

ON THE LIMIT
Pastoral Letter 2025
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Always dear to me was this lonely hill,
and this hedge, which from so great a part
of the furthest horizon hides the view.
But sitting and gazing, boundless
spaces beyond it, and superhuman
silences, and deepest stillness
I fashion in my mind; where, for a moment,
the heart is almost afraid. And as the wind
I hear rustle through these plants, I that
infinite silence to this voice
go comparing: and the eternal comes to mind,
and the dead seasons, and the present,
living, and its sound. Thus in this
immensity my thought is drowned:
and shipwreck is sweet to me in this sea.

Giacomo Leopardi

From the hills of Recanati, on a summer evening in 1819, a remarkable young man, Giacomo Leopardi, questioned himself about this mystery. How can an obstacle become an opening? How can what confines become infinite? How can a barrier open our gaze to transcendence? The poet suggests an answer, seated in recollection before a hedge. That hedge prevents him from seeing beyond, yet it is not a mortifying wall. It is a threshold: the exact point where the real opens on to the possible. Where the eye stops, the imagination takes flight towards “boundless spaces”.

Each of us has our own “hedges”: the dependencies that condition us, the fears that paralyse us, the wounds that define us, the failures that isolate us, the crises that restrict us, the illnesses that slow us down, the ageing that weakens us. But if Leopardi is right, these very obstacles can be transformed from walls into doors, from barriers into thresholds.

The fact that the limit can be crossed does not entail fleeing the present. “Always dear,” says the poet, are precisely “this lonely hill” and “this hedge”: these, in their singular concreteness, in their unrepeatable uniqueness. Only, in that crossing-over, something else appears. The suspended world suddenly grows intense. Skirting the abyss of the infinite, the heart wavers; but when the wind makes itself felt among the branches’ leaves, a deeper contemplation is born. That murmur of nature carries with it eternity itself. It is then that the miracle of the “sweet shipwreck” occurs: not the frightening loss of self, but a trusting surrender to something greater.

Leopardi’s “sweet shipwreck” is a powerful antidote to the culture of performance. In a society that measures everything in terms of efficiency and results, learning the art of shipwreck becomes a skill for spiritual survival. Not giving up on goals, but discovering that failure can be a form of life that is deeper and freer from the inessential.

In a culture that promises everything at once and demands efficiency at any cost, such a discourse is far from easy. That is why today living with the limit, and not censoring it, is an almost revolutionary work. Perhaps our problem is not that we have too many limits, but that we no longer know how to recognise the ones that do us good. We have confused freedom with a totally open field, forgetting what art also teaches: a painter needs a canvas, a composer needs musical scales, a poet needs the

rhythm of words, a dancer needs choreography. Leopardi's insight, then, carries profound implications at the existential level.

This restlessness can serve as our compass. Let us move towards a sweet shipwreck in immensity, in search of a harmonious relationship – or at least a non-dominating one – with all things.

The limit, our finitude, is not a condemnation but a vocation: only by accepting that we are limited can we open ourselves to the infinity that dwells within us and that is fully compatible with human flesh. This truth finds a particular expression in the story of a man who had to learn to live within his limits through a long and tortuous path: the patriarch Jacob.

Part One **THE EXPERIENCE OF LIMIT**

1. The limit as origin

1.1 The story of Jacob: the brother as the first limit

The story of the patriarch Jacob unfolds without interruption between chapter 25 and chapter 50 of Genesis. Like any of us, Jacob comes into the world in extreme vulnerability; he is formed within the body of a mother on whom he depends to survive; he did not choose the place, the time, the context of his being in the world. But there is more: he is formed in the womb together with his twin brother, Esau.

Rebecca's pregnancy appears complicated: within her, the two children jostle one another continually. It is as though, already in her womb, a battle were being fought for space, for primacy, for the very existence of two peoples who will be eternal enemies. Why all this? Rebecca goes to ask God directly and receives, in return, a prophecy that immediately shifts her from what is happening within her to the history of her people. Two children formed at the same time in the same mother's womb will become Israel and Edom, two nations with difficult relations, who will scatter and have an unpredictable destiny: the elder will serve the younger. This God, as we know, is not afraid to overturn what seems obvious and often binds himself to the weaker figures in order to open a new history.

Esau is not simply "the other". He is the twin, the one who shares the same vital space, the same time of formation, the same origin. He is the first otherness Jacob encounters, even before coming to light. Esau represents everything Jacob is not: the first-born, the natural heir, the one who enjoys his father's preference, the one destined for a role of power in the community. But he also represents everything Jacob could become, if only he accepted to inhabit relationship rather than suffer it: a man capable of fraternity. A brother – or a sister – is the mirror in which our inadequacy is reflected, but also the promise of a possible wholeness through encounter. When we refuse this fertile limit and reduce it to a sterile barrier, it becomes difficult to flourish as free subjects.

At the moment of birth, Jacob comes into the world holding Esau's heel, as if he wanted to control him, as if he were already seized by the desire to enjoy a blessing that does not belong to him as the second-born. With his mother's help and taking advantage of his father's blindness, he fulfils his dream: he takes his brother's place and receives the blessing reserved for the first-born. In this way he misses his first appointment with fraternity. Instead of recognising in Esau a companion on a shared journey, he perceives him as a competitor, an obstacle to his right to exist fully. The brother becomes the first limit-as-barrier of his life: not a presence that completes, but a boundary that prevents a serene image of himself.

1.2 The limit as a universal alibi, and the cost of deceit

Does this not sound familiar? How often do we too see in the other – brother, sister, colleague, relative, friend, manager, lover – a rival to compete with, a happy life to envy, an impediment to

becoming what we would like to be? It is so easy to turn those who are beside us from gift into problem, from enriching presence into an obstacle that restricts and obstructs our desire.

It is at this point that the limit becomes something even more dangerous: it becomes an alibi. Jacob cannot bear the idea of being second, of having to wait, of not having immediate access to everything he desires. The presence of the older brother becomes the perfect justification for every strategy of domination: “I could do nothing else but use deceit,” he seems to say. Or: “Cunning was the only possible route. Everyone does this when it comes to surviving.”

The alibi of the limit turns necessity into virtue, competition into wisdom, deceit into legitimate self-defence. If the world is divided into winners and losers, if blessings are scarce and must be seized before others do, then every means becomes permissible. It is the perverse logic of a web of conflicts and suspicions that reduces existence to a zero-sum game in which the good of the other automatically coincides with my harm. This logic of the alibi runs through the centuries and continues to seduce our contemporary consciences. How often do we too turn our limits into justifications for behaviours that, deep down, we know to be inadequate and unjust? “That’s just how I am,” “I didn’t have the chance,” “Society forces me,” “If I don’t do it, someone else will”: these are the modern variations of Jacob’s deceit. The limit becomes the perfect excuse not to take responsibility for one’s own growth, and not to recognise in the other a possible ally on the path of becoming more fully human. Jacob chooses deceit as an escape route, convinced he can resolve everything through cleverness.

1.3 Exile

Reality, however, proves far more complex. The blessing obtained wrongly turns into a curse. Esau begins to plan his revenge, and Jacob, in danger of death, must flee. On his mother’s advice, he takes refuge in Haran with his uncle Laban. He will live for twenty years as an exile, paralysed by fear and guilt, with a blessing that has become useless, valid only as a reminder of the wrong he has done and its consequences. He will never see his mother again. The deceit that was meant to guarantee him a future has made him lose what he held most dear: home, family, peace.

Jacob’s exile in Haran represents the moment when time itself becomes an insurmountable limit. It is no longer the fertile time of growth or planning, but the suspended time of waiting without hope. It is no longer time to nourish roots in order to open tomorrow, but a sterile present, crushed between fear and regret. In exile, Jacob experiences the precariousness of one who no longer has a place in the world. He lacks everything: transparent bonds, the land of his fathers, the strength of a serene blessing, his mother’s presence, the certainty of an identity. He has become a man with no fixed abode, within and without himself. He is the wanderer who drags behind him the weight of choices that will for ever prevent a return to innocence.

For one reason or another, we too know what it feels like when the limit becomes hardness. If we have experienced illnesses that interrupt our plans, bereavements that drain the days of flavour, crises that dissolve every trust, or depression that turns every horizon grey, we know what it means to feel suspended between a past that cannot be repaired and a future that cannot find hospitality in the dreams that point the way. Faced with death, we feel particularly powerless, and that is why our culture removes it in every possible way. Death is the end of our time, our relationships, our possibilities. When it strikes someone we love, it is for us the end of a world, the end of that world in which we were together. Death can become the wall against which our very will to live is shattered, our desire to be present and to resist pain, injustice, and meaninglessness.

In such difficult times, even prayer can become impossible: words and breath are lacking, and each day offers itself as a desert where nothing can grow. It is the time when even God seems distant, absent, indifferent to our cries for help and to our communal practices of comfort. In this spiritual desert, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke offers us a liberating perspective:

“Be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and... try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now seek the answers that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live with them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” (poem published posthumously in *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1929)

It is an invitation not to flee the condition of one who is still on the way, who does not have all the answers, who must learn to live with the unfinished.

1.4 The primordial suspicion

There is an even subtler and more dangerous aspect to this experience of the limit as obstacle: the suspicion that is born in the heart. It is what happens to Adam and Eve when their desire meets God’s limit: “You may eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Gen 2:16–17). The divine command, however, was not meant to weaken them, but to safeguard their very desire: the limit is the necessary condition for reaching far more than what is immediately within reach. A perverse word, slithering in subtly, instead excites human desire by arousing a real suspicion about God’s goodness. God, according to the serpent, gave a prohibition so as not to have to share power with his creatures: eating that fruit meant opening one’s eyes and becoming strong like one’s Creator.

The limit placed upon desire is therefore perceived as a wall that blocks becoming, whereas it was a form of guardianship over the journey. Thus all bonds are perverted. Suspicion of God spills into our relationships, making them unjust: it happens between woman and man, who accuse one another and fall into the logic of domination; it happens between brothers, where conflict makes room for murder; it happens with all creation, put at risk by our claim to absolute control. It is a story that happens and happens again endlessly even today.

Jesus will come to illuminate this scene of suspicion. God is what we see in him: a presence of solidarity, with words and gestures that heal, free, awaken, regenerate. In his finitude there is hospitality for all the creatures of the world. The limit experienced in the flesh – to which God himself allows himself to be led back – is not a strategy to tyrannise the world, but the compass that directs desire towards authentic freedom.

When suspicion prevails, there is no true freedom. One responds in a linear way, one allows oneself to be positioned always and only face to face, and every thought goes into the concern of how to defend oneself against evil and the enemy. No creativity, no momentum, no trust in good transformations and good company.

And yet, precisely in this empty and apparently sterile time, something unexpected can happen. It is what Jacob will discover: the limit can be transformed from wall into door, from ending into beginning, from curse into blessing.

2. Limit as Threshold

2.1 Limit and Boundary

The distinction between limit and boundary is decisive and should not be taken for granted. The philosophical tradition has taught us to recognise this crucial difference. Let us think for a moment about the difference between a wall and a shore. The wall says “up to here”. It is a condition in which one cannot see beyond, and everything seems divided into a here and a beyond of history. It is the experience of every life in exile: in the lived experience of grief, abandonment, illness, and the many “noes” of life, one has the impression of crashing against impassable barriers.

The seashore, by contrast, tells a completely different story. It is neither water nor land, but the place where water and land meet. It is a threshold that divides, yet also unites a space; that separates, yet

also allows encounter. Here we may linger, cross over, turn back. It is the line of a living horizon that breathes and speaks of a coming and going without interruption. As we read in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is the one who does not remain still even on the threshold and invites us to do likewise: “Let us go across to the other side” (Mk 4:35).

This image of the shore as a living threshold takes on particular meaning if we think about our relationship with God. We are like children on the beach who absent-mindedly play with grains of sand, unaware that they stand “on the shore of the infinite sea of mystery” (according to the image attributed to Karl Rahner). Every moment of our history, however contingent or apparently insignificant, may become a place where the infinite makes itself present. The limit is no longer a wall that excludes, but a threshold that welcomes and allows passage, transforming our world. This image does not lose its relational dimension: the limit becomes a threshold insofar as it concerns what happens between us, and not only within us.

The discovery of the limit as threshold therefore opens a fundamental question: how do we cross the doors that open before us? How do we avoid fearing that they may be too narrow for our humanity? Emily Dickinson offers a response that is both poetic and wise:

“Not knowing when the dawn may come
I leave each door ajar
That has wings like a bird
Or waves, like a shore.”
(Emily Dickinson, 1884)

2.2 The Threatened Threshold: Between Violence and Attention

The transformation of limit into threshold is not spontaneous: careful work is required if it is to occur in a fruitful rather than fragile way. In these days, when the news reaches us laden with violence—wars breaking out, hands dripping with blood, cities burning, faces closing themselves in hatred—we seem to be witnesses to a world adrift after shipwreck.

Violence always arises when the limit is rejected and one claims to live in the limitless, while the ego dominates the world as if it belonged to it. This is not an accidental outcome. Violence is by nature limitless. It spreads like a fire in a time of drought, overwhelms embankments like a river in flood, humiliates, devastates and kills whatever life stands before it. It knows no measure. It has no effective restraints in the ordinary world, neither within the human psyche nor outside us. On the contrary, it tends to recharge itself by gathering all the anger in the world.

Violence, incidentally, never comes from nowhere. It arises from a self that believes itself omnipotent and denies the limits of reality. In doing so, it enters the realm of the imaginary, the unreal, the dream, and allows itself to annihilate the otherness it encounters. It is the same dynamic we see in someone who, at home, expects everything to revolve around their moods; in the professional who cannot tolerate criticism because it damages their perfect image; in the parent who experiences their children as a narcissistic extension of themselves.

The antidote to this limitless violence is not an opposing force of containment, not a barrier we set against fury. It is something infinite within us that brings about a miraculous shift: attention. Attention is like a return to the shore, the recognition that there exists a threshold to be respected between ourselves and the world, between ourselves and the other.

Attention dissolves the violent dynamic. It is like a reversal in the direction of the soul and of history. It is a form of prayer that asks nothing for itself: it does not seek to change the world according to its own desires but makes itself present to reality as it is, with its wounds and its questions, with its needs and its contradictions. It is the gaze that knows how to pause on the threshold, that does not seek to possess but knows how to contemplate.

This gaze welcomes the simple presence of things, because it loves them in their irreducible otherness and accepts their resistance and mystery; it recognises the other in their authentic face and one's own suffering in its truth, without the need to alter its nature. It is the art of remaining on the threshold without violating it.

This wisdom has profound consequences for how we educate and how we allow ourselves to be educated. We live in a world that fears the limit because it confuses it with death and despair. But the limit is life. It is the form that allows being to exist and to work through suffering. Without limit there is no beauty, no recognition, no possible love.

Attention also teaches us that the highest prayer is not the one that asks for miracles, but the one that learns to see the miracles already present: the fact that something exists rather than nothing, that a flower grows from the earth, that a child smiles, that it is possible to forgive and begin again. Attention is the most radical form of love because it loves without dominating, looks without judging, receives and gives without demanding.

This is what we most need today: to learn again the art of attention. Not the frenetic attention of the screen that consumes everything and forgets everything, but the contemplative attention that knows how to remain, how to wait, how to recognise in the limit not an enemy to be destroyed but a teacher to be honoured. In the fragment of the world the universe often lies hidden.

2.3 Dissolution: When the Self Becomes a Dwelling

“Water is taught by thirst,” wrote Emily Dickinson. This means that in the situation of limit we learn to recognise not only our needs but also the quality of our desire. When we find ourselves at the edge of our possibilities, a decisive question emerges: are we beings who demand satisfaction at any cost, or cups capable of receiving the good given to us with gratitude?

Perhaps we too, at some point in life, have cultivated the illusion of being self-sufficient. It is human: we grow up thinking that if we try hard enough, if we are good enough, we will be able to control everything that happens to us. And so, without realising it, we begin to live as though the world should adapt itself to our needs. Little by little we turn relationships into instruments for our well-being, rejecting the idea of depending on someone or something. The result is paradoxical: we build the most bitter form of dependence there is.

Life soon unmask the illusion and intervenes in its own way, bringing us back to the limit. The effort is unavoidable, yet it often offers the opportunity to mature spiritually. At times limits even heal us: a failure may open unexpected paths of learning, an illness may bring us back to what is essential, a relational crisis may rebalance our emotional life. They are all invitations from life to change pace in order to go further, beyond ourselves.

The process of dissolving the ego does not happen all at once. It is made up of small daily deaths: renouncing the control of the moods of those who live with us, accepting that this generation may follow a different path from the previous one, recognising that our opinion is not always the most important one around the table at work. Each time we let go of a fragment of our imaginary omnipotence, a new space opens up in which to welcome life as it is, rather than as we would wish it to be.

It is here, in the hollows that life offers us to suspend the rhythm of our days, that the miracle of dissolution occurs: the rigid self softens until it becomes receptive. Like clay in the hands of the potter, which must be soft in order to take shape. Then an elderly person who accepts help discovers the tenderness of those who care for them. A figure of authority who acknowledges their own mistake without feeling diminished expresses an authentic humanity. Someone living with illness and at the mercy of pain may discover that their words can be healing for others.

The water that symbolically evokes this transformation is that of desire. As we read in Psalm 104, God sets a boundary for the waters: they shall not pass beyond it nor return to cover the earth. Here the limit appears once more as a guardian of life: not an impediment, but the condition that allows each thing to exist within its possible space and time.

The self that has come to know its own boundaries is therefore not a diminished self, but a self finally free to be itself without worrying about becoming everything.

Freed from its pretensions of omnipotence, the subject can be reborn as a hospitable space. No longer a fortress defending itself from the world, but a house that welcomes life. This is the transformation we see in those who have passed through great suffering without hardening their hearts: people in whose presence others seek refuge, not because they have all the answers, but because they know how to remain with the questions. Their presence does not weigh down; it frees. Their companionship does not judge; it accompanies.

This dissolution of the self into a hospitable space is the most mature fruit of the wisdom of the limit. It is not a renunciation of one's identity, but the discovery of the truest one: a relational identity that exists in giving and receiving, in being cared for and caring for others. The self has learned that life is not a possession to defend but a gift to share, not a right to claim but a grace to celebrate.

2.4 The Limit of Affliction and the Gate of Heaven

"There is a limit to everything," we often say. Even to pain and to our ability to endure it? One then thinks of mothers and fathers who have lost a son or a daughter, and who for this reason find themselves in a nameless desert. A pain that has no seasons and no consolation. Here the door between the before and the after is a gate of hell. In the heart there remains forever an empty imprint left by glances, laughter, gestures and light footsteps that will never return.

In this cathedral of silence, language learns to use the conditional: "it would have been, they would have done, we would have seen...". The experience is extremely harsh, yet also revealing of something we tend not to grasp: love has no boundaries. It goes beyond, transcends absence, slips into the pauses of history. One then discovers that the gate of hell had been preceded by another door: the one we pass through when we bring someone into the world, when we love someone, when we share a passion with others.

It is certainly not a consolation. Yet it may be a path for understanding what it means to live on the threshold even when everything collapses. When pain goes beyond a certain limit, one may speak of affliction, says Simone Weil.

Affliction is the suffering that has branded the soul and rendered it enslaved forever. It happens when an event seizes a life, uproots it and strikes it in every dimension. At that moment even God seems absent. One cannot leave such a situation except by continuing to love in vain, within the void, through the void that has opened before our steps.

I think of a woman named Giovanna who, on the night of the Amatrice earthquake (24 August 2016), in a matter of seconds lost her father, her mother, her son, her daughter and her husband.

Affliction is the true enigma of life. It is useless to search for answers or justifications. If we find them, they are certainly not the real ones. One simply no longer recognises oneself and even ceases to struggle. One feels cursed, and nothing more. The world can no longer reach us in any way. That inaudible vibration offers itself at a frequency that no one receives. Despair consumes itself and becomes anguish. Before this impenetrable muteness, one must stop: the human being experiences their full powerlessness.

Yet there is another kind of powerlessness, more subtle and everyday. It is the bitter experience of parents, friends, pastors and therapists who collide with an invisible barrier when they try to help someone who, day after day, withdraws and distances themselves. One discovers then that all our love, all our dedication and all our competence are not enough.

This form of limit can also become a teacher: it reminds us that we are not the “saviours”. Our task is to offer presence and safeguard the space of encounter, inhabiting a suspension that does not presume to force the timing and conditions of people’s lives.

In any case, we should never allow ourselves to be annihilated by discouragement and by our inability to relieve suffering—our own and that of others—which casts us at the foot of the cross. If in those conditions we remain capable of loving, then within wounded life a passage is formed, infinitely small yet extremely precious: through that fissure in history God manages to pass and reach his creation.

It is not a blessing of evil, nor the fruit of a sadistic or masochistic culture (from which, to tell the truth, Christianity has not always kept its distance). Rather, it is the good news of salvation.

One does not remain still on that threshold. There is a time of entering, made of silence, prayer and feeling. There is a time of going out, towards brothers and sisters, but also towards the whole of creation. In this way we too may become open doors for those who will knock and ask permission to enter our space and our time of life.

This movement of entering and going out is the very rhythm of mature spiritual life: no alienation and no annihilation, only the deep breathing of one who has learned that every limit can become a threshold, every wound can open to healing, every closed door can reveal another open door. Life never ceases to teach us the art of crossing over—the art of transforming every boundary into a place of encounter, every ending into a new beginning.

3. The Limit as a Place of Blessing

3.1 A Mysterious Adversary: the Hidden Master

At the ford of the River Jabbok, on the darkest night of his life, Jacob remains alone. He has sent across his family, his servants, and his flocks. It is the moment of truth, the moment when one can no longer hide behind excuses, deceit, or protection. And it is precisely then that “a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn” (Gen 32:25).

Who is this adversary emerging from the darkness? Scripture preserves the mystery. It could be everything Jacob had tried to escape for twenty years: remorse, fear, the face of the brother he betrayed. Or perhaps it is something greater: life itself coming to call him to account, destiny catching up with him, an angel, God who becomes struggle.

In this mysterious adversary we recognise all those “limit situations” that sooner or later knock at the door of every life: when illness erupts and changes every plan; when an economic crisis sweeps away the certainties built through years of work; when bereavement tears apart the fabric of our relationships; when an important relationship breaks and we find ourselves having to learn again how to live in solitude.

The adversary has something enigmatic about him: he does not come to destroy, yet neither does he come to console. He comes to transform. He is the most demanding master we could encounter, the one who refuses our masks and forces us to face who we truly are.

The struggle lasts the whole night. There is neither victory nor defeat. No easy solution. There is only the long time of endurance, of passage, of transformation that takes place drop by drop, like water that wears away the stone.

3.2 The New Name: When Identity is Transfigured

There is something deeply paradoxical in the fact that Jacob receives a new name precisely when he is about to return home. After years of flight, deception, and life elsewhere, at the moment when he must face the brother he betrayed, he finds himself in the darkest night wrestling with a mysterious being. It is a hand-to-hand struggle, relentless, lasting until dawn.

And when everything seems finished—when Jacob’s hip has been dislocated and he can no longer flee—his adversary gives him a new name:

“Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed” (Gen 32:29).

It is as though, in order to rediscover the road home, he must first wrestle to exhaustion with the very mystery of life.

The new name is not a free gift. It is the recognition of a struggle endured, of a confrontation that Jacob did not avoid. The deceiver has become the wrestler, the one who has the courage to measure himself against what he does not understand, what he cannot control, what frightens him.

It is precisely this radical transformation—so intimate that it touches his very identity, so demanding that it leaves a permanent scar—that enables him to cross the ford and return to the land of his fathers.

He is no longer the deceiver who fled, yet neither has he become someone else. He is Jacob-who-has-become-Israel through the struggle, and only thus can he face Esau; only thus can he receive the embrace he did not deserve; only thus can he welcome the tears he had caused.

Jacob’s story becomes the mirror of every human life, because every existence knows changes so deep that they seem to take away our identity and yet—mysteriously—bring us home again.

But such changes are not gentle, gradual, or painless. They are struggles. They are those nocturnal confrontations with reality that we would rather never face, those battles that leave us marked for ever.

The illness that forces us to wrestle with the fragility of the body; the loss that obliges us to confront the pain of love; the crisis that places us face to face with the fragility of our certainties; age itself that compels us to wrestle with the end of our dreams.

Moments when we wake in the night no longer knowing who we are, moments when we must wrestle to exhaustion with what frightens us most.

Yet there is also another form of limit: the one we impose upon ourselves out of fear of leaving our securities. The short film *The Butterfly Circus* by Joshua Weigel (2009) offers a striking example. Will, a man without arms or legs, has resigned himself to living as a sideshow curiosity, convinced of his own uselessness.

When Mr Mendez, the circus director, seems almost to mock him by reminding him how different he is, Will reacts:

“Why do you say these things to me?”

The answer is illuminating:

“Because you believe it!”

Often the most insurmountable limit lies hidden within our own convictions.

Mendez challenges him:

“If only you could see the beauty that can arise from the ashes... The greater the struggle, the more glorious the triumph.”

Will must learn to fall and rise again by himself until he discovers that he can swim:

“Stop! Stop! Look! I can swim!”

In that moment of joyful astonishment, the curse becomes a blessing. He is no longer “the freak”, but “a brave soul”.

The limit is transfigured into a gift when we accept to change the way we look at ourselves.

It is precisely in these agonising passages that something essential comes to light. Like a diamond formed from coal under pressure, like a spring that bursts forth where everything seemed dry, our truest identity emerges not despite the struggles, but through them.

We do not erase what we once were; rather, we integrate it into a broader, wiser story, one more capable of embracing the complexity of life—just as Jacob does, who does not cease to be Jacob but becomes Israel: the name of a man, yet also of a people.

3.3 *The Wound and the Dance*

Beyond the change of name, the struggle leaves another indelible sign: Jacob will limp for the rest of his life. Yet this lameness is not a punishment but a seal—a bodily reminder of that transforming encounter that marked the passage from flight to blessing.

From that moment onwards, every step of the patriarch will carry the memory of that night, that struggle, that grace received.

There is a profound wisdom in this limping that speaks directly to the human condition. Lameness imposes a different rhythm: slower, more attentive. It is no longer possible to flee as Jacob had done for twenty years. One must pause, lean for support, sometimes ask for help.

Thus the wound becomes a teacher of authentic humanity, educating us in that vulnerability which opens the way to genuine encounter with others.

This is evident in people who have passed through great trials: they all carry some form of limp—visible or hidden, physical, psychological, or spiritual. Yet precisely that wound has made them more real, more compassionate, more attentive to the suffering of others.

“I have seen your face as one sees the face of God,” Jacob says to Esau (Gen 33:10).

After twenty years of separation, after all the harm done and suffered, the two brothers meet again. And instead of the vengeance that had been feared, there is an embrace, shared tears, forgiveness.

The most precious gift for those who have passed through the night of limitation is the ability to see beyond appearances, to recognise a glimmer where others see only shadows.

Lameness is thus transformed into a new dance. Not the dance of those who pretend that everything proceeds without difficulty, but the dance of those who have learned to move with grace within their own limits.

At sunrise, Jacob limps towards the future. Yet in that limp there is more strength than in a thousand confident steps. For it is the limp of one who has wrestled with the mystery and bears its marks; of one who has been wounded and blessed; of one who has discovered that limits are not the place where God stops, but where he chooses to meet us.

Like Jacob who becomes Israel, we too may discover that a new name awaits us beyond the night of struggle—a name that does not erase who we have been but gathers everything into a greater story. A name that only the passage through limitation can reveal.