

Jesus 101

God and Man

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To Monsignor James P. Callahan

Rev. Christopher M. Martin

Rev. Rodger Fleming

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Foreword

In *Jesus 101*, Dr. John Gresham, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, has written a basic introduction to Christology for the average lay reader in the pew. It is well grounded in the scriptural and Catholic understanding of Jesus.

It is written in straightforward, concrete, and inspiring prose. It reveals the Jesus behind the sacraments and alive within the Church and its believers. Written in the simple, yet profound, style of Mother Teresa, this work awakens within us the Jesus for whom our hearts have been hungering and thirsting. It flows from a heart that has been transformed by a personal faith experience of Jesus and from a head that communicates that experience in the context of the Church's universal teachings.

The opening sentence of the first chapter states, "At the heart of Catholic teaching is a person, the person of Jesus Christ."

So many Catholics long to experience in a deeper way the person of Jesus within our teachings and within our worship. When people make this discovery, their lives change dramatically.

While the language is simple, the message is profound and substantive. Take for example the quote from Cardinal Ratzinger's *Behold the Pierced One*: "Since the center of the

person of Jesus is prayer, it is essential to participate in his prayer if we are to know and understand Him....” When we apply this to praying the Eucharistic Prayer, the Mass really becomes alive, because we enter into Jesus’ prayer to the Father, and that is a powerful experience!

To know the name of a person and his title gives us access to that person. Dr. Gresham explores at least fifteen biblical titles of Jesus, each of which reveals a different charism of the Master.

Checking out a person’s resume is a standard practice for choosing friends and employees. The author explores thirteen mysteries in the life of Jesus, which invite us to contemplate Jesus in his unfolding revelation of himself as our Savior and Lord.

In reflecting on the many images of Christ that the Church puts forward for prayerful contemplation, we experience the power and the love of the person of Jesus. Consider, for example, the line, “The crucifix can teach us so much because it reveals the heart of Jesus.” So many one-liners in the book could furnish the basis of an extended meditation on the person of Jesus.

I highly recommend *Jesus 101* to anyone who wishes to experience a personal relationship with Jesus and to grow in that relationship through prayer, through the Mass and the sacraments, through Catholic art, and through the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Simply put, this book exudes the richness of the Church’s understanding of how to engage the person of Jesus in a way that transforms us. I highly recommend it.

MOST REV. ROBERT J. HERMANN
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF SAINT LOUIS, MO

Introduction

This book is a short introduction to Jesus Christ written from a perspective of faith, hope, and love. First of all, the book is written from a perspective of personal faith in Jesus Christ. I write about Jesus as one who believes in him as the Son of God. When I was sixteen, I first committed my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and now that I am in my fifties, he is still the foundation for my life. My conversion to Christ came about through reading the Scriptures. Years of personal and academic study of Scripture since then have only increased my faith in the truth and power of the Bible. Scripture is the written Word of God that through the medium of human words gives witness to the Word Incarnate. This book is based upon a reading of the Scriptures from a perspective of faith in their power to communicate to us the truth about Jesus Christ.

I do not write merely out of my own personal faith in Christ, however. I write from the perspective of Catholic faith, the faith in Jesus Christ handed on by the Church. It was precisely through study of the early Church fathers and the first Church councils that I first discovered tradition as a work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Reading the writings of the Church Fathers and following the guidance of the early Church councils led me into a deeper understanding of

the mystery of Christ revealed in Scripture. That discovery of tradition eventually led me into the Catholic Church. In the teaching of the early Church councils, I discerned the voice of the Spirit. I later discerned that same voice in the teachings of the second Vatican Council and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This book is informed by the teaching of the Church that guides us into the authentic understanding of the fullness of truth given in Christ and handed on by Scripture and tradition.

Faith is not merely the handing on of doctrines and intellectual concepts. Catholic faith in Jesus Christ is concretely lived by receiving the sacraments and participating in the liturgical and devotional life of the Church. Along with my reading of the Church fathers, the documents of Vatican II and the *Catechism*, it was my experience of Jesus Christ's presence in the holy Eucharist that drew me into the Catholic Church. My knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ has deepened over the years by participation in the sacramental worship of the Catholic Church. That knowledge and experience informs the writing of this book, in which I try to show the connections between Jesus as he is known through Scripture and tradition and as he is experienced in Catholic worship and devotion.

This book is also written in hope. I hope that the Holy Spirit will work through my inadequate words to reveal Christ to each reader and to bring each reader into an encounter with Christ, a living Savior who reaches out to each of us with love and mercy. I encourage each reader to accompany the reading of this book with prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking him to reveal Jesus Christ to you in a deep way.

Finally, this book is written out of love. It is an expression

of love for Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the bridegroom of our souls. I hope this little book honors and exalts him and in some way expresses something of the “glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Second, it is written as a service of love to those who read it. I have tried to take some of the theological riches of Scripture, tradition, and Church teaching and to present those treasures in an accessible way to assist each reader in knowing Jesus Christ.

This book is written primarily for Catholics who wish to know more about Jesus Christ in the light of Scripture and Church teaching. I have tried to make it accessible to those without academic training in Scripture or theology. At the same time, I have not tried to “dumb it down,” but rather I hope to convey something of the fullness of scriptural and Church teaching on Jesus Christ. In addition to Catholics, I hope other Christians might find this book to be an illuminating Catholic perspective on our shared faith in Jesus Christ. I hope non-Catholic Christians will discover ways in which some of the insights of Catholic faith can help them to know Christ better. Perhaps even non-Christians might find this book helpful, as well. I do not try to argue for the Church’s claims about Jesus Christ, so doubters and skeptics will not find answers to all their questions in this book. Yet, they may find it helpful to know something about the content of Catholic belief in Christ. The French Catholic philosopher Blaise Pascal said that we should first help non-believers see the beauty of our teaching and then offer arguments for why it is true. I hope any non-Christians reading this book will catch a glimpse of the beauty of Christ and be encouraged to search further concerning the truth of Christ.

The first chapter begins with an overview of a Catholic

approach to Jesus Christ. In this chapter, I try to answer such questions as: What is the role of the Catholic Church in our knowledge of Jesus Christ? What is the Catholic understanding of Christ in Scripture, tradition, and the Eucharist? What is the relation between the Christ of Catholic faith and the Jesus of history? Do Catholics have a personal relationship with Jesus? Chapter 2 digs into Scripture to uncover the meaning of Jesus' names and titles. What is the meaning and theological significance of such names and titles as "Jesus," "Christ," "Lord," "Son of Man," "Son of God," and others? This chapter also speaks of the three messianic offices of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. I will show how each office is foreshadowed in the Old Testament and fulfilled and perfected by Jesus Christ. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the life of Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, read in the light of tradition, with a focus on the theological meaning and significance of each event in his life. The fourth chapter moves from Scripture into the teaching of the early Church fathers to trace how the first ecumenical councils led the Church step by step into a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Person of Christ in his divine and human natures. Our study will take us from the first to the seventh ecumenical councils. That seventh council reaffirmed the Church's practice of venerating images of Christ, and I conclude that chapter with a look at the image of the Sacred Heart, which symbolically summarizes the teaching of these councils. The final chapter will consider the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on Christ, with its emphasis on his continuing ministry through the Church.

The primary sources used in the writing of this book are the Scriptures and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Scripture citations and references to the *Catechism* are cited

in parentheses in the text. References to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are abbreviated as CCC followed by the paragraph number. References to other sources are identified within the text.

I wish to acknowledge and thank those who read these chapters and offered their encouragement and advice: my friend Tim Dallas, who read each chapter and encouraged me along the way; my colleague Dr. Daniel Van Slyke, who read the chapter on the Church Fathers and offered some helpful clarifications; and New Testament scholar Dr. Mark Reasoner, who was particularly helpful in providing additional biblical references. I very much appreciated the Carmelites of the Divine Heart of Jesus, who read these chapters while I taught them a course in Christology, especially Sister Immaculata, for her extremely helpful grammatical and stylistic suggestions. I am very grateful to Deb Meister and Liguori Publications for the invitation to write this book, to Bishop Hermann for his kind foreword, and to Dr. Scott Hahn for taking time in his busy schedule to read the manuscript and offer his recommendation. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the administration of Kenrick-Glennon Seminary for the semester sabbatical in which I could devote time to this book.

I wrote this book during a time that Pope Benedict XVI declared as the Year of the Priest. While this book is written for lay people, I wanted to dedicate the book to priests. I have known so many fine priests, including those who first led me and welcomed me into the Catholic Church, the faithful priests I am honored to work with as my colleagues at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, and the many faith-filled young priests I have had the joy of teaching as seminarians. Of all the fine priests I know, however, I wish to dedicate this book

to the faithful priests of my parish. As I wrote about Jesus this year, I grew all the more grateful for the work of these faithful priests who day in and day out proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their preaching, bring the grace of Jesus Christ through the sacraments they celebrate, and model the example of Jesus Christ by their lives of generous service and love. I dedicate this book in gratitude to the priests of Saint Joseph Parish in Cottleville, Missouri: Monsignor James Callahan, Father Chris Martin, and Father Rodger Fleming.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus, the Heart of Catholic Faith

CATHOLIC FAITH IN JESUS

At the heart of Catholic teaching is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. According to the Catholic faith, Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who became man, who taught us by his words and example, who died for us upon the cross, was raised from death, and now lives forever as God and man—two natures united in one person. The goal of catechesis, the teaching and handing on of the Catholic faith, is to bring others into communion with Jesus, that in union with him, they may know the love of the Father and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The person of Jesus Christ brings us into communion with the Holy Trinity. Through Jesus Christ, we come to share in the eternal exchange of love between Father and Son in the Spirit (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC 426]). We come to know the triune God, because the Father sent his eternal divine Son to be born in the world as man, to reveal the fullness of divine truth. The book of Hebrews contrasts Jesus to all those who came before him. God spoke in the past in many ways through many prophets and teachers, but now in the fullness of time, God has spoken by his Son. As divine Son, Jesus is the mediator and fullness of divine revelation (Hebrews 1:1–2, CCC 65).

The confession and proclamation of Jesus as Son of God is at the center of the Catholic Church. When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds by renaming Simon as Peter, the rock, and declares that it was on this rock that he would build his Church (Matthew 16:15–19). When Jesus names Simon Peter as the rock, he acknowledges both his office as the first pope and his confession of faith (CCC 424, 552, 881). The rock of Peter and his confession of faith both point us to Jesus Christ himself as the ultimate foundation stone upon which the Catholic Church is built. Through the ministry of Peter and his successors and the faith that they proclaim, we come to know Jesus as the living stone, rejected by men but chosen as the foundation stone for the new people of God to whom we are united as living stones in his Church (1 Peter 2:4–9, CCC 756).

Catholic faith in Jesus Christ is centered in the mystery of the Incarnation. The word “Incarnation” refers to God becoming “flesh.” The eternal divine Son assumed our human nature to be born, live, die, and to be raised as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh. Saint Paul speaks of Christ as the glory of God revealed in a human face (2 Corinthians 4:6). Throughout the Old Testament, we encounter the desire to see God—often expressed in prayer to see the face of God—yet, God’s face remains hidden. Even Moses, who is described as speaking to God face-to-face, only sees God’s glory from behind while hidden in a rock (Exodus 33:11, 18–23). The Old Testament prayer that God will shine his face upon us is answered by the Incarnation. In the face of Jesus, we see God. By looking at his life and hearing his words, we come to know who God is.

In becoming man, Jesus the Son does not only reveal God, he also brings God to humanity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists four reasons for the Incarnation (CCC 456–460). First of all, the Son came to save us. By becoming man, he brings to humanity divine forgiveness, healing, liberation, light, and life. Second, he reveals to us the love of God. Through the Son we come to know the Father and Spirit. We discover the mystery of God as an eternal communion of love. In the Son coming to us as man, we learn of God’s great love for humanity. Jesus reveals the heights and depths of this love, a love that does not remain aloof in heaven but fully enters into and shares our human nature and human condition in order to raise us up to share God’s life in heaven. This sharing of divine life with humanity is the third reason for the Incarnation. This is what the Church Fathers called the “marvelous exchange” (CCC 526). The Son takes what belongs to us, our human nature as well as our burden of sin and death, in order to give to us what belongs to him, divine life and holiness. He became man so that we might become divine. This divinization does not mean that we cease to be human creatures, but by the grace given to us through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, we come to share in the divine life of God. This divine life is that gift of grace that makes us children of God and transforms us into the image of the Son. The divine image expressed through the humanity of Jesus the Son is the fourth reason for the Incarnation. Jesus restores the divine image to humanity and provides us with a model for authentic and holy human living. We are created in the divine image, but we have wounded and marred that image through sin. Jesus restores the divine image to human nature and lives a life of service to others, which provides us with a model to emulate.

As our model, Jesus shows us the truth about humanity and directs us toward our true destiny as human beings. Vatican II emphasized that “only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light....Christ the Lord...*fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Contemplating the glory of God in the face of Jesus, we may come to know God and, at the same time, come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of our human dignity and ultimate destiny as those beloved by God and called to become his children by our communion with Christ. As human beings, we puzzle over the mystery of our own lives: our origin, our destiny, our sufferings, our sins, our hopes. Jesus comes to reveal the mystery of humanity within the mystery of God’s love for us and his gift of redemption. The Church invites us to gaze on the face of Jesus not only to come to understand the mystery of God, but also to understand the mystery of humanity. Jesus teaches us to understand ourselves as created in God’s image, wounded by sin, and yet loved by God and embraced by his mercy and called to life and redemption through union with Jesus Christ.

JESUS IN CATHOLIC FAITH

Jesus is at the heart of Catholic doctrine, worship, morality, and prayer. The fullness of truth that the Catholic Church proclaims is rooted in Jesus Christ as the Word of God Incarnate. Through Jesus we come to know God the Father, and from him we receive the Holy Spirit of Truth. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, also known as the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of the Son, makes Jesus the Son known and unites us to him. All that the Church teaches on the gifts of grace,

salvation, and eternal life is the expression of the saving work of Jesus Christ for humanity. The Marian dogmas are all based on the relation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to her son Jesus. Catholic ecclesiology rests on an understanding of the Church as founded by Christ and united to him as his body and bride, carrying on his prophetic, priestly, and royal mission.

When we move from doctrine to worship, we continue to find Jesus Christ at the heart of Catholic faith. Christ is the high priest who reconciles us to the Father (Hebrews 4:14–16, 8:1–2). The ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of all the baptized are two ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ. United to him, the whole Church offers its praises to God in the liturgy of the Church. Jesus Christ is present in the songs and prayers of our worship, in the proclamation of the Word, and above all in the Blessed Sacrament. The sacramental character of Catholic worship is rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, God provided salvation in a visible and tangible way through the flesh of Jesus Christ. By the sacraments, God continues to offer that gift of salvation in visible and tangible ways through water, oil, wine, and bread. In all of the sacraments, Christ is present, and it is his word and power that makes each sacrament efficacious. At the source and summit of Catholic worship is our union with the sacrifice of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. This Christ-centered worship leads to transformed lives. The entire section on Catholic morality in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is entitled “Life in Christ” (CCC 1691–2557). Through his grace, by our union with Christ, we fulfill the law of God, which is revealed most fully by the example of Christ. The Catholic moral life is rooted in the call

to love as Christ loved. Our ability to follow Christ is rooted in the grace given in the sacraments and nourished by prayer.

At the heart of Catholic prayer, we again find Jesus. Jesus teaches us to pray. It is in and through his prayer that we pray to the Father. Our prayer becomes a participation in the eternal dialogue between the Father and the Son. In union with the Son, we pray to the Father, and with the Son, hear the Father speak to us as his beloved children. We pray to Jesus as our Savior, our Lord, our friend. We pray to the Holy Spirit as the one who renews us and enables us to call upon Jesus as Lord and to cry out to God the Father (Romans 8:26–27). In contemplative prayer, we learn to gaze upon the face of Jesus in silence, receiving him as the Word of God and joining in his own ineffable prayer to the Father. The centrality of Jesus in the Catholic prayer is summed up by Saint Augustine, who says that Jesus prays for us as our priest, Jesus prays in us as head of his body the Church and is prayed by us as our God and Lord (CCC 2616).

Centered as it is on Jesus, the Catholic faith is not based upon a philosophy or an ethical system. Catholic theology makes use of philosophy and teaches ethics, but those do not provide its ultimate foundation, nor do they express its central content. Catholic faith is rooted in a person and an event. That person is Jesus Christ, and the event is his coming into human history.

JESUS IN HISTORY

At midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, the cantor traditionally sings an announcement of Jesus' birth, which places the event in time, counting the number of years according to Jewish tradition, from the creation of the world, the flood, and such