

“Who is a friend to you?”

“WHO ARE YOU, THAT YOU FILL MY HEART WITH YOUR ABSENCE?” (P. Lagerkvist)
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“And what worth does life have except to be used and given?” (P. Claudel)

By Pierluigi Banna*

“The heart can’t be ‘photoshopped’¹: the more I repress it, the more it makes its voice heard. There is a contact that we can never block out: with ourselves, with the mystery that we are. Here, a second lie insinuates itself into our way of reasoning: to think that we are wrong, because we have a problem and can’t resolve it with our own strength. We are led to believe that someone is good, is not wrong, when he knows how to respond to his needs by himself, when he knows how to put things right by himself. But who knows how to do this? The animals. We treat ourselves like animals: we reduce our life at home, at school, with friends, even with someone we love, to a problem that we should be able to fix on our own. But when we do this, we are treating ourselves like animals!

The human heart, instead, has something inside it that does not allow itself to be resolved by our solutions. The greatness of man, the dignity of man, lies in the fact that there are problems within us that we don’t know how to resolve by ourselves. The nostalgia that comes over us, rather than being a weight that gives shame, is the strength of life, what distinguishes us from dogs, what allows us never to settle for less. The problem, as Jacqui Treco says in *Be Still My Heart*, is if we turn the things that we aren’t able to resolve by ourselves into a question, if we do not look at it as “bad luck”, but as the most precious thing we have. “Cause if you stay still, you won’t get burned. And if you stand still, you won’t get hurt. But if you stand still, you’ll never know why you burnt at all.”²

Not only is it useless to isolate ourselves (the first lie), because this turns us into slaves; not only is a heart with this brokenness not wrong (the second line), because it is a resource, the sign of our greatness; but, what is more, “the nostalgia for this absolute is like the invisible, unknowable, background, with which we face all of life,”³ as Ernesto Sabato writes. Which means, this brokenness is the instrument, the weapon with which to discover if someone is a friend or not.

Thus, we can recognize a third lie, that has to do with friendship. If we face everything with this nostalgia, we will understand who our true friends are. The people that abandon you if you change, in front of whom you always have to put on a mask, are not friends, but false friends »

* Introduction to the GS Pascal Triduum, Rimini, 29 March 2018. For quotes, cf. *Who are you, that you fill my heart with your absence?*, pp. 10-12, of the booklet for the GS Triduum, [which may be downloaded in Italian as PDF document from CL website](#).

¹ Francis, *Angelus*, 21 January 2018.

² J. Treco, “Be Still My Heart.”

³ E. Sabato, *España en los diarios de mi vejez*.

» who play on your emotions. When, instead, you keep your broken heart open, you discover that the friends who tell you: "You are not adequate" and run away from you, will keep their distance, because they don't know what to do with you! This is how you will unmask the lie of false friendship: contract friendship.

Thanks to the crack in your heart, you can find true friends who are able to live up to what you feel as most problematic, most incomprehensible, most mysterious, most unresolved in your life. A friend is the one who knows you better than you know yourself. Certainly, they don't take away the brokenness, they don't "pump your stomach" to rid you from your difficulties. True friendship is, instead, what finally allows you to look with sympathy at your broken heart. You know someone is a true friend if he or she makes you feel free, yourself, finally taken seriously, even if he or she knows how you were before. With this person, you feel that you are at home.

Chester Bennington from Linkin Park intuited that this nostalgia was the criterion for finding a true friend, someone who could love him just as he was: "I want to heal, I want to feel [...] like I'm close to something real. I want to find something I've wanted all along, somewhere I belong."⁴ What a misery to think that he couldn't find this, and last July took his life for this reason!

Only the one who does not isolate himself and tries to see this lack as the most precious thing about himself will discover if there is a friendship capable of embracing him just the way he is, where our questions can be taken into consideration, as one of us wrote after meeting some friends from GS:

"My father abandoned me when I was five years old. From that moment, therefore for eleven years, I continue to ask why. This fact made me refuse beforehand to trust another person. I started to believe that sooner or later everyone would abandon me, that no one stays around forever; it doesn't matter if they say they love you.

I spent eleven years looking to cover this emptiness, looking at myself with shame. I fooled myself that by doing this it would disappear. And this made things even more complicated. I believed that I was just used to having a missing piece, but instead, this last year I started to pay attention to it.

It has been and still is painful, an excruciating pain, but one that I am taking on. And I am here to write about this because I have a desperate need to understand the reason for certain choices. I need someone to help me, by myself I can't do it [She stopped being someone who thinks she can solve her problems by herself. What freedom!] I met this 'someone' in the GS community, who led me to think about Someone much bigger."

We are together to see if this Someone much greater, if this unknown Friend is so present, so concrete, as to make us look at what we usually consider a shame as our greatest resource. We are together to see if there is an unknown Friend for our heart, a true friend, who understands us better than we understand ourselves.

Jesus, to be a friend to the very depths of this brokenness in us men, to be a friend for Judas who betrayed him, and to the other disciples when they were confused and afraid, understands that He must give His life for them. This is the true friend, not one who expects or claims something from you, but one who for love of you begins to give His life for you. He does not claim anything from you for Himself but is the first to give His life for you. Is He a true friend or a crazy person, this man who gives His life for His friends?

⁴ Linkin Park, "Somewhere I Belong".