

REALITY, TOGETHER WITH THE HEART, IS OUR GREATEST ALLY

*Notes from the Beginning Day
for Student Youth, with Julián Carrón
Milan, Basilica di San Marco, October 4, 2015*

Songs: *Ballata dell'amore vero [Ballad of True Love]
La strada [The Road]*

Alberto Bonfanti. Welcome to this gesture with which we begin together a new academic year. I'd like to greet all those present here today, with my heartfelt thanks to the parish priest, Fr. Luigi Testore, for his hospitality in this very beautiful church, and I'd also like to greet all those participating by satellite link-up from thirty-two sites in Italy and abroad, from Lugano and Fribourg in Switzerland, from Barcelona and Madrid in Spain, from Lithuania, Great Britain, Ireland, and Portugal. Fr. Giussani told us, as a sort of provocation, as Davide Prospero reminded us last Saturday at the Beginning Day for adults: "The most beautiful day of the week is Monday, because on Monday you start again, you start again the journey, the design, you begin again the actuation of beauty, of affection" (L. Giussani, *Dal temperamento un metodo [From Temperament: A Method]*, Bur, Milan, 2002, p. 31). We, too, have begun again, full of the beauty we have experienced on vacation and that many of you have documented, full of the questions that emerged from the things that have happened, sometimes dramatically, full of the desire to communicate this beauty we have experienced to our companions, but also, for some, full of the fear of losing this beauty in our daily routine, which at times seems to suffocate all desire. In this context, Julián,—and we thank you for being here with us again this year for Beginning Day—what you said at the Easter Triduum, and that we began dialoguing about with some of you in Cervinia together with our friend Davide, is a challenge that remains as pertinent as ever: "Reality, together with the heart, is our greatest ally." Together with the heart, that is, together with our ineradicable desire for happiness, truth, and beauty, reality is our ally. In the contributions you sent, we see a serious commitment to verify this challenge and come to grips with the questions that arise from this verification. We have chosen some contributions, some questions to help us in this new adventure that has begun for each of us, certain of the positivity of what awaits us. I'll read the first question, because the person who wrote it preferred it that way. It seems important to us because of the question it poses.

"Compared to the Beginning Day, at the *Raggio* there are often contributions in which people say that in such spheres as sports or a vacation alone, reality immediately seems to lack meaning. Often the response is that if you look at it deep down, this reality is also an opportunity to understand more and live what we say in GS. I live in a complicated family situation. It seems to me that in my circumstances there is continually a lack of meaning, one that every now and then is overcome in the experiences of CL. This often makes me angry, because when I'm suffering, usually because of conflict in my family, I suffer all the more acutely because I miss the moments of life lived authentically. Paradoxically, I wish I had never met GS, and that I could just abandon myself to my family's idea that there is nothing. Yet I understand that this position does not correspond for me, because I am in need for meaning, so my question is, how is it possible for this void to be always filled in my life?"

Julián Carrón. Good afternoon, everyone. I am particularly happy to be able to continue this journey together because, since I sent you the message that reality, together with the heart, is our greatest ally, many of you have taken it seriously, and many questions have emerged. We are travelling companions for this, not in a sentimental companionship; we are not together to cry on each others' shoulders or to look at each other. Our companionship is to see whether what we say to

each other helps us enter into reality. If it does not help us to live, if we do not perceive our staying together, our belonging to this friendship as pertinent to the needs of life, as Fr. Giussani always told us, sooner or later it will no longer interest us. Instead, when you take it seriously, you begin to see how pertinent what we say to each other is to the questions that life poses, to the questions that well up in our heart, as it says in the letter Albertino just read.

I would like to start out by clarifying what I mean by “ally.” We often imagine that something is our ally because it mechanically removes the difficulties of living, so when things do not go our way, when problems do not get resolved mechanically, we say, “Well, how can reality be an ally?” This question makes us start a journey. Already, in this, reality is our ally, because it makes our “I” emerge, our questions, our reason, our freedom; it helps us realize that there is nothing mechanical or automatic in the human person, because everything passes through freedom, everything is an opportunity in front of which our freedom is in play. Reality can be perceived as void of meaning or, if you look at it deep down, as our friend says, as an opportunity for understanding more. Is reality something void of meaning or is it an opportunity? Who can discover it? Maybe someone who makes our head spin, to no end? No. It is discovered by the person who risks, who runs the risk of verifying whether the things that seem void of meaning actually contain an opportunity that I do not imagine and that I do not sense. So then, circumstances begin to become allies because they provoke us; they become a provocation for us. But I have to decide: void of meaning or opportunity? Who can swear that reality has absolutely no meaning at all? I challenge you! You have to take your questions seriously. Who can be so certain that what in some moments appears meaningless is truly so? How many times has it already happened to you in your life, even though you are still young, to discover that some possibilities that had never occurred to you turned out to be real? What a help Shakespeare is for us when he says, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (*Hamlet*, act I, scene V)! How can we discover it? Only by accepting as a positive provocation the circumstances that life forces us through. Why is this decisive? Why do we need this? Because our elementary experience—that is, the structure we have had since our birth, made of evidences and needs of truth, beauty, goodness, happiness—needs a provocation to be awakened. A provocation must come from outside us to reawaken our “I,” to pull us out of the numbness into which we often fall. In fact, Fr. Giussani told us that “original human experience,” that is, what we are, this set of evidences and needs that makes me human, “does not exist actively, if not within the form of a provocation. [...] In other words, within a modality in which it is stirred” (*Dall’utopia alla presenza [From Utopia to Presence]. 1975-1978*, Bur, Milan, 2006, p. 193). Thus, the truly radical issue is that there be a provocation that favors the perception of myself as an “I” who desires everything. In fact, certain encounters, certain circumstances, set into action our consciousness, the original nature of our “I.” You see it when you like a person: in that moment all your “I” begins to emerge with all its needs, with all its capacity to vibrate in front of some stranger who attracts you, who spurs you and provokes you with her or his presence and beauty; you could never erase it, because it makes you feel so much yourself. The other provokes us to be ourselves. The same thing happens in every circumstance. Circumstances are provocations that re-awaken your “I,” your need to understand, to discover the meaning of everything; they prompt questions in you. Only those who take these questions seriously, only those who see these questions emerge in themselves are able to grasp the answer. In fact, only when we have questions are we able to grasp the answers. If the person who wrote this letter pays attention, she will realize that she already has the beginning of an answer in what she is going through: she acknowledges she has lived moments of authentic life, and precisely for this reason she misses those moments. It is not that nothing happened. She lived moments of authentic life, and so she misses them irremediably, but then, in front of the difficulties of living, she would prefer never to have lived them, and to abandon herself to the idea of those who surround her. You have to decide, kids! You have to choose: to be willing to follow what you have seen with your own eyes or to follow what others tell you. Do you want to live your own life, or do you prefer someone else to live it for you? If you do not begin to decide to live, there will always be someone who will

take you for a ride. You have to decide, because you have lived moments of authentic life, you have seen with your own eyes, you have felt them vibrate in the fibers of your being. And if someone tells you—as in the song *Barco Negro* (music by Caco Velho and Pirantini, text by D. Mourão-Ferreira) – “You’re crazy,” “são loucas” (they are crazy), you respond: “No, *you’re* the crazy one! I am truly certain of what has happened to me.” Why are you so certain about it? If you pay attention to yourselves, you will find the starting point of the answer: because what the others tell you does not correspond to you the way what has happened to you does. She says, “I understand that this position does not correspond for me, because I am a need for meaning.” So then, decide! Life does not mistreat you and you are not some poor wretches who have never seen anything truly clear, alive, attractive, and fascinating; you have seen and lived it, so much so that if the others tell you “you are crazy,” this does not correspond because you are a need for meaning. Do you see how reality is your ally? But this is not mechanical, because each of you must follow the provocation of reality; this way, I will be able to see emerge in front of my eyes what reality is, what I am and what promise reality offers me for the fulfilment of my “I.”

This summer was one of the most meaningful ones for me. I was able to keep present that promise, that encounter I’d experienced and that happens anew when I am in this companionship. Through the little vacation and the vacation for adults I became increasingly aware that reality is not mine, but is for me; it’s exciting to think that no matter what happens, reality will always be there. Everything changes, however, according to your attitude in front of it. This is my problem, because at the GS Equipe Davide Prosperi told us that it is good to return with questions, but I have a constant question that scares me: how can I maintain all this? How can I continue to live with this awareness that reality is for me? I knew that after the Equipe and after such a true summer I wouldn’t be able to maintain it, and so to avoid this I threw myself into everything that I was doing, above all the activities with GS, because it is the one companionship that helps me, as Prosperi said, to carry the burden of my humanity. With the beginning of school I feel that everything I’d built has been erased; I knew that it would happen, but I didn’t think it would happen so quickly. How can I not lose my encounter every time reality sets itself in front of me?

Is it true that everything has been erased? Tell me, yes or no.

No.

“No.” You can’t lie to yourself.

A little.

A little, but not everything has been erased. In fact, you are here to ask this question. If everything had been erased, you would not be here and you wouldn’t wish you hadn’t lost what happened to you. So then, the first thing to recognize is that not everything has been erased, though we often think so. It is very important to realize this: the very fact that you ask the question indicates that what you have encountered has not been erased from your “I.” It seems like almost nothing to you, but instead, it is crucial. Why? Because something of what I have seen, of what has happened to me, remains; an event cannot be entirely erased from my life. It is important to realize this, because in this way we begin not to be scared anymore when everything seems to collapse. When that fear grabs you, look it in the face and ask yourself: is it true or not? Don’t miss the opportunity. When you get the suspicion that everything has been cancelled or erased, that everything is an illusion, that it was all a dream, look it all in the face and ask yourselves this question: is it true or not? If you do not judge whether your thoughts are true or not, you will freak out. If instead you judge every time doubt assails you, you will discover you are increasingly convinced that it was not a dream, that it was not entirely erased. Rather, you will perceive that when this question arises in you, it is a precious opportunity to rediscover this event, to realize how substantial it is, how long-lasting what you have seen and lived really is. You do not have to convince yourself, or tell each other a bunch of hoey; you do not have to believe in some “visions.” You simply have to take yourselves seriously and ask yourselves: is what I have experienced true or not? Is it true or not that what I have experienced has been erased? A person

who encountered the Christian community and then left for years, seventeen years, in fact, as a friend told me, phoned his friends one day, saying, “Do you still get together?”, “Yes.” “Can I come too?” After seventeen years! “Certainly! But why?” “Because I miss it so much!” You would think that after seventeen years nothing would be left, but that person had seen what he had seen, had seen that there is a place of life, had seen that there is an experience and had seen that all the attempts he had made in leaving failed to give him even one minute of the fullness he had lived. We have no problem with reality. We have no fear of challenges, because it is precisely in facing circumstances that we see the difference between Christ and any other response, but only those who are not afraid to verify it in reality will discover it. This is why I am always struck by the story of the prodigal son: he felt the walls close in on him at home, so he left. You could think that everything was finished. But when he found himself in the midst of the pigs, he could not help but think, “In my father’s house I was well off and even his servants lived infinitely better than I do here eating cornucobs with the pigs” (cf. *Lk* 15:16-17). Was his a vision? An illusion? Science fiction? He could not forget the experience he lived in his father’s house, that seemed erased by all the stupid things he had done. Was that experience totally erased, as our friend said? No, because the further away he went, the more he felt a desperate longing for home. God did not send him an angel to say, “Oh, you poor thing!” From the depths of his “I” flowed a desire for happiness and fullness: “I am living like a pig here when I could be living like a son,” and it all bore on him with even more intensity than in the beginning: if Christianity were only an invention for those who have experienced nothing of life, after having tried everything, you should be truly convinced that everything is over. But precisely in that moment it all bears on you again with even greater power. After we have verified all our dreams, all the short-cuts we have imagined for reaching our happiness more quickly, precisely in that moment all the difference of Christianity appears. So you ask yourself, is the only alternative doing stupid things? Leaving for seventeen years? No, there is another possibility: when you feel this temptation you can look it full in the face, as I said before. With everything that has happened to me and that has not been entirely erased, I can engage myself again in this new beginning. Circumstances are given to you so that, throwing yourself in again, you can become increasingly certain. The Christian life is only for the daring. If you prefer an easy life, go look elsewhere. The Christian experience is only for those who desire to live an adventure in which we do not tell each other a bunch of hooey, and are constantly invited to verify what we tell each other. But in order to verify it, you have to engage full-heartedly over and over again. You also have to do this together with your friends; we are not left alone with our attempts, because we are in a place that constantly encourages us onwards, accompanies us, responds to the questions. In this way, life becomes another thing.

At the end of the summer, I felt an intense desire to return to school, because for the first time I sensed the need to verify whether the beauty and happiness I experienced during the GS vacation and the Meeting were truly part of reality, a reality that for me primarily means school. If what I live in this companionship is true, it should be so in every circumstance, so much so that I desire to sit in front of my teacher with the same open heart that I have during a hike in the mountains. Since school began, I have become aware that I am living it with an open heart. I perceived this when I began to feel the need at the end of the lesson to leave the classroom and go tell GS friend and the GS group about my morning. All this is really beautiful, because finally these two realities that were distinct, school and GS, are now just one thing, and I feel that without the support and above all the presence of my friends, this reality that now seems to be my ally and close to me, would be detached and against me. In addition, this new school year has prompted a lot of questions in me, above all about the girl with whom I share a desk. At the end of every lesson that I thought was beautiful, she would show her reaction of apathy and boredom and make me doubt what we had just experienced. Initially it seemed like a limit to me, but then I realized that it didn’t have to be, and rather, it should be something to start out from, a challenge. So I wondered, and I still wonder,

how it is possible that she, who has a heart like mine and lives my same school reality, cannot see what I see in what we live.

Why do you think? What is the starting point for answering this question, when we see that we have a series of needs that at times the others do not recognize as their needs, or when we see certain things that the others have difficulty recognizing? What is the point of departure for answering these issues?

My experience.

Very good! Your experience. Your experience! Years ago, a university student asked Fr. Giussani a similar question: “What if [...] I talk to another, to a classmate I meet at university, and at a certain point he says to me, ‘Look, this is *your* need, not mine?’” Fr. Giussani responded, “Someone who answers you in that way is anesthetized. Why? How can you know this? You know what is in the human heart, because it is in yours [...]. And you understand that the other does not understand what you understand because he is blocked, he suffers from ankylosis, he’s paralyzed, his heart is paralyzed” (*L’io rinasce in un incontro. [The “I” is reborn in an encounter] 1986-1987*, Bur, Milan, 2010, pp. 364-365). Certain needs have awoken in you at a certain point of your human evolution, of your human journey, because something happened, because an encounter happened in your life, something awakened them in you. So then, you mustn’t judge your desk-mate; you should just wait until she has the opportunity to discover it, as happened for you. This is the importance of our experience: how can your desk-mate be challenged to discover it? Only if first of all you respond to the need you have, as you said at the beginning, to verify whether the beauty and happiness you saw during the vacation or the Meeting are truly part of reality, “if what I live in this companionship is true.” You need this first of all for yourself, not just to respond to your desk-mate. The first question is ourselves. Precisely because you respond to yourself, you can show your desk-mate the newness that Christ introduces into the way of living reality. You challenge her by living what has happened to you. Verifying what has happened to you, you are challenging her: “See how it is possible to live your studies differently, live your relationships with your classmates, live the difficulties, live the tiredness, live the daily life that crushes you?” And so you understand the method of God, which is the same as always: God gives the grace to one person so that it will reach everyone. He gives it to you so that you will communicate it to all your schoolmates. You do not need to make any grand proclamations during lessons. You simply have to live, so that the others can see the newness that Christ introduces into life. We do not discover it because you say so in words and explain it; if they do not see it in you, in the way you react to things, they will never ask, “Why does she live this way? Where does this newness come from? How is it that you come to class happy, and even though you have the same challenges we do, you live them differently? Why do you never get tired of starting again?” These questions offer you the opportunity to answer. Your schoolmates have the same needs as you do, but as we said before, they need the right provocation to discover all the possibilities of living that they do not know yet. Just as the Lord gave it to you, at a certain point He will also give it to them. I am always amazed at God’s respect for the freedom of each of us: instead of getting angry with your classmates or getting confused because they do not understand, think of God knocking ceaselessly, waiting like a beggar for us to answer. I challenge you to find someone who loves your freedom so much, who loves the freedom of your classmates so much. We cannot love our classmates’ freedom less than God does.

This summer I was really wounded in a relationship. What particularly hurt was that this relationship had become for me the main opportunity Christ used to encounter me, to make Himself present in my day, making it better and fuller. When this relationship ended, the break was very painful for me, both emotionally and because I felt betrayed by Him.

By whom?

By Christ. Even though I was deeply wounded, I asked my dearest friends for help, and they helped me face the situation, simply by staying by me. As the pain diminished, I found myself weighing what had happened to me and I realized that notwithstanding the pain, reality had been

my ally, because the relationships with my friends and with my parents had grown in this situation, but above all my relationship with Christ was re-born. In my pain I consciously decided to stop praying Morning Prayer, and this no to Him was the proof that I had become aware that I depended on Him, because if I say no to Him it means that He has some kind of substance.

Do you all see how he felt?

My question emerged when school started. Daily life is crushing me. I am flattening out into an apathy that is preventing me from living that relationship with Him that has become vital; it's absurd. When I was suffering I could live it in a certain way, but now, in the very normal daily life I've always lived, I can no longer do so, and this is absurd for me. Not knowing how to see Him, how to find Him in my day is confusing me. I know I need Him, because I saw that in my suffering the relationship with Christ transformed my woundedness into an opportunity for me. But if now in the banality of daily life I can no longer perceive His presence, it won't take much to make me fall. How can I perceive Him in my day? And above all, how can I attain a constancy in this relationship with Him that is not diminished by the circumstances?

What amazes me first of all is your saying that "In my pain I had consciously decided to stop praying Morning Prayer," precisely because you suspected that deep down Christ had betrayed you, but very acutely you observed: "This *no* to Him was the proof that I had become aware that I depended on Him," because you say *no* when a relationship has already begun.

You have to say the no to someone.

Perfect! This is fundamental, because a lot of other people would have gotten angry at their own lack of coherence, seeing only their *no*, as if to say, "Notwithstanding this, I said *no*." Instead, he did not stop at appearances, but pursued it more deeply. He said, "But my *no* is the proof that I have begun to feel close to Him and I am aware of this precisely because I say *no*, because I can say *no*." Do you see that in life, in the experience we live, everything is useful? His example is impressive, because even a *no*, if you realize it, can be useful; in fact, it enables him to be even more aware of He to whom he says *no*. Tomorrow he will say *yes* to Him, don't you worry. The important thing is that I have already begun a relationship, that I do not conceive of myself as totally autonomous, that I do not conceive of myself by myself. I have begun to see the truth of what we were saying, quoting Guccini: "I do not exist when you are not there" (*Vorrei [I would like]*, words and music by F. Guccini). Why do I like these expressions? Because they say that, precisely when we conceive of ourselves in total autonomy and isolated as individuals without relationships, elementary experience tells me that I am more "I" when you are there, when a "you" enters into my life—a friend, your beloved, your mother. I exist when you are there. It is crucial for a person to begin to experience this. There can be moments when I say *no*, because of my fragility, my idiocy, my stubbornness, but I have already begun to see something more interesting than all my *no*'s: there is someone with whom I am more myself, there is someone who makes me more myself, as happened to the prodigal son: he perceived that there is a more decisive place, a more decisive relationship for living than any other thing, that is, his home and his father. He can do all the stupid things in the world, but he can never avoid returning home to his father. Think of saint Peter. He could err over and over, but he had seen, and in fact, he tells Jesus, "Where can I go without you, Christ?" This is more important than all the rest, including all our *no*'s. Over time, according to a design that is not ours, according to a journey that remains to be discovered, thanks to the infinite patience that Christ has with each of us, we will reach a point someday when we, like Peter, can say—after Jesus asked him, "Do you love Me?"; He asked him this after he had denied knowing Him in front of everyone—"I don't know how, but all my tenderness is for You, Christ, all my 'I' is bound to You" (cf *Jn* 21:15-17). It will also be for you the victory of the bond with Christ; it will be the victory of affection for Christ. All my affection is for You, Christ. Peter was not shaken by the many mistakes he had made, because through all his errors, he became ever more closely bound to Him. This is what is amazing. This is why you already have the answer to your question. "Daily life is crushing me. Apathy is preventing me from living that relationship with Him that has become vital for me." I ask you, how can you live without it? Period! So then, the apathy, the daily life that is crushing you

offers you the possibility to ask yourself, “What am I doing here? Why am I not seeking Him?” It is as if Christ, starting from the innermost depths of your experience, starting from the apathy you are experiencing, was saying to you, “Don’t you miss Me? Can you live without Me?” Answer Him! Paradoxically, the apathy becomes the drive for the memory of Him. Like when you miss him or her, this too is the opportunity for memory. Apathy or daily life become an opportunity to resume the relationship, that relationship that deep down was never interrupted.

In this period I feel the presence of Christ more than ever, not because the reality that surrounds me is the way I prayed for it to be. Actually, it’s the opposite. Obviously, I thank Christ for having given me these friends with whom I can be myself and for having given me a place in this companionship. Without You, Lord, where would I go? The fact is that sometimes my desires do not correspond to what He would want for me. A painful reality has been set in front of me, but at the same time it is an opportunity for growth and also a push to make me open my eyes more and more to seek the happiness, the greater good that He wants for me. Every day I try to understand what lies behind this pain, because reality, together with my heart, is my greatest ally. Through the clash with this reality I am realizing more and more how great my desire for happiness is. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I abandon myself to Him, letting myself be transported by His hands, saying yes to this pain. When I am with my friends I’m well; I smile at Him and thank Him. I feel that with them my journey has another flavor, sweet and simple. Notwithstanding all this, there are moments when at the height of joy, my heart empties and melancholy assails me. Very often when I am at school I feel this way, and I tend to close in on myself. I am afraid of fleeing, of being unable to stay in front of Christ, because when I return home I rest, I listen to some music and feel that this melancholy assails me and keeps me from sensing Christ at my side as I felt Him before.

No! The melancholy is not the cause of your not sensing Him anymore, because melancholy is precisely the modality through which He is calling to you: “Don’t you miss Me?”

The fact is that I know He is at my side. I know He is there. I know it, He is always at my side, but I am the one who flees.

Okay, right. But the first thing to do is to begin to see with clarity what reality is, to begin to look at it with a new judgment. Reality, any reality, not just a beautiful one, but also a painful one, as you said before, can be an opportunity for growth, a push to seek something else. This already says that we are beginning to look at reality differently from how we looked at it before, when we considered it just a disturbance, something to avoid, to flee, thinking that there was nothing good for us in a certain circumstance. This is how you discover, as I did, that reality is an ally. I did not learn it by reading some book; I learned it as you are learning it, that is, living, living. When you begin to experience this, reality becomes your friend, every aspect of reality becomes your friend. And any person who joins this journey becomes a friend. For this reason, you begin to recognize that your friends are a good for you. You said, “Notwithstanding all this, there are moments when at the height of joy, my heart empties and melancholy assails me.” My dear, it is precisely the moment of your personal relationship with Christ; otherwise, if all the rest were enough, how could you enter into a unique and personal relationship with Christ, one that is absolutely “yours”? I remember a story Fr. Giussani told: he went to a party to welcome home a friend who was returning from abroad, and he was entirely amazed by the beauty of the companionship, the friends, the songs, all the friendship that there was at that moment of celebration, but at a certain point, he said to those present, “If at a certain point, kids, you don’t feel an intense desire to say His name, all this vanishes” (cf. *L’attrattiva Gesù [The Attraction of Jesus]*, Bur, Milan, 1999, p. 148). He did not say that because the party was going badly; everything was going great, a beautiful companionship, beautiful friendship, beautiful songs, everything beautiful, but recognizing that none of this is enough says who we are and to Whom we belong. For this reason, in the moment of the greatest longing, the relationship with Him is truly unleashed. The important thing is whether we are willing to enter into this relationship instead of fleeing to Internet, your cell phone, your friends, everything else. In the culminating moment, let’s decide to enter into that unique relationship, otherwise we

will always be like a drifting mine. Let's accept that all that happens to us is the door for entering more deeply into the relationship with Christ.

This year began differently than the other years because I felt everything was really difficult. In the beginning I thought it was because of resuming my studies or the routine, or because my older friends were not there. But I realized that the problem was much deeper, because I felt engaged in my studies right away and I continued to see my older friends. When we had the first Raggio the theme was "Reality, together with the heart, is our great ally," and this left me speechless, not out of amazement, but because I had nothing to say, no experience to recount. As I listened to the contributions of my companions, I began to grow resentful of them, because they had something to say and I didn't. I found myself completely emptied and with bitterness towards this companionship because it touched my deepest self. The thing that shook me up the most is that even though this hatred grew in me against this companionship, this is the place where I can't help but ask my deepest questions. Why is it that I am still so bound to it, even though it makes this hatred grow in me? Living with my friends, I also became aware of a deep envy that increased the hatred; I felt a lacerating inadequacy, and I don't know where it comes from. Though I know that reality can be my ally, it seems that it is neither ally nor enemy.

Thank you. The dramatic journey through which we discover things is really beautiful; the more you go forward the more you become self-aware. "I began differently than in other years and I thought it was fear of the routine, but the issue was much deeper." Do you see? Circumstances make us understand the profundity of the human drama, the beauty of which we are made. Without this experience of the beginning of school, she might have taken for granted the title of the first Raggio: "Reality, together with the heart, is our great ally." Instead, when you have such deep questions as hers, just reading the title of the Raggio leaves you speechless. What intensity of living anything whatever! So then, the drama begins, that we have to learn to live well, because in front of this she feels resentment growing inside her. Each of us must decide, because freedom is always at stake, is always called into action. Reality is a sign, Fr. Giussani always told us, in front of which each of us has to decide. In front of what? You are in front of a fact, a person who talks about beautiful things at the Raggio, some positive experiences that he learned from, and he offers them to you and the friends present. This is a good. He did not insult you or offend you. He set before you the experience of a good he discovered, and he offers you the contribution of his experience, of the journey he has made, and he shared his life with you. In front of this good, even in front of a good like this, we can have two attitudes: to welcome it for what it is, a good, a desire to share, an invitation to share your experience ("Tell me what you have experienced."), or perceive it as a judgment on us. In the latter case, you begin to get gloomy and think, "I don't have anything to recount." This breeds resentment. But not even in that moment are we left alone, because, as you went on to say, you wondered how in the world a place that evokes this hatred and resentment could still be the one where you ask your questions and to which you feel so bound. It seems like a contradiction to us. Instead it is not; at times the two things co-exist, feeling hatred and at the same time acknowledging that it is impossible for us to avoid returning there with our questions. What promise must we have perceived in this place, that not even all the resentment, all the hatred we feel can erase the presentiment of good that continues to prevail, notwithstanding everything, to the point that I return here again today! The issue is whether we freely follow what has happened to us in that place, whether we return to that place to which we feel bound—in the end it is a problem of affection—whether we return there even though we are seized with resentment or a sense of inadequacy that makes us say, "I'm not worthy to be here." This is why the figure of Peter is so astonishing: how many times must he have felt this inadequacy, how many times must he have felt he was unworthy of Jesus' friendship, His preference, but at the same time, he could not leave: "Where will I go without You, Christ?" All my fondness is for you, Christ, all my human fondness is stronger than all my inadequacy. My inadequacy doesn't matter at all, because my fondness prevails, almost visceral, like that of a child for his mother: he can't help but be attached to his

mother. It is astonishing to see how this grows in us. As you see, reality is anything but indifferent; it constantly challenges you to return to this place. The more reality provokes questions in you, causes questions to emerge, the more these questions drive you to return to this place, the only place where your questions are taken seriously. Where else are your questions taken as seriously as they are here? If you find one, go there. I challenge you, tell me if there is a place other than this one where to be yourself you do not have to suppress your most human questions, a place where you have to embrace all your humanity without censuring any of your inadequacy, your lack of coherence, the bad things in you. At this point, you can understand why the inadequacy that reality often makes us see in ourselves does not make us doubt this place, this companionship, this friendship; to the contrary, thank goodness it is there, and thank goodness you do not have to be worthy. I assure you that if it were necessary to be worthy, there would be no place for me! This is the place for those who feel inadequate, who are not shocked by their feeling of inadequacy, who do not need to be worthy to be accepted. We are all companions of Peter, the first one Jesus chose not because he was good, not because he was worthy, but because, like you, he was made of such a human fiber that notwithstanding everything he could not help feeling all his human fondness for Him, for Christ. He felt so bound that nothing could separate him from Jesus.

Dearest Julián, when I learned that the title chosen for the opening of this new academic year was “Reality, together with the heart, is our great ally,” I was moved deeply. No line could correspond better to what I have experienced in these first days of school, and above all during the summer. In fact, I only understand my beginning of the academic year if I think back to the months of summer vacation, when, first in London and then at the seaside, I found myself facing a series of circumstances that not only had I not planned, but that I never would’ve wanted. I had an idea of what the perfect vacation before the last year should be, and everything turned out the opposite. In the beginning I felt an unbearable weight of the toil and sadness, and I continued to feel closed in on myself and my problems, and I said to myself, ‘Why do these things happen?’ After a few days spent suffocating, I realized I had a choice: either stay closed up in my little corner of the world and look over and over again at the things that weren’t the way I wanted, or look up and accept with humble obedience that they could be a special opportunity to become great. It was a turning point, because it asked me to engage all the greatness of my freedom. It would have been much easier to remain a slave to my constant complaining and my continual measurement of myself and others. Then I remembered what you said, that in order to engage in the battle to take seriously the desire to be happy, you have to truly love yourself. You have to love yourself, because I knew that things would not change and I would have to fight to be free from their appearance. In that moment, I had to love myself and my heart, which knows so well what corresponds to it, and can never fool itself. Supported by the loving tenderness of many friends, by my family and by the beauty of the places I saw, I decided to raise my gaze and to keep it fixed on the essential, on the Aconcagua, as you once told me. Then I found that I was free to love the toil, free not to get lost in the appearances, not to stop at what people think of me and of how they think I should be. The circumstances did not change. Rather, with the death of my friend the pain intensified, but it was all a continual grace, because God used it to make me draw forth even more truly all the passion of my heart. Reality enabled my heart to re-awaken. In fact, I felt a powerful desire to stay in front of the beauty of the things I saw with a deep and grateful gaze, in silent and amazed contemplation, to seek purity and clarity in the relationships with my friends, to give myself totally in the sacrifice of helping at home. After the vacation I was worried because I hadn’t seen many friends for three months and I didn’t know what to expect. God decided to make me understand definitively that He is much more original and imaginative than me with many small facts—a phone call from an adult friend who told me he cared about me, the re-discovery of the friendship with a classmate who returned from America, preparation of the party for the first year students and the sight of their wonderstruck faces, the renewed embrace with old friends and the opportunity to meet new ones—all examples of the paternal embrace with which the new year began. The subjects I study at school

have become extraordinarily interesting, each thing surprises me. I know that I have a really hard year of studies ahead of me and a lot of choices to make, but for the first time I'm not frightened. I have an immense desire to live everything, to love everything, every person I meet, even those I see on the metro and the things I run up against. At times I'm taken aback by my own heart, so burning and alive, desirous of change. There are still the small daily sufferings, and I feel they often hurt, but it is through them that the road is shown to me, it is through them that I understand what I truly desire. Everything that will happen will be a superabundant grace that I can't even imagine.

Thank you. You describe well the itinerary that each of us has before us. In the beginning you could think that the circumstances were an unbearable burden, but after a few days you saw the alternative between living closed up in your little corner or raising your gaze and living that situation as a special opportunity to become great. Kids, life is vocation. God calls us through the circumstances. Only those who follow the circumstances can begin to discover what He, the Mystery who makes all things and has much more imagination than we do, has prepared for us. Those who think they already know, and thus believe they do not need to engage in life by responding to the circumstances through which the Mystery calls us, miss out on the best. Instead when they follow them, they discover that God is much more original and imaginative than we are, and everything becomes interesting. They are no longer frightened, but have an immense desire to live everything. This happens through circumstances and the most interesting thing is to discover, as she said, that “through them the road is shown to me.” The road is not something that we already know *a priori*, because you discover life in living. A Spanish poet said, “Se hace camino al andare” (A. Machado, “Proverbios y cantares”, XXIX, in *Campos de Castilla*, 1917), you discover the journey by walking. It is not already laid out in your head. This is why, as I always tell you, life is only for the audacious, for those who accept the challenge of the constant provocation that circumstances pose; at times the circumstances are banal, but through them the Mystery who made us calls us to bring us more and more into the fullness of living.

Have a great year, my friends!

Bonfanti. Our heartfelt thanks, Julián, for the road you are showing us, a road that is for each of us and that I, we, want to travel, a road in which also the instruments we are given (and that you will find in the page of announcements) are to be taken seriously, each in his or her own group.

Appendix
Other written contributions received

■ This summer I had to study to make up for subjects I'd failed the previous school year, and so I spent a lot of days in the library and on the metro. Obviously I had no desire whatsoever to do so, seeing as I could have spent that time on the beach or elsewhere. It was a Friday afternoon and I was on my way home from a day of studies at the library. I had to wait almost fifteen minutes for the metro and I wasn't very enthusiastic about it because I just wanted to get home and throw myself on my bed and not have to think about anything involving studies. When it finally arrived I got in and went to the last seat on the left. That Friday was one of those days when you find someone you don't want to greet and you do everything possible to avoid looking at him or him looking at you. That's how I felt toward everyone. I had my music and my earphones and I was just thinking about getting home, but something happened. I turned my head a bit and I saw a pregnant girl who was crying at the other end of the car. She wasn't crying like when they flunk you or something not very important happens: she was crying with pain, with a lot of pain. Her pain was so strong that even I noticed it and I became very sad. I felt all shaken up inside, and thought of approaching her. What could a girl like me do, speaking with a person who was so sad and who I didn't even know? It seemed really stupid to speak with her or even just greet her, and I tried to avoid it. I raised the volume on my music and I turned my head. But I just couldn't avoid that girl's pain in such a mean-spirited way. I couldn't pretend nothing was going on after seeing her like that, and so something prompted me to get up, and the closer I got to her the more afraid I was and the more questions I had. What would I say? What would she say? What would happen? Why was I approaching her? In the end I sat near her, and the only thing I could think of was to introduce myself. I told her my name, that I had seen her from my seat and that something had moved inside me. She told me her name, looked at me and began telling me what had happened to her. I couldn't believe it. How could an absolutely unknown girl tell me why she was suffering so much? She told me she was very sad and that she was on her way to an abortion clinic to have an abortion. I asked her why, and if she wanted to keep the baby. She said yes, but it meant so many difficulties and she couldn't picture herself with a child to bring up, to support and take care of every minute, but that notwithstanding all this she wanted to keep the baby. So I asked her why she was going to the abortion clinic, if she wanted to keep the baby? She looked at me without speaking and started crying again. I could see she was afraid, afraid of being abandoned, humiliated by people, mistreated by her boyfriend for wanting to keep the baby, and afraid of other things that could happen. When she calmed down she told me she was afraid and didn't want to lose her boyfriend because of what was happening to her. I asked her if she thought she would be more peaceful after the abortion, having relieved herself of a burden, or if she would regret it. Without any doubt she said she would regret it, and that she already loved her baby, that she was beginning to realize what the love of a mother is, and what a sacrifice lay behind it, and that she loved her baby anyway. If she was so sure, why was she going to the clinic? She said that very morning her boyfriend had called her while he was drinking a beer with his friends, and told her to go that afternoon to the abortion clinic because he didn't want the baby. I just lost it. How could he possibly tell her something of the kind on the phone? I told her I thought it was terrible, and she agreed I was right. I told her about homes that host pregnant girls, about the people who welcome them, about the Movement, and I saw that the more I talked the more she became a bit more peaceful, but I continued to see that terrible pain. We arrived at a stop and she got up and ran out, but then suddenly turned around and came back in. She looked at me, gave me a hug, and said, "I'm going home. I'm not going to the clinic. I realized that this child I'm bearing is my boyfriend's but she's also mine, and I love her with all my heart. Thank you." And she got out. I stood there, not knowing what to do. What had happened? Who was that girl? What would happen to her and her child? I continued thinking, who am I to make a total stranger change her mind? Who am I, that this girl

should have told me her whole story? What role do I play in all this? How is she and the baby now? I know one thing clearly. This is a true Mystery, something I can't understand, but the happiness I feel for having accompanied her in those minutes in the metro is incredible.

■ I'm attending the fifth year of Classics High School. At the GS Equipe in the morning, after breakfast, they said there would be the *Angelus* and Morning Prayer before the meeting/assembly. I didn't really want to go (excuse me if I say so, but I want to be frank), because I wanted to start the assembly right away. But as I was thinking this, a friend sent a message that said "Eyes open." Well, yes! I opened my eyes! I realized what I had in front of me. Before beginning Morning Prayer we sang *Al mattino [In the Morning]* and the priest said "What enables us to start anew in the morning? To wake up again every morning? 'That I see, and this is the morning'. Begging to see Him, staying in front of your desire. Prayer is begging, and begging constitutes the human person. This is why we pray, to ask Him to encounter us." All summer long, I felt I was a beggar, and this is why he was speaking directly to me. I fully enjoyed the Morning Prayers because I wanted to be attentive to the words; I didn't want to say the words just to say them. In fact, keeping my eyes open, I understood that Morning Prayer is the expression of "Desire," because every word talked about my position as a beggar! After this experience my "shabby" companion and I reminded each other to always keep our eyes open, to stay in front of what happens to us and to recognize it. So I began school in a different way, begging Him to come to me every morning at the *Angelus* together with my friends. Staying with my eyes open together with that friend, I enjoyed the first day, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, etc. Every day in little things that happened to me—a simple smile of my friends, something our Philosophy teacher said about her position on Gender theory, contrary to mine, but that drove me to find out more, to understand better, a meeting during which they talked about the need of the human person, the embrace of my friend who is going through a hard time in her life... the list could go on and on. One of the first days of school we had our Greek teacher, and I thought to myself, "Oh, now she'll give us the same old scolding that we are passive, that we're not attentive, etc." But at the same time, I thought, "Well, is reality is our ally, it must be our ally right now, too!" So I decided to attend class with a different attitude. Shortly afterwards, talking about Euripides, she said, "Euripides shows in his tragedies that man does not make himself, that he needs something other." This blew me away, especially coming from our teacher. That lesson was like School of Community in the classroom, among non-CL people, speaking about an author accused by many of his contemporaries of being an atheist, and yet he was "religious" in Giussani's sense of the word. In all this, I recognize that I have verified the hypothesis that reality is a true ally, even in school. The one thing I ask for this year is that, in this shabby companionship that is GS, we help each other keep our eyes open, to recognize our ally!

■ During this summer vacation I discovered the beauty of staying with the simple things that are asked of me. In particular, working on security for the Meeting, I was essentially asked to wait. Waiting for the time to open the doors of the Expo Center, waiting for people I didn't know, some of them even grouchy, who needed my help: I didn't understand the sense of this waiting. Who was I waiting for? The first two days I was angry at having a job that seemed almost useless. But slowly the waiting grew less of a hostile thing for me. As the days passed, the companionship of the others in my group began to support me: we no longer waited half asleep, but sang together, and each person who arrived even just to ask where the bathroom was became a great event, a small thing that gave meaning to the waiting. Then on the next to last day a dear person I hadn't seen for a long time chanced to come by to ask for help. With his arrival a good part of my waiting acquired

meaning. I had waited all week unconsciously, but not in vain. This enables me to trust the Someone who gave me the waiting, knowing before I did what I should be waiting for.

■ I was born with a rare disease that has forced me to undergo numerous operations on my legs. Then, something that should never have happened, happened: the pin that they put in my femur broke, and with it my femur. When this happened, obviously my world fell apart. But then I understood that every time they operated on me I came out happy, with the awareness that everything that happens to me is for me, for my good. So I even thanked God, not because of an idea, but because of what I had lived, had experienced. In this adventure I re-discovered my classmates and my family, my home, my grandparents and all those who surround me. In addition, I was blown away by the enormous number of friends who were praying for me. This was like a re-birth for me, because shortly before the surgery I was furious with God because He didn't want to heal me. I understood then that healing can't be merely physical, but also moral, so much so that I find myself continually thanking the Lord, because without this situation I would not be the person I am. This summer I understood that reality is my greatest ally because without bumping up against reality (the pin that broke) I would not be who I am; reality enables me to live my days better and to rediscover every time that everything that is given to me is for my good. Before this "disaster" I was very apathetic about my reality, my life; I was a person who "couldn't see the colors of reality," because everything was in black and white, but then reality wanted to enter into my life powerfully, wanted to make me understand that she was there, that she has always been there, but that I didn't want to look at her, didn't see her, reduced everything to what I wanted. For me the rest didn't matter; it wasn't even worth looking at it. Everything that has been given to me is for me, but it's like each time I have to rediscover this. Each of us, I believe, always needs something that shakes us free from all that the world proposes and that always makes us forget that reality is beautiful for each of us.

■ "Can reality, together with the heart, be your ally?" I've been asked this question repeatedly in the last year, and quite early on it became something that demanded an answer, probably because of the insistence with which it's been posed. I have to say that initially I answered very skeptically, because this year I've had to face things that were forced on me, like my grandmother's cancer, leaving me unable to do anything and suffering in solitude from my uselessness, which those events brought increasingly to the forefront. At the beginning of this year I had a turning point that made me re-think my position and my skepticism. I was invited to participate in the national Equipe for GS at Cervinia. I left Milan with the intention of living those days for myself, after a year in which I'd done everything but stop and look at myself seriously. But after only a few hours I was already lost, because I met a person with whom I'd had several run-ins, and this led me to immediately lose sight of the idea of living those days for myself. I was distracted by problems like, "how should I act with him?" That very evening Albertino told us, "Remember that you are here only for yourselves. You have to take yourself seriously, first of all, before others. What you give others is a superabundance that arises spontaneously." His encouragement to live those days for oneself made all the difference. First of all, when I told my friends at Cervinia about this situation, one of them thanked me right away, saying, "You have already taken yourself seriously by telling us all this. You made me pay attention to those words to which I had paid little heed. If you think about it, this is already a superabundance that you have given me." I hardly need to tell you how amazed I was to see this superabundance become more and more present in my everyday life once I returned to Milan, starting with a friend who'd been unable to go to Cervinia and who asked me to tell her about everything; setting aside my initial resistance, I ended up telling her everything that had

struck me, and in doing so understanding better what I had experienced. A surprising dialogue began between us, to the point that the next day she sent me a message quoting her school Principal, who reminded her of something we had spoken about the day before. Isn't this superabundance? Or a simple dinner with my classmates, during which my friend who had also been to Cervinia and I talked to everyone for two straight hours about what had struck us and how it had already given us a fresh start back in Milan. What we recounted so amazed them that they thanked us, and I wondered again, "What is this, if not taking oneself seriously? What is this, if not a superabundance?" I realized that something is inevitably triggered when you begin to ask yourself, "What do I desire for myself? What triggers this fact in me?" This is a loving gaze that you have upon yourself, and then it is reflected in the relationship with your friend, your parents, etc., to the point that it makes school, even if you don't really like it so much, a place where you can engage fully. The other day in class we read a text by Pasolini in which at a certain point he wrote, "It's a scream for someone's attention / or help; but also, maybe, to blaspheme him. / It's a scream that wants to announce, / [...] that I exist, / or, not only that I exist, / but that I know. It's a scream / in which deep inside the anxiety / you hear some contemptible accent of hope; [...] / In any case, this is certain: that whatever / my scream means, / it is destined to last beyond any possible end," and this contains taking oneself seriously. I realized that reality as an ally does not mean that it substitutes you, simplifying everything for you, preventing pain from being an important fact in your life; it means that first of all it makes you to take a step in taking yourself seriously, as Pasolini wrote.