

“Is it better to be alone than to feel ourselves mistaken in the eyes of others?”

“WHO ARE YOU, THAT YOU FILL MY HEART WITH YOUR ABSENCE?” (P. Lagerkvist)

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Is it better to be alone or mistaken?

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Why do we feel mistaken when we sense that we are lacking something? Why are we distressed by our distress? The weight of shame is sometimes so strong, that we are tempted to isolate ourselves:

“I often feel a profound hole in my heart, an unquenchable absence that I have always instinctively repressed.

I repress it probably out of pride, or maybe because I pay more attention to the life and the problems of others than to myself: maybe because the people around me have always seemed stronger, as if they didn't have problems or that, if they did have them, found the solution without asking help from anybody.

But my life is totally different. When at the end of the day I manage to think about what happened during the day, the only thing I can do is start crying. I cry, because this absence that I feel and that I try to push down becomes stronger and stronger. The more I repress it, the more I feel it. This absence corresponds to my desire to be accepted everyday by the people around me, with whom I have grown up over the years.”

Why do we try to repress this sense of emptiness, as if it were something to be ashamed of? First of all, because of the fixation we have with pleasing others. We fear that, if others were to discover our most fragile aspects, they would abandon us. We grow up with this worm that eats away at us: we have to please others. And thus, we think that we have to live up to others' expectations: we are buried alive in the images of perfection that adults and friends make for us. If you have a problem, you have to resolve it by yourself, because a good friend, a good child, a good student is one who doesn't cause problems, who doesn't bother anyone. You cannot mess up, you cannot be fragile.

But our hearts cannot cheat: the more this demand is pushed down, the more we feel it. So, what do we do? When we cannot resolve this sense of emptiness by ourselves, when we are ashamed to speak about it with friends because we fear they will reject us, what do we do? »

* Introduction to the Pascal Triduum of Gioventù Studentesca, Rimini, 29 March 2018. For the passages cited here, cf *Who are you, that you fill my heart with your absence?*, pp. 7-10, of the booklet for the Triduum, [which may be downloaded in Italian as PDF document from CL website](#).

» There is a temptation to isolate ourselves, hoping that sooner or later this “negative moment” will pass on. After putting on our best face for everyone, putting on a show, we close in on ourselves, as if we could block out all contact with reality, just like we block contacts on *WhatsApp*. We try to build a wall around ourselves:

“When I think I’ve given an answer to whichever question, it always returns [It always returns! The more we push it down, the more it will return!] and the search begins again. I get fed up with everything.

I’ve built a wall around myself, invisible but poorly made, a wall I’ve constructed every time I need a barrier; a wall that every now and then falls down, and then I have to rebuild it, but every time it comes back with more cracks. This soundproof wall that blocks out the majority of things around me occasionally allows a little sound to get through, through one of those little cracks.”

We need to unmask some of these lies. The first has to do with the futility of isolation. Does isolation make the lack or the emptiness disappear? No, sooner or later, these return. Isolating ourselves, therefore, does no good. But then, is the one who isolates himself or herself truly more mature, more free? No! Everyone thinks he can reason with his own head, isolating himself, but then—if you pay attention—everyone dresses the same way, everyone thinks the same way.¹ One thinks he is isolating himself and thus that he is more free, but in reality he only becomes more a slave of fashion or of the dominant mentality. This is the first great lie. The price of isolation is not freedom, but slavery.

¹ Father Giussani writes: “Man is *alone*, and thus [he becomes] *dominatable* [...], a prisoner of whoever, in whatever way, presents himself more strongly.” (p. 7)