



## Journeying Towards Hope. The Gestures of Encounter

In cammino verso la speranza: i gesti dell'incontro

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The theme that the Holy Father Pope Francis has given to the upcoming Jubilee is "Pilgrims of hope". I would like to explore with you the significance, including the educational significance, of a gesture that we all make, of which we are all capable – an everyday gesture that, even if we perform it without our full attention, is one full of hope. It is a gesture that is common to all humanity, and is capable of furnishing us with the basic grammar and vocabulary for proclaiming the Gospel. Besides, this is one of the methods often used by the magisterium of the Holy Father Pope Francis; and I believe it is one of the most promising theological seeds of his pontificate. It is a gesture that is so pregnant with meaning that it requires the cross-disciplinary approach that *Veritatis Gaudium* called for. I am referring to the gesture of greeting, which we we teach and learn within our families, right from birth.

People receive greetings right from life's earliest days, when their parents – with the mother undoubtedly at the forefront – make a gesture to the child that is the beginning of every greeting: looking at a face; giving it room in one's field of vision; recognizing it as being worthy of attention. That gesture, too, is what makes them parents. On close inspection, that action of the two adults is rather courageous, since they are looking at someone who, at that moment, is unable to look back at them and is, therefore, unable to greet them. They are greeting someone who certainly will not greet them. The greeting reaches the child from outside (from mum and dad), before the child can either desire or imagine it. Just like God, who comes from outside, from above, who is out of reach. The first greetings of the parents are also the initial experiences of transcendence. The welcome given by mum and dad, which is generous and apparently senseless, lasts for the whole of the little one's first month, at the end of which the child will finally be able to look back at them. The same is true with another fundamental element of every greeting we make: the smile. In fact, mum and dad constantly smile at the child, despite the fact that the child is unable to reciprocate, at least for two months. Thanks to the courageous initial greeting of the parents, the fire passes from a lit candle to another that is as yet unlit, activating the combustion of a soul that is, at that moment, inert, but already primed to burst into flame. In fact, by exchanging a look and a smile, by greeting in its turn, the child pronounces, in an entirely somatic way, its first "I am" and its first "You are". If the parents had not first given their greeting, and continued to greet into space, what would have happened? Or better still: what would not have happened? The first "I am" and "You are" take place, like every smile, around the mouth, that is, the door to the body, through which, right from the start, enter air and, immediately afterwards, milk – in short, life. Life and smile have always shared the same dwelling. What God has united let no man put asunder.

Not for nothing one of the most moving songs of the twentieth century in Italy begins "I rethink your smile". The first line of the lyric does not say "I rethink of your smile", which would allude to an act of memory, but rather "I rethink your smile", as if that facial expression were the object of reflection, a theme for quiet meditation, reasoning and evaluation. In short, that smile makes the person think. Among many other things, the lyric of Eugenio Montale argues, with poetic logic, that a smile is something to be taken seriously. In truth, it is one of the sources of our humanity and the building-block of a greeting. Pace Descartes, I can assert that "I am" not because "I think" but because, right from the start, I have been greeted and I returned the greeting. Therefore, the director Robert Zemeckis, in his film Cast Away (2000), narrates how a smile is the gesture that is both necessary and sufficient to indicate our humanity. Due to an aircrash, Chuck Nolan, who works for a famous mailing firm, finds himself on an uninhabited atoll, stuck out in the middle of the ocean. He survives thanks to a few rations and tools, salvaged from the aircraft and washed ashore by the ocean onto the island's beach. Among these things, he finds a volley-ball. With his own blood he paints onto the ball the features of a smiling face. From that moment the ball becomes Wilson and will be Chuck's only interlocutor during his four years of solitude. He confides in him, fights with him, makes up with him, jokes with him; tortured with grief he cries for him when, abandoning the atoll on a raft, Wilson ends up in the sea and the current renders useless the dangerous attempt to recover him. A smile transubstantiates a thing into a person. What would its permanent absence from a face mean?

A smile, received from life's beginnings and exchanged when adults greet shows an interest and a desire for peace. On its own, interest for someone can unleash violence and injustice. With a smile, as long as it is neither artificial nor false, the body is inviting the other to disarm, since it has put down its own weapons first. In fact, in a smile we see the most powerful and lethal weapons of a mammal: its teeth – the mortal bite that captures, wounds, tears apart prey and enemies. The most powerful muscles of the human body are the masseters, which are the primary agents in opening and closing the jaw. They cause chewing, and exert a force of about 100 kilogrammes. Some paintings of Francis Bacon show, in a disturbing way, the desirous and anguished violence of mouth and teeth. In the relaxation of a smile, therefore, there is the de-activation of a potentially lethal energy and the opening of peace negotiations. It is impossible to bite and to smile at the same time. Certainly, there are as many kinds of smiles as there are adjectives in the dictionary. In any case, when the smile reflects the welling up of affection that is felt at life's beginning, it expresses nothing less that the candid pleasure of existing, the pleasure that the other exists and, therefore, it is the bold adversary of the void.

With the exception of the solemn salutation that the ancient poets make to Virgil, on his passage through Limbo, in Dante's *Inferno* no-one makes greeting or smiles. When he reaches Purgatory, the Florentine not only "sees the stars again" but also greetings and smiles. According to Dante, the smile, alongside the light, is the principal characteristic of Paradise. There, everything and everyone smiles. In Paradise, the saints smile, as do the planets, the heavens and the whole universe. The God Dante portrays is like a mum who kindles the first smile in creation, and is able to make it smile again even after the saddest weeping of death. What a power!

According to some scholars, other elements of greeting, too – the kiss and the handshake – would be part of the infant's gesturing. In fact, the kiss would have its origin in feeding. In times past, mothers, when feeding their children, would pre-chew the food, so helping the child to swallow and digest it. Using her tongue and lips, the woman would pass the food that she had first chewed directly into the child's mouth. Similarly, a kiss on the cheeks, accompanied by a lateral head-movement, recalls the gesture of the breast-feeding child looking for its mother's breast. Finally, a handshake re-evokes the hand held out by dad and mum to support the child in its first, shaky steps and to show their affectionate closeness to the child, when he is older and they accompany him hand in hand. If that is how things are, many of the elements common to every greeting would

carry those who meet and welcome each other, or who say goodbye, back to the promises of faithful affection that parents, house and things made to each child at the start of his or her life. The gestures made in greetings (including those of the Maori, who simultaneously touch forehead and nose) would be a daily immersion, repeated several times a day, in the promises received during infancy, a mutual encouragement and a pledge so that those promises may be kept.

A greeting is a preliminary offering of oneself, an entering into the life of another. By primordial gestures (looking, smiling, holding out one's hand, etc.), one presents one's credentials to the interlocutor, eliciting the memory of a shared infancy. In this way, a dormant and ancient familiarity is re-awakened, one that precedes any conscious initiative. It is like saying: although we don't know each other, we speak the same language or, better yet, as Marcel Jousse would say, the same "body language", which we learned at the start of our lives. The act of greeting precedes us both and, in that way, forms a common bond between us. Therefore, when we greet each other, we already find ourselves in the greeting; hence, we are capable of greeting. The thing becomes even clearer when we meet people of other languages and cultures that are also characterized by obvious differences as to gestures in greeting: they do not understand each other's words, and perhaps they are startled by the strangeness of the gestures; yet each one intuits that the other person is offering a greeting.

We greet each other precisely because we feel that we have something in common, and in view of a possible development of what is already part of our history. In fact, a person who greets is sounding out the possibility of the beginning of a relationship, be it fleeting or long-lasting. Were this interest and intention to be wholly lacking, even a simple "hello" would be a faux-pas. The person who is the first to offer a greeting, especially in meeting someone new or in the attempt to patch up a relationship, opens themselves up to a variety of reactions on the part of the person greeted, accepting the risk of being rebuffed, even if perhaps very gently. To be first to greet is a primordial and everyday expression of courage, which is "the beginning of everything". Courage is a primary and basic impulse, on which faithfulness is built, that is, the virtue of continuity. Without courage, without action, there can be no relationship, no faithfulness.

Among the most complicated and exciting challenges for a child is the first time he or she rides a bicycle without the reassuring support of the stabilizer-wheels. These, together with the two larger wheels, guarantee four points of support and complete stability; but they render the vehicle more like a childish, clumsy tricycle rather than an elegant, agile bicycle. Before riding on only two wheels, sometimes an intermediate stage is appropriate: to keep at least one stabilizer-wheel. In this way, the child can have a taste of the unstable balance of the bicycle, and, if necessary, can count upon the third, convenient prop. Nevertheless, sooner or later, comes the time to leave behind even this last refuge. Certainly, the preceding stages have prepared the child for this moment; and yet, riding on two wheels is a totally different experience, something completely different. The actions required are numerous: pedalling; controlling handbars and brakes; looking ahead; observing the road surface; avoiding obstacles of all sorts; and, naturally, keeping balance. All tasks to be performed at the same time. Moreover, the child who rides a bicycle for the first time must take in the incontrovertible recommendations of the parents: "be careful!"; "not too fast!"; "keep pedalling!"; "look where you're going!"; "keep your head up!"; "don't look at the wheel!"; "speed up!"; "brake!"; "don't brake!". Stuff that would put you off cycling. To that must be added the understandable fear of falling. Fear leads to an excessive prudence, perhaps propped up by overly scrupulous thoughts. If the child were to organize in his mind the sequence of actions to perform, enumerating and classifying them in a precise order, he would become even more afraid. If he aimed to foresee every move and the system of variables in such a complicated act, he would forever put off the first turn of the pedal, until the impossible day in which he would have eveything under control. Insisting on being sure of success before acting, he would never act. In this case, the insistence of his parents of how easy it is to do would be in vain. A well-argumented, physical demonstration of the gyroscope effect, which guarantees the bicycle's balance, would be useless. The child would still remain frozen; no syllogisms, either his own or of others, would persuade him. And yet, no-one can take his place; the child finds himself faced with his uniqueness that cannot be substituted. It is up to him and no-one else.

What transforms his desire to ride a bicycle into that first, real movement of the pedals? What throws a rope-bridge over the empty space of fear, of indecision and of cowardly excuses? Courage, which is the building-block of hope. It affirms itself and imposes itself, who knows how, who knows from where – that "I just know", the *fiat lux* of courage. In the chaos of the soul, which is immobile even if agitated by indecision and excuses, in bursts – lacerating, drastic and unavoidable – a first decision that, while protesting against the inertia of an overly prudent, overly lucid conscience that is calculating and looks ahead, creates something new. No admirer of embellishment (neither of thought nor emotion), courage comes straight to the point; it aims at the essential, avoiding all that dissipates the shock-force of the initial decision. Therefore, courage is similar to poverty, to the virtue that sees in what is superfluous an indecent waste of time and energy. "Blessed are the poor in spirit"...because in general they have loads of courage. Want to bet that, deep down, someone who is avaricious is a person who lacks courage?

Driven on by the foresight that he will succeed and by his willingness to fall and break his bones, the child lights the sacred fire that is far more mysterious that the chemistry that produced it. Courage does not transform him into an imprudent adventurer who plays with fear and death to give himself a false stature or to achieve an antidepressant jolt. Perhaps it makes him adventurous, someone who risks their life in the name of life. And so, we have the beginning, the inauguration of a new era in the child's life. There is a before and an after that pedal-movement. Just as there is a before and an after the creation of light.

A bicycle is a curious thing: paradoxically, its stability is achieved through motion. The more you pedal and move, the more you are stable and in balance: if you stay still, you fall. And so, after the first pedal-movement must come the second, the third, the fourth, and so on. The movement is regular, a perfect circle traced by each foot; and yet, to ride a bicycle requires continuous adaptation to the anomalies of the asphalt; to pedestrians and cars that suddenly cross your path; to the succession of curves, straight lines and reverse curves (the best way to fall by the wayside is to go always straight ahead!). That means that faithfulness to that first pedal-movement requires a long series of new, small re-starts of courage. Vladimir Jankélévitch would say: "courage is not only the spasm of that first decision, but is a state of being" – the patient, faithful continuation of the beginning, of the first pedal-movement. Were an act of courage not to generate a courageous person it would only be a happy chance, an accidental episode. Courage is so miraculous that it demands faithfulness. After all, it is well known that courage is needed to remain faithful.

The person who first greets does not give themselves excuses, does not give in to calculations, does not get lost in the interminable lists of for and against; but goes off balance towards the void, resolving all possible problems of that greeting, by greeting. The person who first greets does not pour out a measure, but magnanimously risks everything for everything. In this sense, the first greeting has a sacrificial element, alongside the creative one: to inaugurate something new it does not cut corners. With a rough, magnificent expression, Jankélévitch asserts that "the devil cannot hurt us, but he can frighten us. The devil dies through our innocence and our courage". He frightens us to extinguish our courage. Perhaps he wants us to be rash, imprudent, but not courageous; because in courage sparkles the image and likeness of God. Just like the absurd gesture of the parents who continue to look at someone who does not look back, to smile at someone who does not smile, or in the first pedal-movement of the child, or in the going off balance of the first greeting. In fact, God is the Courageous One, because, since the beginning of time, in his freedom, he decided to exist, opening himself up over the immense, unmoving darkness of the void. If God truly is infinately free – as the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson argues with

a touch of emotion and mysticism – then, paradoxically, he could even have decided not to exist, remaining in the static confusion of a void where everything is possible but nothing takes shape. And yet, *from all time*, with a sudden flash, although he could have denied himself, the freedom of God boldly affirms itself: "I am" – "an immense and terrifying act", ii the first act of courage that rises up against the formless, sterile cowardice of the void. It follows from that first, eternal decision that to exist is something good. Therefore, *from all time*, God wanted to be Father, giving existence to another, the Son, through whom "all things were made" (Col 1: 16). "In the beginning was courage", and nothing and no-one would have happened without it. A rock, a leaf, a wolf, a dolphin, a star, the wind, a man and a woman, a child are all signs of the eternal courage of God.

People who greet first are courageous, because they are not afraid to become dependent on their interlocutor: will they respond? Will they refuse? Moreover, they are courageous because they are not ashamed to show their need. In fact, they do not mask their need to be recognized and to be confirmed, but they express it fearlessly. In a greeting, we see echoed both the generosity of the person who offers themselves, as well as the need to be accepted. Indeed, the person who has need expresses, simultaneously, both their lack and the goodness of what they require; just like hunger, which simultaneously says, "my stomach is empty and the bread is good".

The person who greets first opens themselves up to the other and, at the same time, imposes themselves on them. In fact, the first greeting is an intrusion that shakes the emotional state, the flow of thoughts, the rhythm of intentions or, more simply, the action of the other. The person who replies to the greeting, too, is not without courage, since they agree to exit the homeostatic envelope of the lived moment, by assuming a new standpoint. The person who reacts to a greeting puts themselves out, in the literal sense of the word: they go out of the comfort of their own way of living. That happens even if they should decide not to respond to the "hello" and continue on their way; in either case, the enchantment of their state of mind has been broken and they must pick up the pieces. If the person who greets first has the courage the take the initiative, the person who answers has the courage to let themselves be disturbed. Neither of the two will be the same again. In short, to the *fiat lux* of the first greeting corresponds the *fiat voluntas tua* of the one who answers. It is difficult for something miraculous not to happen when these two *fiat* meet.

We live in a time where people greet each other less often; some say it is also due to Covid. Few people offer greetings in the street, on the train, in shops ... even entering or leaving a church. Even a ghost of a smile or an exchange of glances have become rare. Is this a time of discouragement? Have courage!

At a first meeting, greetings inaugurate a new relationship. When there is already a relationship established, greetings have primarily the function of confirming it, by means of a reciprocal "somatic debt", commensurate to the time that the persons who now meet have been separated. The longer the time away from each other has been, the warmer the greeting – as if to make up for lost time. Emblematic is the need of children to greet: they greet much more frequently than adults, even if just with a smile. That is because they need continual confirmation of affection on the part of their parents and of those who care for them. Similarly, too, at all ages, the uncertain recommencing of greetings after a fight assures people that there is still a relationship, notwithstanding the disagreement that has taken place. Reversely, the refusal of a greeting is equivalent to the firm, grave decision to break off a relationship for good, even denying it in advance the simplest chance of resolution.

Why is it that, by repeating a greeting, we feel the need to confirm pre-existing and even close relationships? I do not believe that this has to with a general search for security. Rather, it is a sign of the unconscious recognition that every day of our lives something new is born. Certainly, the woman to whom this evening I say "hi", "welcome home", is the same to whom I said this morning "have a good day" when she left the house; she is the same woman I married almost ten years ago.

And yet, the hours of life that have passed since that morning greeting have produced in her something new, an original nuance due to today's experiences. And so, this woman, both known and unknown, is she still willing to live with me? Thus, the renewal of greetings tests whether it is possibile to proceed with the old relationship, which is now overlaid with unforeseen gradations. Therefore, even greetings that are typical of a long-lasting relationship always inaugurate something new. They are the sentinels and guardians of novelty.

Greetings confirm a relationship particularly at the moment of farewell, when they become particularly warm, as if they want to make up for the distance by compensating for the emptiness of separation. Indicative of this is the special, daily farewell given by parents to their children just before night-time. The darkness, the loss of control typical of sleep, make the night-time separation frightening in children's eyes. Fearing that the night will break their connection with dad and mum, they demand a longer-lasting and efficacious greeting. And so we have the interminable "good night"s, composed of lullabys and fairytales that they have heard who knows how many times. The "good morning" of the new day will heal the dark fracture of the night, keeping the promise made before they fell into sleep.

With the realistic anticipation that a meeting will be the last, the farewell becomes almost definitive. In this case, at least in romance languages, the greeting makes an explicit reference to God, as if he were the Lord of meetings and their destiny; as if the permanence of a connection, notwithstanding the definitive separation, were guaranteed by God to whom it would belong to prepare the place of a future, hoped for, unimaginable re-encounter. Therefore, "Ad-Dio", "A-Dieu", "A-Diós". Even in temporary farewells God is often evoked and invoked. Just a few examples of a globally very widespread linguistic phenomenon: "God bless you"; as well as the probably more widespread farewell "goodbye" and its shortened forms "bye bye", "bye", which come from the old and middle English "God by ye", "may God be with you". Also in the *moore* language of the Mõose people in Burkina Faso, "Wēnd na maneg f sore", "may God bless your path". God is also remembered in a few initial greetings. Only a couple of examples: the Gaelic "Dia Dut", "God be with you"; and the German "Grüß Gott", "may God bless you", "may God greet you". In short, it appears that what happens during greetings is so pregnant with meaning that it is good to involve God. Or is it that it is so pregnant with meaning because, under the surface, God is already involved?

If by greeting we hope for a return of greetings and a confirmation, the visit to those who have died, to bid them farewell, is one of the most eloquent of human paradoxes. Why go to greet someone who certainly will not respond? Why visit, kiss, caress someone who can no longer return the greeting? Why perform such gestures, notwithstanding we are absolutely certain of the inability of those who have died to reply? Foolishness? Madness? Or courage? Perhaps the same courage that our parents had when they greeted us when we were newborn, notwithstanding they knew that they would not receive any reply. The same courage that we, too, feel when, as adults, we greet newborns who are unable to look at us and smile at us. From where comes this decision that breaks the oppressive temporizings of logic and common sense? The life of a man and a woman is stretched between two impossible greetings: the greeting we receive when we are newly born and the greeting we receive when we have just died. These two gifts are transformed within us into the duty to give, in our turn, a welcome to one who is born and into the obligation of bidding farewell to one who dies. The greeting at the start and the one of the end of life are too similar not to be related; if in the farewell to the person who has died resonates the same courage that animated the looks and smiles directed at the child, what do we expect from this person who is deceased? What do we expect for them? Certainly, Christ expects much from the dead and for the dead, so much so that he spoke to them, as if they were able to hear, and commanded them, as if they were able to obey. He behaved in this way with the little girl who had died, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" (Mk 5: 41); with the widow's son "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Lk 7: 15); with his friend:

"Lazarus, come out" (Jn 11: 43). We humans are unaware of the courage we have when we greet those who have died; of the hope we nourish, when we bid the deceased farewell; we are like parents who say "goodnight" to their children. In greeting those who have died, we project our hearts beyond night, beyond death. This gesture is so important that, in all cultures and in every age, there are ceremonies for offering salutations to the dead – even in non-religious or even anti-religious contexts.

The Christian burial rite is explicit. At the end of the celebration of the Mass, we live the moment called the "Final commendation and farewell", where the assembly receives encouragement and the deceased person is bid farewell.

We ask ourselves: what can a greeting accomplish? How much can a greeting accomplish? The Gospel of Luke is particularly interested in this question. Who knows what Mary was doing when the angel Gabriel burst into her life. In any case, the greeting of the angel "troubled" the girl, who begins to ask herself questions. What moves her and raises questions is not so much the appearance of an angel – that does not disconcert her at all – but rather his greeting (Lk 1: 26-38). The unimaginable majesty of Gabriel's message leaves the reader breathless, with the risk that a precious detail is pushed into the background: the first act of the angel, and therefore of God himself, is to greet. God reveals himself also as one who greets ... and greets first. In any case, before transmitting a message, Gabiel bears greetings. I have said that the one who greets first becomes dependent on the one greeted: will they return the greeting or, being indifferent and annoyed, reject the offer? In any case, there is a "before" and an "after" to that gesture; the one who greets will not be the same again. And this is the case also for God. By greeting her, God considers the girl from Nazareth to be a co-protagonist of the event, to the point where what follows in the meeting is in her hands. Gabriel greets her using the imperative of the Greek verb chairein, which means "rejoice". This is a very common and everyday way of greeting, frequently found in Greek literature and also used in the New Testament. Even Judas makes use of it, just before kissing Jesus: "hail, Rabbi", literally "rejoice, Rabbi" (Mt 26: 49). Some scholars confidently interpret the "rejoice" directed to Mary in the light of some ancient prophecies, where the invitation to rejoice was directed to Jerusalem, to which was being proclaimed its immanent liberation by God (Zeph 3: 14; Zach 9: 9 and Lam 4: 21). Therefore, the angel would be greeting Mary as the Holy City that was finally visited by the Saviour. Even if other commentators suggest prudence, the similarity with those prophecies is surprising. Nevertheless, the principal argument used by those who support the prophetic interpretation is astounding: if this is not the case, Gabriel's greeting would sound more or less like "good morning" or "good evening", appearing excessively "banal" with respect to the importance of the Annunciation. In short, what happens at Nazareth is too important for a commonplace "good morning", and so the angel's greeting must have a deeper meaning. But why should something that is commonplace have to be banal? Certainly, Jesus does not think this way. In fact, when he proclaims the active presence of God in history, the Kingdom of Heaven, he recognizes it in the most commonplace and everyday realities of life. Moreover, for him a greeting is the first step in evangelization, in proclamation: "whatever house you enter, first say: 'Peace be to this house!'" (Lk 10: 5) - that is, "say shalom", "offer greetings". Christ asks us to greet, and to greet first, as his mother did when she entered Zechariah's house (Lk 1: 40). Luke takes the time to mention this detail, not considering it at all banal. So much so that it is the case that Mary's action, which is indeed ordinary, in reality sets off a shockwave that the evangelist is happy to narrate: "when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1: 41-43). Mary's greeting makes Elizabeth's entire body resound, even reaching her womb wherein lies John the Baptist. The child's body, in its turn, resounds, leaping for joy. What is more, the greeting causes the Holy Spirit to burst into the old woman, who immediately learns of Mary's pregnancy, calling her "the mother of my Lord". Not bad for an everyday gesture!

Look where were have arrived, having started from the shared experience of greeting: to the mystery of the Incarnation, to the method of evangelization.

About ten years ago, the world smiled at the first words of the newly elected Pope Francis: "Brothers and sisters, good evening". A simple gesture, one full of meaning and hope, able to gather together all humanity (Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers) in one *piazza*. An apparently usual entrance, in truth it was not so novel. In fact, one evening about two thousand years ago, a Jewish man went to meet his friends. He arrived unexpectedly at the house and greeted them the way all Jewish people do: "Shalom!". Given the hour of day, it was as if he had said, "An evening full of peace!", "good evening!" (Jn 20: 19). That Jewish man had just risen from the dead. Oh, how good was that evening!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> V. Jankelevitch, Les vertus et l'amour. Traité des vertus, II, volume 1, Flammarion, Paris 1986, 138.

ii L. Pareyson, Filosofia della libertà, Il Melangolo, Genova 1990, 27.

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