

**JULIÁN
CARRÓN**

**REAWAKENING
OUR HUMANITY**

Reflections in a Dizzying Time

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Reawakening Our Humanity

In the course of just a few weeks, the health emergency caused by COVID-19 has become a shared experience. All of us, in different ways, have felt the challenge. Paradoxically, the state of isolation in which we find ourselves has become an opportunity for greater dialogue, even if it occurs at a distance.

Everyone, in one way or another, is trying to see how he measures up to this unexpected event that has burst into our daily lives, imposing drastic changes in lifestyle and awakening pressing questions we cannot ignore. What kind of answers are adequate to such a situation?

Fr. Julián Carrón, president of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, is grappling with the questions we all have. In the following pages, he offers his contributions for our shared reflection.

What is happening?

We are facing a challenge that is unprecedented in our generation. The Spanish poet Julio Llamazares stated this concisely in the newspaper *El País*: “Today I turn 65, in the midst of the biggest crisis I have ever known.”¹

The situation we are experiencing has made us aware that, for a number of years, we have lived, in some sense, as if we were in a bubble that protected us from the blows of life. And so, we went about our lives distracted, pretending that we could control everything. The circumstances, however, spoiled our plans and gave us a rude awakening, telling us to take ourselves seriously and rethink our situation in life. In recent days, reality has torn apart our more or less peace-

¹ *El País*, March 28, 2020.

ful routine by taking on the threatening face of COVID-19, a new virus, which has caused an international health emergency.

Reality, which we often try to escape, looking for space to breathe since we are incapable of being with ourselves, has this time been unrelenting, forcing the majority of us to stay put, shut in at home. In this isolation, our real situation in life is coming to light—perhaps for the first time in such a clear way affecting everyone. I read years ago in an American newspaper about a prisoner, who, forced to come to terms with years without freedom, could no longer avoid “stopping and thinking.” We, too, who are so used to a thousand ways of running away from ourselves and from the deeper call sounded by the things that surround us, have perhaps been forced to stop and think during this time.

What burst the bubble of a life that was under control?

An unforeseen and unforeseeable interruption of reality, wearing the face of the coronavirus. The Spanish novelist José Ángel González Sainz describes it well: “In the

life of a country, or of a person, there are moments in which reality, that most concrete and objective reality, raw and unseasoned by the recipes of chefs in the habit of cooking up stories and mentalities, suddenly breaks in with an unnerving force to which we are not accustomed. It is not that reality becomes real in that moment; it has always been real, it has been there from the beginning, but its previously gentler approach allowed us to avoid looking it squarely and steadily in the face. It was enough to see it out of the corner of one's eye, while focusing on all the stories and illusions served up to us, some more pleasing and deceptive than others. [...] When that hidden but undeniable foundation of life that sustains everything unexpectedly explodes and overthrows the control—or the ability to create dizziness—wielded by the illusory part of our lives, that world of illusion in which we have been living, which we consider to be reality, is shaken. That is what is happening right now, everywhere.”

All that has happened is like a tidal wave, a volcanic eruption which found us defenseless. González Sainz continues, revealing the reason for our weakness: “The habit of substituting strategically fraudulent interpre-

tations for real objects and events: substituting ideology for reality, the impunity we have enjoyed when substituting deception for truth and banality for what is essential, has made us much less capable of facing a reality that is unleashing its full revenge.”² Reality has rebelled against its misinterpretation, suddenly taking back its predominant role. As Fernando De Haro, a friend and journalist who works for Spanish radio, said, echoing the novelist, “Reality [...] was there, but we never saw it. Now, it has made its clamorous entrance. [...] Reality interjected, without asking permission. [...] Now what we need is to make ‘the stuff of reality the heart of our intelligence’ (quoting J.A. González Sainz).”³

What does it mean to “make ‘the stuff of reality the heart of our intelligence?’”

It means that the forceful irruption of reality into our lives has made the full weight of our need to understand, which we call “reason,”

² *El Mundo*, March 20, 2020.

³ *ilsussidiario.net*, March 24, 2020.

emerge again. At times, because of the toils of life or our laziness, the trajectory of our gaze is lowered, remaining at the level of appearances, at the surface of things. We think we are exhausting everything offered by the world as we breathe the air of these small realms we share, as we look through the keyhole of our rationalistic measure: a measure that is cramped, narrow, and, in the end, suffocating (it is that suffocation that tips us off to the fact that we are stuck in appearances). Only the impact of reality—when we accept it—can open wide our reason once again. It is always a reaction, being struck by something, that causes us to open our eyes again. Knowledge, in its dawning and development, always includes an original affective dimension. The more reality strikes us and interests us, the more our reason opens up, is stretched and sharpened; it is not content with cheap solutions. The fullness of meaning and of life contained in the things around us is only revealed to a reason that engages our affection. The feelings sparked by reality (wonder, fear, curiosity) are an essential factor in our capacity to see; they are a lens that brings objects closer. This is what we have seen.

All that has happened has awakened our attention, setting our reason back into motion,

bringing us to recognize, beyond our comfortable patterns of thinking, that “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy,” to use Shakespeare’s words.⁴ In this time, in other words, reason emerges again as “that singular event of nature in which it [...] reveals itself as the operative need to explain reality *in all of its factors* so that the human being is introduced to the truth about things.”⁵

Now we understand how we ended up in a bubble. For a long time, we were perhaps able to avoid the impact of reality, but reality never stopped calling out to us. We did not let reality challenge us, believing we had tamed it, protected on the privileged perch from which we view things. “If an individual were to barely live the impact with reality, because, for example, he had not had to struggle, he would scarcely possess a sense of his own consciousness, would be less aware of his reason’s energy and vibration.”⁶ Today it is not quite impossible—because nothing in our human experience

⁴ *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V.

⁵ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 1997), 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

is automatic—but certainly extremely difficult to hide from the urgent call of a reality that has become so unavoidably and dramatically challenging. In any case, anyone who tries to spare himself the provocation of reality, of the events happening within it, will not be able to experience the depth of that indescribable vibration of our reason and heart that makes us human. Over the last few weeks, we have seen an abundance of signs of that humanity, which have filled us with gratitude and wonder.

What do you mean by the “indescribable vibration of our reason?”

Those questions that plague all of us. The challenge that reality has posed has forced us to look deeper at who we are as human beings. We have been ripped out of the comfort zones in which we were comfortably planted and seized by questions that we usually, in a more or less intentional way, avoid or drown out with our daily routines. The Italian psychologist Umberto Galimberti underlines this in his response to a letter from a reader. He writes, “In the unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves as a result of the suspension of our daily activities, in this state of disorienta-

tion, is it not the case that you turn your gaze inward, to that typically neglected realm, to learn who you are? What are you doing in the world? What is the point of your life? [...] These reflections are truly a step forward in becoming more human, because living without knowing ourselves is not exactly the best path to self-realization or to finding meaning in our lives.”⁷ Every crisis, every deep and urgent call from reality, as Hannah Arendt teaches us, “forces us back to the questions themselves”;⁸ they cause our “I” to blossom with all its need for meaning and cry out, “Why?”

These are questions that bother and disturb us and force us to focus on answers that escape us...

They are the questions posed by our reason, questions that accompany us as a structural part of our human journey, inasmuch as we are creatures with self-awareness. They are proof of the self’s deeply-rooted and inexhaustible search for meaning in everything

⁷ *D-la Repubblica*, March 21, 2020.

⁸ H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin, New York, 2006), 171.

that happens in life, including pain and death, and at the same time, constitute the profound alignment of reason and religiosity. That alignment may surprise those in our culture who are in the habit of reducing religiosity to a sentiment, a feeling. The irruption of these questions (What is the meaning of life? Why is there suffering and death? Deep down, what makes life worth living? Where does reality come from and what is it for?) communicates to us reason's vocation and what I consider to be man's authentic and unavoidable religiosity.

What has revealed itself to our reason in the current situation?

A structural fragility—not temporary or contingent—has come to light, with all the drama this entails. Many people have written about it. Here, I will cite two dear friends, Pilar Rahola and Pedro G. Cuartango, well-known intellectuals from Barcelona and Madrid, respectively, who are trying to come to terms with the pandemic that is bringing the country where I was born to its knees.

Rahola asserts that “the shock of this pandemic will make us feel [...] much more

vulnerable, finally convinced that our lifestyle, and life itself, are enormously fragile. It is a sense of fragility that has perhaps been present throughout the history of man, but that we had forgotten in these times of technological hubris. A simple flu virus, and suddenly the world is in chaos... Yes, without a doubt, we will return with a greater awareness of our vulnerability.”⁹ That we are vulnerable is not a new discovery—it is a condition we find embedded in us from birth; but in times of technological hubris, when everything seemed to be under our control, we somehow forgot about it, setting it aside and losing sight of what we are. Reality has disrupted this forgetting, restoring our awareness of something that, as we can see, is crystal clear but not automatically understood. “This pestilence,” Cuartango emphasizes, “makes us aware of the fragility of human beings and their profound insignificance in the face of forces of nature that we do not control. Let us hold onto this lesson of what we are not.”¹⁰

I find the considerations of Jean Pierre Le

⁹ *La Vanguardia*, March 26, 2020.

¹⁰ *ABC*, March 24, 2020.

Goff in *Le Figaro* a natural complement to that line of thought. He writes, “We have to confront tragedy, and we are faced once again with the limitations of our condition, with the ‘fragility of human things’ [...]. This ‘suspended’ time can be an opportunity to refocus on the essential, to try to understand the challenges of our time. [...] The rupture caused by this epidemic [...] calls into question ideas and representations that seemed solidly anchored [...]. Modern life seems to be structured in exact opposition to the Pascaline idea that ‘All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.’ [...] The epidemic forces us to confront the tragic side of history without any way to escape. [...] it is up to each of us to draw out the appropriate lessons.”¹¹

This renewed experience of our fragility is something we are all sharing in...

Yes, we heard Pope Francis say this to the whole world in a deserted St. Peter’s Square on the evening of March 27, in a manner and with an intensity that silenced all of us. “We

¹¹ *Le Figaro*, March 19, 2020.

have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented [...]. The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes the souls of our people; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly ‘save’ us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away.” Francis places us all in the same boat, having been overtaken by the storm, the entire human family and all of creation: “We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless,

thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: ‘Wake up, Lord!’”¹²

But what can we gain by discovering that we are fragile and vulnerable? What good is that discovery?

It can pull us out of the stupor in which we usually live, out of the distraction to which we abandon ourselves almost unknowingly, and break through the obscurity that often engulfs us. “And all combines to suppress us / partly as shame, / perhaps, and partly / as inexpressible hope.”¹³ It is not just one’s fragility that is discovered, however (“Away from your own branch / poor, frail leaf, / where are you going?”¹⁴ Leopardi asked).

¹² Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, March 27, 2020.

¹³ Cf. R. M. Rilke, “The Second Elegy,” in *Duino Elegies*, English translation by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (W. W. Norton and Co., New York, 1939), 31.

¹⁴ Cf. A. V. Arnault, *La feuille* “De la tige détachée / pauvre feuille desséchée/ où vas-tu?” Leopardi translates this poem in his *Imitazione*.

The very perception of our fragility brings with it, as its precondition, that which makes man great: the “eternal mystery / of our being:” “If Human Nature, then, / In all things fallible / You are but dust and shade, whence these high feelings?”¹⁵ The acknowledgment of our limits, of our finitude and the tragedy of life, all presume the infinite desire that defines us as human beings, even without us realizing it; the possibility “to imagine the infinite number of worlds, the infinite universe, and then feel that our mind and aspirations might be even greater than such a universe.”¹⁶ Part of that greatness is being able to recognize our contingency: we do not make ourselves; we do not give ourselves being. In the end, what dominates in us is dependence. Today, in a particular way, we have the chance to become more aware of this.

¹⁵ G. Leopardi, “On the Portrait of a Beautiful Woman,” in *Selected Prose and Poetry*, translated by Iris Origo and John Heath-Stubbs (Oxford University Press, London, 1966), 28.

¹⁶ G. Leopardi, *Pensieri LXVIII*, translated by W. S. Di Piero (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1981), 113.

Have you noticed any hints of a revival of awareness?

Yes, and not just in the big names or authors where you would most likely expect it. One retired teacher, who is involved in an initiative that provides academic assistance to foreign-born students, wrote to say, “Today, I saw a glimpse of light inside the increasingly alarming news about the coronavirus. We do a video conference with any of our students in the Italian course at Portofranco who want to participate. It is made up of boys and girls from various backgrounds: Egyptians, Moroccans, etc.,” and of every religion, including Islam. “We talk about how we are living this time: the fear, the worries, the absence of school. At a certain point, one of them commented that this event highlights man’s limitations, beginning a dialogue on the subject. It was a conversation that revealed a certain distance in their understanding of who God is, but at the same time, what emerged is that what unites us is the search for meaning within this drama and the question of why the situation is a trial for each of us. It was an intense conversation without prejudices, each person trying to understand the other’s ra-

tionale. It was a very open dialogue among people who take what is happening to us seriously and are using this time to verify what is worthwhile in life.”¹⁷

In contrast, we usually live vast swaths of our life looking at a false image of ourselves, putting our human condition into quarantine. This keeps us in a constant state of anesthesia. This calls to mind the comment of Llamazares: “If there is anything useful about this health catastrophe, it is in reminding us of the fragility of everything, something we forget the moment we have a few years of peace and well-being in a row.”¹⁸

What are the consequences of the stupor we live in?

It leaves us defenseless when the unexpected happens. As González Sainz wrote in *El Mundo*, “When the most raw and unfiltered reality brutally breaks in as it is doing

¹⁷ Letter, “Con tutti, noi condividiamo la stessa domanda” [With everyone, we share the same question], *clonline.org*, March 24, 2020.

¹⁸ *El País*, March 28, 2020.

right now, when the distance between the facts and our description of them, between the names we give objects and the objects we are naming, must be reduced to a minimum, that infernal mechanism of lies and hypocrisy, all our vain ignorance and lack of prudence, and all our rigid adherence to reality and to the most efficient, timely, and profitable ways to control and manage it, are the worst weapons against it. Reality catches us clueless about everything, unarmed, and prisoners to the most counterproductive mental ruts.”¹⁹

“The most raw and unfiltered reality brutally breaks in...” Those are dark words...

Reality is not cutting us any slack. As Paolo Mieli wrote on April 3, “Throughout the world, we are now at a million infections. A million and we already know that it will not stop there. Half the population of our globe is shut inside. Italy has the most deaths (13,915), with Spain a close second, exceeding ten thousand. The first prisoner to die was in Bologna. In China, there have

¹⁹ *El Mundo*, March 20, 2020.

been clashes on the Yangtze River bridge with Jiangxi agents determined to prevent the transit of travelers from Hubei, where they just declared the end of the official lockdown. At the same time, another county in Henan, which borders Hubei, was placed under lockdown. In Hong Kong, a second quarantine has begun following the reappearance of the virus, in part due to (according to official sources) a lack of respect for safe distances in restaurants.”²⁰

With the spread of the virus, we are experiencing the “otherness” of reality, seemingly opaque and deaf to its absolute difference from us. It is an unavoidable presence on which we depend. The primacy of reality has been imposed despite our attempts to reduce it. Its irreducibility interrogates us, holding our “I” in its relentless grip. With Nietzsche, we had been convinced that, “there are no facts, there are only interpretations.”²¹ This declaration, which was seen for many years as an indisputable truth, betrays its weakness in situations like this.

²⁰ *Corriere della Sera*, April 3, 2020.

²¹ Cf. F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003), 139.

Reality, which we seemed to have overcome, turns out to be stubborn and is taking the stage again, forcing its way back into the spotlight. Before our eyes, we have something greater than interpretations: stubborn facts, which demand to be considered and properly interpreted. Nihilism is—at least in this sense—put to the test.

The stubbornness of reality leaves us no peace, though we often would prefer not to look at it; for example when, a few weeks ago, we saw the line of army trucks carrying away the bodies of our deceased from Bergamo. For this reason, it is not wrong for Domenico Quirico to ask himself, “Is it not our cultural duty, imposed upon us by history, to sit down with dignity, in silence, and ask ourselves about death?”²²

Reality has emerged once again in all its mysteriousness. Ezio Mauro describes the “anxieties that arise from the unknown, from an unreachable dimension,”²³ in the face of which we come up against the limits of our capacity to dominate.

²² *La Stampa*, April 5, 2020.

²³ *La Repubblica*, March 11, 2020.

And when it appears with that mysterious face, reality commands fear...

The enemy we find ourselves confronting is not, in fact, the coronavirus itself; it is fear, a fear always in the back of our minds that explodes when reality exposes our essential powerlessness and, for many people, takes over, sometimes prompting impulsive reactions, pushing us to close ourselves up, to despair. Ilvo Diamanti, ever-attentive to the undercurrents in our society, noted this when he said, “We live in the ‘age of fear.’ [...] Insecurity and uncertainty have accompanied us for many years, probably forever. [...] So fear entered into our lives. Into our world. Long before COVID broke out. [...] Far from others; increasingly alone [...] We are at risk of losing hope, and ourselves.”²⁴ Succumbing to fear, however, is not the only answer.

What do you mean?

Times like this reveal what kind of progress we, personally and all together, have made on

²⁴ *La Repubblica*, March 9, 2020.

the path of maturity, how much self-awareness we have gained, and how capable we are of facing the life that has been put in front of us. All our ideologies, big and small, and our convictions, including our religious convictions, are being put to the test. The crust of a false sense of security is showing its cracks. It is in circumstances like these that we come to understand that “the subject’s power lies in the intensity of his self-awareness, that is, of his perception of the values that define his personality”;²⁵ that is, in the clarity he has in perceiving himself and concerning that which makes life worth living.

How can we face this circumstance like true men and women, and what does that look like? It touches us all, whether we like it or not, though in different ways: some are on the front lines battling the disease (patients, doctors, and health professionals), some ensure the provision of essential services (from employees at supermarkets to law enforcement), some venture outside to share with those in

²⁵ L. Giussani, “Religious Awareness in Modern Man,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 1 (1998), 104–40.

need (volunteers, religious, and many others), and others shelter at home in obedience to civil orders and the needs of “social distancing.”

There is a factor that we all have in common, and that is our willingness to accept the call that comes from reality. No matter where we fit into these categories, whatever the task that has been entrusted to us or that we have chosen to undertake, events—that is, the pieces of reality that concern us and close in around us—challenge us and call us to respond. There is no other place where the meaning of life, our destiny, can be played out; we have no other way of walking toward our fulfilment except through the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This fact, I would dare to say, applies to everyone. In his best-known book, *The Religious Sense*, Fr. Giussani affirms that, “The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious [...] is to live always the real intensely.”²⁶ His is a conception of religiosity that pushes us to recognize every circumstance as a calling; that is, as a vocation.

Circumstances, those things that affect and provoke us moment by moment, are the

²⁶ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 108.

expression of a reality we do not make and which points us back to, as its ultimate origin, something “other,” beyond and greater than us. They point back to that unfathomable origin that we call “Mystery.” Religiosity manifests itself as a lived intuition of the Mystery, that enigmatic immeasurability, in the way we relate to every circumstance in life. Therefore, Giussani says that, “Living life as vocation means tending toward the Mystery in the circumstances through which the Lord has us pass, by responding to them. [...] Vocation is a movement toward destiny, embracing all the circumstances through which destiny has us pass.”²⁷ Fr. Giussani was well aware of the dizzying effect this has on our life: “Man, the human being’s rational life, would have to be suspended on the instant, suspended in every moment upon this sign, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, yet the circumstances through which the unknown ‘lord’ drags me, provokes me toward his design. I would have to say ‘yes’ at every instant without seeing anything, simply adhering to the pressures of the occasions. It is

²⁷ L. Giussani, *Realtà e giovinezza. La sfida [Reality and youth. The challenge]* (Rizzoli, Milan, 2018), 65.

a dizzying position.”²⁸ I would have a hard time finding a better description of the situation in which we find ourselves when we truly face all that happens in life: it is a dizzying experience of being suspended “in every moment upon this sign, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, [which are our] circumstances.” Yet, I would say this is the only reasonable position, because it is through our circumstances that the presence of the Mystery, of that “unknown ‘Lord,’” challenges us and goads us on to his design, to our life’s fulfillment.

We often perceive certain of our circumstances as obstacles to our personal fulfillment...

That is always an issue. Today it is the isolation we live in because of coronavirus or a situation that could be even more serious and demanding, tomorrow it will be studies that are too hard or the job we have that we never would have chosen, a lack of success when we expected to do well, unrequited love, an intrusive friend or colleague, or an illness: there will always be something that

²⁸ L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 135.

seems to be an obstacle to the fulfillment of our lives when that circumstance is in fact—in a dizzying, dramatic way—the very place where the fulfillment of our lives is played out, in our relationship with the Mystery. It is, I would say, an objective fact, not a choice. Our choice is in whether we acknowledge this or not.

What can sustain us in this dizzying state?

A human companionship. Or better, a *certain* human companionship. This answer leads us to a careful examination of our social life to see who turns out to be a help to me and who is a distraction, when it comes to that dizzying state. Being isolated is paradoxically an opportunity to understand what kind of companionship enriches our life in a deep sense. I do not mean an extrinsic companionship, an accessory to life, or one that anesthetizes the questions burning inside us, but rather one that helps us to look them in the eye without running away.

From that point of view, every kind of companionship—Christian or secular, with classmates in high school or college, our friends at the bar or colleagues at work,

family members, etc.—is put to the test. How often we compromise our needs and lower the bar, contenting ourselves with a web of relationships that protects us from the shock of things, that spares us the challenge posed by circumstances instead of spurring us to embrace it! But such a company will not live up to the drama: in moments like the one we are living, when the urgency of life appears in all its unavoidable power, this is more evident than ever.

If we are dominated by fear, what can conquer it?

Perhaps the most elementary experience available to us to answer that question is that of a child. What conquers a child's fear? The presence of his mother. This "method" applies for everyone. It is a presence, not our strategies or our intelligence or our bravery, that propels and sustains each of our lives—a presence and the working memory of that presence.

Antonio Polito highlighted the value of this metaphor of a mother and her child as the true response to the fear of coronavirus, saying, "I see the need to have faith in some-

thing greater than us that loves us infinitely and therefore protects us, the same need children have.” He then made reference to the artistic rendering of Our Lady of Mercy who “opens up her mantle and shelters the people.”²⁹

And when it is the fear of the darkness of death?

The dynamic cannot help but be the same because our humanity has certain laws. In the face of deep fears, however, those that grip the depth of our being and that we try to cast as far away from us as possible (the fear of death and every reverberation of it in life), we have to ask ourselves what kind of presence is capable of conquering them. It is not just any presence that will do this. This is why God became man, why he became a historical, embodied, familiar presence, a companion on the road. Only the God who enters history as a man can conquer that deep fear, as the lives of his disciples have testified to (and continue to testify to), as narrated in the gospels. To share our human

²⁹ *Traces*, n. 4/2020, 7.

toil, God became man, “a man called Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, [who] that day in Nain, on seeing a widowed mother following the bier of her dead son, was gripped by the impulse of emotion and, stepping forward, put a hand on her shoulder and said to her, ‘Woman, don’t cry,’ a strange thing to say. Then he raised her son to life. But how can you say such a thing to a widow who has just lost her son? It’s absurd. And yet it was this very ‘absurdity’ that left the people agape.”³⁰ Who knows how that woman must have felt, enveloped in that embrace that exceeded every human emotion and restored her hope! That death was not the end of everything; that widowed mother was not condemned to be left alone because the seed of the Resurrection was present in that man who spoke those unimaginable words to her and then immediately gave her back her son, alive.

What, then, is the response of Christianity to our human dramas: the dramas of solitude,

³⁰ L. Giussani, S. Alberto, J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World* (McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2010), 32.

pain, sickness, and situations that seem to have no answer, like those we have seen in abundance in recent days?

Paul Claudel made a striking observation related to your question: “One question constantly presents itself in the soul of one who is sick: ‘Why? Why me? Why do I have to suffer?’ [...]. The only one capable of responding to that terrible question, the oldest question of Humanity, to which Job gave the almost official and liturgical form, was God, who was directly addressed and called upon. The question was so immense that only the Word could address it, providing not an explanation, but a presence, according to those words of the Gospel: ‘I have not come to explain, to disperse doubts with an explanation, but to fill, or better, to replace the very need for an explanation with my presence.’ The Son of God did not come to destroy suffering, but rather to suffer with us.”³¹

God did not respond to the problems of life, to solitude, to suffering, with an explanation, but rather with his presence. He

³¹ P. Claudel, *Toi, qui es-tu?* (Gallimard, Paris, 1936), 112–13; translation ours.

came into the world to accompany us in all of it; he came to keep man company in any and every situation, that we might be able to face them head-on and endure them with an ultimate, indestructible positivity. As Pope Benedict XVI said in a famous homily, “Only this God saves us from being afraid of the world and from anxiety before the emptiness of life. Only by looking to Jesus Christ does our joy in God come to fulfillment and become redeemed joy.”³²

*You speak of an “indestructible positivity” ...
How is that possible?*

I imagine how happy that widow must have been when she saw her only son alive even though he would die again sooner or later, just as she herself would. The problem would come up again. I then think of St. Paul’s experience when, while waiting in chains in Rome for a sentence that could have meant death for him, he wrote to the people of Philippi full of gratitude and joy, saying he “holds them in his heart” and “longs for them with the affection

³² Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Regensburg, September 12, 2006.

of Jesus Christ.” These words seem absurd to most people: “For to me life is Christ, and death is gain.” How was that possible? He had seen Christ alive, risen, definitively victorious over death: that was the wellspring of his certainty, his joy, the way he lived that circumstance just as he lived every moment of his existence (“whether I live or die...”). Everything was determined by his relationship with that presence. Now—and I say this thinking of what is happening right now, which also affects many Christians—Christ does not cancel out the drama and the pain of being separated from loved ones, but he does make it possible for us to live them and to face death in a way that is not dominated by nihilism, but rather by the certainty of his victorious presence, of an everlasting embrace, and therefore the certainty of the fulfillment of our lives, of our definitive relationship with him. This can only be true for those who have seen in their own experience the signs of that fulfillment and a growing desire above all other desires, as St. Paul writes, “to be with Christ, for that is far better.”³³ Not because of any disdain for life, but out of that love for life that will not settle for less than eternity.

³³ Phil. 1:21, 23.

But how can a person today, with all we see happening, and immersed in the mentality that surrounds us, recognize the truth of those affirmations?

Those affirmations are only believable if we see people whose lives, here and now, show the signs of God's victory, of his true and contemporaneous presence, and therefore of a new and different way of facing circumstances, one full of hope and an otherwise unimaginable joy that is channeled into an indomitable industriousness.

What we need, therefore, more than any reassuring speeches or moral instructions, is to tap into the people who embody the experience of *this* victory, of an embrace that allows us to face the tender wounds of our suffering and pain, witnesses to the fact that there is a meaning in life proportionate to its challenges.

Are there really people like that?

Of course there are! And in times like these, they stand out even more, because of the difference in the way they live and the hope they bear. With them, wherever we find them, it will be easier to begin again, get-

ting up after we fall and rebuilding, thread by thread, a social fabric in which fortified defenses and fear are not the last word.

I see many of these people, including doctors and nurses. They are truly “friendly” presences, bearing witness to a road we can walk, presences that we do not plan to encounter, so exceptional—though found in the same circumstances as everyone—that they leave us speechless, in silence; for example, the woman who wrote the letter I am about to read. I asked myself whether to print it here, considering the direct reference it makes to me, but I thought it still deserved to be included.

“I was suddenly thrown into the trenches. It feels like being at war. My daily work and family life changed overnight. As a doctor, a mother, a wife, I found myself sleeping isolated from my husband, not seeing my children for two weeks, and not being able to have direct contact with patients. Between me and each sick person is a mask, a face shield, and my protective suit. Often, they are elderly people who are living all this alone. They are afraid. They die alone. Their relatives, isolated in their homes, cannot help their loved ones and receive calls from me in the middle of the night to communi-

cate the death of their family member with the phone standing between me and them. What can I do for them, at a human level, as a Christian? I go back to the ward; I look for the smile and hug from a nurse who is a friend: during this time of isolation I also need to physically feel togetherness. They are the only ones I can hug. In the face of all this, I am strengthened by rereading Carón's letter to *Corriere della Sera*³⁴ every day, which helps me to return to an attitude of openness, of asking myself what holds up in the end. I am called to recognize what is essential, what is true. Then, there's the path I've walked in the work of School of Community [*Editor's Note: the ongoing catechesis in the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation*]: trials are the way faith can grow if our freedom is put into play in the face of that preference that asks everything of us. This is dizzying. We have to entrust ourselves and accept the risk. The certainty that sustains our life is a bond, and there is a journey to make before we arrive at that affective certainty. Circumstances are given to us to help us become more attached to

³⁴ "This is How We Learn to Conquer Fear in Times of Difficulty," March 1, 2020, 32.

the one who calls us in a mysterious way. Faith is trusting that he is calling us. ‘It is only when a well-founded hope prevails that we are able to face our circumstances without running away.’ We are called, now more than ever, to respond to Him who calls us in a mysterious way. This is the certainty I can give to my patients and to their families, in addition to medical care.”

These are presences that communicate a certainty and well-founded hope to anyone they run into on their path—a certainty they can communicate only because they live it.

In other words, “Christian discourse” is not enough...

Only a witness, the evidence of a different humanity generated by the Christian encounter, acknowledged and translated into life, really helps. And we cannot “make up” witnesses, we can only communicate or offer to others what we ourselves experience in our personal journey. I recently spoke with a woman whose husband has coronavirus. She cannot go to visit him; she cannot even be with him for a minute. In addition, she has a young daughter. She said to me, “You

see? Right now I would like to help him, to be close to him, but instead I am stuck here with my daughter.” I tried to tell her, “You, too, must accept the responsibility to respond to the circumstances you are in, just as your husband is trying to do with the reality he finds himself facing. Otherwise, if you do not walk this path, if you do not live a relationship with a presence that conquers fear, when you call him on FaceTime so he can see you and your daughter, what help can you offer? You can only collaborate with him in his time of trial, have something to offer while he is suffering with coronavirus in the hospital, if you walk your own path: even without you saying a word, he will be able to see in your face the hope that can sustain him.”

What do the people who, as you describe, find themselves on the front lines of the battle against coronavirus, daily exposed to risk, inspire in you?

Over the last few weeks, I have witnessed an outburst of generosity, dedication, and care that have deeply moved me. What I feel for those who share the needs of their human brothers and sisters, putting themselves at risk, is an immense gratitude.

“When we see others who are worse off than we are, we desire to help them with something of ours. This need is so original, so natural, that it is within us before we are conscious of it. We call it the *law of existence*. [...] To be interested in others, to communicate to others, enables us to fulfill the supreme and, indeed, the only task in life: to become ourselves, to complete ourselves.”³⁵ The Christian encounter serves to sustain and render this human impetus more solid and sincere, exalting the humanity of every person, so that every expression of life may become “charity,” the gratuitous gift of one who has first been moved.

Is this time of forced solitude, this circumstance, not an obstacle to the Christian experience you are describing? Social distancing imposes distance from those “presences” you mentioned earlier and results in a decrease in the amount of sharing and companionship...

On the contrary, it can be a great opportunity to deepen one’s Christian experience, to

³⁵ L. Giussani, *The Meaning of Charitable Work*, in Publications, clonline.org, 1.

mature in the faith; in other words, to discover the full content of what you encountered, the origin of the companionship that you first experienced as a place that generates you, the solidity of your person. If you do not discover this, you remain at the surface; you risk reducing the Christian event to a sociological phenomenon, emptying the companionship of its authentic meaning. I will try to explain using an anecdote. A young friend of mine just graduated college and began his new life. Consequently, we cannot see each other as often as when he was at the university. Recently, he was complaining to me about that, so I reminded him of an episode from the gospel. One day, the disciples were in a boat with Jesus and realized they had forgotten to bring the bread. Despite the fact that they had witnessed two gigantic miracles—two multiplications of loaves as had never been seen in history—they began to argue because they had forgotten the bread. I pointed out to my friend that Jesus was there, beside them, in the boat! But they kept complaining! The problem was not that they were alone—Jesus was with them—but that it was, for them, *as if he was not there*. So, they argued about the fact they did not have bread! To help them

see the real problem, Jesus did not perform another miracle. What good would it have done to perform another one, after all they had already seen? So, what contribution did Jesus make? He asked them three questions. First, “When I broke the loaves the first time, how much was left over?” Then, “And the second time?” And, finally, “Do you still not understand?”³⁶ How invaluable was this contribution Jesus offered his friends by not sparing them the questions! He did not continue to explain, or perform other miracles, but rather solicited them, within their own experience, to make full use of their reason, that they might be able to recognize *who it was* they had encountered. (They had the lord of the “bakery” with them!) If they did not understand—pay attention—it was not because they were alone or did not have what they needed to understand; it was because they were still not using their reason well. Jesus had revealed himself to them through the many signs they had seen as an exceptional response, one that finally corresponded to the heart, to the needs they and other men and women often had, including in dramatic ways, but they had still not recognized

³⁶ Cf. Mk. 8:19–21

who he was, with the recognition called faith that “flourishes on the extreme boundary of the rational dynamic as a flower of grace to which man adheres with his freedom.”³⁷

The Christian faith is not a recognition of the “divine,” but of the “divine present” in humanity, in Jesus of Nazareth, in Christ, and, today, in that sign of Christ that consists of the company of those who believe in him. “The Event of Christ goes on in history through the companionship of the believers”;³⁸ “Jesus Christ, that man of two thousand years ago, is immanent, becomes present, under the veil, under the aspect of a different humanity,”³⁹ within the phenomenon of a different kind of humanity; a person runs into it and discovers a new presentiment about life, a greater possibility for certainty, positivity, hope, and usefulness in life. Many of us may have experienced this impact without fully maturing into that recognition we call faith, which flowers as a grace on the extreme limits of the dynamic

³⁷ L. Giussani, S. Alberto, J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹ L. Giussani, “Something That Comes First,” *Traces*, n. 10/2008, 1–2.

of rationality, therefore involving every step in the trajectory of man's reason, affection, and freedom. This circumstance of forced isolation, precisely because it calls us to stop taking the new humanity we bumped into for granted, can be a great opportunity to follow that trajectory at a more aware and personal level, to come to see the nature of the event that has reached us in the form of a fascinating, persuasive human encounter. We can either embrace that opportunity or give ourselves up to complaining, like the disciples in the boat.

The fact remains, however, that in this situation of forced isolation, many cannot share the pain and suffering of their loved ones; they have to abandon them in the hospital...

This is the question a girl from Madrid asked me during a meeting I had with some university students by videoconference during the last week of March. She said, "Right now, my grandfather is in the hospital. He will probably die, and my family and I are facing the fact that we cannot be there with him. Not only is he dying; he is dying alone. I feel all of my powerlessness and ask my-

self: ‘Why can’t I be with him? Why can’t I keep him company now?’” Here, it is evident that circumstances require, and in a certain sense, impose a sacrifice: what we would like is not feasible, we are impeded. But, once again, the point is whether this circumstance as it is given to us, in the sense of its inevitability—we cannot get rid of it or change it; otherwise, especially in cases like this, we would immediately do so, with good reason—is a tomb for us, pure annihilation, or if it is a vocation, the place of a mysterious call; if it is the way the Mystery that underlies all of reality pushes me toward the fulfillment of my life, makes me walk toward destiny. These are our two choices.

If she recognizes reality as a call, then that girl can say, as she did go on to say, “Even this circumstance is for me. Even this powerlessness is for me. Even my grandfather’s loneliness in the hospital is for him. I am asked to be willing to adhere to the sign of the Mystery that makes up my circumstances, to follow the provocation of reality.” It is a dizzying state, as I said before, and it is dramatic. The Mystery became flesh so that man could withstand this vertigo, could endure and embrace the drama of life. That girl was proof of this for all who heard her.

Our yes to our circumstances becomes our yes to the Mystery made flesh, to that man, Jesus Christ, who died and is risen and is present here and now—two thousand years later—in the flesh of a human companionship generated by him, identifiable because of certain unmistakable signs of its humanity. “The truth of the faith,” Giussani said in 1972, at a historical moment full of difficulties, is demonstrated “by one’s capacity to make what appears to be an obstacle, persecution, or difficulty, into an instrument and moment of maturation.”⁴⁰

Could you say, then, that those confined to their homes are called to the same experience as those on the front lines?

The heart of the experience does not change. It is a question of responding to reality in all its profound mystery, which is calling us through the circumstances we have been given to take a step toward our destiny, toward our fulfilment, discovering what and who help us to maintain a state of alertness.

⁴⁰ L. Giussani, “The Long March to Maturity,” *Traces*, n. 3/2008, 1.

I am thinking now of a young university student, who until a few weeks ago was at the center of a whirlwind of relationships, always away from home, thrown into a thousand meetings and initiatives. Suddenly the government's order is forcing him, like everyone else, to be isolated at home, spending day after day, 24/7, with his parents. Instead of seeing this as a misfortune, he embraces it as an opportunity, a provocation, in the sense of the word we just described. After two weeks of that, he wrote to me:

“Faced with the prospect of staying at home, I was afraid, because I have always tried to escape from home, where I have never quite felt at ease. Then, however, I remembered the gratuitous gaze that has been given to me over the last few years in my encounters with certain people in the CL community, and those moments during this time at home when I have managed to be with my parents without measuring them. I realized that this remembering happened when I recognized Christ present in my days: only then was I truly free before my parents. I began this time of isolation by praying like I never had before. I prayed, ‘I beg you, Lord, make yourself present.’ What is surprising to me is that I began to see that the fault was nev-

er totally theirs; in fact, it was first of all in me, because I assessed them according to an idea I have of perfection, comparing them to others and so disqualifying them from my idea. Now that I have started to really look at them, I have recognized who they are. Until now, I had been looking at them thinking I knew everything about them, so I didn't even try to start a conversation or spend time with them. Instead, I see they are my companions in life for this time, and things I never would have imagined are starting to happen.”

That young man could not continue to treat his parents according to the image of family he had in mind. The tight quarters—when accepted and experienced as vocation—pushed him to reckon with them as they really are, and this was a gain for his life—he immediately saw the effects. He said yes to the challenge of reality and took some unexpected steps forward.

By adhering to the circumstances, going to the bottom of certain situations—in which we are constrained by various forces—we can make discoveries that mark a point of no return for our lives. A young university student gave witness to this in another video conference in which she told us:

“A few weeks ago, after a year of illness, my mom died. Exactly one week after the funeral, I found myself shut up in my house, alone. My brothers live abroad, and my father leaves home at 6:30 a.m. to go to work at a hospital and comes back at 8:30 p.m. In these days of solitude—which I have to admit, are very trying—I realize how this situation and these conditions can be privileged. In order not to waste the whole day I have to ask myself, from the moment I open my eyes, what I truly need. I ask some friends to accompany me and share what they are living with me. The circumstances give me no room to distract myself from the death of my mother; even my awkward attempts to take care of things around the house remind me of her words and her gestures 24 hours a day. Despite all this, in the pain of loss that I see growing in me with the passing of each day, I realize that my mom, though in a different way than before, is still present in my life. She keeps me moving in these days that all seem to be the same. It works exactly the same way with my boyfriend, who’s not physically with me but is still present, living out his quarantine miles away, and when the mere fact that he is there jumps into my mind during the day, it sets me in motion.

The life that has been generated in me since the death of my mother—I am spending this time of solitude simply doing the things I have to do, but with an underlying serenity that I cannot explain—inspires me to say, though perhaps with a trembling voice, that Christ does indeed make life conquer death. Over these days, I have been filled with gratitude for everything that has happened. At the same time, there is a pain that grows within me because my father comes home in the evening distressed from his time at the hospital, missing my mother endlessly, and we eat our dinners in silence. My helplessness makes me sad, and I wonder what is asked of me in this circumstance, what it really means to offer up a load of laundry I have to do or a page I have to study.”

What contribution can this girl offer to her father when he comes home dead tired at night and does not want to talk? Precisely the journey she is making; the awareness rising up inside her of herself and of what generates her; the reflection of gratitude in her face.

Recently, in a letter to all your friends in Communion and Liberation, speaking about this time defined by coronavirus, you wrote,

“Our recognition of Christ and ‘yes’ to Him, including in the isolation each of us might be forced to maintain, is already our contribution to the salvation of every man and woman today, before any legitimate attempts to accompany one another, which should be pursued within the allowed limits.” May I ask you to explain what you mean by that?

I meant that the greatest contribution we can give to the world is our yes to the call of the Mystery, our yes to Christ—our faith—and not primarily what we manage to do. In fact, even when we do a lot—like those who find themselves on the front lines right now—our greatest contribution is still that yes because it changes the very way we do what we do, and the more sincere we are in living that yes, the more it becomes useful for our human brothers and sisters. Let me be clear: there is no opposition between faith and action; on the contrary, faith is what founds the fullness and indomitability of one’s actions. It is at the root of that action which, through grace, takes the form of charity, of an unconditional affirmation of the good of the other person, expressed in many ways according to the occasion. The most original contribution we can offer the world is

in acknowledging Christ, our yes to him, whether that means doing a lot or finding ourselves unable to do anything. For the season of Lent in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI put this in terms we all remember: “Even in this era of global interdependence, it is clear that no economic, social, or political project can replace that gift of self to another through which charity is expressed. Those who act according to the logic of the Gospel live the faith as friendship with God Incarnate and, like Him, bear the burden of the material and spiritual needs of their neighbors. They see it as an inexhaustible mystery, worthy of infinite care and attention. They know that he who does not give God gives too little; as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta frequently observed, the worst poverty is not to know Christ. Therefore, we must help others to find God in the merciful face of Christ. Without this perspective, civilization lacks a solid foundation.”⁴¹

The situation in which many people are living, of isolation and forced inactivity, can be an opportunity to come to see how living out our faith is the original contribution that we as Christians have to offer to others,

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2006*.

because if, in our attempts to accompany others—pursued within the limits imposed on us right now—they cannot see Christ, our yes to Christ, shining through, then what we are giving others is “too little”; we withhold what is really essential. Even in the isolation each of us may be forced to maintain, therefore, our yes to Christ is already a contribution to the salvation of every man and woman living today that takes place before any legitimate attempt to accompany them, since it is the very heart of such attempts.

This overturns the idea most of us have about our contribution to the world, for the good of all people, starting with our loved ones. This is why so many people feel somewhat useless right now. In short, we are discouraged by not being able to “do” much...

I always think back to the fact that the church named St. Therese of Lisieux, a cloistered nun who died very young, as patroness of missions. How is that possible? What is the church saying about her? That her yes, which was hidden and ineffective according to the mentality of the world, coincides with the good of the world. I understand how

this undermines the image we usually have of the contribution we can make for others. How is it possible that the Church could point to a girl who never left the monastery as the greatest missionary, the patroness of missions? It seems absurd. And, yet, the yes of that little nun had a powerful impact on the world. Just think of how many people have been changed by her faith, by the witness of her life, directly or indirectly. As I often repeat, Our Lady's yes, in the enigmatic obscurity of her circumstances, was the greatest contribution she could give for the life of the world and for every person, just like Fr. Giussani's yes and that of many others has been for us.

I recently read the book *Van Thuan: Freedom Behind Bars*, by Teresa Gutiérrez de Cabiedes,⁴² which tells the story of a great witness to the faith, a life spent in loyal and heroic adherence to his vocation, as Pope John Paul II said of Cardinal François Xavier Nguyen van Thuan. In 1975, van Thuan, shortly after his appointment as coadjutor

⁴² T. Gutiérrez de Cabiedes, *Libero tra le sbarre*, Città Nuova, Rome 2018. Original Spanish edition: *Van Thuan: Libre entre rejas*, Ciudad Nueva, Madrid 2016.

archbishop of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh Ville, Vietnam), was accused of treason and arrested. The decree said, “Nguyen Van Thuan [...] we had you brought here because you are guilty of causing problems for the government of the sovereign people of Vietnam. You are accused of imperialist propaganda and of being a spy for foreign powers.” He spent 13 years in prison, nine of which were in isolation. I was impressed by how he lived that circumstance. Locked in a horrible prison, he, too, wondered what use his life could have: “What use is it for me to stay alive if I cannot fulfill the mission for which I was born?” In order to answer this question, “lying prostrate on the ground, he turned to God again, begging Him to free him. [...] ‘I left my orphans, my poor, my family alone. [...] And now what? What’s the point in my lying here like a trapped insect?’” Everything seemed useless to him, but the Mystery had a surprise in store for him. In his inner dialogue with God, he heard a voice that said to him: “You have done something great. [...] You complain that you cannot work for me. Why don’t you leave all your projects to me? Do you love me, or the works you do for me? [...] You worry about your people because you love

them. Think how much greater my desire to help them is! Trust me. I'll take care of the work you did out there."⁴³

He saw the results of his yes over time—at the beginning he certainly could not have imagined what would be generated by trusting God. It was only when he agreed to follow the mysterious path designed for him that he saw, with surprise, how every person he met in prison was changed, especially the guards watching over him, so much so that the authorities were constantly replacing the guards because they could not avoid “contagion”; they could not prevent the people who came into contact with van Thuan from changing. “Everyone wants to share a cell with you,” his jailer shouted to him, “but I will not allow you to infect all my prisoners.”⁴⁴ Sometimes that flowering is evident to our eyes and sometimes not, but that does not mean that our yes to the Mystery fails to have an effect on the present.

The thing that struck me the most was the time van Thuan asked himself why the Mystery allowed him to go through that cir-

⁴³ Ibid., 9–10, 67–69.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 187.

cumstance. It was the same question that the guards asked him, the guards who could not explain why he persisted in his stance when, if he repented for having “betrayed” his country, he would have been released and could have had a wonderful future. The more our circumstances challenge us, the more the question “Why?” emerges. In response to the umpteenth interrogation on the subject conducted by those who wanted to keep him in prison, he answered that he’d had enough time to reflect on whether it was a mistake to persist in his stance; that is, to rely on the design of an Other, and he added that the more he thought about it, the happier he felt about having received, and seeing blossom within him, a freedom that captivity could not touch.

The result, a contribution to the good of the world that we are seeking must be generated by a person who is free, who has a freedom that no kind of imprisonment can touch. This is something that will only be fulfilled in eternity, but you can already begin to see it in the present: an unimaginable freedom blossoms, becoming a witness for all people, “How do you do it? I tried to make life impossible for you,” they asked him. Van Thuan replied, “How can I help

but shout for joy when I see that Someone gives me this love that destroys hatred and resentment?”⁴⁵ Even for him, it seemed impossible that someone could cause him to flourish like that, could make him so free; things always blossom according to a design and a timeline that aren’t ours. If a person accepts this, the results surpass any and all expectations.

How are we, forced to stay home to avoid contagion, reckoning with the circumstances we are all living! Are we suffocating, as if we had no way out, or are we surprising ourselves with how free we are?

What will remain of this whole experience once the emergency has passed?

Someone wrote that we will come out of this great pandemic changed. I would add: we will come out changed, but only if we start to change now. That is, only if we are aware of what is happening, if we are present to the present and learn now to judge what we are living, whether confined to our homes or in action on the front lines facing

⁴⁵ Ibid., 322.

the disease. The change does not come about simply through an accumulation of shocking events and our impressions of these events; it happens when we understand the meaning of what happens to us, in other words, when we acquire knowledge. So, the change in us is not automatic. We will come out of this situation changed if we go deeper right now, using the provocations reality sends us, in order to discover who we are and what makes life worth living, what protects us from being crushed. I often quote these words from Pope Benedict XVI: “Incremental progress is possible only in the material sphere. Here, amid our growing knowledge of the structure of matter and in the light of ever more advanced inventions, we clearly see continuous progress towards an ever-greater mastery of nature. Yet in the field of ethical awareness and moral decision-making, there is no similar possibility of accumulation for the simple reason that man’s freedom is always new and he must always make his decisions anew. These decisions can never simply be made for us in advance by others—if that were the case, we would no longer be free. Freedom presupposes that in fundamental

decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning.”⁴⁶

This means that if we do not get into the habit of judging what we are living during these days of obligatory isolation and the efforts to fight the virus, we will lose everything. Paolo Giordano underlines this point, saying, “It has been a month since the unthinkable broke into our lives. [...] At a certain point, it will come to an end. [...] In the meantime, we are distracted and just want to let everything roll off our backs. It is the great darkness that falls, the dawn of oblivion, unless we dare to reflect right now. [...] Let us imagine the time after, starting today. Let us not let the unthinkable catch us off guard once again.”⁴⁷

This means a work of verification that we have to do in our daily journey, from the time we wake up until we go to sleep at night. Giordano goes on to say, “I decided to make use of this time by writing [...]: I do not want to lose all that the pandemic is revealing to us about ourselves. Once we are past the fear, that volatile kind of aware-

⁴⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Corriere della Sera*, March 21, 2020.

ness will vanish in an instant,” but “certain reflections that the virus has awakened will still be valid.”⁴⁸ Certainly, without that kind of personal work, everything will vanish and we will return to life as usual without having learned anything from this strange and painful circumstance. But the choice to do this work is up to us: it is the one thing no order or decree can force upon us. At this level, nothing is automatic. So, let us decide to do it! It is a kind of work that requires attention and, therefore, reason and freedom must always be alert, ready to embrace each moment. Otherwise, sacrifice and toil will simply give way to forgetfulness. Eugenio Borgna knows the human spirit well and is well aware of this: “All too easily, forgetfulness takes over in a person once the danger has ceased. There will be some—however, I do not know how many—who will have used the opportunity provided by this time of pain to be more attentive and to listen to him or herself and to others at a deeper level. Yes, some of us, after this bitter trial, will be reborn and will have a new capacity for hope.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Corriere delle Sera*, March 24, 2020.

⁴⁹ *Avvenire*, March 25, 2020.

At the same time, though, the pandemic continues. At this point, it is clear to us all that it is not a passing phenomenon.

This brings to light the value of time, which puts our position in life to the test, including the way we face our lives, our relationships, and our circumstances. When reality does not yield to our expectations, strategies, or initiatives, the solidity of our person and the patrimony of our convictions, whether secular or religious, can be revealed.

From the beginning, we have seen a great deal of indecision about how to think about and respond to the pandemic. Why is it so difficult to find an appropriate path?

I am not equipped to answer that. I limit myself to what I can see in the realm of my experience and what I find to be true. There is a saying by Chesterton I find disarming: “The trouble with our sages is not that they cannot see the answer; it is that they cannot even see the riddle.”⁵⁰ Seeing the riddle is a

⁵⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Dover Publications, Mineola, 2015), 273.

condition for being able to see the answer. This entails a certain posture toward reality: letting yourself be challenged and following the suggestions contained in what happens, ready to reconsider our ideas and plans and to learn from all those who can help us. In short, it is a question of looking at reality, which concerns each of us, and also of being free even in the face of our mistakes and from the specter of the “payoff” (the effects we want to achieve in others). In this way, we can recover more quickly from our stumbling, our failures, and our defeats, having as our only compass a commitment to the good of all people, nothing else.

If I may: What is sustaining you during this time?

I have often seen the advantage of not pulling back from the challenges that life does not spare me. Therefore, I have approached the situation ready and attentive to discover what might arise from a provocation whose true proportions have been revealed a little more each day. I could not look at all that was happening without being pummeled by my wonder at the presence that dominates

my life. And in the face of the vulnerability that has become increasingly evident in all its facets, I became filled more and more with this question: “What is man that you are mindful of him, or mortal man that you care for him?”⁵¹

It is that presence, that You, that transforms my outlook on the challenges that I and everyone else must face. It allows me to live the resulting dizzying position as a man, without running away from the drama, pain, and death that I see happening around me and therefore reverberating within me. I am trying to live all of this as an opportunity to verify my faith. Letting myself be impacted by the questions that this situation solicits, I have been surprised, dumbstruck, to find a light inside that allows me to face them. I am seeing how supremely reasonable the approach suggested to me by faith is.

Jesus takes to heart all of my humanity and that of others. I am understanding more and more the source of St. Paul’s unshakeable certainty, a certainty he received precisely because he was spared no trial: “What will separate us from the love of

⁵¹ Ps. 8:5.

Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? [...] No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁵²

People who live with this certainty provide hope for everyone—including for me, first of all, during this period and for those who feel weak in facing the challenge posed by the virus or who are far from having the faith of St. Paul. People with that certainty can spark in others a desire to possess the faith, begging for it in every heroic gesture, small or great, of their days.

Who would not want to have this certainty? We all want it, especially considering how little we still know of how we will come out of this, not only from the health perspective, but from all the other consequences that may await us. Only such a certainty can keep us from being deaf to

⁵² Rom. 8:35–39.

the call contained in the circumstances and from missing the opportunity to become more ourselves, and therefore a greater help to others.

