

**A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, THE CHRIST:
SEARCHING FOR WHAT WAS ALREADY THERE**

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As a “cradle Catholic” I am very aware that God is my creator and Father, Jesus is His Son and my Savior, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. I have “known” these three persons my whole life, or so I thought. I was baptized, “made” my first communion in second grade, was confirmed in eighth grade, went to confession, now called reconciliation, many times, and was married by my father-in-law to be, who was a Deacon. Both of my daughters were baptized, attended Catholic grade school and made their first reconciliation and communion. We attended church regularly and I thought of myself in general as a “good, practicing Catholic”. The façade came tumbling down when the marriage came tumbling down and I found myself wondering how I could’ve failed God so terribly. I didn’t even realize I was asking the question and there was the answer – Jesus. Before the divorce was even final, being the “good Catholic”, I made an appointment to see the Parochial Vicar at my church to discuss the annulment process and to “go to confession” for the first time in about ten years. As I shared with him a very brief synopsis of the last ten years and what led to the divorce he said one thing that has always remained in my heart: “If you make a decision and you feel a deep peace inside, then you made the right decision”. I thought about his comment and truly felt that deep peace within. For my penance from confession, I was to spend time in the Perpetual Adoration Chapel with the Blessed Sacrament, which I had never done before. He asked me to say the Lord’s Prayer three times and when I reached the line “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us”, I was to think of my ex-husband, and myself as well, and to spend some time on those words. During that time in the Chapel, I felt the grace of God wash over me and cleanse me from my feelings of guilt and failure. It was a cold, cloudy day in February, complete with snow flurries, yet as I walked to my car that day, I felt as light as a snowflake but

as warm as the sun because I was wrapped in God's warmth and love. I knew I encountered God, but it is only now, as I write this paper, that I realize God revealed himself to me that day through Jesus, the Christ. It was Jesus speaking to me that day through the Parochial Vicar, telling me that the peace I felt was from Him and it was Jesus I felt the forgiveness from as I sat in His presence in the Chapel.

That day, which was almost six years ago, was the first day of a new life for me, one in which God was the foundation and at the forefront. It was the beginning of my search for a deeper relationship with God. I have succeeded in deepening my relationship with God and have also become keenly aware of the Holy Spirit working in my life. While I realize it will never be complete until I am with Him, I do feel as though I am "good with God and the Holy Spirit". Jesus, however, seems to be more distant in my life. Thus, the next step in my spiritual journey is a search for a relationship with Him, and this essay is one of the steps on that journey. I have turned to several great theologians and scholars, to gain insight from them in relation to who Jesus is and what role He plays (has played) for Christianity and even more specifically, the Catholic faith.

Edward Schillebeeckx, in his introduction in *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, explains that God, as our Creator, provides "ultimate meaning" to our lives and "the supreme possibility of our life in this world" is that we all desire a personal relationship with God.¹ This is the foundation of all spiritual and religious experience in life. He goes on to elaborate that as humans we are powerless to reach God of our own accord and that it is only by

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 4.

the grace of God that we can achieve this relationship.² It is only through God's generous initiative of coming to meet us in grace that personal communion with Him is possible.³ Jesus, as the Christ, is that "initiative" taken by God and is what as humans we call salvation and/or sanctifying grace.⁴ Schillebeeckx discusses this in great detail in the first chapter of *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, and I have attempted to emphasize and piece together what spoke to me as to "who" Jesus is:

God lovingly takes the initiative and comes down to meet man in grace that man lives in a condition of active and immediate communication with the one who, in this relationship becomes the "living God".⁵ . . . God himself raised up a man in whom was concentrated the entirety of mankind's vocation to faithfulness, and who would himself keep faith with the Covenant [with the people of Israel] in the perfection of his fidelity. This man was Jesus.⁶ The dogmatic definition of Chalcedon, according to which Christ is "one person in two natures," implies that one and the same person, the Son of God, also took on a visible human form. Even in his humanity Christ is the Son of God. The second person of the most holy Trinity is personally man; and this man is personally God. Therefore Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way. . . . His human love is the human embodiment of the redeeming love of God.⁷ . . . if the human and all the human acts of Jesus possess a divine saving power, then the realization in human shape of this saving power necessarily includes as one of its aspects the manifestation of salvation: includes, in other words, sacramentality. The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption.⁸

² Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 15

God “became” man through Jesus in order to meet us in relationship – to provide a pathway to encounter Him. Jesus is for us as humans, our “Door to the Sacred”. He is God’s love in human form. Yet, if Jesus, as God in human form, is our only way to the Father, how we can experience that personal encounter with the “glorified Lord, who has withdrawn himself from our sight”?⁹ Schillebeeckx suggests that the answer is in the sacraments, which he describes as the “earthly extension of the body of the Lord . . . the Church”.¹⁰

Joseph Martos, in *Doors to the Sacred*, discusses how Schillebeeckx believed that a sacramental experience was like that of an encounter between two persons and a sacrament was a visible sign of a divine reality.¹¹ Therefore, Jesus as God was a visible sign of a divine reality; a sacrament. While Jesus lived He was THE encounter with God for those who knew and believed in Him.¹² After He died His resurrection appearances revealed the mystery of God that was in Him and in turn, those who believed He was the messiah “preached his message and in their words God was present, touching people’s hearts and transforming their lives.”¹³ This was the beginning of the church, whose role became that of:

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 40.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41,

¹¹ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Missouri: Ligouri Press, 2001), 110.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

. . . making the divine mystery present in the world primarily in seven ways, corresponding to the seven ways that Christ himself was a sacrament of God to others: in introducing others to new life [baptism], in sharing the power of his spirit with them [confirmation], in healing their illness [anointing] and forgiving their sinfulness [reconciliation], in ministering to their religious needs [ordination], in being faithful to his Father and his church [matrimony], ultimately in the action of sacrificing himself out of love [eucharist]. . . . In this way Schillebeeckx traces the seven sacraments to the church, which is the sacrament of Christ, and to Christ himself, who is the sacrament of God.¹⁴

Hilkert, in an article on Schillebeeckx echoes this view by emphasizing that preaching the gospel has been a challenge for all Christians from the beginning and that it's not just "spreading" the good news, but is a "matter of living communities of faith handing on the *experience* of salvation."¹⁵ She goes on to quote from Schillebeeckx that "Christianity is not a message to be believed, but an experience of faith which becomes a message, and as an explicit message seeks to offer a new possibility of life experience to others who hear it from within their own experience of life."¹⁶

But what does it mean to say that Christ is "present"? Schillebeeckx would emphasize it as the extension of the bodily presence of Christ in the Church, as was discussed above. The Catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that Christ is "present in the earthly liturgy . . . in his Church . . . in the Sacrifice of the Mass . . . in the person of his minister . . . in the Eucharistic species . . . by his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes, it is really Christ himself who baptizes . . . he is present in the word since it is he who speaks . . . he is

¹⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵ Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, "Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914-): Encountering God in a Secular and Suffering World," *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 383.

¹⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books "Jesus" and "Christ"* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 50, quoted in Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, "Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914-): Encountering God in a Secular and Suffering World," *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 383.

present when the Church prays and sings . . .”¹⁷ Martos references the theology of Karl Rahner in his book, *The Sacraments*, that Jesus, as the incarnate Word of God, or Logos, became flesh and in this humanity is the “self-disclosure of the Logos itself”.¹⁸ He also refers to the experiential theology of Bernard Cooke:

Everybody can look back at certain experiences that have shaped reality for them, but Christians point to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as definitive for revealing what the experience of being human is all about. For Christians Jesus was not just a man but a man in whom God spoke the ultimate word about the meaning of human life. By being completely open to that word and letting its meaning form his experience of who he was, Jesus fully became the word of God spoken into human history.¹⁹

Since Christ is the Logos, the incarnate word, one cannot discuss the presence of Christ without discussing His presence in the word. Upon Jesus death and resurrection, the word was THE mechanism Jesus’ believers, followers and disciples used to share their experiences with Christ when He was alive. They shared their experience of the Word or Logos, through the word, verbally at first by stories, songs, and prayers, which laid the foundation for the formalization of those words into the written words of the scriptures, prayer books, song books, etc.

The importance of the word became apparent by the emphasis placed on the Liturgy of the Word in the reform of the Second Vatican Council. Wedig, in his article points out that while the Catholic community now has a “unique and rich encounter of the Scriptures through

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II, 2nd ed.* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 283.

¹⁸ Joseph Martos, *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 140.

¹⁹ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 116.

the service of the word . . . there still remain great pastoral challenges for understanding how to interpret the word of God uniquely through this mode of encounter.”²⁰ In this same article, he quotes David Power: “to hear the Word as it is given to us, with all its variety of meanings, require open minds and open hearts. Once we lay aside the illusion that the sense and impact of a text are fixed for all time, we can listen with greater attention, with the desire to receive what is being offered, with the will to respond.”²¹

It is interesting to note however, that there are some who have the opinion that something is missing from the post Vatican II liturgy; the Mystery.²² Collins, in his book on ritual and parish liturgy, *More Than Meets the Eye*, believes that imagination, which is the part of our “knowing powers” that enables us to experience Mystery, is what has been missing.²³ He is not referring to imagination in the way that one might think.

I speak of the imagination as a power of human knowing. It is an act of the mind. It operates through the languages of image, symbol, story, myth, parable and ritual. What one comes to know through this cognitive functioning of imagination is the reality that is more than meets the eye. It is the mystery in life.²⁴ Imagination . . . has the potency of opening us not just to fantasy and escape from reality but to the kingdom which is God’s gift, ‘the hope of a glory that is to come’ (Col

²⁰ Mark Wedig, “A Practical Liturgical Theology of the Word,” *Liturgical Ministry* 13 (Fall 2004): 193.

²¹ David Power, “*The Word of the Lord*” *Liturgy’s Use of Scripture* (Maryknoll Orbis Books, 2001), quoted in Mark Wedig, “A Practical Liturgical Theology of the Word,” *Liturgical Ministry* 13 (Fall 2004): 193.

²² Patrick W. Collins, *More Than Meets the Eye: Ritual and Parish Liturgy* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 23.

1:27)”²⁵ Through reason we *explain* reality but through imagination we *explore* its unseen possibilities and know more than eye can see and logic can discern. We can know mystery. And through our creativity, God makes all things new.²⁶

I particularly like the “language” of story, as that is what has transcended time; stories of the Jewish people, stories of Jesus, stories of the early Christians, stories of the Church. Collins discusses how stories can provide new knowledge to us by disclosing personal truths and that knowledge transcends reason and transforms hearts.²⁷ He refers to Henri Nouwen, whom I have been reading as part of my own spiritual formation and he quotes from Nouwen’s book *The Living Reminder*, “One of the remarkable qualities of the story is that it creates space. We can dwell in a story, walk around, find our place. The story confronts but does not oppress, the story inspires but does not manipulate, the story invites to an encounter, a dialog, a mutual sharing.”²⁸ This is what reading about Jesus in the gospels is all about! It is through the gospels and in liturgy that we attempt to merge stories of individuals and communities with the Jesus story; this is how we come to realize that Jesus’ story is also our story.²⁹

It is from here that I circle back to my story and how I might merge my story with Jesus’ story so that I can find the relationship with Him that I long for. I have always believed in the

²⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 16-17.

²⁸ Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 65-66, quoted in Patrick W. Collins, *More Than Meets the Eye: Ritual and Parish Liturgy* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 17.

²⁹ Collins, 16.

presence of Jesus in the sacraments and the addition of Schillebeeckx's connection that they are symbols of the seven ways Jesus was Himself a sacrament of God to others only strengthens my belief. I think this connection will further enrich my participation in the sacraments because I will now feel a new experience of Jesus; the experience of His sacramentality of God. I can also relate the sacraments to His life and thus enter into His story much more quickly by making the immediate connection of the sacrament to the experience of His life. For example, when I participate in reconciliation I can think of His forgiveness of others and allow that to teach me to forgive others, as well as myself. I will be able to "feel" His forgiveness as I did that day in the Chapel, but more quickly as I now have a new "door" to Him!

As a lover of the word, both the Logos Himself, and that which we use to communicate, I also have always found Jesus there. What I believe I am lacking however, is the imagination and openness that Wedig and Nouwen talk about. When I read or listen to the word, whether in scripture, prayer or other form, I think I maintain some preconceived expectation of what the experience should be. Perhaps, that there is a standard way or right way that I should feel and experience Jesus. Perhaps, because I haven't been moved in the same way as that day in the Chapel, I feel that something is lacking. I believe I need to open my mind and my heart to the reality that it will be Jesus who comes to me and not I that goes to Him. He will create the exact relationship that I need with Him if I am but open to the possibility. I need to create the space in my story, in my mind, in my heart that Nouwen refers to. I have filled that space with models or methods of prayer, fears of failing in my attempts to know Him, thoughts of unworthiness of being in relationship with the perfection of humanity that is also divine. "To discover God in the course of daily reality seems to make people anxious, as an eagle makes the little birds it is going

to devour anxious . . . but Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.”³⁰ I believe that I am fearful that if I am in complete relationship with Jesus that I too will have to be perfect. I will be in the presence of perfection – how can I not learn from Him, follow His teachings, do exactly what I am supposed to do and be as a Christian? Quite simply, I am afraid to fail in His presence; afraid to disappoint Him. It has been irrelevant to me that Jesus loved everyone, saints and sinners alike! I think the disciples are a prime example of Jesus’ love for all. They walked with Jesus when He was man, yet were unable to be perfect. Judas and Peter immediately come to mind and Peter went on to become the founder, the rock, of the Catholic Church! Jesus still loved them, welcomed them in His arms, was disappointed perhaps in their actions, but understood nonetheless. It is in this search of the historical Jesus that God has issued an invitation to faith.³¹

[O]ur purpose is, along with his disciples, as it were, to follow the way of Jesus from Nazareth right up to his death so as in that way . . . to trace for ourselves how the faith-inspired interpretation of Jesus the Christ came into being. . . . we are looking for traces in the life of Jesus that, for us as for the disciples, could constitute an invitation to assent in faith to what is indeed God’s great work of salvation in Jesus of Nazareth. . . . Encountering Jesus in the companionship with the disciples which is facilitated by historical reconstruction, the believer today must then do what they did.³²

The disciples were unaware they were walking with Christ until after His death and resurrection. Schillebeeckx ends his book on *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* with the same understanding:

It is by the sacraments that we journey toward our final goal – the sacramental way is our hidden road to Emmaus, on which we are accompanied by our Lord. And even though we are not yet able to see him, we are conscious of his concealed presence near us, for when he addresses us through his

³⁰ Edward, Schillebeeckx, “I Believe in Jesus of Nazareth: The Christ, the Son of God, the Lord,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17, no. 1 (1980): 22.

³¹ Gabriel Fackre, “Bones Strong and Weak in the Skeletal Structure of Schillebeeckx’s Christology,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 265.

³² Fackre, 265.

sacraments, our hearts, intent upon his word, burn with longing and we turn at once to Christian action – in the words of the Evangelist, “Was not our heart burning within us whilst he spoke in the way?”³³

I have found that my heart has been burning for Jesus, yet He has been with me all along! Jesus was with me before I was even born, as a child growing up, in Church, in those around me, in the prayers and scriptures I have encountered over the years, and in every sacrament I participated in during my life, including those that didn't end up as I'd planned. I didn't fail; it was my marriage that failed. I may have disappointed Him a time or two, but He has remained with me always, forgiven me always. I don't need to be perfect to be in relationship with Jesus, I simply have to be open to letting Him create the type of relationship that will be perfect. I need to allow Him to come to me in my imagination. How wonderful to have found Jesus where I wouldn't have thought to look, anywhere!

³³ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 222.

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Evidence for the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ) allegedly occurs in several places: the Bible; other early Christian writings (including various early churches c. 100 CE); and what could be referred to as "the usual suspects", a lineup of writers generally consisting of Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger - and, on occasion, Thallus.