableness of open, eager reason, do I start living again. This “becoming aware” drives recognition to become an entreaty. Isaiah says, “*Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down*” (Is 63:19).

Oh heart, why do you tremble? You are not alone, you are not alone. The big work is precisely self-awareness, and the morning is this journey that each person has to make to recognize this in the struggle between being drawn into the abyss of nothingness and — starting from the discomfort we feel — being so present to ourselves as to recognize that “You exist”. You, Mystery, exist.

The big work is precisely self-awareness, this path, as the song describes it: *Make me walk in Being*. In Being, not in nothingness. Make me grow and change. “*Make my soul take on color, as the snow [...] takes on the sun of Your Love*”. Like an echo, as if illumined by Your presence that emerges in my desire for You. This is the documentation that is within easy reach, within me, in my experience of You. You make me full of desire for You, awaiting for You. Make me walk everyday this path that from nothingness arrives to recognize You. That is why silence, which is walking this path, is the great weapon against nothingness.

In short, friends, this is not first of all a health emergency. This is a human emergency, a real emergency of our humanity, because here we clearly had the opportunity to see the greatest need emerge. That is why not every solution measures up to the problem.

3) Inadequate attempts

What became evident in certain attempts we have yielded and continue to yield to, which are not commensurate to our humanity, that is, to our desire, has become an experience. We have always said that, but now it has emerged from our experience that the answer, the meaning for which we are thirsty and hungry every morning, is not an explanation.

a) Repeating the discourse.

Fr. Carrón said succinctly, “*A line of thought, a philosophy, a psychological or intellectual analysis does not enable our humanity to start afresh, does not give new breath to desire, does not regenerate the ‘I’.*” Do you remember when we were told as kids (and we repeat it to our young people), “If you don’t study you don’t move forward, if you don’t study you will go nowhere.” True, logical, and clear. Yet, none of us has ever opened a book for that reason and will never open it. Understanding something does not mean that it is enough for the “I” to move. In fact, if the “I” does not move, it is because we have not understood something. We think we understood it, but we have simply pasted

it on in a discourse that we have already in mind, in an abstract universal — said Fr. Pino at the last School of Community — as part of a Christian, or a CL theory.

Let us get to the bottom of this. To understand something means to love it, or in order to understand it, you must love it. It means to be attracted to it, to live now the awareness that that specific thing is part of the answer to my desire for happiness and fullness, that is, it has to do with my desire. Pay attention to this because it is very insidious. In fact, if we pay attention, we realize that it is probably the biggest oversight we regularly make. For this reason, from the point of view of method, it is very relevant that Fr. Carrón put us in front of Azurmendi, that is, in front of his way of facing the Movement. In fact, we can be in front of dozens of facts that amaze us in our companionship, that move us, that happen in front of us... How many of these facts we hear about, how many do we witness, how many can we recount? But then it is as if we embedded them in an already known universal. Fr. Giussani says, “*We subsume the particulars into an abstract universal,*” (*Generating Traces*, p. 54) that is, we look at them, we treat them as the confirmation of something we already know rather than something, someone who is happening now and asks me to simply follow him. That is, by subsuming them into an abstract universal, into what we already know, using them to confirm something we already know, which is lifeless and abstract, we “sterilize” them, eliminating their being an Event. It is not that we don’t see the facts, Fr. Carrón said — Azurmendi is an amateur compared to what we have seen in our companionship for years and decades — but while he followed, obeying a recognized correspondence, we subsume these facts into an abstract universal: we follow an abstraction of the Movement, of the charism, that we already know, that we already control. However, in front of a woman we fall in love with, in front of a man we fall in love with, we do not subsume the facts to confirm what falling in love is, to understand more clearly what falling in love is! We follow that fact, that gesture so significant for me of a presence that is speaking to me, that is happening in front of me and calls me, and I simply follow it. It is not that it confirms to me the theory of what love is.

That is why in Azurmendi everything changes, knowledge changes, it becomes true knowledge. In us, instead, in front of the same things the charism is no longer the Event that happens again and that we recognize and follow here and now — exactly like I follow a woman who fascinates me, with whom I fall in love. Rather these facts embellish and confirm the abstract concepts that we have in mind. This is striking. We must look at it carefully, because this is really dangerous, a terrible reduction of the Event. We know how to repeat the facts, the facts strike us, they amaze us, but they do not move us. We “sterilize” them, we put them into the abstract universal. This is a lifeless alternative, because it means that, no matter what happens in front of me, ultimately, I do not move.

This is exactly the rebuke Jesus made to His generation, to His countrymen, “*We played the flute for you, but you did not dance.*” It is not that you did not hear the flute, that you did not notice it. You did not move! It did not tell your heart anything. They

definitely saw what was happening, but they did not obey! Ideology or a discourse are not enough. Not even “Christian ideology,” let alone the others! We did not need any explanation about this, we felt within ourselves the boredom of certain discourses, analyses, reassurances given on TV, from the pulpits and maybe in our Schools of Community and in our small groups. However, a detector that we no longer remembered emerged powerfully in us. Discovering this in our experience is not a small thing! The fact that “ideology is not enough” is not a statement fabricated by me, but rather, an invitation to recognize it in your experience. When it becomes ideology, an abstract universal instead of an Event, it bores you because your desire is not mistaken.

b) Clinging to the rules has also proved inadequate.

It always seems that we are against the rules and we praise being totally unconstrained. It isn't like that! Yet, it became clear that the attempt to control reality, on the one hand, and oneself, on the other, with beautiful clear rules that I imposed on myself, did not work and proved to be a useless and illusory attempt. Our growing cry of need for meaning was not appeased by the (perhaps) initial contentment of following well the rule of the Fraternity of Saint Joseph, of the Movement and of the Church. I repeat, it is not that I am against having a rule, yet, trying to respond to our need with rules does not work.

c) Then, let us be content!

If we say it like that no one in the Movement would ever accept it, we have an antivirus that kicks in right away! Yet, in fact, all of us, a bit like children who keep trying and do not give up even in the face of experience, try to be content in some way. Since it is impossible for us to maintain the position of dizziness caused by our need, our attempts to give up fulfilling our desire and being content with some surrogate alternatives have accompanied, and continue to accompany us, daily. We experienced it while we were doing it, almost helpless in the face of our own attempts.

4) So what really pulls us out of nothingness?

What does really answer? Each of us knows it. We know what were the occasions, the moments, in which we breathed freely. What were these moments when we found that we were certain?

Fr. Giussani says this beautiful phrase, which we have repeated during this period, “*I am unable to find an index of hope other than the multiplication of these people who are presences.*” When did we see the hint of a response that lived up to our desire? When were we intercepted by people who revealed themselves to be a presence, authorities, that is, people in which we saw that nothingness was defeated due to what they said and for how they said it, for the immediate correspondence with what we needed. They carried the answer to our thirst for meaning in their flesh and in the radiance of their eyes. They are people who made us relive in that moment the paternity of the charism,

that is, of the Spirit of Christ who came to us through Fr. Giussani. That is why they were authorities. They were an “I” who had been regenerated and through their different, more fulfilled, more desirable humanity, in turn they regenerated us in that moment. They were not superhuman, but in that moment we recognized them because we breathed more freely. It echoes in our experience something we heard at other times and may have accepted and made our own as an intelligent analysis of that moment, but which we now really comprehend, namely the statement of Fr. Giussani, *“This is the time of the person.” “When we get together, why do we do it? To pull back our friends — the whole world, if we could — from the nothingness in which every man finds himself.”*

The meaning became flesh two thousand years ago, and how did it move through history? From heart to heart, from freedom to freedom, from amazement to amazement, from a “yes” — that of the Virgin Mary — from “yes” to “yes”, through Fr. Giussani, through faces and friendships that you know, He reached you. Now! He is reaching you now. This is the heart of the Christmas Mystery. Fr. Carrón says, *“The sinful woman in the Gospel was not saved from nothingness by her own thoughts, intentions, or efforts. It was a presence who had such passion and preference for her person, for her “I”, that she was won over entirely”* (*The Radiance in Your Eyes*, p. 59; cfr. Lk 7: 36-47). And now He wins me over and wins you over. The presence of Christ here and now is realized today in His body, which is the Church.

5) Advent

There are two conditions, though. The first is to watch, and it is not a given, because to watch, to see, you need all of your humanity as we have discovered and described so far, that is, your humanity wounded by the temptation of nothingness, your weak and vulnerable humanity, together with your heart which, precisely because it is provoked by this nothingness, wounded by this nothingness and by this weakness, begins to be itself, that is, to desire. It sounds complicated when we describe it, but in our experience, it is easy, it is simple, and it happens every day. There is no need for anything besides your humanity as it is, as it wakes up in the morning, as it is now, as it will be in half an hour. If God became flesh, “you must be in the flesh to understand Jesus” — said Fr. Giussani. What makes us understand Jesus is an experience. If God, the Mystery, has become flesh, born of the womb of a woman, nothing can be understood of this Mystery unless we start from material experiences, from our own depths.

Let us read the Christmas Poster:

“He is present here and now: here and now! Emmanuel. Everything flows from this; everything flows from this because everything changes. His presence requires flesh, something material, our flesh. The presence of Christ, in the ordinariness of life, increasingly involves the beat of our heart: being moved by His presence turns into being moved in our daily lives. Nothing is useless, nothing is extraneous. We start to have an affection for everything, everything, and the magnificent consequences of this are respect

for what you do, precision in what you do, loyalty to your concrete work and tenacity in persevering to the end; you become more tireless. Really, it is like as if you were outlining another world, another world within this world.”

To intercept the answer in the flesh you need to *look*. The first condition is to *look*. One looks because he knows that he can find, and he knows that he can find because he has already been found. That is why Advent is only and exclusively Christian, because we are waiting for the One who has already come.

The second condition is to *recognize*. This is also not to be taken for granted, because in order to recognize it is necessary to be poor, that is, to have nothing to defend, no preconceived ideas. It is not up to you to decide how, where, and when. Advent, Christmas, are beautiful for this reason, because while the Pharisees could claim some ideas about the Messiah, how He should have been, when He should have come, rattling off an avalanche of quotations, studies, and interpretations, the shepherds had nothing to defend. Yet, they moved, like the Magi. When they arrived in Jerusalem and they pulled out all their books, they had the place and the time (almost the time, but certainly the place where it would happen). They had Him there, twenty miles away. Yet, the Pharisees did not move. They subsumed it into their abstract universal. Recognizing the Event is not a given. Following it for what it is — an Event — is not a given. The three Magi did it. Advent and Christmas are full of these figures, these signs, these aids: it is not you who decides how, where, and when. We need the openness and poverty of those who do not claim that they already know. That is it. To be open and available means to be so poor that you do not claim to already know.

We will end by reading together how Fr. Carrón introduced us to Advent in the last School of Community:

“Advent is the time of this waiting, to which the Church introduces us once again. Christ responds to this waiting — which no one can eliminate, as we have seen — by means of a presence that speaks through facts, in the beginning and today. The method is always the same, as the Gospel constantly reminds us. I am always amazed at that phrase of Jesus, “But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Mt 13:16–17). This also applies to us who always, every time we meet, listen to all of these stories and see all of the facts they feature day after day. The facts are what He uses to call us to conversion now. We are part of the lucky blessed ones mentioned in the Gospel. In front of these events, each of us can check our availability today, as did those who saw the events of two thousand years ago. It is possible that we refuse to recognize them: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented” (Lk 10:13). For this reason, let us accompany each other — witnessing to each other — in following these events so that we don’t have to hear that “woe to you!” said to each one of us. Who is calling us through these events?

Jesus continues, “Whoever listens to you listens to Me. Whoever rejects you rejects Me. And whoever rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Lk 10:16). It is through the witness of someone present that Christ calls us today; it is He who still has mercy on us and knocks on our door at the beginning of this Advent season, so that He can take hold of our whole selves and so that He can reach everyone through us. So, have a good Advent season!

Fr. Carrón said this to us, and we repeat it to each other.

Announcements

I take the liberty to give you some details about the structure of this retreat: how, when, and in what way, is not decided by us. I review what Fr. Carrón said at the Summer Exercises as a suggestion for these days. Fr. Carrón said, *“We ask to be open to be struck by His presence. We ask this during the silence that we will try to keep, each of us wherever we are, supporting each other in our witness as people who seek Him, as the prophet Isaiah told us, “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.”*

Each of us is in our own home, in our own circumstances, in our own situation. This is given to us, this is asked of us, and silence is really the great weapon against nothingness. Whatever each of us can do, we should do it to live fully these few hours that we gave ourselves and that the Lord gives to us to be together, even if we are far apart. So, let us keep working until we get to the time of the assembly.

Fraternity of Saint Joseph
Advent Retreat in video connection

November 21-22, 2020

Sunday Assembly

Music:

A. Dvorak, Piano Quintet in A major op.81

Fr. Michele Berchi. The Mystery became present and made Himself visible, a Presence that can be experienced. He came to meet us and chose us in order to embrace the whole world and draw the whole world to Himself. It is awareness, consciousness, that opens us to the magnitude of Being and beauty. It is this awareness of Being that opens us to the magnitude of the truth and the beauty of the world that is Christ.

Songs: *Canzone di maggio [Song of May]*

Haja o que houver [Whatever happens]

(Whatever happens, I am here. Whatever happens, I am waiting for you. Come back in the wind, my love! Oh my love return soon please! How long has it been, I have forgotten why I stayed away from you. Each moment that passes is getting worse. Come back in the wind please! I know, I know what you are to me. Whatever happens, I am waiting for you.)

Fr. Michele Berchi: Let us begin our assembly, so new in this different format. Gathering via video connection challenges us to go even more into the essentials of how we can help each other.

Let us try to help each other, then, so that our work is useful and is a step that the Lord makes us take together.

Contribution from Italy

Dearest Fr. Michele,

After being in the emergency room because I had a high fever and I was gasping for air, having tested positive for COVID-19, I locked myself in a 12 sqm room for two weeks. That day, my closest coworker wrote to me, "What a shame, such rotten luck!" I remember I wasn't just scared; I was terrified by the possibility of having to be admitted to the hospital. My coworkers had warned me, "Check the oxygen saturation, how many breaths per minute, if they get worse you must call an ambulance." Faced with my coworker's message, my initial reaction was one of deep anger and rebellion (I too had thought for a moment that it was a rotten luck) but then, pacing back and forth in the room, I found myself glued in front of the painting of Our Lady holding the Child in her arms, and a question came spontaneously: Is it possible that You give me all of this just for the sake of it, due to some rotten luck?

Looking at Mother and Son, I answered myself that it wasn't possible that everything that was happening had such a trivial and superficial explanation. It became clear to me that

He was giving this new circumstance specifically to me and I didn't understand why. In a flash I had gone from taking care of others to having to be taken care of. Suddenly, the passage "When you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go..." came to mind. In front of this I could only let Him do what He wanted, with a dawning certainty that everything (even the possible hospitalization) would be for me and not against me. I began to keep silence, a true silence. I followed what I had been prescribed to do, I prayed even without saying formal prayers, in a constant dialogue with Him. I saw my children taking care of me. I saw my friends keeping me company through text messages, I saw through my PC how Fr. Gianni and Angela serve the Lord through Holy Mass, I read every day a little piece of the "The Radiance in Your Eyes," I saw from my window day and darkness alternate through the trees of Adda Park that I have in front of my house (even those were given to me in those days!).

After two weeks, still with a positive test, it was even more obvious that the Lord wanted me right where I was. Once I left my room, I spent a whole week following the kids with their homework, something I could never stand in the past, and now I was enjoying. Maybe when you are afraid of losing your life you appreciate everything, even what makes you work harder, or maybe "the task" just becomes clearer, which is not what you have in mind, but it is simply living seriously wherever He wants you: everything becomes more livable. I had the same feeling yesterday when I went back to work. I prayed and I am praying not to lose this increased self-awareness of being made and loved: how true it is that I am You who make me!

I have a question about the third point. You talk about inadequate attempts and you say that it is not enough to "repeat a discourse" to overcome the challenge of nothingness. How is it possible to stay in front of a person you love and breaks your heart because you see her throw away the entire reality? My personal temptation is to face her head-on thinking that this may work, but we all know from experience that this doesn't save us. I am praying about it, but I would still like some help from you.

Fr. Michele. Thank you, because it is as if you made us retrace, in nuggets, the whole path of yesterday's lesson, starting with your reaction, which is what we all find within us and that you summarized with that term that for us Italians is very clear — "a rotten luck." It is just a trivial, superficial way, as you said, but actually full of nothingness, like saying that life is like a roulette wheel, that is, "it was just my bad luck." We feel a sense of injustice, but we don't have the courage to turn to someone to complain and we simply notice that we are uncomfortable, that it isn't what we want, that it is against our desire. This way of reacting is certainly superficial, but our humanity contains this rebellion against COVID-19, gasping for breath, the possibility of death. That is why I say that your contribution contains the whole path of this lesson: there is the reaction, there is nothingness that frightens us, that looms, but actually in the flesh, in our depths, in our anguish, in the difficulty to breathe. So, we do not fight the theory of *nihilism*, but the concrete pull of nothingness that draws us under, because

when the possibility of death is real and we feel it in our flesh, it is anything but an abstract theory. Yet, we are also experiencing a rebellion.

The impressive thing is that this seems to have no way out. At some point, though, there is a new step — you said — perhaps short time-wise, only a moment. It may take a long time to get to that point, but it is the step you mentioned when you quoted the episode of Peter in Saint John's Gospel. That is, in the face of this reality I can recognize the presence of someone who invites me to take a step with him towards what I would not have wanted to undertake: *"Someone else will [...] lead you."* It is an instant, but from there it is a succession of consequences, of a gaze that changes, of a gratitude that is born, of regaining all of reality with a new taste and intensity, down to the trees. What is that moment? That moment is Faith, brandished by your freedom. It is your "yes". That is, my whole person stands before this reality and, recognizing a Presence, can say, "yes", count me in, I will follow you. It is hard to describe it in theory, because it is an instant, but at the same time, it is everything. The "yes" means: no matter what happens, if You are with me, I accept it. We all know well what dizziness we experience in that moment when you face the possibility of an illness, of something that scares you. Saying "yes", and therefore relying entirely on Faith, is a unique experience, because in the moment after everything is liberated. You start breathing freely.

But what is this Faith? It is made of a struggle, of a battle. And a battle is a reasonable step, it is not closing our eyes. While everyone tells us *"blessed are you who have Faith, blessed are you who can close your eyes and trust,"* our experience is exactly the opposite: it needs our eyes to be totally open to what happened in the past, to my history, to the present. Let us live this assembly with this question, to better understand what Faith is, how it is possible to take that step, to say that "yes", how it is possible to say it in a way that it is reasonable, that is human. Many of the questions that we have received express the suspicion that this step is an intellectual process, as if one had to rack one's brains with strange and somehow complicated thoughts in order to be able to... However, this is not our experience. I leave this point open to go more deeply into what the step in which one says "yes" means.

The answer about our own experience is the answer to your question. To understand what is useful to another person you need to understand what has been useful to you. Your concern is very real, the grief that we often feel for our children, for our loved ones, for our dear friends is very real and we would like to intervene and face them head-on. Yet, when did we ever move because we were confronted with the truth in order to convince us? We never moved for that. So, what moves us? What makes that "yes" possible? What makes it possible for me is the method, and that makes me useful for others as well. The more I am aware of what has happened to me, the more I can be a useful tool to help with the problem, and not — as Fr. Carrón would say — to exacerbate it, as when wishing to help we step in instinctively, haphazardly, or thinking that we know what is good for the other.

Contribution from São Paulo — Brazil

First of all, I want to thank Fr. Michele for these words that move me and give me hope. When you talk about the rule, it isn't that it's enough for me or it saves me. I am literally struggling (and failing) in trying to live the rule as if it's the last resort to free myself from the nothingness I feel I am falling into so many times during the day. Every morning when I wake up, with all the responsibilities that "scream" at me now that I work from home, before praying I turn on the PC and only when I am already connected do I start saying my prayers. This makes me feel bad, but either I do that, or I don't pray. I think that I am putting the Lord always in second place, because the first place is for work and for my commitments. Thank God you talked about the struggle we live each morning. If I understand correctly, it is the struggle between being and nothingness. I would like to delve deeper into this issue. If the struggle happens daily, is there no end? Do I always have to go through this struggle? How is it for you? My flesh desires this change, in the sense of being more faithful, even if I am "pulled down" and often fall miserably. Is the desire not to need to engage in this struggle a temptation? I don't want to give up, I want to win. Is this position right?

Fr. Michele. *I don't want to give up, I want to win.* The alternative to the struggle, the alternative to the battle — Fr. Carrón would say, with an example that has always made me smile — is the cemetery, where the Lord would reign supreme. And today, instead of celebrating Christ the King of the Universe, we would celebrate Christ the King of the cemetery, who reigns where all enemies have been wiped out and where there is no more struggling. Instead, in our daily experience, even physical, the struggle is not against... The drama of life that originates from our wound, from our humanity, that is born of our forgetfulness, of our being often distracted, of letting our life get busy with a thousand small things, which sometimes fill the whole horizon of our interest dazzling us, all of this is not against us.

I often give this example. When they invite me to eat at some friends' house, I always hope that they invite me for dinner, because I usually arrive hungry. I eat little for lunch and in the evening, I arrive so hungry that I could eat up even the guests. It would be terrible to get to the barbecue already sated. Hunger is not a problem if food is available. Hunger is a problem for those who do not have food. So, the desire that emerges from this daily struggle, this need for an answer, is not against us, but we can recognize it because of the encounter we had, because the answer became present.

The One who responds entered the reality of our lives. That is why being put back on the journey is the only possibility to not take everything for granted. Our difficulty, the greatest risk, is to remain unmoved in front of the answer because we are not hungry, because we do not face who we are, which is our need for desire. It is like a mother telling her child not to eat candy before lunch because it ruins your appetite and then you cannot satisfy your hunger. It is not good, because then you are not hungry for what nourishes you and after half an hour you will be hungrier than before, but it will

not be lunch time anymore. Sorry for the trivial example, but this fight is not against ourselves.

We can say this precisely because Christ became man, because He came to meet us. So, the Advent we begin is not against us, it is the attempt that the Church makes — and therefore that Christ Himself makes — to educate us and put us back in a position where we realize the need we have, the expectation we are, so that when He comes, we can meet Him. What was the most terrible thing documented in the Gospel? That His people, who had been prepared for centuries, were not waiting for Him, not because they did not need Him, but because they were waiting for Him as someone different. They were stuck on their own ideas and images that somehow suffocated their expectation. Instead, the characteristic of God who became man was that the more He was present, the more He made you desire His presence. The desire of those who met Him was awakened even more, first of all because it was confirmed that there was an answer... so I am not “poorly made”, I am not crazy, I am not wrong.

How beautiful the contributions of many who, in the face of the description of this drama, of this battle, said: I always thought that I was “poorly made”, I always thought it was my problem, I always thought that maybe a little psychological help... Instead I discover that this is not a disease, this is not against me, but rather it is a path, a journey, a being put back in a position that makes the encounter possible. Look, the moralism with which every day we measure and kill our humanity by saying “I am poorly made” — which is the source of much anger, of many consequences that others have to endure — stems from this misunderstanding, that is, from thinking that there is no need for this struggle.

Do I always have to go through this struggle? Yes, because that puts you back on track. This is the first aspect of what our friend described between the “rotten luck” reaction and the feeling that it was not enough, that it is not true, that it cannot be simply bad luck. If there is no struggle you are not present and the desire remains a complaint rather than becoming an openness, a waiting.

Contribution from New York

When I think about nothingness, I think about some passages in the Gospel, especially those in which Christ is rejected even by those who have witnessed His miracles. For example, when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, some ran to tell the Pharisees. When ten lepers were healed, only one returned to give thanks. When Christ was on trial with Pontius Pilate, some who knew of His miracles and works were still shouting, “Crucify Him.” The level of freedom is also played out in front of me, in my daily interactions, through my interpretation of things or through my poverty of spirit. I find that through reflection or silence, my freedom or non-freedom unfolds in the way I interpret the circumstances. I want to get out of this pattern and move to a truer freedom, to be free from my interpretations, to see things as they truly are.

Christ continually awakens my humanity through my desire. My conscience must be formed to desire the things that really fulfill me and not those that leave me empty. The value

of the companionship, regardless of the distance, is that it is making me look at and recognize in my own experience what really fulfills me. Any experience can reawaken my desire, but only one leaves me with some knowledge, while all the others leave me wanting for something more and better, for new or improved things, yet things I can control or achieve on my own.

I think that every desire can reach Christ if one is accompanied, open and available. Coming from a Buddhist moralistic cultural background, I have always thought of desire as something bad, something that will make you suffer. Since there is no way to satisfy this Unknown Desire, it is better to “be happy with what you have,” or with what you can attain. This is only half true, because without Grace I cannot reach Christ. It is purely His gift.

I am no longer afraid of my desires because if my desires are not fulfilled, I understand that either they are not fulfilled for the time being, or it is a good thing that they aren't fulfilled yet. I can think this way only through the recognition of my relationship with Christ. In any relationship you cannot have everything you want. If I had it, I would already be holy, because His will would be my will and I would have everything.

Fr. Michele. Thank you, because you testify to us that desire is not a given and that those who do not know Christ, those who have not known Him, live desire as a problem, as something to get rid of, as if after all it were a disease, a contradiction. It is true that Buddhism has this conception, but, as you said, I can look at my desire without trying to be content because I have met Christ, because it is as if my humanity had been confirmed: it is not sick, it is not making a mistake. We risk taking this for granted because we grew up in a society determined by Christianity which, even without knowing it, has always exalted desire. It is normal for us that the fact that one desires is a good thing. Instead, where Christ is not in the picture, desire becomes a problem, it is a disturbance, because it cannot be controlled, because — since there is no answer — I cannot face it.

To “*be happy with what you have*” is a half-truth because we see in our experience that in everything we have in our hands there is the possibility, the way, to reopen our relationship with the One who responds to our desire. There is a way to be content with what we have which is, in fact, an attempt to lower our desire, to censor it. Or, there is a way to find out that all the things I have in my hands, the children, the face mask, the trees, my coworkers, especially a companionship, even if distant, everything is something that is given to me by Someone, now. So it is not that what I have is enough for me, but that what I have is full of that Presence, it is a gesture of that Presence, it is something given to me by that Presence, by the One who gives me everything.

What made it possible for my eyes to recognize Him? What frees me from my interpretations? — that is to say, from subjectivity, from not being sure. This is a big challenge for everyone. That is why the great help we try to give to each other is to look at reality, to look at ourselves, to look at what happens in order to understand what is objective, that is, what we cannot change, what — even if we make a mistake — later emerges in its truth. The issue of desire is the first fixed point that is not an

interpretation. In fact, I can try everything, but this desire continues to emerge, it continues to be objective.

To go back to your example, Buddhism cannot completely erase desire: it is only possible for a few, with great efforts over a long time, with great oriental arts, to try to keep it at bay, but actually it is enough to have a pandemic, a virus, just to be forced to stay home for the lockdown, to start feeling the fear. What is happening these days really seems like an education to me, a way in which the Lord is teaching us something. He is using one of the smallest and most insignificant things in the universe, a virus, to bring down the whole Western and Eastern systems of interpretation and attempt to control desire, that is, to control the nature of man that is made for God, that is made as waiting for God, as need for God. This came out clearly in everyone and made everything collapse in an instant, making us look ridiculous with our sophisticated attempts. It is like hitting a pole: it is not an interpretation. The pole is something real, standing there, something we cannot move and that we have to deal with.

Now let us look at the answer: *How is Christ not an interpretation?*

I just want to say that in the silence I am discovering that it is for my growth, it is for me, for me to grow.

Fr. Michele. Exactly. It is for your growth, for our growth, and discovering this is not an interpretation. Let us use the beautiful example that Fr. Carrón reminded us of from the Gospel. The man born blind has no doubts. They can tell him whatever they want. They keep asking him the same questions. They also go to his parents to ask if it is really true that he was born blind. He has only one thing to say and he is not mistaken. As Fr. Carrón says — *God is not afraid to throw him in the midst of all the interpretations with only one certainty: I did not see it and now I see it. Period.* You people can say whatever you want, interpret things as you want. They say: but that man keeps company with sinners... In fact, that is a real question. He counters: It is unheard of that a sinner, that is, someone who is not a prophet, who is not sent by God, can heal — this is what you have to explain to me, I can only say what happened to me. You can say whatever you want, but I could not see and now I see.

The real question is whether we recognize this, whether we are aware of this. That is why we were so struck by Azurmendi at Beginning Day. We are helped by friends who have clear this step and who can say with their lives: I used to be like that and now I am like this. This is not an interpretation. What helps all of us to recognize this? Because it is not a given. Look at the example of the lepers: only one in ten realizes what was an objective fact for everyone. Before they were lepers, then they were not lepers anymore. This is not an interpretation, but you can avoid looking at it, you can avoid considering it, you can take it for granted, you can even be cured of leprosy and...

It is a level of freedom. I am amazed, I am amazed at my friends, at my family, and I want to thank the Lord because, when I look at my background, I am amazed.

Fr. Michele. In fact, I am saying that we are all grateful for this, because it is like being in front of the man born blind, of the tenth leper, that is, in front of someone who notices, who looks back. It is a matter of freedom, you are right, it is like having someone who shows it to me, who helps me look, who makes me aware of this. I care a lot about what you are witnessing to us, even the last thing you said about gratitude in looking at your background, because the temptation is to think that self-awareness, that is, realizing what happened to me, what I am, is something abstract.

I know that it is a matter of freedom and grace, but there is also my desire. How do they go together?

Fr. Michele. We have said it all along. Desire is objective. You do not give yourself your desire. Desire is our structure; need is the structure of our nature, that is, we are made thirsty for a relationship with Christ. It is true that freedom is involved because I can oppose this truth. I may want something different. I may not want to see everything. We know this very well. It is like falling in love. Falling in love happens, but then I have to move and follow this falling in love, or I can start saying: no, who knows where it will take me... but I am fine at home... I am trivializing a bit, but not that much. In front of a desire it is as if my freedom is reawakened by a presence. Freedom decides whether to follow or not the desire and Christ who responds to this desire. This really happens every day. When we get up in the morning and feel all the bitterness, the weariness and we become aware of our need, where do we look? Or instead, we decide where we do not want to look. We decide it. That is why our freedom is at play. Freedom is always at play in the face of something that is objective. It was the same for those who saw the healing of the man born blind, they decided. Because watching a man being raised from the dead, like Lazarus, does not leave me indifferent. It obviously attracts me. It is the answer to what I want. It is something “more” in life that I want. But as soon as I realize that this is asking me something, to follow that Man, to stay with Him, to change all of my thoughts about that Man, about myself, about reality, I have to decide whether to overcome this apparent sacrifice, that is, this resistance, or whether to say “yes” to, and therefore follow, what attracted me and responds to my desire.

Contribution from Italy

I need to understand more. In the Introduction you said that every morning, when we get up, there is a struggle between the fragmenting tendency that we feel churning within us and in things and the force of God who wants us and calls us. Later you stated the usefulness of looking at the consequences: precisely because you can treat them as such, we have to go to their root.

What does it really mean to go to the root? Because the risk I experience is to do a kind of analysis-memory of what has happened to me in all these years, to self-convince and console myself. It is clear that since I met Christ, something about me and in me has changed. That is not enough for me. And as I go over my story remembering it, I realize that it leaves me completely emptied of the Event, I become the event (I end up “telling stories” to myself). From where can I begin again?

Fr. Michele. This is what I wanted to hear. Thank you. We have to face this suspicion that we are “telling stories” to ourselves. The man born blind had to use his memory to recapture what had happened to him, but he did so by virtue of something present. “Telling stories” means introducing something I have in my mind. To remember, on the other hand, means to put before my eyes, in the present, a fact that was and is. It is a fact that continues: I have changed! I can see! So not only do I not empty the Event, but I fill it with a story. Filling it means looking at it in all its depth.

We are truly amazing. We are here, five hundred sixteen people via video connection, some in their kitchen, some in their home office, some who knows where in the world, but as soon as I leave my office and see someone outside my door — we are in lockdown, but someone is around — if I stop them and say to them, “*come and see what’s happening!*” they would be astonished. A person spoke from Brazil, one from the United States, one from Italy: What is that? We take all of this for granted. What does it mean to take it for granted? What I said in the lesson. It is placing it into something you already know. This empties the Event. It is the opposite of making emerge from memory everything that explains, tells me, and makes me see what I have in front of my eyes. I empty the Event when I do not look at it and insert it in what I already know, into my frame of mind.

Instead, it is not a cold analysis, but rather looking at what I have in front of my eyes, full of all its depth and consistency, which is a story. I repeat, the man born blind had to look again at what had happened asking himself, “*Who healed me? What happened to me?*” That explained what he had in the present, that is, his sight, the possibility of seeing. We have to look exactly at this, because it is a way of using reason through a full 360 degrees, so that I can take everything into account to see and to know what I have in front of my eyes. If I do not keep it in mind, everything becomes abstract. It is like being in front of your child, your grandchild or even a friend who tells you, “*Since you answered me like that, you don’t love me.*” Wait a second! How can I not love you? Look at everything, at the story that explains the fact that you are in front of me now and I tell you these things. If you eliminate all of this, you certainly do not understand why right now I may rebuke you, or tell you to do your homework, or correct you about something. If you take away the density of this moment, which is the love I have for you, which is made of a story, of a relationship, what is left? In doing that you are clearly emptying the present Event, you make it become only your reaction, the reaction of a child or of a friend who reacts badly to what I say. Instead, it is just the opposite.

That is why silence is the weapon, because silence means entering into everything leaving space for all of the memory to emerge: Who gives me this? We almost never look at ourselves like that, but it is a way of looking that requires a journey. How is this possible in front of Christ? My “I” and my “yes” are necessary to get into this reality (I am sick, I am short of breath). Why is it not bad luck, why is it not against me? I need exactly this awareness, a story, to be able to look at this moment of reality going to its roots. How can I say that all this reality was given to me by You? I need to keep in mind everything that has happened to me. What awareness must I have to be able to trust that reality is in the hands of Someone, that this Someone loves me, and therefore that this reality, this circumstance is not against me? What do I need to recover? Like a child in front of his mother who scolds him. It depends on my freedom: do I accept this or not? Even if it means that I trust something that scares me so much, so much. Yet, as soon as I say I trust You — with a trust based on a reasonable path, on an awareness full of reasons, that is, of facts seen and remembered — then peace really begins, another love begins. Until one lives this experience one can believe it abstractly, but it is really something else to live the liberation of being able to say: I can trust You, Lord, who are leading me where I do not want to go.

Contribution from the Czech Republic

My question “Why?” which continues to haunt me, is related to my conversion from an inherited Faith to a personal Faith, which took place sixteen years ago through a baby girl who, when she was only nine months old died of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). For me this was terrible, and I said to God: If my conversion passes through this, I don’t want to have anything to do with You. I ended the game, and I was extremely unhappy. Then I met some people who witnessed to me a beautiful and full life, and it always turned out that they were Christians. In front of that I realized that I had to follow the One who also allowed something that beautiful. Yet, the question always comes back. As soon as something breaks into my life and I don’t understand it, I immediately return to that initial death. I can’t find an adequate answer. I recognize a good that these facts have irrefutably brought into my life and that is proving more and more powerful, but in the end, I always close those questions with: God can do everything, so He can also allow something like this which I don’t understand. I end up saying, when we see each other in the Hereafter, I will ask Him. If I don’t give myself this answer, I stop, and everything becomes nothingness.

Yesterday, while listening to the lesson, when you insisted on the heart that is irreducible, I said to myself: yes, there are certain questions that cannot be asked, otherwise one goes crazy. I also realized that my list of these questions grows over time. This hypothesis came to my mind: what if the only reason was what I call the beautiful consequences? What If the reason was really just love for me? A Love that isn’t even afraid to risk the excruciating pain and sorrow that I and others are suffering? I realized that this happened with Jesus’ cross. God’s love was so huge that He didn’t withdraw even in the face of a pain so much greater than mine. To look at Jesus on the cross is to look at the questions that drive you crazy. I feel like Peter after the

miraculous fishing, I find myself saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner." How can I stay in front of such great preference?

Fr. Michele. Thank you because these questions raise a fundamental issue. As soon as we try to find the answer to the questions that drive us crazy in some explanation, even Christian explanations, the answers become unacceptable. They are not enough. When you said, *"I can't find an adequate answer. I recognize a good that these facts have irrefutably brought into my life and that is proving more and more powerful, but in the end, I always close those questions with: God can do everything, [...] then I will ask Him in the Hereafter"* ... I stop asking the question. That is, I have to turn it off somehow. Because the good He brought, even if recognized, is not enough, it does not close the question. Instead, what did you say right after? *"What if the only reason was what I call the beautiful consequences? If the reason was really just love for me?"* That is, what is the difference between the first and the second position, between the two hypotheses? That the first is a Christian theory and the second is a Presence. That is, the answer to Job's great questions about pain, death, sickness, *"Why me," "What did I do," ... "Why that baby girl,"* is not an answer that is an explanation, it is a companionship — as we have heard people witnessing — who is holding my hand now. Because my being able to understand does not consist in closing the question intellectually, it is much more. The factor of a companionship must be introduced in me. The meaning is a love, exactly a love for me. Then, from that experience I start to also understand some explanations. If Christ had not become man, that is, full of love, a presence that loves me now, those questions would drive me crazy, because I would try to be content with an intellectual answer.

I happened to go to see a lady. She had invited me and, when I arrived at her house, she told me that she had finished writing a book in which she had recounted her tragedy with her daughter, who had a disease for which, although she was 27 or 28 years-old, her intelligence had stopped at the level of a five-year-old. She was desperate. She said: I spent a lifetime and I could never have what all the other mothers had. She wanted me to write the foreword to her book. She was actually mistaken and thought she had invited my brother, who is a journalist. I replied, *"I can write the foreword, but maybe you didn't want to talk to me. I am a priest."* When she heard that I was a priest, she became even angrier and began to say, *"Why? Why me? Why my daughter? Why do I have to live this?"* I looked like a defenseless boxer with my arms down, who kept getting punched in the face, in the corner, unable to react. What could I answer to these "Whys"? When she stopped, I was dazed. Then she realized she had exaggerated a bit and she offered me some tea. I had a flash, a reaction that was just a revelation of the Holy Spirit and I said, *"Listen madam, I don't know how to answer any of these "whys", but if I could answer and give you an explanation that stopped your questions, an explanation you couldn't argue against, would you be happier? You are not looking for a reason, you are not*

looking for an explanation, you are looking for someone to love inside this thing, you look for a companionship, because you don't care about knowing a reason."

We do not live for a reason that is an explanation, we live for a love inside our situation. How many times have we seen that happen to our friends, to our families, exactly in situations like that? Then there are also explanations, so to speak, that make more understandable and lovable even what we had previously hated or feared, but we need the answer, the meaning of things to be a lovable Presence, a love that enters life: a Presence. It is interesting that everyone's journey regarding this is truly unique, personal. That is, you told us that in the beginning you turned away from God for that reason and later the Lord came back to you with a lovely beauty. I say this so that we may learn not to judge, in the sense of measuring others according to what we should have understood. If God has patience, imagine how much patience we must have! What I am really excited about what you say, though, is the difference between not being able to bear an explanation and instead being faced with a love for me: then everything changes, everything becomes part of this relationship.

Contribution from Italy

As I listened to the lesson, I was particularly struck by two moments. The first was when you spoke about the sense of void in the day during the lockdown. When is my day worth it? Whether or not I do something useful? In these months since we have returned to school, rather than still my day is a whirlwind of things to deal with: at school, even if in person, everything is more demanding, and there is more work to do at home. Following my son, who has Down syndrome, both for schoolwork and for the activities of the center he attends, occupies a big part of my day.

However, I understand that this is the other side of the coin: the sense of nothingness comes even in such full days.

I was deeply struck a second time when I heard the song "Il Mio Volto." I often sing it in the car in the morning driving to work, when I have already been up for two hours and after I have accompanied my son to the trolley stop. I understand that it is my cry to Him before I throw myself into the things of the day.

My question is: When is time mine? This irreducible question has been stirring in me for a while. When do I do what I want? When do I determine the rhythms of the day? When do I find a moment for our rule? What if I cannot find time for it? I understand that the point is not to wait to have free time, but that the issue is played out exactly there, within the folds of our commitments. You said, "If there's the need, there is the answer. The big work is self-awareness, to be so present to oneself as to recognize that You, Mystery, exist, are present." I sense that time begins to be mine if I am His, it is a possession of things that arises from being taken hold of and loved, recognizing this in the hour I am living. However, I would like to be helped on this, because sometimes the doubt arises that this self-awareness is not much, that it is weak. I sense instead that the challenge is here: like for a trapeze artist —because that is how I feel sometimes — who has only one point of support to launch himself.

Fr. Michele. Can you better explain that passage when you say, “*I sense that time begins to be mine if I am His, it is a possession of things that arises from being taken hold of and loved.*”

I understand that things are not mine because I fix them or through an effort I make, but that I can belong to things, or I can belong to Someone else. I intuit this. Because, if I don't belong to Someone else, to the One I have seen holding my life together in so many situations, even in the face of my husband's death, for example, that didn't sweep me away... paradoxically what sweeps me away sometimes are the things I have to do, due to the tension I feel. I understand that it is the other way around. Things are not mine, time is not mine when I take possession of them, but when I recognize Who is the Lord, the true Master. I can't say more than this...

Fr. Michele. You said it all, though. You said “*When is time mine? When do I do what I want?*” Who among us is not able to answer this question? It is not that we don't want certain moments, but when these moments are separated, isolated, not lived within that relationship — the only one that fills our life — when they are not lived within the recognition... we know very well if they fill us or not. We know very well if time is ours: we are left empty-handed, that is, with the illusion and having nothing in our hands.

What you said helps us understand that everything is played out right here: whether what I call my time is a time that I set aside for myself, or what fills time and makes it mine is to live it within that Presence. This is fundamental, because, if for those who are called to the vocation of the FSJ the alternative were: on the one hand the circumstances and on the other Jesus... then we should dissolve the Fraternity of Saint Joseph. It is exactly the opposite. The experience that you all carry within yourselves says that the story that brought you here is that Love, it is being called here. So many among us could tell incredible stories, in the sense that they are full of unexpected things, of things you never imagined, and in which you saw the victory of Christ. Then I can face the circumstances with the awareness of that Presence who has shown how much He loves me, and I live within this relationship witnessing to the world that a great Love makes all circumstances become an Event. And that we do not need anything else. I do not need to carve out extra spaces for ephemeral consolation to endure the present. This is a challenge, a journey that repeats itself every day. Yet, every time I can see that I am walking, I am on a journey. The impressive thing, especially when we talk about free time, is that we seem to have this mindset, hard to eliminate — despite our experience says otherwise and we all say it to each other — that actually the sacrifice is to follow Christ, to live all things in Christ.

Let me give you an example. Yesterday I was sitting in an armchair and I had to pick up something that was behind me, in an awkward position. I should have gotten up to get it. Instead, to make it easier....I think everyone has done strange movements

that make you triple the effort! I almost fell off the armchair. If I had gotten up, I would have saved some effort. This is how we behave in front of Christ. The real suffering, the real sacrifice is when He is absent, it is not living things within the relationship with Him. I have always been struck when Fr. Carrón says that the real question is not how one can live everything in relationship with Christ; the real question is: How can you not live everything in relationship with Christ? How hard it is for us! Time is emptied, time never passes, time has nothing inside, time is something we hope will pass because then there is something else. Time is no longer ours without Christ because there is nothing for us in it. It really a reversal of our experience. The image of the trapeze artist is very beautiful, but the question you asked in the end was like a bolt of lightning for me: *"The doubt arises that this self-awareness is not much."* I say that it is everything! Because without self-awareness, without becoming aware of oneself, without memory, without all of this struggle, without desire emerging, you are not really present. It seems abstract to us, but during these days it should be a clear experience.

As I said in the lesson: before it seemed that the desire for meaning that constitutes me was abstract, was the object of interpretation, a bit "spiritualistic", while the things we do were concrete. Now it is clear that what we do is empty, abstract, meaningless and crazy if I do not have all my desire in front of me and I do not have a meaning, I don't have a reason, I don't have someone to love in what I do. Anything but "not much"! It is everything! In this regard, I wanted to read a very short contribution by a friend of ours who, being sick with ALS, can only dictate, miraculously, her contribution with her eyes.

Contribution from Italy

It doesn't seem to me that I live in the nothingness of which you and Fr. Carrón speak. Am I numb? Should I worry?

Fr. Michele. *"It doesn't seem to me that I live in the nothingness..."* This is what amazes us all and is a reminder for all of us, because according to our ideas, you are the example of someone who should say: I am useless, my life is nothing, what is its purpose... Instead, you witness to us the opposite with this simple statement-question: *it doesn't seem to me that I live in nothingness.* But what a battle takes place in you to be able to say that! What an awareness of the truth and of your relationship with Christ and the need you have for it and the effort, the contradiction you have to face, in order to be able to say such a thing! We are the ones who should be worried! We who instead do not realize that we live in nothingness, because we have a thousand opportunities that you do not have.

Instead, I believe that what you witness to us is the most valuable thing with which to conclude this retreat. That you can say that you do not live in nothingness, for me is a reminder, a testimony, it is a reality that the Lord puts before my eyes and that reminds me that one can be victorious going through the struggle that you live every

day. That is, Christ wins. That you can say almost as if it is normal that you do not live in nothingness, leaves me speechless and full of gratitude.

Dear friends, I would say that we have made a good journey and we have some points for our personal work, to help us and to make us walk together towards the One who is coming.

Thank you for these days, for your patience, for your cooperation, for being there and for having welcomed the appointment that the Lord gave to us. Let us pray for each other and for our companionship in this time of Advent. The responsibility that each of us has of living to the full this consciousness, this awareness — which begins again every morning and every day — is big, because in the world there is no one else who is guided, led, taken by the hand with such care, as today's reading says, "*The injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal ...*" (Ez 34:16). We are taken hold of in the same way, won over by this King, and we are called to give this awareness to the least ones. It is the greatest thing we can do for the whole world, for everyone.

Let us ask Our Lady to support us in this journey of Advent, all together, and like her let us always begin from the recognition of Jesus whom she carried in her womb. We can say the same, we can begin from the recognition that Jesus is in the womb of our companionship. It is not an image; He is physically present. That is why we conclude by praying the *Memorare* together. We want to ask Our Lady: Remember that never was it known that anyone who asked you for something has not received it.

(Texts not reviewed by the Author)